

## The Changes in the Social Structure and Social Activism in the Urban Underclass Area: A Case of Yokohama, Japan

### 都市下層地域における社会構造と社会活動の変容

— 横浜・寿町を事例に —

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#### Abstract

*Kotobuki*, Yokohama is a day laborers' town that was formed in the 1950s. The area's social structure involves: 1) increasing numbers of foreign migrant workers through globalization, 2) increasing numbers of social welfare recipients and their dependency on the welfare system, and 3) gentrification. Migrant workers started coming to *Kotobuki* in the latter part of the 1980s, but many of them left after the economic recession at the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, the number of laborers in the area has decreased, and with the aging of the area and the shrinkage of the day laborers' market, the number of people on social welfare has increased. Moreover, the number of the homeless has been also increasing in and around the area.

In *Kotobuki*, the labor union and the neighborhood community association were both organized during the 1970s for the betterment of residents' working and living conditions. Other civic activities, such as welfare and medical services, also supported the day laborers in the area. Recently, a new organization from outside the town has begun activity for social town development with some of the local organizations and the City of Yokohama. On the other hand, the union that once supported laborers has started supporting the homeless to resolve the problem of poverty.

**Key Words:** Urban Underclass, Yokohama, Social Structure, Social Activism, Aging

#### 要 約

横浜・寿町は1950年代に形成された日雇い労働者の街、「寄せ場」である。1980年代後半以降の寿町の世界構造変容は以下の3点からとらえることができる。1) グローバル化にともなう外国人労働者の流入、2) 生活保護受給者増加と福祉への依存、3) ジェントリフィケーション。寿町では1980年代後半から1990年代にかけて外国人労働者が流入したが、バブル経済の崩壊とともに減少した。その後、住民の高齢化、日雇い労働市場の縮小などともない、現在にいたるまで労働者数の減少と生活保護受給者の増加が著しい。地区内および周辺地域ではホームレスも増加している。同時に、横浜都心部、繁華街に近接し、利便性も高いため周辺地域での高層マンション建設が相次ぎ、新たな住民として都市中間層の流入もみられる。

寿町では1970年代から自治会、労働組合などによる地域活動が行われてきた。また、日雇い労働者を対象とした福祉活動、医療活動も民間組織によってすすめられてきた。2000年以降、地域再生を目指すNPOが外部から参入し、地域の自治会、行政と連携してまちづくり活動を進めている。いっぽうで、労働者を対象として旧来から活動してきた団体は労働者の減少ともない、対象をホームレスとした新たな支援活動を行っている。

**キーワード:** 都市下層、横浜、社会構造、社会活動、高齢化

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explains the structural changes and the ongoing social activism in the urban underclass area, examining a case in Yokohama, Japan.

This is a case study which is based on microanalysis, focusing the historical and structural transition of one area, but at the same time describing how the daily living situation of urban working class people has been changing in Japan's post industrial society. Today inner-city communities must address various issues: the needs of the elderly, the increase in the number of families receiving public assistance, growing unemployment among younger people and redevelopment businesses. With rapid changes in the industrial structure, it has become more difficult to find jobs and earn enough money to survive for those who once worked as manual laborers. As a consequence some of the underclass become homeless and must live on the street.

Along with structural changes in the underclass area, social activism and those who have engaged in it have also changed. When more day-laborers lived in the area, the labor union was very active, but today the number of the elderly has increased, more social welfare groups have been organized to assist the poor. Union support is on the decline.

Yokohama has the biggest harbor in Japan and it also has a large industrial area adjoining Tokyo Prefecture. This city in Kanagawa Prefecture has grown and developed as a trading port since the middle of the 19th century. After WWII, many jobless people came to Yokohama to work as dock laborers. In time large slums developed near the harbor. In the 1950s, the administration started clearing these slums and slum dwelling families were moved to public housing. Single men who were left behind moved to cheap lodging houses which were newly built around a job-center for day-laborers. This laborers' town, called *Kotobuki*, immediately increased in population. In the 1960s it grew to more than 6,000. Most of the people living in *Kotobuki* were day-laborers working as dock hands, but with growing automation of dock work many of them moved on to construction sites. Among these laborers, aging population has increased since the 1970s. At the end of the 1980s, during the time of Bubble

Economy, prosperity, migrants from South Korea and the Philippines began to arrive in the small town and worked as day-laborers. Their numbers increased and at its maximum, 20% of the *Kotobuki* population was comprised of migrants. But as business is declined during the middle of the 1990s, the migrant population has decreased. Old men who are retired day-laborers cannot go back to their own hometown so they remain in *Kotobuki* and live on public assistance. Since the end of the 1990s, over 90% of the area's population has seen living on social security.

