

***The Impact of Internal Urban-to-Rural Migration and Its Limits:  
A Case Study on Japan and South Korea***

Akio Nawakura, National Federation of Depopulated Municipalities in Japan, Japan

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**Abstract**

This study asks how the governmental promotion of urban-to-rural internal migration in Japan and South Korea has impacted on agricultural labor shortage and rural communities in the two countries. For decades, the Western developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have introduced international immigrants to secure their workforces in agricultural sector and it has promoted bipolarization of farmers to farmland operators and their employees. Japan and South Korea, on the other hand, have promoted internal migration from urban areas to rural ones while accepting foreign workers with limited terms. The analysis based on literature review and interview by the author points out that, though Japan and South Korea have chosen different policy approach from the West in terms of securing workforces in agriculture, agricultural labor shortage occurs and the differentiation among farmers have also been proceeded in the two Asian countries.

Keywords: South Korea, Japan, Agriculture, Workforce, Immigration, Labor Shortage

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## **Introduction**

This study asks how the governmental promotion of internal urban-to-rural migration in Japan and South Korea has impacted on agricultural labor shortage and the status of rural communities in the two countries.

Labor shortage in agricultural sector has been a common policy subject among governments in developed economies. Internal applicants to work in farm sector Europe and North America have been decreased for decades and domestic labor markets of those countries cannot supply sufficient workforces to their farm sector's demands (Cristea and Noja, 2019; Martin and Taylor, 2013). Japan and South Korea, two major developed economies in Asia, are not exceptional. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery in Japan, more than one third of the nation's farmers over sixty years old are troubled to find the successors of their agricultural works (MAFF, 2023). Also in South Korea, a governmental survey shows that more than half of the farmers over sixty are troubled for the absence of their successors (KREI, 2023).

While labor shortage in agricultural sector is one of the serious policy subjects for developed economies around the world, the governments of the developed countries have employed some different countermeasures each other. Inflow of international immigrants as agricultural workforces, on the one hand, has been a major policy approach in the Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In Japan and South Korea, on the other, the governments have promoted not only the inflow of international immigrants but also internal ones. Since the mid-2010s, the government of South Korea has implemented the Return Farm Policy to promote urban dwellers' migration to rural areas and to work in agricultural sector (Green-Daero, 2024). Also, the Japanese government has promoted internal migration to non-urban regions under the Regional Revitalization Act of 2014.<sup>1</sup>

Different policy approaches can result in different outcomes. This study analyzes how the internal migration policies by the governments of South Korea and Japan have impacted on their agricultural sectors in terms of labor markets employing the research methods of literature review and interview conducted in the two countries. The next section reviews previous studies to research agricultural labor shortage in developed countries and shows a theoretical framework to analyze the case of Japan and South Korea based on the literature review. Following the framework, this paper sees the cases of Japan and South Korea. And, in the last section, the analysis on the policy outcomes in the two countries are shown.

## **Literature Review: Bipolarization of Farmers**

Since the mid-20th century, the workers in agricultural sector have been decreased in most developed countries (FAO, 2022). In the Western developed countries today, foreign workers including immigrants are necessary workforces in their agricultural sector. It is pointed out that Mexicans occupy more than half the farm workers in California, the United States (Zahniser et al. 2018). Also, it is pointed out that the immigrants from Central and Eastern European countries are indispensable in the agricultural production in the United Kingdom today (Angioloni et al, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> For detail of the Rural Revitalization, see Public Relation Office, Government of Japan (2024).

In terms of the role of the farmers in agricultural fields, on the other hand, the previous studies point out that the farmers in developed countries have been bipolarized to skilled workforces and unskilled ones. It is argued that, as the Mexican immigrants are increased, the farmers in the United States have been bipolarized small number of American operators and large number of Latino workers (Minkoff-Zern et al, 2016). Employed by the American operators, according to their argument, the Mexican workers are engaged in unskilled works on farmlands. The classification of farmers based on their skills is also argued in Europe. A report published by the European Parliament argues that the agricultural labor shortage in Western Europe is particularly serious on unskilled workers mentioning to the unskilled workers migrating from Central and Eastern Europe (European Parliament, 2019). The disparity of farmers can occur also among foreign workers. Also in British Columbia, Western Canada, socio-economic exclusion of foreign farm workers are reported (Caxaj, 2018).

