

# The Characteristics of Notable Ethnic Towns in Tokyo

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## *Abstract*

This paper focuses upon the development of ethnic businesses in Japan's urban communities, with special attention on the Ikebukuro and Shin-okubo districts, both of which are well-known for their ethnic character. Ethnic businesses have developed in these districts, selling Chinese and Korean cuisine and groceries. Both locations are popular for ethnic commerce and entertainment with a variety of taverns, restaurants, and grocery stores. These ethnic businesses continue to attract visitors and interest from wider afield as "ethnic towns". After briefly explaining post-war developments in these districts, the characteristics of each "town" will be illustrated. Though they have not yet have been able to consolidate themselves in the pursuit of a common "town" goal, for instance in their cooperation with local shopping malls, they certainly have a potential for revitalizing the inner-city, and also for contributing to a more pluralistic cultural presence.

## **Introduction**

This paper is concerned with the development of ethnic businesses in Japan's urban communities. The particular focus is upon the Ikebukuro (of Toshima-ward) and Shin-okubo (of Shinjuku ward) districts, both of which are well-known for their ethnic towns. Here ethnic businesses have developed, selling Chinese and Korean cuisine and groceries.

Firstly, let me consider the Ikebukuro district with its terminal railway station. It is one of Tokyo's most popular districts with a major concentration of places for commerce and entertainment. On average, 550,350 people use this station every day (these are 2013 figures). This is the second largest terminal station in Japan. This area is a popular spot for various forms of urban entertainment with large department stores, various shopping malls, taverns, restaurants, and so on. Particularly since 2004-2005, this area has become the subject of intense media investigation of plans that would establish a new 'Chinatown'.

My second example, the Shin-okubo district, is popularly referred to as 'Korean town.' The area is close to the Shinjuku station, which is the most popular terminal station in Japan, with its 751,018 commuters passing through each day (the 2013 figure). There are various Korean taverns, restaurants, groceries, and even spots exist where live Korean music can be found. In recent years, this area has developed some other ethnic businesses, apart from those with Korean characteristics. Examples are quite visible due to the presence in the town of Muslim community's notice boards with information about Mosque activities, and there has been a gradual increase in the availability of *halal* groceries and restaurants.

Before explaining the reasons for the presence of these ethnic communities, I should first explain the post-war urbanisation of Tokyo. Tokyo's urban development is closely related to contemporary multi-ethnic diversity. When that is explained, the character of each area will be illustrated. These are sites for on-going sociological research.

## **2. Background to the Embrace of Newcomers into Japan's Metropolises**

Immediately after the Second World War, Tokyo's terminal stations, Ikebukuro and Shinjuku, became centers for black market operations amidst extensive burnt-out ruins. This was also when large numbers of city dwellers dispersed, deserting the city for rural regions. The rural areas embraced the demobilised and repatriated people (Hasumi, 1984). And since the late 1950s Japan has experienced significant economic development. The rapid urbanization of the post-war period was then supported by a growth in a domestic population movement from agrarian villages to metropolitan centers. Guided by the government's development policy, the influx of new settlers from northern to southern islands meant there was a very strong gravitation to the Tokyo metropolitan area. This coincided with similar rates of growth in its neighbouring prefectures (Okuda, 1993: 229). This was accepted as public policy to enhance post-war economic growth, but it is important to keep in mind that for Japan the large scale labour force movement was obtained from population movement *within* the country to its major urban areas.

After the oil crisis of 1973-1974, Japan experienced stable economic growth, and that was also when domestic human mobilisation *en masse* halted. As the immediate district surrounding the City center descended into a phase of urban decay, this community confronted a serious shortage of local labour combined with the challenges of a predominantly ageing population. Following the suburban development, the former newcomers, who had arrived from all over Japan, then moved away, particularly when they formed households that relocated to the *outskirts* of Tokyo (Okuda and Tajima 1991). So,

with increased suburbanisation, these various inner areas in Tokyo encountered intense problems brought on by this demographic shift. But in the 1980s, a new pipeline of human movement has appeared from neighbouring Asian countries (Ibid.).

Since the late-1980s, the presence of foreigners has become a visible and welcomed aspect in several inner cities. The attraction of these inner areas for newcomers from foreign lands lies, in addition to the convenient railway stations nearby, in the development of businesses which offer numerous service industry jobs. Furthermore, advanced shopping facilities and low-priced, even if somewhat dilapidated, accommodation opportunities are also located in these areas (Ibid.). An increasing numbers of foreign residents are drawn to these areas by the convenient location of commercial and other facilities. This is why the areas of Ikebukuro and Shin-okubo districts have attracted single dwellers since the end of the Second World War, with its supply of shops, taverns, public bathhouses, coin-laundries, small restaurants, and the like.

Additionally, the anonymity of the city has another effect for any newcomers (Ibid.). The local residents do not pay much attention to the arrival of new neighbours from foreign lands. Particularly in some shopping malls of eastern Ikebukuro, shop-owners have developed their businesses from out of the black markets, and many residents have formed lifestyles in which they are not overly concerned with identifying what is going on in the private lives of others (Ibid.).

