

Transition and Issues in Studies on Urban Poverty in Japan

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1. Focus on Poverty as a Specific Area Issue

Similar to the case for other countries, sociological studies on urban poverty in Japan started as an analysis of the present state of specific areas with the primary aim of imposing a series of measures intended to promote welfare in areas that had been seen as having high level of poverty, crime, unemployment, family disorganization, and other social ills.

Comprehending the facts and reality of poverty in the urban underclass areas of Japan started as a way to address the social problems that appeared following the rapid growth of the population. With the onset of the Meiji Restoration and a civil war, the population in Tokyo fell to about half of that in the Edo Era (580,000 in 1872). It started to recover soon after, hitting the one million mark again within the next 20 years. However, the housing supply and other aspects of the living environment could not support this rapidly increasing population. In Tokyo and also in Osaka and other large cities in Japan, people who made a living by recycling and working other low-income jobs began squatting and living in slums. Some even lived alone because they were too poor to start a family (Nishizawa 2008). Only a few journalists, such as Gen'nosuke Yokoyama (1871–1915) and Yaso'o Kusama (1875–1945), visited such areas on fact-finding missions to describe the living conditions of those in poverty. Their findings showed that such individuals were unregistered, meaning that they could not receive the same educational opportunities or public welfare benefits as other citizens (Yokoyama 1985, Kusama 1992).

As a modern state, Japan had developed its welfare policies between the Meiji Era and the beginning of the Shōwa era. These programs were carried out directly to the poor and/or disabled as 'beneficence' or 'charity' (Iwata 1995, 2007, 2008). After World War II, the Public Livelihood Protection Act (*Seikatsu-hogo-hō*) was enacted in 1946 (Old Act) and revised in 1950 (New Act). With this act, poverty was assessed on the basis of a minimum standard of living. On the other hand, during a period of high economic growth (1955–1973), the understanding of poverty had been limited to discussions in the context of developing countries (Iwata 2008).

At that time, poverty seemed to be found in only specific neighborhoods in Japanese society, and each instance was therefore treated as an exceptional case. One such case was that of *Yoseba*, where cheap rooms or lodging houses (flophouses, single-room occupancies) for day-labor male workers were concentrated. Kamagasaki

(Airin) in Osaka, San'ya in Tokyo, and Kotobuki in Yokohama were known as the big three *Yoseba* in Japan. During the rapid economic growth period, many day-laborers from *Yoseba* worked in construction sites all over the country at the bottom of the social pyramid, serving as the invisible backbone of Japanese economic development. During this period, some social workers and activists recorded their activities and provided portrayals of how such people lived (Watanabe 1977, Nomoto 1982=1996). Although those writings gave general society a rare glimpse into the underclass areas, they still tended to view such areas as 'unusual', 'peculiar', or 'hard to approach', and therefore subjected them to discriminatory treatment.

2. Focus on Poverty as a Homeless Issue

After the end of the so-called 'bubble economy' during the 1980s, Japanese society began facing long-term economic depression and unemployment. The number of welfare recipients had increased, and society started to view poverty as a social as opposed to an individual issue.

From the perspective of urban and regional sociology, some academics engaged in social research on *Yoseba* and other urban underclass areas and viewed *Yoseba* residents and day-laborers as survivors who had lived long lives despite facing constant oppression, discrimination, or exploitation as lower-class laborers. Through his research on *Yoseba*, Hideo Aoki revealed how laborers lived as human beings and identified a social and industrial hierarchy that subjected them to discriminatory treatment (1989, 2000). At the same time, several anthropologists from the West engaged in similar research as a result of that on Japanese *Yoseba* (Stevens 1997, Fowler 1998, Gill 2001).

In addition, as concrete research had been conducted on people in urban underclass areas, moving from one place to another to find construction and other jobs was often seen as the day-laborer lifestyle. Before the word '*hōmuresu*' (homeless) came into widespread use in Japanese society, people had assumed that those sleeping outside and on the streets were '*furō-sha*' (vagrants) and viewed them as lazy. With the recession and changes in industrial structures, the actual number of people who lost their jobs and homes and were forced to live on the street increased, so that their existence became visible in urban spaces such as station yards, public parks, and commercial facilities.

In 1991, some people living in and around Shinjuku Station in central Tokyo grouped together and built their own housing from cardboard (the *dan-bōru* in public open spaces in the front of Shinjuku Station was known as '*Shinjuku dan-bōru mura*' (Shinjuku cardboard village)', and soon became visibly recognizable by many passersby. At its peak, more than 200 people lived in such housing, and some citizens even joined as supporters and volunteers. Some young artists produced paintings on the cardboard houses, and some supporters started broadcasting from the village. Such incidents

helped the word 'hōmuresu' (homeless) spread in popular usage (Inaba 1997)¹. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan conducted the first nationwide homeless count in 2003 and publicly disclosed the results: there were, in total, 25,296 homeless persons in Japan, including 7,603 in Osaka and 5,927 in the 23 special wards of Tokyo.

