

Barriers to foreigners could backfire

Unless robots can meet its labor shortage, Japan must learn to accommodate and encourage migrant workers

Spring is the time when Japanese companies recruit college graduates. Students who will graduate this spring in Japan seem to be the happiest people in the world thanks to the best job market in decades. More than



Cai Hong

60 percent of the students graduating in 2018 got preliminary job offers in June last year.

Japan had 1.59 jobs for every applicant in January, the highest since 1974. And the unemployment rate stood at 2.8 percent in December, the lowest among developed countries.

Japan, however, has the worst manpower shortage since the early 1970s. According to a survey of more than 1,300 companies by Japan's Ministry of Finance, about 71 percent said they are undermanned.

The Japanese government decided in mid-February to raise the retirement age of public servants, from 60 years to 65 years in stages. At the earliest, the bills to revise the related laws, such as the National Public Service Act, are expected to be submitted to the parliament in 2019 to enable the retirement age to be

extended in phases from fiscal 2021.

At present, Japanese citizens can choose to start receiving their pensions at any point between the ages of 60 and 70, with higher monthly payments offered to those who do so after their 65th birthday. The government has said it would support firms that raise their mandatory retirement age, which is 60.

Still, immigration remains unpopular in Japan as the country wants to retain a strong perception of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Immigration is such a politically sensitive issue that the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has reiterated it will stand by immigration controls.

Learning from the experiences of countries such as Canada, however, Japan introduced a points-based system for "highly skilled foreign professionals" in 2012.

Advanced degrees, language skills, work experience and other qualifications are tallied up, and a high score can help foreign workers earn permanent residency — the equivalent of a US green card — in as little as one year.

After that, it takes up to five years of residency and another year or so of paperwork for a foreigner to become a Japanese citizen.

The total number of legal foreign workers in Japan remains small,

at 1.28 million as of October 2017, in a total population of 127 million. While people in Japan do not welcome immigrants, the Japanese government has moved to expand the scope of a system under the "technical intern trainees" program.

In 1993, Japan launched the Technical Intern Training Program as a way to contribute to the international community by sharing Japanese knowledge and technology with the developing world.

But people from developing countries including China have ended up toiling in hard-scrabble sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and construction in which fewer and fewer Japanese choose to work.

Japan's Ministry of Labor says 40,000 companies have accepted foreign trainees under the program. The total number of foreigners working under the program increased by 120,000 in four years to nearly 260,000 in October last year.

After one year of training, during which the migrant workers receive subsistence pay below the minimum wage, they are allowed to work for two more years in their area of "expertise" and earn the usual wages, in principle. But cases of long working hours, unpaid wages, harsh living and working conditions, and even violence, have been reported.

Japanese and foreign critics say

migrant workers from developing countries have become a source of cheap labor in Japan, which has one of the world's most rapidly aging populations and lowest birth rates.

Under a new law that took effect in November, nursing care has been added to the list of sectors in which foreign trainees can work.

The labor shortage is serious. Abe has ordered the creation of a new system for admitting large numbers of foreign workers for Japan's nursing care, agriculture and other industrial sectors.

But the workers will not be allowed to bring their families with them, and they will have to leave after working in Japan for a certain period of time.

The Japanese government plans to broaden the coverage of, and lower the requirements for, residence status categories in "professional or technical fields", which currently cover only skilled non-Japanese workers, such as university professors, corporate managers and researchers.

Whether the approach, which critics called "opportunistic", will attract foreign workers to Japan is doubtful.

Japan is found not friendly to foreign residents. A survey of long-stay foreigners aged 18 or over conducted by Japan's Justice Ministry last year brought to the fore the problem of

rampant discrimination against foreign people who call Japan home.

Thirty-nine percent of the respondents who had sought housing during the past five years said their applications had been turned down because they were foreigners.

The survey showed that 25 percent of the interviewees said their job applications had been refused, while 20 percent said their wages were lower than their Japanese colleagues doing the same kind of work and 17 percent said they had been denied promotion.

Kiyoto Tanno, a professor at Tokyo Metropolitan University, warned that unless Japan treats the foreigners living in the country better, they will not come to its rescue when Japan truly needs their manpower.

Mid-sized Japanese companies, which are too small to compete with large corporations for the college graduates, plan to buy robots and other equipment to automate a wide range of tasks, including manufacturing, earthmoving and hotel room service.

They may be right to turn to robots for help. The country's hiring pool will become smaller as long as the government keeps Japan closed.

The author is China Daily's bureau chief in Tokyo. caihong@chinadaily.com.cn

Unique system with roots and a soul

Multi-party cooperation and political consultation ensure China conforms to actual conditions, traditional culture

By YANG KAI

Two punctuation marks have generally symbolized the world's impression of China in the 21st century: The exclamation mark and the question mark.

The first signifies surprise over a developing country with a huge population and economic aggregate faced with complicated situations maintaining long-term stability and developing to become the world's second-largest economy and a leading promoter of better global governance.

And the second represents curiosity over the secret to China's marvelous development, hoping to understand the inherent logic of China's well-functioning economy and society.

At a time when partisan politics have come to symbolize modern politics, how has the Communist

Party of China (CPC) maintained long-term leadership in China and achieved great successes while the bipartisan and multi-party systems have failed to do the same in the West?

Traditional Western political textbooks do not have the answer to this. Instead, the annual sessions of China's top legislature and top political advisory body offer the best window to the outside world to get the answer.

On March 4, President Xi Jinping, who is also the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, while meeting with some members attending the first session of the top political advisory body for group discussions, made an important remark on China's political system — that the multi-party cooperation and political consultation system under the leadership of the CPC is China's

basic political system.

He added that it is a great political invention forged by the CPC, the Chinese people, non-Communist parties and non-party personages, and a new political system that is unique to China.

What constitutes the new type of political system?

First, the system has a more authentic, extensive and lasting representation. China's political system is an outcome of a combination between the Marxist party theory and the country's actual conditions, which can represent and realize the fundamental interests of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups, and effectively avoid the shortcomings of the old political system that represented only a minority of the people and a few interest groups.

Second, the CPC has built a united, instead of a viciously competitive partisan, relationship with

other political parties. The CPC is not the only political party in China. Several non-Communist parties and non-party personages are also part of the political system, and all of them work together to achieve the common goals.

Third, China has built a more democratic and efficient decision-making mechanism. Through institutionalized, procedure-based and standardized collection of opinions and proposals from all walks of life, the CPC-led multi-party cooperation and political consultation system has prevented social divisions.

The new type of political system is a system with roots and a soul. It is rooted in China's historical, social and cultural soil, and conforms to not only the actual conditions in China, but also its unique traditional culture that advocates such concepts as "inclusiveness" and "seeking common ground

while shelving differences".

The CPC has always stayed true to its original goal of establishing multi-party cooperation, and advanced political consultation, participation of other parties in State affairs, and democratic supervision to promote more extensive and efficient democracy in China. It is because of this that China has enjoyed a unique systemic advantage and will gather more steam in the new era.

China's new type of political system is an important contribution to human civilization, as it shows the world that a political party must adopt a pragmatic and innovative approach and continuously improve if it wants to achieve self-development and better govern a country.

The author is an editor with People's Daily, where the article was first published.