Ethnic Communities and their Contact Channels:
A Case of Islamic Area in Inner City Tokyo

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Islamic area in Okubo district of Shinjuku ward which is located in inner city Tokyo and examines the features of the current ethnic community in Tokyo through its people and ethnic facilities which form a multicultural space.

Japan has seen a significant rise in foreign population. There was a rapid increase in foreign population from the late 1980s to the beginning of 1990s reflecting Japan's bubble economy which pulled a significant number of foreign workers into its manufacturing industry. Foreign workers gradually settled down in Japan, got married, and had children. Thus, they have been developing their own social networks and forming ethnic communities in the host society. Currently, their ethnic business is flourishing in areas such as Okubo which is the focus of this article.

The current ethnic community in Tokyo, analysed through the Islamic area in Okubo district, has many contact channels of migrant transnational practices which earlier used to be invisible to the host society but are now being recognised.

On the other hand, the ethnic community when analysed by social cohesion is very weak on solidarity or togetherness with the host society. However, there have been cases of people trying to communicate or have a relationship with the host community. These dynamics of social cohesion indicate that there is a possibility of creating the 'we feeling' between immigrants and local community.

1. Introduction

(1) Immigration Policy Changes in Japan

Since long, Japanese government has been refusing entry to overseas immigrants under its official 'closed-door' immigration policy. However, studies focusing on Japanese immigration policy point out that Japan has been accepting a significant number of immigrants unofficially using the 'side-door' policy. Peng (2016) argues that the 'side-door' policy allows company trainees, students, entertainers, and ethnic Japanese foreigners or *Nikkeijin*[1] to do

unskilled/semi-skilled jobs, enabling the country to manage labour shortages in manufacturing and service sector industries, while maintaining the official non-immigration policy (Peng, 2016, pp. 283-284).

However, since the 1990s, Japanese government has been changing its position on allowing entry to immigrants because of the following two reasons: (a) increase in visibility of the *Nikkeijin* and other foreign-born population in the local community. The foreign-born population increased rapidly from the late 1980s to the beginning of 1990s. During this period, Japan was in an economic bubble and attracted a significant number of foreign workers to its manufacturing industry. Even after the bubble economy came to an end, the foreign population kept on increasing, and gradually settled down among the community. Foreign workers' families or relatives also migrated to Japan, got married, and gave birth, and (b) increase in shortage of nurses and care workers in elder care services because of the ageing population. According to the Statistics Bureau of Japan, the proportion of elderly (over 65 years old) in Japan's population was 28.4% in 2019, which is the maximum so far. This proportion is significant, especially when compared to other countries such as England (18.5%), America (16.2%), Korea (15.1%), and China (11.5%). Peng (2016) insists that by the mid-2000s, Japanese government had begun to seriously consider reforming its immigration policy, in particular, opening the border to foreign nurses and care workers. In 2010, government's position on pro-immigration policy position was unambiguous (Peng, 2016, pp. 284-286).

(2) Foreign Population Changes in Japan

Figure 1 shows foreign population changes in Japan from 1979 to 2018. The foreign population has increased rapidly from being less than one million in 1989 to over two million by 2015. It increased rapidly, in particular, from the late 1980s to the beginning of 1990s because of the following two reasons. First, during this period, Japan's economy was a bubble economy. Therefore, a significant number of foreign workers mainly from neighbouring Asian countries came to Japan for work. Second, the migration reform introduced in 1990 liberalized migration, allowing people of Japanese ancestry living in South American countries to migrate to live and work in Japan. In the period between 2011 and 2013, the foreign population decreased because of the Great East Japan Earthquake. During this time, many foreign workers left Japan.

The foreign-born population in 2018 was 2% of the total population. This number is quite small compared to other western countries, however the rise in foreign population has been a big social issue in Japan and there has been a growth in research on this issue.
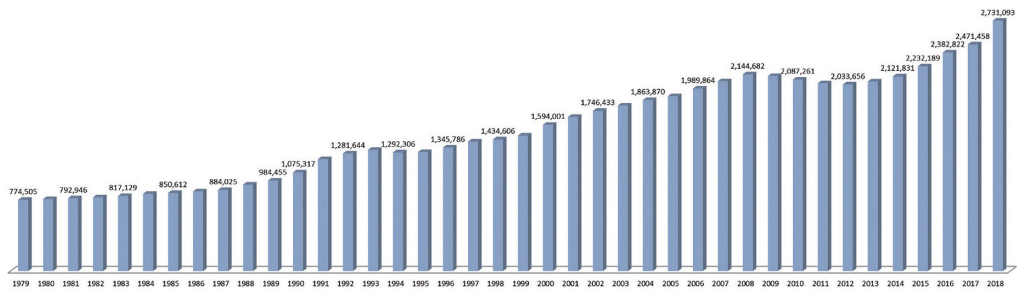
Source: Ministry of Justice

