

Kamagasaki: The Legacy of Poverty and Uprising in Urban Spaces

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Global History

Inside the southern edge of Osaka's Loop Line, the human cost of globalization is manifesting (Mizuuchi 2000, 1). Known as Japan's largest slum, Airin is inhabited primarily by aging, single men who arrive to the region to utilize the *yoseba*, an open-air labor market for day laborers (Aoki 2003, 361; Yamaguchi et al., 2011: 731; Gill 2000, 127-128). Living in *doya* — high-occupancy, inexpensive, inn-style lodging — these men comprise an impoverished and unstable workforce (Gill 2000, 128; Tsuyoshi Haraguchi as cited in Country Report 2009, 375). Necessary for the construction of Osaka's new symbolic architecture, the labor force simultaneously jeopardized the city's reputation as socially responsible (Wilson 2012, 160; Mizuuchi 2000, 7). The workers are underprivileged and underrepresented in the political system, a product of "[intensifying] intercorporate competition" in a deindustrializing city in which economic recession and fiscal downturns have produced a shrinking demand for labor (Aiko 2003, 361-362; Mizuuchi 2000, 6). These economic events often serve as catalysts that produce violent uprising (Mizuuchi 2000, 4). However, Kamagasaki's uprisings are not only the product of economic climate, but also a deficit of political power among subaltern populations of *yoseba* laborers. (Ong 2011, 2). Attributing the violent social movements in Japan solely to economic and political climates and power disparity ignores social and cultural factors that have enabled Airin to persist as a concentrated slum across generations of economic development.

The Airin district, known until 1966 as Kamagaski (Röpke1999, 5), became synonymous with poverty, labor, and occasional outbursts of violence in Japan's post-war era after 1961(Mizuuchi 2000, 4). Partially produced by lack of urban planning in the early twentieth

century and a tradition of encouraged urban growth, the space itself represented a problem even before the first post-war riot in 1918 (Alred 1984, 55-56; Mizuuchi 2003, 16). After the 1880s, southern Osaka transitioned from a hotbed of industry in the nineteenth century to a container of concentrated human capital responsible for the construction of the new symbolic city (Mizuuchi 2003, 12; Mori 2009, 375). Kamagasaki's history of turbulent uprising began in 1918 with a Rice Riot, one of many across the country staged in opposition to rice seizures (Gordon 1988, 146-147). In 1918, the Airin district was considered a ghetto and by 1961, when the first post-war riot erupted, was home to a variety of impoverished urban dwellers from Korean migrants (the result of Japanese colonization) to large numbers of laborers who depended on *yoseba* markets and construction jobs (Mizuuchi 2003, 15-16; Mizuuchi 2000, 3). Populated by a compacted, poor, and seemingly restless citizenry, the area represented an area of volatility that was subsequently renamed the Airin district (meaning lovely neighborhood). Centers were built with the aim of rehabilitating and supporting the laborers that congregated there (Mizuuchi 2000, 4; Gill, 2000: 128).

The concentration of Japanese urban poor and lack of infrastructure in the Airin district/Kamagasaki prior to the 1960s owed largely to the combination of economic incentives for migration and unplanned developments prior to 1919 (Mizuuchi 2000, 2-4; Alred 1984, 55-56; Röpke 1999, 24). The year 1909 marked the first milestone in urban planning in Great Britain with the implementation of the Town Planning Act, a policy that transferred to the Asian nation by 1919 in the form of the Urban Building Act, likely the result of British-Japanese international relations (Alred 1984, 57). In accepting the policy and implementing it in Japanese law, the nation not only began a national process of urban assemblage, but also effectively ended unplanned urban development (Mizuuchi 2003, 16-17). This event became important in the Airin

district's genesis because it signified a first step in the process of restructuring the urban space that has continued into the twenty-first in accordance with the demands of multifaceted growth in Osaka. Interestingly, perhaps “ironically” — as Dr. Mizuuchi writes in his 2003 analysis of Airin district/ Kamagasaki's urban and spatial development — the 1960s, which marked a growing need and support for *yoseba*, produced an “Airin model” of class and worker containment to the inner city (Mizuuchi 2003, 25). This policy aligned with economic and political interests that sought preservation of the suburbs as residential spaces for middle-class professionals who were urbanizing Japan, an attractive demographic for entrepreneurial Osaka (Mizuuchi 2003, 25; Alred 1984, 60).