First, I will describe has the social forces that shaped *Kotobuki*, the urban underclass in Yokohama, and second, the structural changes going on in the urban underclass. And then, I will examine how social activism in the urban underclass has changed as one of the micro phenomenon which accompanied the changes in the social structure of the underclass.

## 2. Forming Process of the Urban Underclass in Yokohama

### 2.1 Transition of the Port and the Urban Redevelopment

Yokohama Port was opened in the 19th century and early on became one of the world biggest trading ports for raw silk. However, in the 1920s, a large manufacturing of factory district was built in the Tokyo-Yokohama area called *Keihin*, making the port's main trading products industrial goods. During WWII, the city of Yokohama, including the port, were attacked by allied bombing raids but manufacturing and harbor facilities in the coastal industrial zone were not badly damaged. In the post war period, almost 90% of the port facilities was taken over by the General Headquarters (GHQ) and these facilities were not released until 1952, when the peace treaty was signed. After the derequisition, rehabilitation of the city and the manufacturing zone started immediately and trading with foreign countries in the port increased rapidly. Right after the release, imported goods comprised mainly vital food, shipments but later oil, metal, iron ore and also lime increased.

In 1967-68, container ships started their arrival in the port. To relieve traffic congestion caused by container

trucks, street improvements were started as a new road plan for the Yokohama City. In 1989, the transport bridge, Yokohama Bay Bridge, was completed, which has a total length of 860 meters and is one of the symbols of the Yokohama bay area. At the same time, urban redevelopment of Yokohama began in the waterfront area, many projects of which were on reclaimed land. The Plan's name was 'Port-Future 21st century' (*Minato-Mirai 21*) and the redeveloped district as called as the same name. The area was mainly developed as an urban commercial/business and residential space.

Now, we should remember who were the people left behind in those redeveloped spaces and where they are living and working today.

## 2. 2 Slum-Clearance and Development of the Day-Laborers' Town: the 1950s

The greater part of Yokohama's inner area was reclaimed in the latter part of the 17th century. At that time, there was a abandoned pond and *Kotobuki* which we see today is a part of this area. After finishing reclaiming the pond in the latter half of the 19th century, a red-light district was built in the center of the area and gradually small retail shops and residences for laborers grew up around it.

During WWII, inner Yokohama was damaged by attacks from the air and an area of 363,638 square meters, was requisitioned for almost 9 years. After derequisition, there was nothing left so people called it "a stock farm".

A few years before the inner area's release, the port started its operations. At that time, more than 80% of imported grains landed in Yokohama so that enormous amount of man-power was needed to unload the grain shipments. More than 1,000 people worked as dock laborers. Also, because the Korean War started in 1950, an economic boom came to Japan, which was triggered by the influx of hard currency for payment for special procurements (war materials). This gave even more demand for laborers and a large number of people from all over the country flocked to work in Yokohama, especially around the port.

With sharp and sudden increase in the numbers of laborers and their families, there were not enough residential facilities. Gradually slums formed in the area near the port. Also, some workers lived in ship-hotels

anchored on a nearby river, but because of some terrible capsizing accidents and the spread of infectious diseases, these hotels were soon abolished. Then, demands for laborers' housing dramatically increased.

Soon after the derequisition Yokohama City started its master plan for postwar rehabilitation, and as a part of this plan the slum was swept away and those people living there were moved. Among the former residents, families and women went and live in public housings in suburb on Yokohama. However, single men moved to, where there was a job-center for day-laborers, relocated to *Kotobuki* from the center of Yokohama in 1957, and cheap lodging houses owned by Korean residents which were just being built. In 1957, the number of these lodging houses was only 2 or 3, and 2 years later it increased to 64. At the same time, some cheap pubs moved from the slum to *Kotobuki*. The land on which run was owned by the municipality Yokohama City. This showed that day-laborers' migration to *Kotobuki* was not spontaneous but clearly planned.