In 2002, the law to support the homeless becoming financially independent (*Homeless-no-jiritsu-no-shien-tō-ni-kansuru-tokubetsu-sochihō*) was established. Regarding the self-support system for the homeless, some sociologists have pointed out that the system itself has to screen out those who prefer to earn money by recycling and are ill-adapted for so-called 'regular work' (Kitagawa 2008). With institutionalization and the identification of 'homeless issues,' study and research observing the attitudes, inner struggles, and interactions with fellow homeless persons and greater society have developed through describing this population as disadvantaged by social inequalities (Aoki et al. 1999, Watanabe 2010).

3. Aging and Increasing Welfare Needs in Urban Underclass Areas

Because of the rapidly aging population in Japan, the number of welfare recipients has increased nationwide, and poverty has become the main social issue of the country. In recent Japanese society, the number of welfare recipient households, especially single-person households, has increased, and most urgently, the elderly comprise the highest percentage of welfare recipients [Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2005–2015].

In March 2016, there were more than 826,000 welfare recipient households over the age of 65 years, which represented more than 50% of all first-time recipients². More than 90% of them (the over-65-year-old welfare recipient households) were living alone. The welfare recipient households accounted for 6% of all senior households over 65-years-old (1,221,000 households). Both the number and percentage of seniors living alone in poverty have therefore been increasing.

For the elderly living on welfare, finding housing has become increasingly difficult. This is mainly because of the lack of affordable barrier-free housing for single-living elders, age discrimination in privately owned rental accommodations, and prejudice and discrimination regarding the formerly homeless. Therefore, with limited housing options, there are many cases in which the needy and formerly homeless choose to live in lodging houses upon becoming welfare recipients (Yamamoto 2013).

¹ This village was demolished by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 1994. Soon after, the villagers and supporters rebuilt the housing, but faced forcible removal by the Metropolitan Government in 1996. The rest of the residents continued to live in cardboard housing until a few were killed in a fire in 1998 (Inaba, 2013).

² Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2016, "*Hihogosha-chosa*" (approximate figures from March 2016). (Japanese)

In relation to this, underclass areas, which are generally poverty-ridden, have undergone changes in their populations, problems, and participants. Since the latter half of the 1990s, the number of day laborers has dramatically decreased while the homeless population has increased in each area. The number of welfare recipients increased to the point where each underclass area began focusing on human rights, life skills of the homeless, and social and welfare support for the elderly and disabled (Mizuuchi 2007). In addition, the increasing number of welfare recipients living in day-laborer lodging caused local organizations to change their activities and objectives in each underclass area from those for laborers to those for single male seniors living alone.

As the number of those who could exit homelessness and settle into rental accommodations or other supportive housing increased, some academics started giving attention to the factors behind this and attempted to explain associations with social change at the macro level (Marr 2015). In addition, some new approaches focused on support for homeless people and their relations (Yamakita 2014).

4. Rise in Irregular Employment and Poverty among Youth

At the end of 2008, just after the worldwide recession triggered by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, many irregular dispatched workers who had lost their jobs grouped together and formed a tent city known as *Toshi-koshi-haken-mura* (Dispatch Workers' New Year Village) in front of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in central Tokyo.

All of the country's attention was focused on this incident and more broadly on the issues of job instability and the housing and living conditions of dispatched workers (Inaba 2009). In addition to urban and regional studies, other academic studies on youth and families have increasingly focused on poverty issues, especially in regard to seniors, single mothers, and youth with broken family relationships. For a long time, homeless issues were viewed as specific to male laborers; however, academic fieldwork, intensive interviews, and other reports have provided understanding of additional phenomena and people facing poverty in urban spaces in Japan (Iijima 2011).

5. Remaining Issues to be Considered

Although poverty has become a nationwide social issue in present-day Japan, there is still room for additional research and considerations in academia. First, homeless issues in Japan have been often viewed as male-oriented, and this gender-based framework is not an accurate reflection of reality. Some studies have started to focus on poverty among women, describing it as having a structural basis in relation to gender-biased labor, discrimination, and violence (Kosugi & Miyamoto 2015). Though the number is small, there are several outstanding studies that focus on homeless women in urban Japan (Maruyama 2013).

In addition, poverty among migrants in Japan has not been adequately examined. Academic studies on Korean residents in Japan or Japanese Koreans

(*Zainichi-kankoku-chôsen-jin*) have described poor living conditions, discrimination, and poverty, and other studies have focused on older Korean people left behind in regard to the economic and social successes of their former fellows; the same aspects have been adopted in terms of poverty issues among elderly outcasts (*Buraku*) in local cities (Jeon 2015). Focusing on so-called 'newcomer' migrants, or those who moved to Japan after the 1980s, some academic and practical approaches have attempted to characterize their actual living and working conditions and examine their poverty from the viewpoint of systematic discrimination in Japanese society (SMJ 2011).

In recent years, the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion have entered the discussion of poverty in Japan. Moreover, housing and shelters for those who have exited homelessness have become more multifaceted, and this phenomenon has been examined academically (Yamada 2016). Nationwide, some nonprofit organizations in each city have tried to help the vulnerable come out of isolation and start their lives over again through a variety of welfare programs (Okuda et al. 2014); this kind of practice has often been discussed in relation to acceptance of and cooperation among the vulnerable in local contexts. Further academic studies that combine these local practical programs into a theoretical framework are expected.

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