ISHIKAWA Yoshitaka ed.: Ethnic Enclaves in Contemporary Japan

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No country is more renowned than Japan for the extent of its ethnic homogeneity and its efforts to minimise immigration. Indeed it would probably still surprise some distant observers that, despite fierce opposition to immigration, there are now many migrants in the country. That has been necessitated by a combination of factors: Japan’s low birth-rate, an aging and declining national population (that peaked in 2008) and the unmet demand for workers in several critical employment sectors, notably health and manufacturing, but increasingly in IT: varied and divergent strands.

As elsewhere many of these migrant workers are clustered in ethnic enclaves in the largest cities, close to their jobs, and again, much as in other countries, many clusters are in older inner-city areas where rentals are cheap. However the book emphasises that some Japanese enclaves may be small and more suburban. It is otherwise a familiar story of early migration structures and patterns, where migrants are yet to move far from their initial places of residence and employment (and sometimes tertiary education and language schools). Some relatively well-known ethnic neighbourhoods now exist including the Chinatowns of Yokohama and Kobe, and Little Korea in Tokyo.

This is the first book to offer an overview of Japanese ethnic enclaves and to point to what is becoming the new face of Japan, although unlike most countries, foreigners still make up barely 2 percent of the nation. Yoshitaka Ishikawa has marshalled a team of Japanese scholars—both geographers and sociologists—to examine this trend. The book considers eight enclaves of five different migrant groups (Chinese, Brazilian, Korean, Filipino and Turkish) and in twelve municipalities. Unsurprisingly Tokyo figures prominently. No explanation is given for the choice of minority group or for the urban locations, but all the enclaves are in central Japan between Osaka and Tokyo. None are larger than 14,250 people and that of the Turkish migrants is of just 113. It also has the greatest male bias, while the Filipina enclaves are primarily female. The ‘Brazilians’ are almost exclusively return Japanese migrants, or their descendants—the Nikkei-jin. Consequently the book largely focuses on migrants from elsewhere in east Asia—who make up the bulk of migrants to Japan—rather than on any of the growing numbers of migrants from elsewhere in the world. More recently new enclaves have sprung up. Thus Nishi-Kasai in Tokyo, increasingly known as “Little India,” is home to over 2,000 Indian residents, most of whom are linked to the IT industry. Perhaps this will be for the next book. Given the quite small numbers in most enclaves it is reasonable to ask what exactly is an ethnic enclave but no definition is offered.

Ishikawa provides a general introduction and, with Kazumasa Hanaoka, an overview of the various ethnic enclaves. Chapters are then structured in the same way throughout and are heavily dependent on diverse statistical sources, but especially the 2015 census. Kiyomi Yamashita then discusses the Chinese enclaves of Tokyo and Kawaguchi—that in Tokyo being one of the longest established in Japan, and typical of the Chinatowns that occupy many large cities. Many migrants are from northern China where Korean is widely spoken. Again, much as elsewhere, a familiar pattern emerges of migrants increasingly moving beyond the enclaves as they achieve economic success and purchase houses. As more recent migrants are more likely to be better paid IT workers rather than blue collar workers that process becomes a little easier.

Taku Fukumoto discusses the Korean enclave in Osaka, the largest in Japan, alongside a newer enclave in Shinjuku, Tokyo. While that of Osaka is typical of older enclaves, that of Shinjuku, emerging in the last three decades, actually points to more rapid upward social mobility in the newer enclaves. Of all the groups discussed only Koreans have moved away from enclaves in any significant numbers, a measure of both limited assimilation and discrimination (especially in access to housing) which language skills and acquiring a Japanese style surname helps to minimise. Koreans were relatively well established as the largest migrant group, until Chinese numbers grew during the ‘bubble economy’ of the 1980s. Indeed, the Koreans are even described as ‘oldcomers.’
A more gendered perspective is taken by Sachi Takahata on Filipino enclaves who notes that many migrant Filipinas have married Japanese men so that their homes are scattered through much of Japan and enclaves are less evident than those of other east Asian groups. She examines enclaves in Nagoya and Y aizu, and points out that many Filipinas are also Nikkei-jin. Filipino enclaves occur not so much through the volition of the migrants but through the key role of the migration industry in guiding migrants to their first jobs, usually linked to accommodation, but involving women employed in the entertainment industry and in the profusion of Philippine pubs.

Hiromi Kataoka discusses the context of Brazilian enclaves in Hamamatsu city, many of whom had ‘returned’ to Japan during the bubble economy boom of the 1980s. Many later suffered in the 2008 economic crisis. Despite the highest labour participation rate of any of those in enclaves, employment in manufacturing offered them little upward social mobility or security. Many became ‘repeater’ migrants, often where denied permanent residence, moving backwards and forward between Japan and Brazil.

Remarkably therefore both groups of Nikkei-jin seem to fare least well, struggling in blue collar employment such as fish-processing (where wage discrimination can occur), with least adequate housing, and displaying little assimilation and social mobility. Even inter-marriage with Japanese has guaranteed no stability. That raises wider questions about discrimination and the particular problems experienced by groups who might have been expected to achieve success more readily.

Finally, Shuko Takeshita examines the very much smaller group of Turkish migrants—somewhat anomalous here since they have scarcely formed an enclave, despite the role of mosques and restaurants, and with most being from a single province. Many have come as, or become, marital migrants, with more than half the men (62%) having acquired Japanese wives. Intriguingly however, in some respects they represent a different future—migrants quite unlike those from east Asia and with rather different lifestyles and religions. Real diversity only occurred in this century, with migration from beyond east Asia. It will be intriguing to see if these even newer migrants display similar characteristics.

Overall the book points to the widespread lack of assimilation of migrant groups (although it is not clear what measures would define this) and the particular challenge for blue collar workers. The role of racism and discrimination are downplayed—other than in the housing market. As preliminary studies do, the book focuses on quantitative data. Very little is discussed of the lives and livelihoods of the migrants themselves. We learn little about their rationale for being and staying in Japan, their migrant histories or simply what they think about working in a very different country from their own. What aspirations do they have for themselves and their children? The very presence of enclaves suggests that assimilation is limited, but we learn nothing of what the migrants feel about this. Will they stay or will they go?

Urban planners seem yet to see ethnic enclaves as valuable components of cities, even as tourist destinations, despite a start coming from festivals. But then only the Korean enclave in Osaka seems to proudly proclaim its distinctiveness. Ironically the Korean population of this enclave is declining.

This book offers a valuable introduction to the increasingly complex ethnic geography of Japanese cities. It is to be hoped that there will soon be sequels that take the study of diversity further, as future Japanese cities become even more diverse. Vietnamese, Burmese, Nepalese and many others from Africa and the Pacific islands suggest a never-ending task in keeping up with the changing structure of the Japanese urban population. But Yoshitaka Ishikawa has given us a starting point. The book is elegantly produced and liberally and colourfully illustrated although an index would have helped. Hopefully this will be just the first instalment of what would be productive engagement with the growing diversity of Japan.

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