## 2. 3 Forming of a Day-Laborers Lodging Town: the 1960s-the 1970s

With the High-Growth Period of the Japanese economy, demand for workers greatly increased and the population of *Kotobuki* grew to more than 6,000. Still there was a job-center for day-laborers in the area, in fact, another one existed. It was an unauthorized one. In the very early morning people came to the center of the town and traders would gather the number of workers they needed. This was an unauthorized labor market, called *Yoseba*. *Kotobuki*, Yokohama was one of the major *Yosebas* in post-war Japan.

Unlike other *Yosebas*, *Kotobuki* residents mainly worked as dock laborers and stevedores. This means that they did not need to migrate there to find a next job and so married and began families. In 1965, the welfare center opened a nursery school. At that time, both the Mayor and the Governor were known as the 'reformists'. There were many reasons for building welfare facilities in the 1960s and the early 1970s and a reformist local government was one of them. Also, some residents in the town organized their own association and a labor union organized local workers. Their organized activities were mainly for invigorating people's demands communication and for obtaining more welfare facilities

and services.

In 1965, the Promotion Act of Stevedores was approved and the automation of dock work went ahead in Yokohama port. This meant that demand for day-laborers who worked as dock laborers decreased and many of them had to start working in construction sites to earn their daily bread. In the 1970s, the number of

elderly laborers increased in the town and a society of the old was established. At the same time, the ratio of the disabled among the *Kotobuki* population also increased. Many of those were both old and disabled, and lived on social security.

### 3. The Changes in the Social Structure in the Urban Underclass

#### 3.1 The Impact of Globalization

The late 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s was a period of high economic growth on the so-called Bubble'. During this time, many foreign migrant workers came to Japan mostly from other Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Korea. Even now, the Government of Japan has not permitted foreign migrants a working visa for blue-collar jobs, so that most these migrant workers entered Japan with a short-term tourist visa. A lot of the migrants stay and work after their visa has expired.

At that time, migrants also came and worked in *Kotobuki*, mainly from the Philippines and Korea (See **Table1** and **Table2**). Many of them were male, but there were some female and infant migrants. Just as the Japanese day laborers, these foreign migrants worked as day-laborers at the port and at construction sites.

From interviews, I found out that these migrants looked at their situation differently from local Japanese residents. Most of local laborers regard themselves as underdogs of society. One resident told me "People here fell and fell and then finally reached *Kotobuki* at last". On the other hand, migrants come to the urban underclass area without knowing. I would point out that

Table1: Population of *Kotobuki*  
(Total residents, migrants and those on social security)

	Lodging House Residents	Migrants	Over 60 Years Old	Social Security (Housing Allowance)
1984	5,653	—	504	2,100
1985	5,694	—	588	1,861
1986	5,718	—	628	1,723
1987	6,004	—	711	1,710
1988	5,967	—	744	1,729
1989	6,151	533	780	1,652
1990	6,362	814	817	1,638
1991	6,334	1,146	920	1,706
1992	6,476	1,059	1,056	1,983
1993	6,205	932	1,382	2,562
1994	6,331	1,083	1,650	3,413
1995	6,340	651	2,036	3,893
1996	6,243	465	2,042	3,997
1997	6,401	424	2,219	4,221
1998	6,495	377	2,573	4,537
1999	6,678	309	2,641	4,571
2000	6,429	222	2,808	4,627
2001	6,589	223	2,924	4,594
2002	6,559	205	3,039	4,698
2003	6,279	150	3,215	4,836
2004	6,654	92	3,417	4,913
2005	6,412	111	3,436	4,869
2006	6,461	95	3,528	4,849

Source:

\*Data from *Kotobuki* Welfare Center (total population and migrants, 1984-2002, every December)

\*Data from Department of Welfare, Yokohama City (those on social security, 1984-2003; total population and migrants, 2003, November)

Table2: Migrants in *Kotobuki* (ethnicity, gender)

	year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Koreans	male	612	505	665	374	255	234	197	179	142	106
	female	197	190	141	139	79	57	60	53	38	31
	children	26	29	18	20	7	5	7	4	2	1
Filipinos	male	131	109	106	75	74	74	63	45	29	40
	female	41	43	58	14	5	20	14	10	8	8
	children	1	3	6	2	3	1	0	0	0	1
Thais	male	21	14	45	17	20	3	9	1	0	0
	female	24	30	43	7	18	26	19	11	0	0
	children	0	3	1	0	3	2	2	0	0	0
Others	male	6	6	0	1	1	1	5	5	3	22
	female	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	14
	children	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0

Source:

\*Data from *Kotobuki* Welfare Center (every December)

the meaning of “*Kotobuki*” is totally different between that of migrants’ and local laborers.