Figure 1 Foreign Population Changes from 1979 to 2018

(3) Existing Literature on Ethnic Communities in Japan

Numerous academics in various areas such as sociology and economics have been studying the foreign population living in Japan. Sociological study of ethnic community in Japan has begun to increase since beginning of 1990s. Michihiro and Junko (1991, 1993) can be considered as the earliest studies in this area. They conducted interview research and questionnaire surveys with immigrants, which was the first time an academic survey was conducted in Japanese society, and shared information about their way of life in Japan. Since then, numerous sociologists have dealt with this topic, focusing on the political problems in Japanese immigration policy and problems faced by foreigners in the community, and have also developed ethnic media studies (Hirota, 1996; Hirota and Fujiwara, 2016; Shiramizu, 1996; Kajita et al., 2005; Mizukami, 2009, 2018; Okura, 2012).

This study focuses on immigrant's life in their ethnic community. It deals, in particular, with the Islamic area in Tokyo which is one of the vibrant ethnic area in Japan. Currently, this area is mainly populated with people from South Asia and South East Asia. I have conducted field work and interview research with immigrants living and gathering in this area to examine the features of current ethnic communities in Tokyo.

2. The Perspectives of Analysis

(1) Migrant Transnational Practices

This study considers ethnic facilities such as grocery shops, restaurants, and religious institutions as 'contact channels of migrant transnational practices', and uses 'transnationalism' as one of the perspectives for analysis.

Transnationalism is a concept which helps to understand transnational migrants who have diversified their social activity patterns with increase in globalisation. Since the late 1990s,

numerous academics have dealt with the concept of 'transnationalism' to explain the migrants' transnational way of life and their social activity (Basch et al., 1994; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Smith and Eade, 2008; Vertovec, 2008).

Before the expansion of globalisation, migration studies conducted research based on the framework which examined only the host society. In particular, these studies clarified how migrants integrate into the host society and how the host society transforms by accepting immigrants.

Transnationalism is based on the premise that it impacts both the host society and immigrants' homeland. Furthermore, the framework of transnationalism places emphasis on migrant transnational practices which refer to migrants' social practices affecting both the host society and their native country.

Vertovec (2008) emphasizes the following social activities as migrant transnational practices: (a) Communication with family and relatives living in the homeland, and (b) Remittance by the migrant to the homeland. Reflecting these points, this study focuses on pre-paid international telephone card and considers the grocery shop where the card is sold as a place to communicate with families, and also the remittance agency as a place to for remittance by the migrant to their homeland. These facilities are important channels which mediate migrant transnational practices. Vertovec (2008) also insists that it is important to consider the remittance not as transnational cooperation which manages global economies, but individual migrants' practice in the transnational communities.

Table 1   Analysis Framework of Migrant Transnational Practices

Domain	Migrant Contact Channels	Dimension
1. Communication with family and relatives living in the homeland.	1.1 Ethnic grocery shops	Basically, ethnic grocery shops run by immigrants. These shops sell food and serve as a gathering places for immigratns.
	1.2 Pre-paid international telephone card	Immigratns communicate with their families in homeland using pre-paid international telephone card which are normally purchased from ethnic grocery shops.
2. Remittance by the migrant to the homeland.	2.1 Remitance agency	It is not the Transnational cooperations which manage global economies. This study focues on the remittance by individual migrants in the transnational communities.

Table 1 shows the analysis framework of migrant transnational practices which are measured by two domains: (a) communication with family and relatives living in homeland, and (b) remittance by the migrant to the homeland. These domains unfold into three migrant contact channels: ethnic grocery shops, pre-paid international telephone cards, and remittance agencies.

