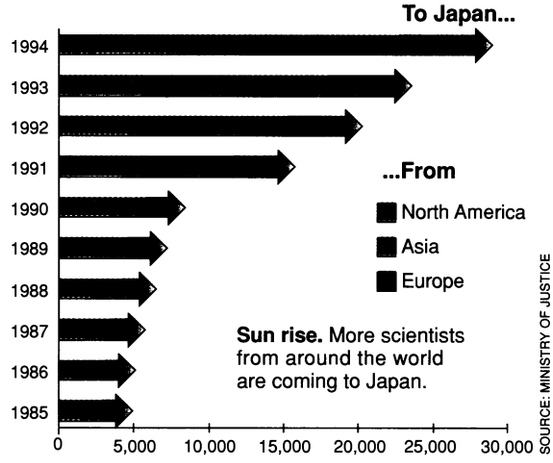
WORKING IN JAPAN

Gaijin Find Balmy Climate For Cutting-Edge Science



British physicist Peter Parbrook looks back on the 4 years he spent as a foreign researcher in Japan as a turning point in his career—and his life. In fact, he was so enamored of the experience that he has compiled information for a book,* which he hopes will entice others to follow in his footsteps. As a postdoc at Toshiba Corp., he did cutting-edge research in optoelectronics and built up a record of publications that has helped him snare a lectureship in electronic and electrical engineering at Sheffield University in the United Kingdom. He also had the good fortune to meet his future wife.

Parbrook's experience may have been unusually sunny, but his tale is common enough to make many Western government officials wonder why so few of their young compatriots take advantage of the many positions available to foreign researchers in Japan—and why their numbers pale in comparison with the flow of Japanese researchers going abroad (see chart).

* *Gaijin Scientist*, P. Parbrook, Ed., British Chamber of Commerce in Japan, 1996. Information on opportunities in Japan can be found on the NSF Tokyo office's Web page: http://www.twics.com/~nsftokyo/home.html

"The majority report having a professionally rewarding experience," says Larry Weber, former head of the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) liaison office in Tokyo. "On top of that, most say emphatically that it was a culturally rewarding experience."

Historically, foreign scientists have avoided working in Japan because of the high cost of living and the sorry state of many university labs. But Parbrook and other visiting researchers say those reasons are no longer valid. Although Japan is an expensive place to live, many grants are paid in yen by Japanese governmental agencies or host companies, and most scientists say the stipends or salaries are more than adequate. David Yamaguchi, an American dendrochronologist who recently completed a 2-year visit at the governmental Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute in Sapporo on a Japan Science and Technology Agency fellowship, has managed to save roughly $1800 a month, more than enough to finance some traveling and still build a nice nest egg. "Almost all foreign researchers I've met here are happy [with their financial situation]," he says.

Another outdated notion is that state-of-the-art equipment is hard to come by. Bridget O'Neill, a U.S. geophysicist working on high-pressure mineral physics at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Solid-State Physics, says her lab is "very well equipped" and that she has access to specialized facilities at other institutes, including a synchrotron beam line at the National Laboratory for High-Energy Physics. When it comes to arranging access to such facilities, says O'Neill, who received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, "the level of cooperation between different groups here makes it very easy."

That is not to say that all obstacles have

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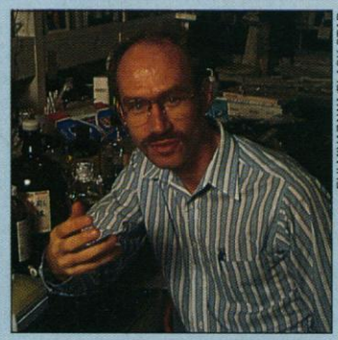
Risky Career Move Pays Off

Marc Lamphier is a research associate at the University of Tokyo School of Medicine. Born in the United States, he received his doctoral degree in biology from Harvard University in 1992. He has worked in Japan for 5 years and holds a grant from the Research Development Corp. of Japan's Presto program. His e-mail address is: lamphier@m.u-tokyo.ac.jp.



ELJI MIYAZAWA/BLACK STAR

I knew it was a risky career move, and my graduate adviser thought I was a little crazy. But a postdoc in Japan seemed like an interesting cultural experience and a chance to explore some unique career opportunities. Having majored in Japanese as an undergraduate at Earlham College in Indiana, I felt comfortable with the language. And two grants, both funded primarily by the Japanese government, paid my way.

The initial problem was finding a good lab. I spent a lot of time searching scientific journals and writing to prospective hosts. My hard work paid off with an invitation to Tadatsugu Taniguchi's lab at Osaka University, internationally renowned for its work in studying the cellular responses to cytokines.

When I arrived in March 1991, the 20 or so members of the lab made a genuine effort to welcome me. However, because I was the only postdoc—of any nationality—it took time to fit in. Much of the research was organized in groups directed by the three assistant professors, and for several months I felt I wasn't consulted about research, nor given any real responsibilities. Fortunately, as the sole U.S.-born scientist in the lab, I was consulted extensively by colleagues writing up their results for publication. This interaction sparked ideas that led to new research, of which I became a part.

Five years after I arrived in Japan, I'm surprised to find myself still here. I had intended to return to the United States after finishing my postdoc, but a generous 3-year grant from a government-funded research corporation has enabled me to pursue independent research into the regulation of cell growth by transcription factors. I'll face another hard choice next fall, when my grant expires. Although Japanese universities and companies seem eager to internationalize their staffs at the entry level, it is not clear if foreign scientists will be promoted to positions of genuine responsibility.

Regardless of what I decide to do, I'm glad I came. Living in a different culture and working in a world-class lab, I've learned that doing research in Tokyo isn't much different from working anywhere else.

–Marc Lamphier