In the following paragraph, I figure out why those migrants come to the urban underclass in Yokohama. Among migrant workers in *Kotobuki*, Koreans from Cheju Island tend to have relatives in Tokyo and Yokohama (known as long term Korean residents of Japan). Some Korean newcomers work seasonally by utilizing their special visas to visit their families in Japan. Migrants returning to their home countries often tell others of their experience in *Kotobuki*. This has made the small lodging town well known especially in some places in Korea and the Philippines. Therefore many newcomers from these countries head directly for *Kotobuki*. Some arrive in other parts of Japan but they are also lured to Yokohama upon hearing that working conditions are good in this town. Indeed most migrants in *Kotobuki* come from particular regions of Korea (Cheju Island) and the Philippines (mid-Luzon), more importantly they tend to assemble and develop relationship based on common geographical roots. Another reason for the heavy connection of migrants in *Kotobuki* is that some of the lodging house owners, mostly Korean residents, allow them to stay which is not necessarily the case in other Yosebas.

With the increasing numbers of migrants, some ethnic businesses developed in *Kotobuki*. At the beginning of the 1990s, business specializing in Korean food, newspapers, rental videos, magazines, etc. increased in number. As a result, Korean migrants from other areas in Japan patronize these shops and interact there. According to one Korean male, *Kotobuki* is a place where they can communicate in their own language and preserve their Korean life style. Some shops are run by new migrants who saved enough money to start their own businesses after working as day laborers. What they offer to their fellows is not only alcohol and food but also an atmosphere of home.

We cannot see the situation mentioned above because of the decreasing number of migrants. With the long-term recession of the 1990s, migrants also faced difficulty finding jobs in *Kotobuki* and some of them moved to other areas in Japan to obtain a better chance to earn a living while others went back to their home countries.

### 3. 2 Becoming a Social Security-Dependent Town

With an increasing population of elderly people in *Kotobuki*, the number of those on social security also increased. As shown in **Table1**, more than 90 percents of the residents live with governmental support in this area which was once a day-laborers’ town. Also, the number of homeless people around the area started increasing from the 1990s. In Japan, the majority of the homeless are middle-aged and elderly males. Some of them are former-day-laborers and others are from different types of industry, mainly from manufacturing and service jobs.

The numbers of homeless increased not only around *Kotobuki*, but also the whole inner area of Greater Tokyo. To assist the increasing population of homeless, the government established a self support center for the homeless in large cities, including Yokohama. In 2002, a special act to promote homeless people’s self-support was promulgated. After establishing the support center, the homeless came not only from around the town but also from other areas of Yokohama and even from other cities of the prefecture to *Kotobuki*. This is because it is the only institution for the homeless in Yokohama

Table3: The Number of Rooms and Residents *Kotobuki*

	Lodging House Residents	Lodging House Rooms
1984	5,653	5,738
1985	5,694	6,101
1986	5,718	6,476
1987	6,004	6,234
1988	5,967	6,115
1989	6,151	6,158
1990	6,362	6,349
1991	6,334	6,297
1992	6,476	6,328
1993	6,205	
1994	6,331	6,133
1995	6,340	6,460
1996	6,243	6,606
1997	6,401	6,719
1998	6,495	6,968
1999	6,678	7,199
2000	6,429	7,251
2001	6,589	7,440
2002	6,559	7,443
2003	6,279	7,733
2004	6,654	8,194
2005	6,412	8,461
2006	6,461	8,653

Source:

\*Data from Data from Department of Welfare, Yokohama City

City. As is often the case institutions for the socially marginalized who are regarded as 'a problem' are avoided but was relatively easy to establish in an area like *Kotobuki*.