(2) Migrant Social Cohesion

Though transnationalism is one of the main concepts in migration studies, 'social cohesion' has emerged as a major concept to deal with immigrants in English countries in recent years. According to Healy et al. (2016), since the mid-1990s, there has been an increasing interest in the issue of social cohesion among academics and policy professionals and in public commentary (Healy et al., 2016, p. 3). In 2011, OECD hosted the International Conference on Social Cohesion and defined a cohesive society as follows: 'A cohesive society works towards well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization' by 'fostering cohesion by building networks of relationships, trust and identity between different groups, fighting discrimination, exclusion and excessive inequalities and enabling upward social mobility'[2]. In Australia, The Scanlon Foundation has been conducting an extensive survey 'Mapping Social Cohesion' annually since 2007[3]. The foundation introduced the Scanlon Monash Index (SMI) to measures five domains which conceptualise social cohesion: belongings, worth, social justice, political participation, and acceptance/rejection[4]. Efforts have been made to introduce social cohesion at the community level. For instance, Australian Human Rights Commission has set up online resources to support local government in building strong, socially cohesive communities[5].

Social cohesion is applied to measure behaviour within a socially diverse community, and immigrants are one of the important elements of such communities. Mizukami (2016) focuses on Japan's social cohesion related to immigration issues and argues:

Social cohesion also interrelates with the way in which immigrants and minority groups become participants in social life and therefore in their relations with the citizens of the host nation (Mizukami, 2016, p. 33).

In some areas, ethnic businesses have been prosperous, but this prosperity has not always been shared by local communities. In fact, some surveys have shown that Japanese communities now need a renewed understanding of social cohesion or need to develop a new sense of solidarity to aid in the revitalization of inner cities (Mizukami, 2016, p. 44).

Social cohesion related to immigration issues places great importance on the relationship between immigrants and host society. Moreover, local community needs to build strong relationship with immigrants. Since 1960s, Japanese society has been facing social issues which the local community declines. Therefore, local people need to develop new sense of solidarity such as social cohesion to revitalize the community.

This study uses 'belongings' domain of SMI to measure migrant social cohesion in the community. Table 2 shows the analysis framework of migrant social cohesion. In this study, 'belongings' is measured by social networks, which unfold into three indicators of interview research.

Table 2 Analysis Framework of Migrant Social Cohesion

Domain	Dimension	Index of interview research
1. Belongings	1.1 Social networks	1.1.1 Communication with local community.
		1.1.2 Participation in local events.
		1.1.3 Affiliation with neghborhood association, shopping street association.

As mentioned in this section, this study analyses the current features of ethnic community in Tokyo from the perspective of migrant transnational practices and migrant social cohesion by conducting field work and interview research.

3. Islamic area in OKUBO

The Okubo area which is the focus of this study is located in Shinjuku ward in inner city Tokyo. Shinjuku ward has the highest number of foreign residents in Tokyo. In 2019, there were 43,068 foreign people in Shinjuku ward which is 12.4% of the area's total population.

Table 3 shows the proportion of foreigners in Okubo area in 2019. The foreign residents account for 35% to 45% of the total population in each Okubo area. For example, in Okubo Area 1, the proportion of foreigners is almost 44%, indicating that 1 in 2 or 3 people are foreign. In the neighbouring area, the percentage of foreign residents is over 20%, indicating that 1 in 5 people are foreign. This suggests that over one third of total foreign residents in Shinjuku ward live in Okubo and neighbouring areas.

Islamic area is small compared to other ethnic areas and is located in front of the metro station. In 1995, the first halal shop (Islamic grocery) opened in the area, marking the start of several other facilities related to Islam such as mosques and halal restaurants. Eventually, this area has become to be known as an Islamic area. At present, many facilities related to Islam stand side by side in this area. There are 8 halal food shops, 1 halal restaurant, and a

Table 3 The Proportion of Foreign Population in Okubo Area in 2019

	Total Population		Japanese		Foreigner	
Shinjuku Ward	346,425	(100%)	304,268	(87.8%)	42,157	(12.2%)
Okubo Area, 1	4,422	(100%)	2,458	(55.6%)	1,964	(44.4%)
Okubo Area, 2	8,457	(100%)	5,392	(63.8%)	3,065	(36.2%)
Okubo Area, 3	4,072	(100%)	2,483	(61.0%)	1,589	(39.0%)
Okubo Area, 4	4,906	(100%)	2,826	(57.6%)	2,080	(42.4%)
Neighboring Area, 1	7,384	(100%)	5,537	(75.0%)	1,847	(25.0%)
Neighboring Area, 2	7,313	(100%)	5,627	(76.9%)	1,686	(23.1%)
Neighboring Area, 3	6,683	(100%)	5,246	(78.5%)	1,437	(21.5%)
Total	43,237	(100%)	29,569	(68.4%)	13,668	(31.6%)