### **Agriculture Operation in Japan and South Korea: The Cases of the Study**

While the previous studies above commonly point out that the agricultural foreign workers in developed countries are often employed as unskilled laborers by local farmland owners, it should be noted that the farmland owners in the West have employed huge numbers of workers in their farmlands for centuries. The size of farmland per household in the United States and the United Kingdom have been more than 100 hectares since the mid-19th Century and it is too large to cultivate by family members. To cultivate huge size of farmlands, it has been general among the Western farm owners to employ workers.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, as pointed out in an article, agricultural land reform to distribute farmlands to tenant farmers have been the issue in developed countries, not home (Roman-Alcala, 2024).

Differently from the West, Japan and South Korea are mountainous countries with small-sized farmers. Since the Meiji Restoration in the latter half of the 19th Century, most farmers in Japan had been ‘tenant’ ones to cultivate the land leased by landlords, who were often absent from their own farmlands, rather than employees under the command by landowners until the mid-20th Century. Though the agricultural land reform under the influence by the United States in the mid-20th Century changed the status of the tenant farmers to farm owners, it did not transform the standard operation style of the agriculture in the two countries. In the process of the land reform both in Japan and South Korea, the governments confiscated the landlords’ farmlands nationwide and redistributed the lands to individual tenant farmers. As a result, while the tenant farmers were transformed to the owners of their own farmlands, individual farm household owned extremely small size of lands with one or two hectares per household both in Japan and South Korea.<sup>3</sup>

Because individual farm households' size is too small to employ workforces for cultivation, most farmers in Japan and South Korea since the mid-20th Century have been family-operated and have had limited opportunity to employ permanent workforces except for dairy farming. The tentative labor shortages in harvest seasons have been covered by mutual assistance among rural residents as called *yui* in Japanese and *pumasi* in Korean. Or farm operators’ family members such as farmland owners’ husbands,

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<sup>2</sup> Recent technological changes request farm owners to hold higher skills as operators (Popescu et al. 2021).

<sup>3</sup> For detail, see Nawakura (2019).

parents, and children have supplied most part of the country's workforces.<sup>4</sup> Agricultural workforce in Japan has not been marketized for a long time and farm operators' husbands, parents, and children have played major role as agricultural workforces in Japan and South Korea.

Since the 1970s, the decrease of farmers has emerged as a sociopolitical subject nationwide in both of the two countries. As a result of the workforce outflow to urban areas under the rapid industrialization in the mid-20th Century, the farmers in Japan were decreased in terms of the share in the nation's labor population. However, the mechanization of agricultural works, particularly in rice farming, and labor coordination by agricultural cooperatives in individual areas, particularly in vegetable harvesting, have covered the demand until the early 2000s.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting the historical background as seen above, farmers' (bi)polarization to operators and employed workers has not been as general as in the West.

Both Japan and South Korea have promoted internal migration from urban areas to rural ones while accepting foreign workers with limited terms. Does the policy approach contribute to sustain the conventional style of farm operation in Japan and South Korea? Does it trigger any structural changes in the two countries' rural communities? The sections below analyze the cases.

### **Agricultural Workforce Policies in Japan**

The decrease of agricultural workforces has been one of the major public policy subjects in Japan since the 1990s. In a recent quarter Century, the number of agricultural fulltime workers have been decreased from 3.9 million in 2000 to 1.1 million in 2023 (MAFF, 2024-1). On the other hand, the food self-sufficiency rate of Japan has been less than 40% and its increase has been a task for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (MAFF) for more than three decades (MAFF, 2024-2). Since the 1980s, the MAFF, the Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives (JA-Zenchu), and rural municipalities nationwide have encouraged the urban residents to be farmers by launching agriculture colleges (*nogyo daigakko*) to each prefecture and subsidizing applicants for agriculture.