Also, to assist the increasing number of social security recipients, Yokohama City accepted a lodging house (dosshouses) as resident so that the former-homeless are able to get welfare service of that address. In fact, as the number of those on social security increased, many lodging house owners tended to let them stay on and avoid others. For owners, it is undoubtedly very profitable and those who can accumulate social security many start investing in their facilities. A boom in lodging house rebuilding started at the end of the 1990s. Buildings which are newly constructed never appear to be cheap shabby laborers' hotel. They just look like regular apartment houses. As most of them have an elevator and a handrail on each stair case, it is clear that owners regard their main customers as the old and the disabled, recipients of social security.

These situations altered the population of this small town. In a word, those who never worked as a day-laborer have come to live in *Kotobuki*. A Yokohama citizen who lived and worked in some other area would come to *Kotobuki* to live in a lodging house and receive social security. I might say that *Kotobuki* which was once a vigorous day-laborers' town has become an old men's shelter, who do not have any place else to go. At the same time, this situation did not naturally give a rise. As gentrification of the inner area Yokohama goes on, the homeless and others without social resources (such as security of jobs and residents, families and so on) are forced into the underclass area, where they are not visible to other citizens.

### 3.3 Gentrification and the Inner Area Transition

After the reclamation project in the 19th century, the whole district around *Kotobuki* had been a residential area for the working class. As mentioned already, inner Yokohama started its urbanization by developing of amusement district including a sex industry. However, the urban planning started from the 1960s intended to rebuild and expand the city's function and infrastructure so to be the next largest city after Tokyo. As Yokohama and Tokyo are neighboring cities, planners were eager to make some distinction from Tokyo. Yokohama's unique

character needed to be enhanced and some attractive images were adopted to make its character clearer. In fact Yokohama's development depended on heavy industry, but to attract new residents and consumers a fashionable urban life style and a certain exoticism were emphasized. And then, 'port' was just fitted to the image; a port as a place which receives exotic goods and where culture and one can enjoy fashionable urban shops and amusement facilities, not merely a place where heavy industry products are imported and exported.

From *Kotobuki*, it takes about a five-minute-walk to reach both Chinatown and the *Moto-machi* shopping district. Both are Yokohama's major tourist attractions. The redevelopment area includes a business center, large conference facilities, a museum, high-grade hotels and shopping malls. These give Yokohama an urban image and sophistication, though the land on which the new facilities are built was once site of major heavy industrial company.

From the 1990s even including the recession period, tall multi-story newly-constructed condominiums sprouted up around *Kotobuki* as the government lowered taxes to encourage people to buy housings. Even if it has a lodging house district as a neighbor, the area is very convenient because it is very close to a railway station, a shopping center and a motorway exit ramp. In 2006, one railway expanded its route to this area from a center of Tokyo and named a new station 'Moto-machi/ China town'. The name shows the two attractive spots and is targeting tourists and consumers. However, in early 2007, a major Japanese magazine selected this area as one of the most attractive places for young middle-class couples to live. Some of those couples chose condominiums built near *Kotobuki*, not knowing who their neighbors are.

At the same time, inside *Kotobuki*, the scene was also changing in some ways. About 2005, one enterprising company owner who has a volunteering experience to support the homeless started a project to run cheap hotels for foreign backpacking tourists in cooperation with some lodging house owners. This new business has done well so far and young travelers come to *Kotobuki* from around the world. Also in a lodging house town in Tokyo, some owners has changed their customer base from day-laborers and those on welfare to internationalized backpackers. Not the same as

migrant workers, and their visiting is in fact an aspect of Globalization.

## 4. The Changes in the Social Activism in the Urban Underclass

### 4.1 Union Organization and Human Right Activism for the Day-Laborers

I will now describe some of the changes in the social activism in *Kotobuki*, the poor, impoverished urban underclass area of Yokohama. As mentioned above, *Kotobuki* grew as a day-laborers' town in the 1950s, during the postwar period when much manpower was required for reconstructing war-torn Japan.

As the number of day-laborers increased, those who wanted to organize a stronger labor movement also came to *Kotobuki*. They set up a union for day-laborers and actively encouraged the laborers to join the organization. However, few laborers are joined the union and the majority of the union members were those laborers engaged in labor activism. But, it was very important that the labor union became the representative to stand up for day-laborers demanding their rights from the public officials, in particular Yokohama City. Also, the union tried to protect *Kotobuki* laborers from pernicious labor sharks who were often Japanese mafia (*Yakuza*).