The newcomers from neighbouring Asian countries have therefore created ethnic communities. This can be seen in central districts of Tokyo. In the 1990s, many Japanese language schools were opened in Shinjuku and Toshima wards; some have disappeared due to bankruptcy, but others remain. As for the newly arrived foreigners, these areas have provided accommodation, schooling and employment. The increase in the foreign population is also related to an expansion in the work-age population in inner-city Tokyo which has many older citizens. “Additionally, ethnic businesses have been flourishing with the appearance of Asian restaurants, groceries, and the video rental and book shops” (Mizukami 2009).

### **3. The Characteristics of Ethnic Businesses in Ikebukuro**

In recent years, the Ikebukuro area has been the focus of mass media attention. Magazines, newspapers and television programs, have found the Chinatown project newsworthy. And it is estimated that there are over 200 Chinese shops in the sector to the north-west of the Ikebukuro station. But this is a new kind of ‘Chinatown’ since there are no traditional Chinatown gates as seen elsewhere in Japan’s other major Chinatowns, such as in Yokohama.



One of the popular Chinese grocery shops in the Ikebukuro district, which also deals with international telephone cards, document-translation, deputizing visa-application and so on.

Nor do we see the concentration of hundreds of Chinese shops, though there has been some evidence of Chinese business development in the selling of Chinese cuisine and groceries. Some shops are located within the buildings and not so noticeable from the street.

And so, the unique character of this area is ascribed to the numbers of Chinese commuters who travel to and from the precinct, as well as availing themselves of the various free Chinese papers. Apart from usual advertisements for fashion or cuisine, these papers inform Chinese residents of how to make applications for visas or how to find accommodation and so on. Indeed, various information catalogues and magazines in the Chinese languages are also published on a regular basis. Some major Chinese weekly magazines have also been issued at Ikebukuro. In global terms, it is quite rare for such a concentration of Chinese ethnic media to exist. As time has passed, the Chinese community papers have also changed from being a local town paper disseminating information on the town or lives of the host community to a general magazine, dealing with topics of politics, economics, society and culture.

The increasing number of Chinese people is also a noteworthy feature of the area. The town is identified by its relatively large number of Chinese residents. In Japan the number of foreigners has recently exceeded 2 million, 1.6 per cent of the country's entire population. The Chinese component has, in recent years, become the largest number, but in Tokyo it is only one per cent of the overall population. In 2014 within the 13.01 square kilometers of the Toshima-ward, in which the Ikebukuro district is located, the population from China is



In this building, a Chinese book store is on the second floor, while a Chinese grocery shop is on the fourth floor.



Some Chinese papers at grocery shops and restaurants.

currently 4.3 percent. This is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** The Number of Population, Foreigners, Chinese in Tokyo and Toshima-ward in 2013/2014

Area/ Number	Population	Foreigners	Chinese
Japan	127,297,686	2,066,445 (1.6%)	648,980 (0.5%)
Tokyo	13,202,041	394,410 (3.0%)	162,809 (1.2%)
Toshima-ward	271,643	19,533 (7.2%)	11,584 (4.3%)

\*These numbers from Tokyo and Toshima-ward were corrected from the first of January 2014, while the numbers for the whole of Japan were as estimated at 1\* of October 2013. The numbers for foreigners, including Chinese, indicate the registered population, and thus an unregistered population is assumed, but not included in these statistics.

Source: *Tokyo-to no Tokei [Statistics Tokyo]* (2014); and *Nihon no Tokei [Statistics Japan]* Somusho Tokeikyoku.

In the Toshima ward, about 11,600 Chinese have clustered around the Ikebukuro area. In addition, many people from China who reside outside of Tokyo visit this area to purchase various items and services. Thus, it is estimated that the daytime Chinese population in this town is over 20 thousand. From early evening to late at night, this population is considered to be even larger; apart from people returning to their own homes - either the detached housing or apartment rooms found in the district - there are some others who go to various Chinese restaurants, while others make use of service industries to fulfill personal and other needs.

The unique ethos of Chinese ethnic businesses in the area is ascribed to their diversity. About 5 years ago, as the Chinese businesses grew larger, the largest Chinese bank, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Limited (ICBC), located a branch in Ikebukuro. Apart from restaurants and groceries for Chinese compatriots, there are bookstores, travel agencies, rental CD and DVD shops, IT industries, and even notary public agencies that will arrange for people to obtain Japanese visas (Mizukami, 2014). In fact, the number of administrative offices for acquiring a visa to enable a person to stay has also gradually increased.

At the initial stage, these shops were specifically intended for customers with Chinese backgrounds, and some of them still are, remaining somewhat separate from the host community. In fact, at the beginning of the ‘Tokyo Chinatown project’, some shops required the local shopping mall to be a necessary precondition for the location of their activities. It is important to note that most of these Chinese shop owners did not enter the shopping mall associations. However, in recent years, approaches have been made from the Chinese retail

interests to these local associations.