The begin of the Regional Revitalization (*chiho sosei*) policy in 2014 was a turning point to accelerate urban-to-rural internal migration. Differently from existing national government's subsidy-pride assistance on rural areas, the Regional Revitalization emphasizes the role of not only financial resource but also human one. Also, differently from highly centralized rural vitalization measures until the early 2010s, the Regional Revitalization call on prefectural and municipal governments to play active role for the growth of local economy (Cabinet Office, 2024). Responding to the call by the national government, the local authorities nationwide launched promotion to migrate from urban areas to rural ones for rural areas' revitalization. As of 2023, at least 35 out of 47 prefectures employ professional personnels to assist internal migration to rural areas (National Federation of Depopulated Municipalities, 2024). Those personnels offer the applicants to migrate to rural areas rich information and advice to smooth settlement in non-urban areas.

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<sup>4</sup> For detail of the Asia's family farming, see Ye and Pan (2016).

<sup>5</sup> For detail, see MAFF (2013).

Encouraged by the Regional Revitalization, the applicants of urban-to-rural internal migration have been increased as indicated in Figure 1. Though this statistic data includes also the applicants for nonagricultural industries in rural areas, “The White Paper on Agriculture, Food, and Rural Areas 2022” points out that the inflow of young population to work as farmers increases in some demographically depopulated rural municipalities (MAFF, 2023).

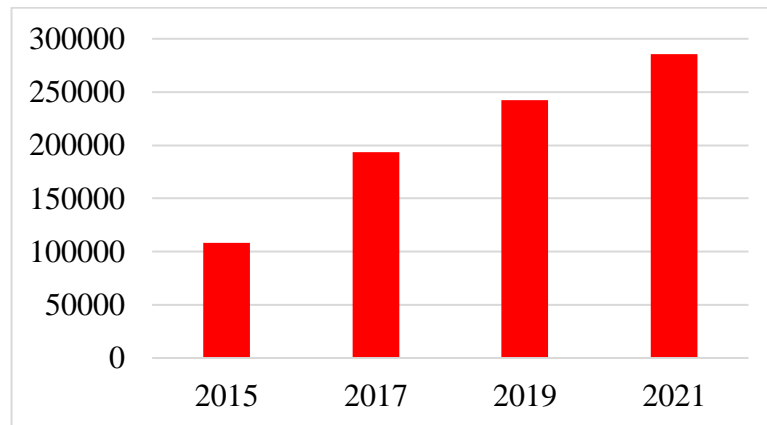


Figure 1: Applicants of Urban-to-Rural Migration in Japan  
(Source: MIC, 2023)

On the other hand, a data analysis by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication points out that more than 80% of the internal immigrants' households to legally designated depopulated municipalities are core families, meaning single households, couples, or households consisted of a couple and its children (MIC, 2019). This means that the average size of internal migration households in Japan have been too small to operate agriculture.

The author joined an interview survey on internal urban-to-rural immigrants in Nantan City, Kyoto Prefecture in October 2023. Ms. Hazuki Dwyer, an interviewee, migrated from Tokyo in the early 2010s after experiencing the malfunction of urban infrastructure caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011. Seeing how urban infrastructure is vulnerable to natural disasters, Ms. Dwyer determined to move to rural areas and begin agriculture as part time work while acting as an English Japanese interpreter. She purchased small size of farmland in Nantan City and has cultivated the land to harvest rice with her husband for a decade. Based on her activity as a farmer, she acts as a lecturer in a seminar to learn how to operate agriculture collaborated with the municipal government of Nantan City as of 2023.

While acting as a farmer and promoting urban dwellers' entrance to agriculture, however, Ms. Dwyer showed little interest in operating her farmland as a full-time farmer. Rather, she was interested in cultivating her farmland to produce small quantity of high-valued crops such as organic rice in the interview by the author. As observed in her case, recently increasing urban-to-rural internal immigrants tend to be interested in small-sized part time agricultural works rather than working as full-time farm operators. In order to promote the demographic inflow to agricultural sector, many municipal governments in rural regions have deregulated the internal immigrants' purchase of extremely small size, such as 10 acre or 20 acre, of farmlands (*Gendai Nogyo*, 2023).

