

The Vibrant Neighborhood of Shin-Okubo: Tip of the Immigration Iceberg

By Alix Mathieu



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Shin-Okubo's Diversity

Of all the districts in the huge metropolis of Tokyo, it is Shin-Okubo that most plunges the visitor into another world. Welcoming messages splash words in unfamiliar languages and wherever one's eyes are drawn they catch glimpses of scenes from a myriad of cultures: Indian women and men walking with red *tilak* on their foreheads or Korean idols being chased by their troops of fans.

Indeed, diversity shapes the visitor's experience, as it does the life of Shin-Okubo's inhabitants. And it has done so for some time now. Shin-Okubo has had the reputation of being a culturally diverse neighborhood since the early 2000s, when it attracted fans of Korean TV dramas, music and cuisine. At that time, the Korean businesses of Shin-Okubo constituted its trademark, but as the popularity of Korean products slowed down a great number of shops closed. The "little Seoul" lost part of its soul and glory, and economic activity decreased — leading to precariousness for part of the population, but also to a reinvention of its cultural identity.

For the Shinjuku district's population has been rapidly diversifying. Nowadays, up to 12% of the population are registered as "foreigners" and the number of short-term newcomers has increased. Thai, Nepalese, Chinese, Vietnamese — but also Lebanese and Indian nationals — have started settling down in Shin-Okubo. *Isuramu Yokocho* — a Muslim area — has started to replace the Korean avenue, and halal restaurants or groceries are opening where *kimchi* and *bibimbap* were once sold. This neighborhood of Tokyo is one of the very few that host many different cultures and where one can witness such vibrant diversity. In some Western countries, like France, such neighborhoods are not so striking, or unfamiliar. Paris, for instance, presents many districts well known for their diversity. "La Goutte-d'Or", in the *18ème arrondissement*, has welcomed migrants from all over the world since the 19th century, and "foreigners" represent up to 25% of the area's inhabitants, without counting second-generation migrants who have taken French nationality. Perhaps the spectacle of Shin-Okubo's diversity is less striking to a Western eye, accustomed to such diversity. But the mechanisms that give such neighborhoods an "ethnic character" are similar from one country to another. In Tokyo, as in Paris, the development of ethnic markets and local networks marks the passage from one wave of migration to another. In Tokyo, as in Paris, different communities unceasingly shape the identity of districts.

Obstacles to Internationalization in Shin-Okubo

It is the relative novelty of the phenomenon in Tokyo that gives the issue an undeniable particularity. Many obstacles remain in the way of internationalization, even in Shin-Okubo. Coexistence is not always an easy path for any country in our globalised world, and Japan, which leans heavily toward homogeneity, is no exception.

One local store employee who wished to remain anonymous recalls how hate speech demonstrations took place in the neighborhood and disturbed its peace a few years ago. Anti-Korean activist groups, such as the *Zaitokukai*, organized rallies in the main street of Shin-Okubo and shouted at its many ethnic minorities slogans such as "Get the hell out of Japan" and "You should be massacred". Although demonstrations on this main street have since been banned, people still remember the calls for murder they heard.

From heated demonstrations to petty everyday finger-pointing, such incidents have occasionally poisoned the atmosphere. Foreigners are often accused of polluting the district and disturbing the well-being of its Japanese citizens. Authorities warn them against illegal dumping and improper behavior — foreigners are sometimes stigmatized by the very proximity of nearby gloomy neighborhoods, such as Kabukicho, and depending on their nationality (e.g. Filipino) may suffer from a strong negative image. Also, here, as elsewhere, they are sometimes considered as doing too little to integrate themselves into Japanese society. "You should speak Japanese if you are coming to Japan," said a vice chief of Shinjuku City Hall in Shin-Okubo, who declined to give his name. As part of his work, this official has witnessed the difficulties integration presents. With little or no city staff in the area speaking English or any other foreign language, the newcomers are mostly left to themselves to acknowledge and apply community rules and to understand the twists and turns of the administration. Because of the lack of interaction between the two worlds, few newcomers participate in the meetings organized by Japanese volunteers, who try to engage them in community life. Although it is commonly observed in most large urban communities across the globe — since immigrants are first of all busy building a life for themselves — in Japan it takes on a special significance, community cohesion being so valued.