Source: Shinjuku Ward

mosque. There are other ethnic facilities too, such as a Nepalese restaurant managed by a Nepalese, cell phone stores managed by Indians or Bangladeshis, and remittance agencies managed by Nepalese. The number of Islamic grocery shops has been increasing in the neighbouring areas. Therefore, including the neighbouring area, it seems there are 18 to 22 halal food shops in the area.

Currently, the Islamic area is the most vibrant one in Okubo with people from South Asia such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, and Myanmar, and Africa living and gathering there.

Source: Taken by author

Photo 1 Halal food shop 'Barahi' run by Nepalese

Source: Taken by author

Photo 2 Sign of remittance agency

Photo 3 Pre-paid international telephone card

Photo 4 Sign of a Mosque at the entrance of a multi-tenant building (the last one)

4. Result—Migrant Transnational Practices

(1) Ethnic grocery shops

Foreign residents gather at ethnic grocery shops like halal shops to not only purchase goods but to also communicate with people of same ethnic groups and to collect information related to job hunting or housing.

(2) Pre-Paid international telephone card

Many migrants who gather at ethnic facilities purchase prepaid international telephone cards to communicate with their families and relatives living in their homelands or other countries. When I visited the halal shops, I noticed that a lot of immigrants want to purchase the pre-paid calling cards. According to the interview results, pre-paid telephone card is still popular among people come from countries having poor internet facilities such as Africa, Pakistan, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.

(3) Remittance agency

Most of the migrants send remittances through remittance agencies representing the contact channels of transnational practices. Furthermore, it seems that invisible informal systems for remittance such as using one's own human resources and social networks within an ethnic community are no longer used. Migrant workers now make remittances through visible remittance systems.

5. Result―Migrant Social Cohesion

I conducted interviews with the owners and staff members of halal food shops in Okubo's Islamic area. Interview results show that most of them do not have connection or communication with local community other than business like connections. Since they also sell Japanese products, they communicate with Japanese local people on the business front, but they do not have any communication relating to participation in local community. All those people who I interviewed did not know whether that there was any neighbourhood association or shopping street association in the host community.

One of the interviewee who is the owner of the oldest and biggest halal food shop in the area also does not have any connection with the host community. He said 'If they invite us, I would join, but they have not yet invited us, so we don't go'. However, in one case, I found that the owner of a halal food shop had been participating in local cleanliness activities. I also conducted interview with the owner of a mosque in this area and found that all the people who come to the mosque are foreigners from countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Most of them are Bangladeshis. The owner also said that no Japanese people visit the mosque and it is not related to the local community.

6. Conclusion—Current Ethnic Community in Tokyo

The current ethnic community in Tokyo is concentrated in the city's inner area and has developed and strengthened its global network through ethnic facilities that act as contact channels for transnational migrants.

From the perspective of migrant transnational practices, inner city Tokyo, analysed through the Islamic area and neighbouring areas in Okubo, has many contact channels of migrant transnational practices and is a space which earlier used to be invisible to the host society but is now being recognised. The transnational networks which are formed in spaces such as the Okubo area are directly connected to small communities and families at the ethnic level. It is a feature of current inner city Tokyo that a local community has regional characteristics that enable its inhabitants to directly connect to global networks.

On the other hand, the current ethnic community analysed by social cohesion, is very weak on solidarity or togetherness with the host society. However, there have been cases of people trying to communicate or have a relationship with the host community. These dynamics of social cohesion indicate that there is a possibility of creating the 'we feeling' between immigrants and local community.

Notes

1) The descendants of Japanese emigrants to Brazil, Peru, and other countries who are given special long term stay visas.

2) See https://www.oecd.org/dev/pgd/internationalconferenceonsocialcohesionanddevelopment.htm

3) No survey was conducted in 2008.

4) See 'Mapping Social Cohesion 2019 national report' https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/2040268/mapping-social-cohesion-national-report-2019.pdf

5) See https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/building-social-cohesion-our-communities

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