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Japanese society is often said to be closed to foreigners, and yet in 2005 the number of foreign residents in Japan reached two million people (1.6 percent of the total population of the country). Among the foreigners in Japan, Iranians total about 5,000 people, constituting a small minority group. In the early 1990s, about 50,000 Iranians were residing in Japan; many of them were illegal workers. Despite the fact that most Iranians were obliged to return to their homeland after the Japanese legislation for immigration underwent changes in the early 1990s, an Iranian community in Japan continues to exist.

Early times. The first mention of Iranians (Persians) coming to Japan can be found in the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), one of the earliest Japanese historical sources, completed in 720 C.E. It records that in 654 C.E. several people arrived in Japan from Tokhārā (Aston, pp. 246, 251, 259). Though there is some controversy about the location of Tokhārā, some scholars have claimed the name to be a shortened version of Toḵārestān, which was part of the territory of Sasanian Persia (Itō, 1980, pp. 5-10). Elsewhere in the *Nihon Shoki*, it is mentioned that in 660, when an Iranian (Persian), whose name was Dārā, returned to his country, he left his wife in Japan and promised the Emperor that he would come back and work for him again (Aston, p. 266; Imoto, 2002, pp. 58-60).

In the 7th to the 9th centuries, foreigners—then known in Japanese as *toraijin*—were coming to Japan mainly from Korea and China, bringing with them technology, culture, religion (Buddhism), and ideas. Eastern Asia, especially the Tang Dynasty of China (618-907), had socio-economic networks with many regions of the world, including southern and western Asia. Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the capital of the Tang Dynasty, was an international city with people from various countries, including Iranians (Persians), some of whom traveled further to Japan. Iranian names are to be met with in historical documents, and one can find some influence of Persian culture in the architecture, sculptures, and also in the customs and old Japanese rituals at that time. For example, some scholars have claimed that there is some influence of Persian culture in the Omizutori ritual held every February at Tōdaiji temple in Nara (Itō, 1980, pp. 125-33).

The oldest document in Persian, which is preserved in Japan, was procured by the Japanese priest named Kyōsei (1189-1268) from Iranians (Persians) during his trip to southern Asia in 1217. Thinking they were Indians, the priest asked them to write something for him as a keepsake. However, after his return to Japan he found out that they were not Indians, because no one could understand what the writing meant. This document—a single page—was discovered in the late 20th century, when it was established that it is written in Persian and contains a line from Abu'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* (qq.v.), a line from Faḵr-al-Din Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin* (qq.v.), and a quatrain of unknown authorship (Okada, 1989).

Early modern times. Due to Japan's policy of isolation in the Edo period (1603-1867), diplomatic and economic relations with foreign countries were much limited. Foreigners were not allowed to reside in Japan except in restricted areas, and there were no foreign communities until the Meiji period (1867-1912). In the 17th century some Iranian merchants arrived from Thailand to Nagasaki, which was the only area that foreign traders were allowed to enter, but this was an exceptional case (Nagashima, 1997). After the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan wanted to become a modern state like European countries and began to open its doors to foreigners. In 1880, the first Japanese delegation was sent to Persia. The head of the delegation, Masaharu Yoshida (1852-1921), wrote a travelogue and introduced Qajar Persia to the Japanese (Yoshida, 1894).

On the other hand, there is a travelogue about the trip to Japan written by Mehdiqoli Hedāyat Moḵber-al-Salṭana (1864-1955, see HEDAYAT [HEDĀYAT],

MOḴBER-AL-SALṬANA, MEHDIQOLI), the Prime Minister of Persia in 1927-33 and a relative of the famous Iranian writer Ṣādeq Hedāyat (1903-51, q.v.; Okazaki, 1992; Rajabzadeh, 2002). He accompanied ʿAli-AsÂḡar Khan Amin-al-Solṭān (1858-1907, see ATĀBAK-E AʿẒAM), the prime minister of Persia under the last three Qajar shahs, in his travels to Russia, East Asia, and the U.S.A. in 1903-04. Hedāyat was both his associate and translator during the trip. They entered Japan by ship from Shanghai on 9 December 1903, arriving first at Nagasaki and then sailing on to Kobe. After visiting the ancient capital city of Kyoto, they arrived in Tokyo on 14 December. The Japanese government treated the ex-prime minister of Persia as an official guest. During their 22-day stay in Tokyo until 6 January 1904, they met with the Emperor Meiji (r. 1867-1912), Prime Minister Taro Katsura, the first prime minister of Japan, Hirofumi Itō, Minister of Foreign Affairs Jutarō Komura, and other politicians. They visited several schools (including girls' schools), courts, the naval port of Yokosuka, and other places.

