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(出版者 / Publisher)

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(雑誌名 / Journal or Publication Title)

GIS journal : the Hosei journal of global and interdisciplinary studies /
GIS journal : the Hosei journal of global and interdisciplinary studies

(巻 / Volume)

4

(開始ページ / Start Page)

21

(終了ページ / End Page)

29

(発行年 / Year)

2018-03

(URL)

<https://doi.org/10.15002/00014592>

Fieldwork Note

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Abstract

Geographically, Edo Tokyo was divided into the hilly area of the high city (*yamanote*), which surrounded the Edo castle to the north, south and west consisting of mainly large wooden houses for feudal lords (*daimyō*) and the warrior class (*samurai*). Other low city areas in the northeast and east along the bay of Edo, formed the ‘island’-like living quarters of the commoners or ‘town folk’ (*chōnin*), as moat and canals structured the area. The ‘low city’ (*shitamachi*) area was famous for its vibrant urban culture, which developed mainly around the Buddhist temple Sensō-ji in Asakusa.

Terms *yamanote* and *shitamachi* belong together, as they form the historical, cultural and economical division of Edo-Tokyo. *Shitamachi* can be translated as ‘low town or city’, back then the area of the commoners of the shogun, located northeast of the Edo Castle and west of the Sumida River (Jinnai, 1995, 108). *Yamanote* means literally ‘hand of the mountains’, being located on the hills of the Musashino Plateau and divided into three districts of *Jōhoku* (north), *Jōsai* (west) and *Jōnan* (south) of Edo Castle, being referred to as ‘High City’ (Jinnai, 1995, 11).

Keywords: shitamachi, yamanote, Tokyo, alleyway, gentrification

Introduction

Both terms are not official names, yet used extensively in the different literature about Tokyo’s history connecting *yamanote* with connotations of a high class and affluent culture and *shitamachi* with bustle, liveliness and human warmth (Bestor, 1993). The terms were used over centuries, but their meaning and physical location has changed in the twentieth century as new administrative

centres of Shinjuku, Shibuya, Ikebukuro and Shinagawa were established, which are situated around the historical core (Seidensticker, 2002). As a result, the old boundaries of *shitamachi* have moved as far as to the edge of Shinjuku and Shinagawa and characteristics of urban life in the *shitamachi* districts can nowadays be found throughout Tokyo and other cities in Japan. Since then, the terms have been used in different ways and their meaning is nowadays loaded with nostalgia and a longing for a traditional urban life (Waley, 2002). This type of re-interpretation is important to consider as it also influences the perception and representation of the marginalised alleyways.

General Perception of Alleyways in Nezu and Yanaka

The area and connecting alleyways of Nezu/Yanaka are known throughout Tokyo, and many people come to Nezu and Yanaka for sightseeing, specific events or out of 'pure curiosity'. Younger people who were interviewed stated that Yanaka was recommended by friends and/ or on a weblog they came across looking for some new city walks. They decided to visit the area to take photographs, experience the mix of traditional and modern life aspects with their own eyes and often they are pleasantly surprised by the 'vibrant feel' of the district which has so many new things and nostalgic details alike to offer.

Nezu is often mentioned when talking about the famous Nezu shrine which is a national treasure, being established over 1900 years ago and attracting every year huge crowds when the azaleas bloom in May. Nezu became especially known for the Nezu *Taiyaki* (fish shaped pastry filled with red beans) and the restaurant *Hantei*, south of Nezu Station, known for its historical building and delicious *kushiage* (fried vegetables etc. on a stick). Many visitors to the area have featured these specialities and their walks in Yanesen in different social media and spread the name of the area beyond Tokyo's borders.

Yet, Yanaka is not only featured in private blogs or networks but often in different print media including magazines and journals, seasonal guidebooks and other social media spreading information about upcoming events and offers to visitors which immediately feel connected to the area which is very 'human scale' and 'down to earth', which people especially find in the narrow alleyways. Many people like to watch and observe local events but not all want to actively take part in the organization and maintenance of the social activities etc which are needed to hold such events.