Entrepreneurialism and Growth

From the emergence of Osaka as an industrialized, globally-relevant city at the end of the nineteenth century to the current state of “deyosebaization,” the demands on its urban governance structures and goals have led to continued modification of its urban form (Aiko 2003, 362; Mizuuchi 2000, 4-8; Gill 2000, 129; Mori 2009, 375; Wilson 2012, 159-160). The transition in Japan from industrialism to entrepreneurialism relied upon economic growth along with the political desire to pursue it. Japan has traditionally valued urban growth. In light of the post-war boom and increased global attention, Osaka was perfectly poised to follow Tokyo's rise to global city status the latter half of the nineteenth century (Alred 1984, 55-57; White 1998, 452). However, Osaka's rise from the ashes of industry did not occur as a singular, even process, nor did its effects distribute across classes for the mutual benefit of all. Symbolic and literal city

builders were spatially segregated by city policy and norms of “who does or does not do what, where, and when” (Pred 1990, 12; Mizuuchi 2003, 25; Mizuuchi 2000, 2). Growth of the knowledge-based economy has separated collared classes even further; urban structures reflect entrepreneurial desires and reject the manual labor sectors in order to tend to them.

Contemporary cities in the modern era are epitomized by their architecture as symbolic representations of competitive global fitness, lifestyle, and class-wide affluence (Ong 2011, 1; Lowry and McCann 2011, 182). The image of the city has taken on new, greater importance in the face of place wars and city branding (Short and Kim 1999, 120). Entrepreneurial branding began in Osaka in the 1960s and occurs against a historical backdrop rooted in warfare and reemergence (Röpke 1999, 5; Alden 1984, 55-57; Mizuuchi 2000, 4; Wilson 2012, 159). Yet it is this same entrepreneurialism that has perpetuated the social, cultural, and economic problems of the Airin district. It capitalizes on regions that are historically impoverished and exploits them for labor and space (Mizuuchi 2003, 13-16; Gill 2000, 128; Bunnell et al. 2004, 4). In doing so, entrepreneurialism perpetuates traditions of spatial poverty (Mizuuchi 2003, 28).

For Japan, the “nineteen-sixties, in particular, constituted a delicate moment in the evolution of national self-images” (Wilson 2012, 159). This evolution occurred in the form of “spectacles” such as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and Expo ’70, which was held in Osaka (Wilson 2012, 159). In undertaking large, globally-visible events, Japan actively pursued genesis on the world stage (Wilson 2012, 160). As the nation was remaking its image, cities were reworked and restructured to reflect the new ideal projected on the national level. In the flurry of activity that accompanied such “spectacles,” it was not the new middle class formed in the Japanese economic boom that toiled. Infrastructure building for events such as Expo ’70 fell to the hordes of human capital occupying Osaka’s southern slum surrounding the *yoseba* in Kamagasaki

(Tsuyoshi Haraguchi as cited in *Country Report* 2009, 375). Later attempts to rebrand the city would call it “City that Respects Human Rights,” and “City Ideal for Living” (Mizuuchi 2000, 7). However, rebranding the city and nation could not erase the remnants of poverty in Osaka, nor could it combat the issues surrounding a homeless labor force. Instead, it “attempts to whitewash exploitation” of a subaltern class of people in favor of a more business- and lifestyle-friendly approach (Haines 2011, 177).

Prior to the 1990 financial crisis that decimated Japan’s construction industry, Airin was a nonissue (Aiko 2003, 357). In fact, Airin and the Kamagasaki *yoseba* were instrumental in building global Osaka, as discussed previously (Gill 2000, 127). *Yoseba* markets epitomized the multi-class construction of the entrepreneurial city. In pursuit of the entrepreneurial ideal of the urban landscape, the differential between active participants in globalization and bystanders is pronounced, but both have roles (Short and Kim 1999, 117; Giddens as cited in Olds 2001, 19). Cities promote territorial advantages to entice growth facilitators from professional classes and mobile capital from corporations as a means to achieve the global ideal that keeps the city growing and sustained (Olds 2001, 18; Short and Kim 1999, 120). Doing this requires not only professional-class players and financial backing, but also the low-end service sector to physically construct the symbols on which the city’s identity is based (Olds 2001, 19; Ong 2011, 19; Short and Kim 1999, 6). It is only when this type of growth and building are no longer possible or necessary that lower classes, such as Airin’s construction laborers, become problematic.

