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The face of immigration is rapidly changing in Japan

BY [MARK SCHREIBER](#)



On the rise: The Vietnamese population in Japan has grown by 36.1 percent between 2015 and 2016. | GETTY IMAGES

Over the past half decade, major changes have taken place in the demographics of foreign residents in Japan. Weekly Playboy's Dec. 18 issue devoted a four-page article to "Research into Vietnamese." Why Vietnamese? And why now?

"Their numbers in Japan have drastically increased," the magazine rationalizes. Up fourfold from five years ago, they grew by a remarkable 36.1 percent between 2015 and 2016. The Vietnamese population of 232,562 (as of end June 2017) has shot past Brazil to make them the fourth-largest nationality, and they may soon overtake the Philippines (251,934) for third place.

Take, for example, the city of Matsudo, a bed town of about 484,000 in Chiba Prefecture served by the JR Joban commuter line, about 21 minutes from Tokyo's Ueno Station. It currently boasts 15,058 foreign residents, including a growing community of Vietnamese. "Matsudo has lots of Japanese-language schools," the chef at a local Vietnamese restaurant tells the reporter. "Spread by word of mouth among Vietnamese, the number of foreign students has increased. Still, they don't stand out much. It's probably because only a few of them do business around here."

Weekly Playboy's reporter then travelled to Hiroshima Prefecture, which last year was ranked fourth nationwide in terms of the number of technical trainees from Vietnam. Enough on a proportional basis, he writes with some exaggeration, to make Hiroshima a "province of Vietnam."

Duan, a 32-year-old housewife originally from Hanoi, tells the reporter: "The Japanese I work with are devious. They scare me and I don't care for them much." Duan arrived four years ago as a language student, and wound up marrying a Japanese 18 years her senior. The language school where Duan first studied operated a side-business of farming out its students to part-time jobs, and initially Duan labored at a demanding job in a shipping depot for refrigerated items.

"One day I dropped a heavy box on my foot," she relates bitterly. "I could barely walk and had to seek medical attention. Even the day I went to the hospital the company made me work." To make matters worse, she said, the school arranged with the depot to report her injury as having occurred during her commute to work, thereby making her ineligible for worker's compensation. Conditions at her second job, at a restaurant, proved no better. Still, she expressed deep affection for her Japanese husband, a "sweet old guy" whom she describes as caring and generous.

While not dwelling on negative aspects of immigration, Weekly Playboy doesn't pull any punches, noting that Vietnamese are already the Japan's top minority in one unenviable statistic: during 2015, their 2,556 violations of the criminal code exceeded the 2,390 cases by Chinese.