The fact above indicates that the internal migration has limited impact on rural communities in terms of agricultural works. Kazuo Kasami, former vice secretary general of *Furusato Kaiki Shien Center* (Support Center for Returning to Hometown), an NPO to promote urban-to-rural internal migration, explained the internal immigrants' interest in agriculture as 'They (internal immigrants) are, in general, interested in life with agriculture rather than life as farmers' in the author's interview. This means that, though the internal migration to rural areas is increased, it rarely contributes to supply necessary workforces to the nation's agricultural labor market. Also, Yuya Nabeshima, vice president of Ehime Life Network, an NPO to coordinate urban-to-rural migration in Ehime Prefecture, reviewed his activity 'Though large number of the internal immigrants to Ehime Prefecture wish to work in farm sector for full time, many of them change their opinion while learning actual rural life and, as a result, act as part time ones.'

While internal urban-to-rural immigrants tend to prefer small-sized agriculture, some municipalities, particularly in those in Hokkaido, northern Japan, have been active to recruit internal immigrants who work as professional farmers. Nayoro City, located in northern area of Hokkaido, have recruited internal immigrants to secure the successors of rice farming as the municipality's main industry. Since the 2010s, the Nayoro municipal government has employed applicants to be farmers as the 'Agriculture Supporters (*nogyo shien-in*),' public officers to learn agriculture with the term of three years (Nayoro City, 2024). During the three years, the Agricultural Supporters learn the methods and know-hows of farming under the guidance by incumbent local farmers. In the author's inquiry by telephone in June 2022, the Division of Agriculture of Nayoro municipal government told 'The local farmers are very kind and active to teach the know-hows of farming to the Agriculture Supporters.' On the other hand, it should be noted that the agricultural training programs for the applicants in most rural municipalities, including the case of Nayoro City, are those to train the methods of agriculture operation, not know-hows to work in agriculture as employees. As a result, the labor shortage in agricultural sector in Japan has still been remained as a serious policy subject in spite of the increasing internal migration to rural areas for a decade.

While the internal migration to rural areas is promoted, the government has increased the number of foreign workers in agricultural sector since the latter half of the 2010s. The number of foreigners working in agricultural sector in Japan, including those who are treated 'technical intern trainees (*ginou jisshu-sei*),' jumped from approximately 18,000 in 2014 to approximately 38,000 in 2020 (MIC, 2023). In addition, the government launched a visa status 'specific skill (*tokutei ginou*)' to permit foreigners to work in Japan for maximum five years. This new visa status covers agriculture. Under this trend, the number of foreigners to work in farm sector as employees are increased (Nikkei Asia, 2023).

The fact observed above indicates that the Japanese agriculture sector experiences the inflow of two different kinds of farmers: Internal immigrant to act as part time farmers, and foreign workers to be employed by farm owners. Though its pattern is different from the West, also Japan experiences some differentiation among farmers.

### **Agricultural Workforce Policies in South Korea**

As well as in Japan, the farming population in South Korea have been decreased for decades. The number of farmers has been decreased from approximately 1.1 million in

1990 to 0.7 million in 2020 (Korea Statistic Agency, 2024). Aging of incumbent farmers has also been a serious policy subject for decades.

South Korea's agriculture has different features from Japan on the one hand. Compared with Japan, for example, South Korea's rural areas have had limited opportunities for non-agriculture income (Nawakura, 2019). On the other hand, however, the two countries' agriculture has common features: Mountainous land, farming operated by family members with limited employed workers, and small-sized farming as a result of land reform in the mid-20th Century.

Under the rapid industrialization since the 1960s, agricultural population in South Korea has been gradually decreased. The government had sought the ways to cover the decrease and secure farming workforces prior to promoting urban-to-rural internal migration. As the government's measures to secure agricultural workforces prior to the internal migration, two major approaches can be pointed out: Mechanization and marriage immigration.

Since the 1980s, the government has subsidized individual farming households and farmers' local cooperatives to purchase agricultural machines (Nawakura, 2019). Though those measures have contributed to alter the decreasing labor by machines such as combining machines and automated water suppliers, it has covered only some parts of agricultural works. While rice farming is friendly to mechanization, fruit and vegetable ones, particularly those harvesting, are not.