At the same time, many people came to *Kotobuki* to support the livelihood of the day-laborers and their families (wives and children). These were divided into two major groups; one was the public agency and the other the citizens' movement organization or religious organizations.

The beginning of the 1970s saw greater momentum to social activism in *Kotobuki*. Because of sudden severe business recession triggered by the oil shock, many day-laborers lost their jobs and it meant that they also lost their place to live. Those who could not earn a living became homeless and slept in the street. During that troubled time, the union asked the City to provide assistance grant funding to the laborers to survive the cold winter months, but the negotiations broke down. Then the union took over the 4-story public facility named "*Seikatsu-kan* (the House of Livelihood)" which was built a few years earlier to make it into a shelter for the homeless laborers. The union aimed at self-

management of the facility and for a short period of time it succeeded. At last, the squatters were evicted from the building by the public security guards.

But after this incident, the union started the "*Ettô* (passing the winter)" program during every year-end through the New Year holiday to support day-laborers who had no place else to go, because the laborers' camp was closed during that period. 'Self-management' also became the keyword for the "*Ettô*" activities (building temporary shelters for one week).

### 4.2 Various Activities for Various Residents

By comparison to other *Yosebas*, the *Kotobuki* community seem unique because a number of women and children have lived there as the day-laborers' families. Therefore, the organizations and individuals that have come to support the people are not only for labor activism but also for women, health care and quality education. Since the 1970s the number of elderly residents has gradually increased in this small town so that geriatric care facilities have been opened in and around *Kotobuki*. Additionally, because day-laborers tend to injure and damage their health on construction sites, the number of physically challenged persons have also increased so that several vocational training centers for those people have been opened by social welfare corporations in the private sector.

At that time, people who engaged in some business in *Kotobuki* (restaurants etc.), the managers of lodging houses, and welfare participants (staff at social welfare corporations) organized a neighborhood community association, but the labor union members never joined as these two groups were not on good terms. The association was organized to improve living conditions for all the *Kotobuki* residents including women, children and those who were unemployed, but the union insisted that resolving labor issues was most important and that by improving labor conditions living conditions would improve too. From the union's point of view, the local neighborhood community association seemed to be pro-government and to play down the harsh conditions of the day-laborers working place.

In the general way of Japanese society, members of any neighborhood community associations are local residents only, but in *Kotobuki* those who manage shops and welfare service workers also play a central role in

the body. Because most of the owners of lodging houses in the town are Koreans, they tend not to care about Japanese local conventions.

As the number of the elderly and the disabled increased it pushed up the number of welfare recipients in *Kotobuki* as mentioned, so that welfare activity has gradually grown in importance among the *Kotobuki* residents. And, not only by the social welfare corporation but also various kinds of activities have started after the 1980s and some of them still continue. In the following, I will pick up the main activity in *Kotobuki*.

#### Medical Activity

Started with student volunteers, open-air free medical consultation is provided by volunteers and working doctors and nurses. No drugs or medicines are offered to patients but blood pressure is checked and some medical advice is available. Some member of this organization and other people opened a clinic in *Kotobuki* about 10 years ago.

#### Literacy Education Activity

Started by a Yokohama City official who worked as a social counselor in the 1970s, and since the 1980s has continued this activity. Not only day-laborers who were deprived of opportunities for education but also Korean and other foreign residents joined. Since the middle of the 1990s, college students and working people who were literate enough also came to join the class. Even if they had no economic and educational difficulties, they sometimes felt loneliness and wanted an empathetic bond with others. One young boy told me that he could express himself freely in the literacy class in *Kotobuki* and he felt this was the place where he could be at ease. As a result, the literacy class started to support day-laborers, this activity also supported (in different way) unexpected people, young people from outside *Kotobuki*.

#### Support Activity for the Homeless

There are several groups supporting homeless people in and around *Kotobuki*. Those groups are divided into two categories: one is mainly organized by the union members and the other by Church members. Basically, once a week they call around to each of the homeless and ask about their health condition and problems. Sometimes they bring food such as soup, rice ball and so

on. If a member meets an aged homeless person, he/she recommend applying for welfare. Also, from autumn to spring the volunteers in *Kotobuki* set up an open-air soup kitchen for the hungry once a week.

