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Abstract

Urban Japan has presented an opportunity for ethnographers to appreciate the heterogeneity and creativity of contemporary Japanese life as well as persistent issues of inequality and marginalization sometimes hidden in plain sight. Japan's cities were transformed by new post-war mobilities and displacements; they were also locations of new forms of settlement and subjectivity. Ethnographies have focused on the durability of local tradition and identity, as well as the subtle negotiations between insiders and outsiders that urbanization amplified. Japan's cities also provide a glimpse at the extremes of the political economic spectrum, from impoverished day-labor enclaves to the white-collar salaryman. At the turn of the century, urban ethnographers turned to music, fashion and youth subcultures. Japanese cities are not only sites for the consolidation of capital, but also places where futuristic utopian dreams and apocalyptic echoes of war and disaster are shaped and circulated.

Keywords

Japan, Urban Anthropology, Modernity, Identity, Globalization

Main text**Introduction: Urban Pasts**

Japan is one of the most urbanized countries in the world, with over 90% of its 126 million inhabitants residing in cities. Japan's urbanization reflects the rapid political and economic upheavals of the modern era and their accompanying shifts in livelihoods, ideology and aesthetics. The urban anthropology of Japan considers the relationship between these changes as they impact both local, everyday practices as well as global flows of people, goods and cultures. In order to balance both its symbolic role as the producer of national identity and its role as a point of connection with the rest of the world, the city must continually make and remake itself. The urban anthropology of Japan has followed this process, exploring the ways it makes city life at once so organized and so surprising.

The Work of Finding One's Place

Ron Dore (1958) conducted his landmark ethnographic study of 'Shitayama-cho', a neighborhood in urban Tokyo, shortly after the end of the US post-war occupation (1946-52). Japan was still on the verge of a rapid and dramatic shift to an urban-centred society and Dore's ethnography not only sought to capture this change, but also to move the anthropological narrative away from conventional documentation of 'traditional' lifestyles, to a dynamic depiction of lives caught somewhere between the traditional and the modern. One of the key questions for Dore, following the wartime work of

Ruth Benedict, was the whether the Japanese adoption of modern American governance and ways of life would result in a more ‘westernized’ subject. While early twentieth-century theorists popularized the notion of the Japanese city as a collection of village-like communities retaining traditional values of self-organization and cooperation (Schmidtpott 2012), Dore found that in Shitayama-cho, institutions of education, work, religion and civic life had a different character than those in the village. There was a sense that the domains of work and home, public and private, male and female were all becoming more separate while remaining complementary and interdependent in distinctly modern ways. The rise in middle-class, male-dominated professions and new ideals concerning the nuclear household developed further by the construction of urban mass transportation and commuter “bed towns”. This reorganization of space came with a reorganization of time through new rhythms and highly rationalized time schedules. If past depictions of Japan were either those of traditions in decline or of a static ‘personality’, the legacy of Dore’s study of urban Japan was the foregrounding of citizens’ eagerness for change, upward social and economic mobility, educational advancement, and for new configurations of marriage and family life that were yet to develop in the countryside.

By the 1980s, Tokyo had become one of the largest and most important cities in the world, the center of Japan’s affluence and power. Yet when Theodore Bestor (1989) conducted his fieldwork in another Tokyo neighborhood, he remained concerned with many of the same questions as Dore. How was a sense of community identity maintained in the wake of rapid economic development? Both class and generation formed potential sites of conflict in urban Japan, and community events and festivals continued to play a role in easing these divisions by performing cohesion and identity. Similar issues were explored by Jennifer Robertson (1994) in her ethnography of ‘Kodaira,’ a Tokyo suburb where long-time residents legitimated their dominance and integrated newcomers into social networks via community events. Using symbols that recalled a nostalgic sense of ‘*furusato*’ (hometown village), Kodaira natives demonstrated the semiotic fluidity of locality-based idioms as they entered urban discourses of ‘community-making’ (*machitsukuri*), a phrase that has been employed in various civic projects in cities across Japan. Cities, then, are both materially and socially constructed; residents and visitors alike are encouraged to traverse and discover the urban space through modern performances of mobility, consumption and self-discovery. For others, the city provided a means to escape from life in the countryside – a place to break with a former identity or to just become anonymous.

Japan’s rise to become the world’s largest economy was also accompanied by both internal discussions about its unique and superior culture, as well as globally circulated stereotypes of the overworked city-dwelling ‘salaryman.’ Anthropologists have produced some of the most important counter-narratives to these discourses through ethnographies of life in neighborhoods like Tokyo’s San’ya (Fowler 1996) and Yokohama’s Kotobuki-cho (Gill 2000). These had long been areas where casual labor for urban construction projects could be found, but with the decline in unions and liberalization of the economy, they became impoverished and highly dependent on welfare assistance. Those who remained in these areas, were mostly single men, often migrants from the countryside, who, by the early 2000s, were getting old. Today, these urban zones of abandonment are known less for their labor than for the many charities and volunteer groups providing meals and shelter for the impoverished elderly residents.

Decades of population ageing and declines in fertility have caused extreme depopulation in rural areas, but cities are also being transformed by demographic change. Iza Kavedžija (2019) examines how older men and women living in Osaka organized mutual aid groups, partly because they felt unable to rely on their children for care and security in later life. This enabled them both to stay socially active and find purpose and meaning. Meaning-making in the city is not limited to secular activities. Members of popular new religious groups such as Sūkyō Mahikari and Risshōkōseikai are mainly drawn from urban centers, but older residents, in particular, also participate in more mainstream forms of religious observance, such as memorial rituals that provide opportunities for creating new narrative connections between identity and place.