The government also accepted female marriage immigrants from Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia to secure inner-home workforces in agricultural sector and rural population (Lee, 2022). In rural areas in the mid-20th Century's South Korea, family members in agricultural households played major roles as necessary workforces for mutual assistance among farmers (*pumasi*). The inflow of female population from overseas were expected to act as new members in rural South Korea. However, the marriage immigration has been criticized as *de-facto* slave trading today. Due to the criticism and cultural friction, the marriage immigration to South Korea once rose in 2012 but began to decrease in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

The financial crisis in 1997 was a turning point for the government to promote internal migration to rural areas. Under the rapid increase of jobless in urban areas following the crisis, the migration to rural areas increased in 1998 and 1999 because huge number of job seekers moved into agricultural sector (Nawakura, 2019). In 2000, however, the inflow into agricultural sector decreased because of economic recovery in urban sectors. This gave the government a lesson that workforce security in agricultural labor should be secured not only by push factors in urban areas but also by pull factors in rural ones.

Reflecting the lesson above, the government launched the Masterplan for Return Farm (*kuinong kuichon chonghap kyehoik*) in 2009. In this plan, the government declared to promote return farming, internal urban-to-rural migration in other words, by collaboration with municipal governments, agricultural cooperatives, and local residents in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> As concrete measures, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery and Rural

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<sup>6</sup> For detail, see Fadanelli (2022).

<sup>7</sup> For detail, see Ma, An & Park (2018).

Affairs (MAFRA) and the Rural Revitalization Agency launched government-funded agricultural training program (Nawakura, 2019). The program offers urban dwellers who apply to migrate to rural areas some training courses to learn how to operate farming without tuition. The training courses are offered in agricultural technology centers in urban municipalities' local governments such as Seoul. As indicated in Figure2, more than 15,000 urban dwellers move to urban areas every year.

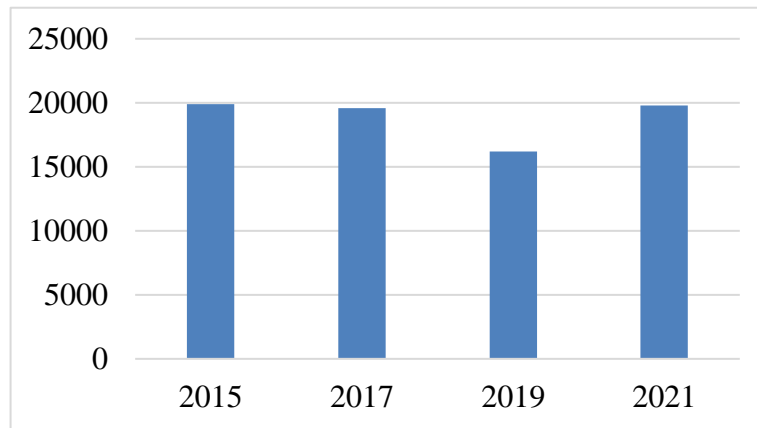


Figure 2: Internal Immigrants to Agriculture in South Korea  
(Source: Green-Daero, 2024)

According to the author's fieldwork and interview on the agricultural technology centers in the mid-2010s, the contents of the training courses emphasized to learn know-how of operating agriculture as entrepreneurs rather than actual agricultural works (Nawakura, 2019). The officers in Agricultural Technology Center in Seoul told the author that the trainees in the courses tended to plan migration to rural areas seeking 'stress-free business.' Because of the preference, the migrated farmers tend to work in agricultural sector not as employees but as operators of their own farms. In addition, the migrated farmers tend to operate their own farms without mutual support with their local neighbors in the migrated rural areas (Yoon et al, 2018). The internal urban-to-rural immigrants tend to build their own mutual networks among the immigrants, not with existing farmers in migrated regions and to produce high-valued agricultural products such as organic vegetables (Yoon et al. 2018; Nawakura, 2019). This means that the internal urban-to-rural immigrants play only limited roles in mutual assistance such as *pumasi* for existing farmers. In other words, the impact of internal immigrants on agricultural labor shortage for existing farmers is minor.