#### 4. The Gate of the Host Community

The other location with which this paper is concerned is the Shin-okubo district. Here there is a public primary school in which over 60 percent of the pupils are non-Japanese or with diverse ethnic backgrounds in which at least one parent is a foreigner. This area is known as a Korean town as there are various Korean restaurants, grocery shops, even Korean theatres. However, apart from the Korean shops, there has been recent development in other ethnic businesses most notably in the sale of halal foods.

The eastern part of the Shin-Okubo station is identifiably Korean, and attracts a steady flow of tourists. Some areas used to be known as the hotel streets. There were many of these among them the so-called “Love-hotels,” with rent-rooms for couples for staying either overnight or just for a few hours’ “rest.” However, since the 1990s, these hotel-buildings have gradually been occupied by Korean grocery stores or restaurants and eating houses. Now only a few hotels remain. When at first a few Korean shops appeared, they stayed open until late at night and the nearby streets were well-lit. But then this meant that the customer-couples for the “love hotels” tended to avoid being seen. The more lighting in a street the more the hotels are replaced by Korean shops. In the western part of the Shin-Okubo station, Chinese shops and other ethnic shops have been increasing, while the northwest area is known for its Muslim streets. This is where halal grocery stores and restaurants that have been located. We are therefore discussing the growth in the ethnic diversity of this area.



In this area, we can see some shops for sending remittances.



Halal restaurants also exist there.

Shinjuku-ward has embraced the largest number and the largest proportion (over 10 per cent) of foreign population in Tokyo’s 23 wards. Population movements in this area are quite active and more than one-third of the foreign population has moved out every year as shown in Table 2. For example, in 2010, some 35,211 foreign people were recorded: in the same year, some 14,546 people entered this ward as new arrivals, while 12,881 people transferred to places outside the ward. Or 41.3 percent of the foreign population in the fiscal year moved-in, but 36.6 percent transferred.

**Table 2** Population Movements of Foreign Residents in Shinjuku Ward in the Selected Years

Category	Move-in			Move-out			Registered-Population	
	Newly-entered	Entered from outside the Ward	Total	Departure	Transferred to outside the Ward	Total	Transferred within the Ward	Total
2000	5,237	3,268	8,505	3,558	3,114	6,672	2,184	21,780
2005	5,145	4,813	9,958	6,011	4,826	10,837	3,316	28,272
2010	7,955	6,591	14,546	5,914	6,967	12,881	4,987	35,211

\* In the above categories, almost all of “newly-entered” were from overseas, but newly-born and nationalized (i.e. non-Japanese) were also included (one each of 2005 and 2010 was in this category); in the category of “Departure,” although the vast majority (over 95 per cent) were departure from Japan, naturalization of Japanese citizens and dead were included.

Source: Shinjuku Jichisozo kenkyujo [Shinjuku-ward local-democracy research center] 2011: 10.



Of 12,881 foreigners, nearly 46 percent moved out for the foreign country including mother-lands, while almost 54 per cent moved to other areas of Japan. We can confirm that continuous migratory movements with new inflows and outflows, and in this context this area is consistently functioning as a gateway (Mizukami, 2014). This means not only the first place to enter and live, but also the initial place for the start of settlement, whether as an academic, in business, or through social network development.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Since the middle and late 1980s, there has been an ongoing diversify trend in foreigners' settlement patterns in Tokyo metropolitan areas. The unique character of the Ikebukuro area is found in the numbers of Chinese commuters who travel to and from the precinct. This is the locality from which various free Chinese papers are published to inform Chinese residents of visa application procedures, available accommodation and real estate, while also providing fashion news and cuisine details. When compared with other larger Chinatowns, the one in Ikebukuro is not as visible as some of its shops are located within the precinct of the large shopping-buildings. However, these ethnic businesses have been strong enough to attract visitors from outside Ikebukuro and thereby make a considerable impact upon in area. This new type of Chinatown is partly characterized by its small shops *within* the buildings, and its new networks. These arise to meet the needs of Chinese residents but this Chinatown also draws significant interest from its host community. When the Japanese media emphasized a Chinatown project in the north and east Ikebukuro area, the associations running Japanese shopping malls were embarrassed because the media released news before the proprietors of the local shopping mall knew about it (Mizukami 2009). But these ethnic businesses have certainly made an important and ongoing impact upon the prospects of this latest shopping mall development.

In conclusion, at this stage, these Chinese shops have not yet organized their own networks, and are still rather individualistic in character. The representatives of the Chinatown project are clearly aiming to develop networks among their compatriots. Moreover, initially they did not communicate with the local shopping mall associations, but now some of them have started to reach out to the local community. In the Okubo district, various ethnic businesses have developed and their urban amenities and entertainment venues attract not only ethnic compatriots but also the host population. The presence of ethnic communities or ethnic businesses has increased the lure of the shopping malls. When they pursue a common goal, cooperating with each other, it provides the opportunity for developing inner-city revitalization, and also for establishing cordial Japanese - non-Japanese

relations from within this district.

\* This article is a revised edition with some added data from the paper presentation, “The Developments of Ethnic Towns in Inner-City Tokyo,” at the 5th International Symposium, “Urban Culture in the Process of Urban Redevelopment: Experience of East Asia,” at Tongji University on 1st of November 2014.

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