#### Support Activity for the Migrants

Since the economic boom that began during the middle of the 1980s, many foreign migrants came to work in Japan and also to *Kotobuki*. In the winter of 1988, one Filipino worker approached the union to discuss a labor issue. This matter made the union member aware of the issue of migrant workers and soon they organized a support group for migrants in *Kotobuki* with other social activist.

The first migrant group in *Kotobuki* was Filipinos so that the organization mainly supported them, but after that more Koreans came and many Koreans were not aware of their support action. In the case of a labor issue, Koreans were regular visitors of other union located in Kawasaki, next city to Yokohama.

In fact, there was a different degree of interest towards the organization between Filipinos and Koreans. But it was very important that a pioneering supportive organization for foreign migrants start in the underclass area in Japan and the organization became one of the leading bodies among social activities to support foreign migrants in Japan.

### 4. 3 New 'Town Development' and the Changes of Social Activism

As mentioned, the welfare recipient rate in *Kotobuki* has risen very high and in fact this small town known as 'laborers' town' became 'welfare people's town'. As the passage of the law to help homeless people become more financially supportive, homeless people who had never visited *Kotobuki* came to stay in social facilities or lodging houses in the area and became the residents. Relatively speaking, the union is losing its power and also the union members themselves are aging. At the same time, people who work in the welfare sector have gained a greater voice in the issue of how the town's future vision should be.

Additionally, local governments including Yokohama City have put much emphasis on co-production way with community action groups in recent Japan. In the past, the labor union tended to take a clearly adversarial



stand against the government and tried to get budget and other materials by through strong claiming demands. But today these methods have declined, and it is common for non-public organizations to apply their propositions to the government and if adopted they carry on as a recipient of the public commission.

Just as the social structure in *Kotobuki* has changed relations between the government and local organizations, power balance among the local organizations in *Kotobuki* have also drastically changed. Under these conditions, the newcomer organization has started hostel business for foreign backpackers and tourists to Yokohama. Some young architects and artists joined in reforming the lodging house rooms in *Kotobuki* and make them clean and attractive space.

This kind of change never happens all at once. Yokohama City has brought a new urban redevelopment plan which puts town development with art and artists, named 'Creative City Yokohama'. With this new redevelopment plan, the areas and streets which were historically underclass and crime-infested have been cleaned up and in the land left behind the government has tried to attract young residents to live or open shops and art studios.

These changes also have much effect on *Kotobuki* and activities in it. The people who play major role in environmental improvement in the town, who are mainly from the welfare sector, attract a motorboat race ticket center to *Kotobuki*. This kind of facility is always avoided by local residents but accepting it brings a community some bounty (income). The members of the local community association have tried to find independent revenue sources for their people for a long time. The ticket center opened in 2007 and 5 % of the gross sales of races will use for development of the community as a governmental budget.

The members of the local community organization hope to regenerate *Kotobuki* and make people outside the town look it as 'a normal town'. For that purpose, the members tried to organize various events to gain recognition for changes in *Kotobuki*. They want to tell visitors that *Kotobuki* is not a sinister town any more and has become a community of "normal" people as a place you can live now. One result of their efforts, in *Kotobuki* the Yokohama City musical band marched and had open-air small musical concert in 2007, and young artists

carried out open-air exhibitions and public performance in 2008.

Thus, the transformation of *Kotobuki* has gradually become known to the public with the events which are planned by the members of the local community organization. But in fact the local residents in this town and people who have engaged in social activities, especially for the poor including the homeless do not recognize that kind of change. Even though the image of this town has improved to some degree, there are still a small number of homeless people in and around *Kotobuki*. Also as labor issues of young people become very severe in Japan now, some of those workers who lost their jobs and suffered economic uncertainty have come to *Kotobuki* as the last refuge to survive. Even though its power becomes weaker, the labor union and its members have carried out supportive activity for the homeless and they have played a central role in not only *Kotobuki* but also in all Kanagawa prefecture.

## 5. Conclusion

Today, Yokohama is known as the second largest city in Japan and also as one of destinations for international businessmen and tourists. Historically, Yokohama developed as the main port city in Japan and become the nucleated city of the largest manufacturing district, Keihin. A multitude of men, hard working day laborers, made a great contribution to the economic and social growth of Yokohama. However, these men have never seen remembered not even a single name. In fact, they were just day-laborers and in a highly expendable position.