Although conciliating, if not bringing together, the different populations appears to be a daily challenge, there is a silver lining. For Tomoko Tokunaga, an ethnographer teaching at Keio University, there has been a positive move toward accepting foreigners during the past few years. "People are trying to understand the potential and power of

the foreign people,” she says. “It is good [for Japan] to be part of the world’s global resources.” Local initiatives bubble up that try to provide the support foreigners need to settle down — side by side with more official entities, like the *Tabunka Kyosei* (multiculturalism) centers, where foreigners can seek help with administration paperwork, translations and daily troubles. For Tokunaga, individual initiatives — from foreigners “voicing and trying to make changes” or from Japanese people “achieving multiculturalism” — are mainly at the core of the improvement and help create a “grass root movement”. For other scholars, local policies are the driving forces in shaping the urban diversity and filling the vacuum left by the state level (see *Multicultural Challenges and Redefining Identity in East Asia*, ed. Nam-Kook Kim, Ashgate Publishing, 2014). The Korean community, for instance, has started pointing out the historical difficulties and obstacles that stand in the way of its integration. Many believe that openly discussing this issue will help arouse awareness and bridge the gap between communities.

Integrating Japan into Globalization

For a long time, welcoming diversity has been perceived as too challenging to the Japanese identity. Yet many now consider it could be a way to better integrate Japan into globalization. Prevailing discourses seem to be changing, as young Japanese students perceive cultural diversity — and the language skills it brings, for instance — as a resource and as the bedrock of useful skills.

For some Japanese, all hopes of improvement lie with children — whether they are Japanese, foreigners or “hafu”. For one Japanese volunteer in his 70s, children are the key to better integration, and the multicultural schools of Shin-Okubo are a precious resource in allowing children to learn how to live side by side — with fewer difficulties and prejudices than those experienced by their elders.

“Children are pure,” he said fondly, and “otherness” bothers little children much less than it does grown-ups. If given the opportunity to integrate society, they could improve it in many ways. As Japan grows older and greyer, the neighborhoods embracing diversity and immigrants experience rejuvenation. As an example, Shin-Okubo has seen its young population skyrocketing since migrants have started settling down.

Immigration could therefore allow Japan to overcome its shrinking population problem and revitalize its labor force. For as an IMF paper points out (*Foreign Help Wanted: Easing Japan’s Labor Shortages*, by Giovanni Ganelli and Naoko Miake, 2015), the country faces challenges today that could undermine its potential growth if immigration policies are not expanded thoughtfully. Expanding immigration would not only benefit the labor force: foreign investments, entrepreneurship and innovations could also be boosted by a change in policies. It is an issue that the country will soon have to face, one way or another: “Whether to accept (more) immigrants or not is an issue relevant to the future of our country and the overall life of the people,” Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told the Lower House Budget Committee earlier this year.

Carefully Designed Immigration Policy

Is diversity being addressed in the best way for Japan? Some doubt it, stressing that both immigration and integration policies still have a long way to go. For Tokunaga, the paradoxes of Japanese immigration

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The main exit of Japan Railways' Shin-Okubo station

policies are part of the problem. “Instead of implementing a front-door policy, in Japan we have a ‘side-door policy’,” she says. While politicians claim that immigration is a key issue, the working conditions are still very fragile and the work status given to immigrants unsecured — as part of a policy aiming at controlling the lengths of migrants’ stays in Japan. Abenomics has so far focused on highly skilled immigration, while other economic activities (construction, services, and nursing, for example) also suffer from severe shortages in the labor force. An expanded, carefully designed immigration policy could help reduce such shortages, in a country where reliance on foreign labor is only 0.3% (the lowest among advanced countries, according to the IMF paper).

As a nation, Japan has yet to frame a cohesive view or overall strategy on immigration. In countries like Canada, which openly calls for more immigration and implements yearly quotas to meet its humanitarian and economic goals, or France, which has historically been shaped by migration, immigration is tackled at both the national and local levels. In countries achieving diversity somewhat successfully, ethnic neighborhoods like Shin-Okubo are often temporary solutions for migrants and serve as a first gateway, before people start melting into the urban and social fabric with the help of the welcoming country. The path is certainly not always rosy and openness is often challenged. But as social, economic, cultural and even diplomatic benefits are numerous, many believe this road is well worth walking.

Furthermore, Japan has itself often benefited from cultural openness and has offered much in return to the world: poetry, painting or even the imperial family would not be what they are without cultural exchanges and Japanese re-appropriation. Diversity and minorities have been a constitutive element of Japan — as they have in countries all over the world.

Nowadays, Japan might hesitate to rejoin the club of “ethnically” diverse nations but as Shin-Okubo shows with its lively and vivid example, many right-minded people would like to come and settle in Japan, while contributing to the economy and to Japan’s wealth and cultural richness. The narrow cadre offered so far leaves it to local policies and individuals to shape the everyday experience of diversity, for better and for worse. In these conditions, just giving the issue a patent framework would be a first step toward that most useful of qualities in policy — clarity.

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