Meanwhile, some internal immigrants began farming by another style distinguished from conventional family-based one: Agriculture operation by enterprises. Though South Korea's Farmland Act of 1996 restricts market transaction so as to prevent landowners' exploitation of tenant farm workers officially, the rural-to-urban migration since the 1960s has encouraged rent and/or sell of farmlands practically.<sup>8</sup> For more effective use of the farmlands, the government has deregulated private enterprises' purchase of farmlands and operation of farming.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting those circumstances, the farmlands

<sup>8</sup> While the Farmland Act restricts the transaction of farmlands, internal rural-to-urban immigrants and retired farmers have often rent their farmlands others. For the detail of the rural-to-urban migration and structural changes in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, see OECD (1999).

<sup>9</sup> The effective use of farmlands and the improvement of agricultural entrepreneurship were crucial policy subjects also in the preparation for international competition under a series of free trade agreements (FTAs) in the 2000s (Ivanova, 2018).



operated by private enterprises have been increased nationwide for decades.<sup>10</sup> The enterprise-operated farmlands have demanded farm workers as employees, which cannot be supplied by the urban-to-rural internal migration.

Reflecting the circumstances above, South Korea began to accept foreign workers in agricultural sector in the mid-2000s. The South Korean government launched visa programs for foreigners to work as unskilled laborers in 2004. Though the share of employed farm workers in the unskilled foreign laborers is only 20% to 30%, more than 6,000 foreign workers have entered into agricultural sector annually since the mid-2010s (Takayasu, 2020). Most of those foreign workers are engaged in agriculture as seasonal workers, who work in seeding, harvesting, and picking fruits (JCMK, 2023). While the internal migration to rural areas is still increased, also the demand for the seasonal foreign workers is increased.<sup>11</sup> This means that the inflow of internal migration to farm sector has limited impact on the shortages of unskilled farming employees for existing farming households.

## **Conclusion**

This study asked the impact of internal urban-to-rural migration for agricultural labor shortage and for the status of rural communities in terms of agricultural works in Japan and South Korea. As well as other developed countries in the West, the two Asian developed countries have been suffering from labor shortage in farm sector for last several decades. In order to secure the number of farming households, however, the two countries have implemented a unique policy: The promotion of internal, not international, migration from urban areas to rural ones. Under the governmental promotion, large number of urban dwellers have migrated to their countries' rural areas and began farming. However, they are engaged in agriculture not as employed workers but as operators and not as full-time farmers but as part-time ones. In Japan, the average size of the internal immigrants' households to rural areas are only two or three members per family and they cannot afford to offer personnels for their neighbors' agricultural works. In South Korea, because the internal immigrants tend to build their mutual assistance not with existing local farmers but with other internal immigrants, they play only limited role in mutual assistance among existing farmers. As a result, while large number of internal migrations to rural areas occur, both the two countries have increased the inflow of foreign workers as unskilled agricultural laborers since the 2010s. And the impact of the internal migration on existing rural communities are limited in terms of agricultural works.

This study, however, is based on literature review on previous studies and statistic data, and interview in limited areas in the two countries. The empirical analysis based on nationwide interview and fieldworks is a future subject.

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<sup>10</sup> The author asked Mr. Da-jin An, a staff the Farm Han-nong Corporation, an enterprise to operate agriculture in South Korea, the origin to purchase farmlands by E-mail. Mr. An, however, answered that the corporation had no information on the process of purchasing their farmlands because the land had been purchased in 'too old days'. This indicates the possibility that the nation's farmlands had broadly been transacted actively prior to the Farmland Act of 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Since the mid-2020s, the South Korean government has issued extra visas for the seasonal foreign workers in farm sector (Philippines News Agency, 2024).

## Appendix

### Interviewees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Language</b>
Nayoro City Office	July 4, 2022	(By telephone)	Japanese
Da-jin An	July 22, 2022	(By E-mail)	Korean
Kazuo Kasami	May 10, 2023	Chiyoda City, Tokyo, Japan	Japanese
Hazuki Dwyer	October 13, 2023	Nantan City, Kyoto, Japan	Japanese
Yuya Nabeshima	October 23, 2023	Matsuyama City, Ehime, Japan	Japanese

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**Contact email:** [republic\\_of\\_korea\\_1948@hotmail.com](mailto:republic_of_korea_1948@hotmail.com)