Analysis

In addressing Osaka's formation as a "global" city and its implications on the lower class — especially homeless construction workers — I acknowledge the importance of political and economic histories and interests. In addition, I accept the role of social and cultural norms. Assigning an exclusively postcolonial, neoliberal perspective, we construct a repetitive, capitalist-dependant narrative, denying unique sociocultural factors in favor of "universal truths" (Ong 2011, 2). Universal modes of analysis treat capitalism as an ultimate power in the construction of the contemporary global city (Ong 2011, 2-7). Yet more inclusive sociocultural analyses (as opposed to economic and political) allow us to build a layered understanding of cities that contrasts the universal truths of capitalism and emphasizes unique variants within urban environments (Ong 2011, 3-6). The story of Kamagaski, now known as Osaka's Airin district, is neither short nor simple. It does not easily conform to linear, neoliberal, and economy-driven analyses. Although the area, which is overrun with homelessness, chronic disease, and power resistance, seems to fall in line with an economic cause-and-effect theory, I assert that the decline of Osaka is not so easily pigeon-holed into political economy. Complex social components also help explain why the inhabitants of the space remain subaltern subjects, despite decades of economic development and generations of growth (Yamaguchi et al. 2011, 731). In acknowledging the role of these factors, I do not reject political and economic analyses but stipulate that, in exclusivity, these modes of analysis serve to skew a multidimensional picture by compressing it into a flattened representation.

In analyzing the development and continuance of the Airin district as a space overflowing with impoverished and voiceless masses, political history and economic turbulence play key roles. However, neither functions exclusively to effectively capture and explain a phenomenon that is perpetuated socially and culturally as well as politically and economically. At the core, the

issues that have arisen in Airin are about the creation of the modern global city, the multiclass participation it requires, and the uneven distribution of beneficial and deleterious effects. The acts of globalizing and worlding are produced through a combination of forces interacting with the social, political, and economic environment on a multitude of levels. In doing so, the processes create unevenness that percolates through class structures and shapes the social and cultural environments within the urban setting (Olds 2001, 19; Chua 2011, 34). These are factors that do not lend well to the postcolonial perspective that cites capitalism as an exclusive mechanism driving the events in urban society (Ong 2011, 6). In dispute is not whether economics and capitalism are at play in the creation of certain urban scenarios; Osaka particularly has shown that they are. At issue are hegemonic perspectives that homogenize unique urban environments and events (Mizuuchi 2000, 6; Ong 2011, 2).

Problems in the Airin District: Space

Japan's "strong urban tradition" created a basis for urban development in the boom of the post-World War II era (Alden 1984, 55-57). This framework enabled economic growth to occur on top of territoriality that has existed in Osaka since the 1880s, when the city became an industrial hub of cotton spinning (Mizuuchi 2003, 12). As a result of industry and the possibility of low-skill labor jobs, Osaka — specifically Kamagaski/Airin district — became a mecca for workers and laborers from the Japanese colonies and for *buraku* (outcast people; Mizuuchi 2000, 2). It was this same population class, especially the *buraku*, who would fuel Osaka's *yoseba*, the

largest in the nation, as development began in earnest after World War II (Gill 2000, 127-128; Mizuuchi 2000, 3).

The Airin district of Osaka has been labeled a container for human capital since the late nineteenth century (Mizuuchi 2000, 2). From cotton spinners to *yoseba* laborers, the space has drawn low-class, low-skill labor for the benefit of the entrepreneurial city and class development while exploiting those at the bottom (Gill 2000, 127-129; Wilson 2012, 160; Mizuuchi 2003, 25). In this process, the city of Osaka has capitalized on the socially and culturally isolated, including the *buraku* and Korean migrants (Mizuuchi 2000, 2). Through the experience of urban planning, class reliance, and social movements, Osaka exemplifies the experience of the urban poor in the entrepreneurial city. Those with little policy-making voice bear the burden of city construction in the physical sense while middle- and upper-class professionals and elites enjoy the benefits (Short and Kim 1999, 118).

The persisting problems of the Kamagasaki/ Airin district as an Osaka slum stem from the space itself, as opposed to broader factors of urban development and change (e.g., politics, economics, culture), although they do play a role. From 1960 until 1990, the Japanese economy grew rapidly, especially in cities. Yet this fiscal growth did not manifest evenly on all fronts (Aiko 2003, 362). It is understood that the new model of city is optimized not for evenness but for the needs of the professional-driven, entrepreneurial space, accommodating and facilitating middle-class growth (Olds 2001, 19-20). Continuation of Osaka's slum indicates a problem beyond unevenness. In the Airin district, the space itself impedes development. Recognized for more than a century as a center of labor, poverty, violence and social ostracism, the district has become a brand of disenfranchisement and powerlessness equal in the strength of its reputation to that of the Roppongi's luxury and style in Tokyo. The late 1990s brought the problematic

concentration of homeless resulting from “deyosebazation,” ultimately leading to the loss of Osaka’s 2008 Olympic bid (Mizuuchi 2000, 7; Aiko 2003, 364-365). If Osaka continues to pursue entrepreneurial and global development, it is critical that urban government learn to cope with the symbolic meaning of the space in the minds of citizens and inhabitants alike, and overcome them to produce a city that is socially harmonious with the expectations of the classes it wishes to attract.

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