Hedāyat was much impressed by the simple and well-organized life of the Japanese, their intense interest in education, and other aspects of life in Japan. He was especially surprised by the fact that the Japanese attended to their business very seriously and without giving any gratuities. He was also impressed by Japanese patriotism. After the victory over China in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, Japan was preparing for the Russo-Japanese War that would take place in 1904-05. Hedāyat wrote that, after meeting with politicians and visiting a military school, he felt that war was very near. Japanese victory over Russia impressed Iranian society, which had suffered from Russian domination in the 19th century.

The twentieth century up to 1979. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), foreigners started to settle in Japan. Diplomatic relations between Persia and Japan were officially established in 1929, when the first Japanese legation was opened in Persia. In the next year, the Persian legation in Japan was established. However, there is a record of a consul-general of Persia from before then: a newspaper in Kobe reported on an Iranian consul-general's residence, calling it "Bajaj's House" (*Kōbe shinbun*, 4 January 2003). The house was built in the Taishō period (1912-26) and, upon being sold, became opened to the public and was used as a Persian museum from 1981 to 1994. Unfortunately, the building was completely destroyed in the Great Hansin earthquake that shook Kobe in 1995. Kobe was one of the first Japanese ports opened to foreigners, many of whom settled there soon after the country opened up, so it is likely

that there was an unofficial or honorary consul representing the Iranians who lived in the city at that time.

After Japan entered World War II, Iran broke off relations with Japan, and they were restored only in 1953. However, economic ties had already resumed in 1947, and there were small numbers of Iranian traders, especially carpet traders and their families, residing in Japan (Inoue, p. 215). Iranians who stayed in Japan were historically limited to traders, students, skilled workers, and temporary residents who worked for Iranian companies or for the Iranian government. Most of them were highly educated people with relatively high income, and their number was not considerable before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Records from the Japanese Immigration Office show that there were 76 Iranians in Japan in 1964, 187 in 1974, 543 in 1985, and 1,237 in 1991. Among them were members of well-known and rich Iranian families, but, even though they knew each other, no particular association or community of Iranians existed in Japan.

Japanese cities which had facilities for foreigners, such as international schools, cemeteries, and religious institutions, were few, and therefore foreigners in Japan, especially those from Western, south Asian, and west Asian countries, tended to live mainly in big cities like Tokyo or in the old ports, such as Yokohama and Kobe, which have long been open to foreigners. These cities had communities of different national and religious groups. For example, a Muslim community existed in Kobe from the 1930s, and both a Jewish and a Bahai community from the 1950s. Some Iranian residents in Japan belonged to these communities. In general, the lifestyle of most Iranians in Japan was similar to that of the Westerners. They sent their children to international schools and used shops that sold imported goods. Japanese people usually treated the Iranians living in Japan just in the same way as they did the Westerners.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979. From 1986 to 1991-92, Japan experienced enormous economic prosperity. However, because the Japanese government prohibited the issue of visas to unskilled workers, a shortage of workers became a serious problem for small businesses and factories in Japan. At first, many of the illegal workers came to Japan from Korea, China, and other countries of the Far East. After that, others followed from South American countries, for example, Brazil and Peru, from southeast Asia, for example, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and from the Middle East, including Iran (Komai, 1996).

After the end of the Iran-Iraq War (see IRAQ vii) in 1988, many young Iranian men who were returning from the battlefields could not find jobs in Iran. Iran and Japan had a bilateral agreement at that time which allowed entry for short-term visits without a visa. The anti-Western Islamic Revolution in Iran caused the West to close the doors to Iranian workers, except for political refugees, but Japan remained a country where Iranians could enter without a visa. Most of the Iranians who came to Japan at that time were single men in their 20s and 30s. They included both ethnic Persian Iranians and ethnic Turkic Iranians, and many of them were from Iran's big cities (Yamagishi and Morita, 2002; Tsukuba Daigaku Shakaigaku Kenkyūshitsu, 1995). As they could not speak any Japanese when they came to Japan, they first had to work as unskilled workers. The Japanese Immigration Office states that, although there were only 764 illegal Iranian residents in 1990, this number increased to 10,915 in 1991 and to 40,001 in 1992. In comparison, the number of legal Iranian residents was 1,237 in 1991, 4,516 in 1993, and 8,645 in 1996.