*Kotobuki* was the area in which these laborers and their families lived. Both the day-laborers and their families, who resided in 'Yoseba', were stigmatized by the neighbors and the general public. As cheap labor, they tended to be treated as 'disposable' by their employers. Especially during any business depression, many of them had to face sudden layoffs, nonpayment of wages, no compensation for industrial accidents and other harsh circumstances.

Sadly, the laborers themselves never really tried to improve their working and living conditions. This was because most of them were not educated. And too, their

work days were long, laborious and back-breaking, there was little time for labor disputes.

On behalf of these laborers, social activists in *Kotobuki* tried various social developments. Some were motivated by Socialism or Marxism, and others by humanitarianism or the Christian faith. Whatever their motivation, many of the social activists made great contributions to the betterment of the social environment in *Kotobuki*. For a long time, the day-laborers and their families had been abandoned and forgotten not only by the society but also by the government. These laborers had been treated as a burden on society. But some young officials who worked locally in *Kotobuki* and met the people directly started helping with social activism at the individual level. And, with their efforts some of the laborers soon learned and recognized fundamental rights for all workers and then tried to join with neighboring laborers, as they too had lived and worked in isolation for long time. That is to say, social activism in *Kotobuki* was carried out not only by the activist from outside the town, but also by humanitarian city employees and day-laborers

However, the social structure of *Kotobuki* has gradually changed and it has been losing its role as a job market for day-laborers and instead is becoming 'a town for the elderly and for welfare recipients'. That change has enhanced the influence of the local neighboring community association members who are mainly involved in the social welfare activities in *Kotobuki*. As a predisposition for social welfare services, the members have built a cooperative relationship with government officials, and that has been looked at critically by the union and those around it. I think it is safe to say that all the individuals involved in any social activism have carried out their duties hoping to make the *Kotobuki* residents' living conditions better. However, the priority of their approach differs according to each individual and also in their belongings.

It is the trend not only in *Kotobuki* but also in other communities that labor activity and social movements have relatively lost their influence to society as union activism declines in Japan. Besides in *Kotobuki*, those the members of elder laborers who have retired and who often have had no place else to go even have continued living in the community are increasing. Also with greater automation on the worksite, the demand for

unskilled laborers has been decreasing.

Recently, the members of the local neighborhood community association have tried to implement various ideas to open the community to outsiders who have thought it as 'an isolated town' for long time. For example, the association applied and got the government grant for town development and provided some opportunities for young contemporary artists to make presentations in *Kotobuki* during the Yokohama Toriennale period in 2008.

Obviously it is desirable that the society become more aware of those who have been socially marginalized and looked down for long time. However, the new social activism and small businesses have conferred support to just a small number of the residents in *Kotobuki* so far. With the recent economic recession, the numbers of homeless have been increasing in and around the community, and those who give a helping hand the socially disadvantaged are the traditional members and supporters of the social activism in *Kotobuki*.

The Social structure of *Kotobuki* has changed greatly mostly in the composition of its population and in the labor environment, but what has not changed is that this is a place where the socially ostracized unwanted individuals could come to gather and insure their livelihood. At the same time, even working as day-laborers' life is harsh, the community gives the people a certain kind of social shelter. And *Kotobuki* continues its role as a sheltering the place for socially vulnerable groups.

Today, the number those who carry out social activism in *Kotobuki* has declined and some have reached on an exhausted condition, as they have had difficulty recruiting new younger members so that the old members have had to continue working. As *Kotobuki* continues to go through structural change, social behaviors and needs of its residents have been altered gradually and some newcomer activists have tried new initiatives with the support public agencies. As *Kotobuki* is in its transition period now, both old and new social activists have become mixed in the community. And there is in fact a tug of war beneath the surface about the future development of the town between the traditional activists and the government.

In several years, *Kotobuki* will probably be altered from what it is today, and the same can be said for the

social activism there. The social transition of *Kotobuki* shows us that urban underclass areas in the post industrialized society will gradually be dismantled and finally rendered as harmless communities, where at one time laborers and their families could earn to live on their own with the support of the social activists and volunteers.

(Monthly Report of Livelihood Protection). (Japanese)

### Homepage (English)

City of Yokohama

<http://www.city.yokohama.jp/en/>

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