Urban subcultures and creative expression

Urban areas, in Tokyo specifically, have generated numerous subcultures that have stood in direct defiance of the ideology of the typical white-collar worker. Whereas urban neighborhoods had been characterized by a certain industry or civic function (Tsukiji with the fish market, Shinjuku with government, Jimbōchō with booksellers, etc.), subcultural groups, referred to as “tribes” (*zoku*), reterritorialized urban spaces based on their aesthetic character and forms of leisure and consumption. Daliot-Bul (2014), for example, argued that local urban subcultures produced a new category of Japanese “youth culture,” practiced through subversive, conspicuous and playful fashions, language, and behavior. As time passed, these *zoku* gave way to new urban subcultures.

Two of the most well-known modern subcultures, *gyaru* and *lolita*, were also associated with specific urban locations, Shibuya and Harajuku, respectively. *Gyaru*, originating in the 1980s, were notable for “Californian Valley Girl”-style of bleached hair, tanned skin, heavy makeup, short skirts, and masculine, rude speech (Miller, 2004). Contrastingly, *lolita*’s were defined by Victorian inspired, doll-like dresses, and feminine, lady-like speech. Although harshly judged like other subcultural groups by the greater public, these young women-led groups were not excised from their public locations and they greatly influenced local fashion retailers and set trends that spread to less urban areas. However, being heavily based on fashion, these bolder subcultures have largely fallen by the wayside with the rise of cheaper, simpler fast fashion like UNIQLO (Assmann, 2018). But, in addition to women-led subcultures inspired by foreign aesthetics, male-dominated subcultures have also emerged in the form of the Japanese *otaku* and “herbivores”.

The *otaku*, both “criticized as a nuisance and praised as a cultural ambassador” (Galbraith 2010, 213), were originally purveyors of science fiction and technology in Akihabara (Tokyo), but their tangential association with acts of deviancy led to mixed perceptions by the general public. Eventually, as super consumers and as a tourist attraction, *otaku* and Akihabara became globally known for its concentration of shops providing anime, manga, videogames, and other aspects of geek popular culture.

Yet, like some other subcultures, in 2008, perceived nuisances led to increased policing and the decrease in *otaku* presence in Akihabara, while the government was still ironically commodifying the “*otaku* image” to encourage tourism (Galbraith 2010). In contrast to these subcultures tightly associated with specific urban areas, the relatively new “herbivorous men” were not defined by physical boundaries. They were defined by their lack of assertiveness with regard to sex or love. Once picked up by the mass media in 2008, the phrase also came to represent the increasing presence of urban men who were effeminate and fashionable with their dyed hair, accessories, and slender physique. These various subcultures became popularized by being different from the traditional post-war ideology that centered around the self-sacrificing and devoted salaryman supported by a housewife’s unpaid labor. As this ideology became less attainable with the economic and social anxieties of the early 1990s, so came the “healing boom,” which would come to be relevant to all Japanese urbanites.

Healing, or *iyashi*, embodied mental and emotional healing and the term soon became popularized in mainstream media. The “healing boom” involved the commodification of informal modes of therapy and stress relief in order to combat the growing anxieties of urban life. The market of healing had proven itself necessary for personal rejuvenation in response to decreasing lifetime employment and social connectedness, and other forms of precarity (Allison 2013). With the loss of social companionship and the stigma surrounding seeking professional therapy, the desire for *iyashi* experiences and goods allowed the proliferation of business geared to release stress and provide alternate forms of intimacy, such as maid cafes, 24-hour net cafes, animal cafes, host clubs, sex parlors, and spiritual healing services.

Two greatly different examples that lead to the same end, both animal cafes and sex work as healing services in Tokyo have allowed people, including the white-collar worker, to temporarily suspend societal responsibilities and obligations in order to renew themselves and socially reengage. Cat café

customers, whom Lorraine Plourde met during her fieldwork, described the iyashi characteristics of a cat in terms of physical qualities, such as their *fuwafuwa* (soft and fluffy) fur, and personality characteristics, such as the charm of their “unruliness and carefree nature.” (Plourde 2014, 119). In sex work (Koch, 2016), iyashi is experienced not only through sexual gratification but through the performance of maternal care where praise and acknowledgment of hard work is given to simulate an “unconditionally nurturing and warm caregiver” (Koch 2016, 709).

Urban Futures

Future imaginaries of urban life vary greatly and change quickly through unforeseen events. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the devastation of cities in the Second World War, for example, provoked major social changes as well as new popular, creative visions of the city from Godzilla to post-apocalyptic science fiction. The 1995 Tokyo subway attacks, just months after a devastating earthquake near the city of Kobe, intensified dystopian anxieties about city life. While the March 11th disaster in northern Japan did not cause direct damage to large urban centers, the cessation of the 10 Fukushima nuclear reactors that supplied energy to Tokyo brought deep concern. In 2012, Fukushima’s Prefectural government announced the goal of a 100 percent renewable energy economy by 2040, based on the principle of ‘local production, local consumption.’ This utopian ecological vision of the city’s future contrasted dramatically, however, with the central government’s intention to continue using nuclear power and maintaining a supply chain of overseas fossil fuel-based energy.

The spread of the coronavirus led to the postponement of the planned 2020 Tokyo Olympics that was, in some ways, meant to show the world how Japan has recovered from 3.11. As Japanese cities remain both popular tourist destinations and centers of global political economies, they will continue to be critical for understanding the ways Japan sees itself and its place in the world. The pandemic has also called attention to the dangers of city life and the inequalities that have left some cities more vulnerable than others (Slater 2020). Looking beyond the skyscrapers, a street-level view of city life reveals vibrant diversity and creativity as well as ongoing social segregation and inequality. Whether earthquakes or viruses, anthropologists looking toward the future of urban Japan will need to attend not only to the complex layering of city life, but also to the flows and tensions between cities and their surroundings, including the fragility and power of the natural world itself.

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