Many of the Iranian workers had little knowledge of the Japanese language or Japanese culture and social system, and there was no suitable Iranian community to guide them. Therefore, they used public parks in the center of Tokyo, such as Yoyogi Park or Ueno Park, to communicate with each other, to get information about work, housing, and shopping, and to receive news about their home country (Morita, 2003, pp. 161-62). Some Iranians, after losing their jobs, would spend their nights in Ueno Park. Every Sunday these parks became full of Iranian workers. In contrast to the Chinese or Koreans, the Iranians were easily recognized as foreigners, and their presence made foreign workers a visible reality for the Japanese. The majority of the Iranians worked in small businesses and factories in the suburbs of Tokyo. However, a small minority began to commit crimes, such as selling fake cell-phone cards or drugs in the parks. Because the Iranian workers were the latest foreign workers to come to Japan, their working conditions were worse than those of other foreigners. The media treated Iranians especially as the symbol of illegal foreign workers at that time, and controversy among the Japanese about the acceptance of foreign workers heated up (Kura, 2000).

With the sudden increase in illegal Iranian workers, the Japanese government decided to suspend the bilateral agreement in 1992, after which entering Japan became very difficult for Iranians. For many Iranians who had left their wives and children in Iran it also meant they had lost the chance to bring their families to Japan. In 1990 the Japanese government changed the immigration

law, and special visas were only granted to people of Japanese descent from Latin America or to those who had been left behind as children when Japan withdrew from China after World War II. This created a kind of hierarchy among the foreign workers in Japan, with Iranian illegal workers in the lowest position. Moreover, the Japanese media often sensationally reported the crimes of Iranians. Following the sudden recession in Japan's economy in 1991-92, the situation of Iranian workers deteriorated drastically. Many Iranians lost their jobs, some of them could not get paid, and if some were injured at work, they could not get any compensation at all. Since they were illegal workers, they received no help. NGOs were established to support the immigrants, and activities to improve this situation began.

After the change in the Japanese immigration legislation, Iranian workers began to return to Iran, and the number of illegal Iranians decreased year by year. From 28,437

illegal Iranians in 1993, 16,252 in 1995, 11,303 in 1997, and 7,304 in 1999, there remained as few as 4,335 in 2001. Generally, there was no way for them to get legal status in Japan, with the exception of those Iranians who had married Japanese women and who could get special legal residential status at the discretion of the minister of justice. But additionally, with the support of some Japanese NGOs, some Iranians and other foreigners applied for legal status in Japanese district courts in September 1999, December 1999, and July 2000. Children born in Japan to Iranian parents with no legal status had in principle to return to Iran. However, the parents and their Japanese supporters from the NGOs insisted that, if the Japanese government deported them, it would violate their human rights. The argument was that, since such children had spent most of their lives in Japan and knew little Persian language or Iranian culture, they would suffer if sent to Iran. In 1994 Japan had ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (of 1989), so the claim was made that the Japanese government must consider the rights of Iranian children born in Japan. As a result, of twelve Iranian families who sued the Japanese government, seven were granted legal status in Japan (Asian People's Friendship Society, 2002, pp. 96-106).

Of 5,227 Iranians residing in Japan in 2005, 1,687 (about 30 percent) were permanent residents, and about five percent (248 people) were students. The number of Iranian students in Japan continues to grow every year. Some Iranian students wish to seek employment in Japan after they graduate from university. The ratio of Iranians who obtained legal residence in Japan by

marrying Japanese women has become about 18 percent of all Iranians living in Japan. They have started to set up their own businesses in Japan, such as Iranian restaurants and carpet shops (Sakurai, 2003, pp. 57-61). Sooner or later, a second generation of them will join Japanese society, giving some influence to the Iranian community in Japan.

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