This relates to the phenomenon Bestor (1993) described as the power of nostalgia when he discussed the shitamachi 'revival', as visitors and newcomers have started to develop a new curiosity for historical places when the area and its shitamachi remnants were featured on TV, in books or in a new soap opera. In more detail, he stated that based on the nostalgic image reproduced by the popular media, they might go out to eat some *dango* (small dumpling made out of rice flour) bought at a local stand or dress "in brand new 'traditional' shitamachi garb, anxious to join in a real shitamachi festival" (Bestor 1993) 54). Most important is the fact that these activities do not form a part of their daily life, but fulfil people's need to occasionally experience something of historical Tokyo. Scholar Hidenobu Jinnai (1995) stated in a similar way, that it is not the physical remains of old Edo people are looking for, but the everyday features and social life of the past - including daily sounds, visits of the yatai seller, annually *matsuri*, *hanabi* and *hanami* parties - which people yearn for, try to experience and recreate (Jinnai, 1995, 54).

Being further asked if they would like to live in the area and their dense alleyways, most interviewees indicates that they do not necessarily have to live in Nezu or Yanaka, as they enjoy the occasional visit or walk around the area to discover traditional things and new aspects of historical Tokyo, which seems to be enough to fulfil their longing for the past and maintain the nostalgic feelings people have when thinking of the alleyways.

Thus, if the alleyway is a desired place for walks and visits, we should maybe inquire more specifically what aspects attract the visitor to walk the alleyway. Next to the atmosphere, most people enjoy traditional features like local matsuri and other events. Besides this, many people find delight in sensual aspects such as smells, sounds and traditional materials which they can touch and feel. This indicates that especially temporary users have strong memories about the traditional atmosphere of areas like Nezu and Yanaka and their alleyways, even though they have lived a long time ago or never in an alleyway. Locals find in comparison pleasure in walking the alleyways on a daily basis, being not disturbed by cars, meeting neighbours and maintaining a 'slow life', rarely found in urban Tokyo.

All in all, we can see that the alleyways are step by step commercialized and used by different media and forms of communication, becoming increasingly an object of desire and being consumed in various forms, from walks, tours, over new images and products making use of a very ordinary feature of an everyday life long gone. Despite that major trend, it is important to study the fine grain, details and exceptions which exist, as for example not all people who want stay or move into the area can afford the rising land prices and cost of living. Thus, the picture is more complex, as each person has their own personal motives to live or visit the area to fulfil specific desires which might be in the case of older people driven by vivid memories and strong feelings for nostalgic things. Yet, in the case of people born in the post-war Shōwa (*shinjinrui*) and Heizei period (1945-1989, 1989 to 2000) it is not entirely clear what attracts these people to experience the past and the traditional alleyway life. The contemporary consumer culture (e.g. in form of the Showa Boom) has a strong influence on the way areas like Nezu and Yanaka are perceived by different users and whether the alleyway becomes a commodity or has a chance to be revived to function in a similar or totally different form?

General Perception of Alleyways in Kagurazaka

After interviewing several people walking around in Kagurazaka it becomes soon clear that people see the neighbourhood in different ways. Talking for example to some women who are in their 40s and on their way to an expensive lunch place, we get to know that they perceive Kagurazaka mainly as a posh place with expensive restaurants. Cobble stoned alleyways help to increase this appeal. Additionally, many young people argued that Kagurazaka still has something of an old, quiet Edo town with its own *shitamachi* character, especially being felt at the lively intersection next to Iidabashi Station.

Walking further up the Kagurazaka Dori, I come across more and more foreigners who either visit or live in the area. Most people respond to the question why they have chosen Kagurazaka as a (living-) place, that they actually live not in Kagurazaka but nearby the French Institute north and west to the neighbourhood of Kagurazaka. In their view, Kagurazaka offers everything they are looking for: a local character combined with sophisticated and elegant spots, shops and events. One lady mentions that she enjoys listening to the sound of the Akagi shrine while sitting in the Italian cafe located right next to the shrine and sipping a matcha latte together with some gateau chocolate.

Another lady, who resided in the area but had to move out of the neighbourhood due to rising rent prices, explains that Kagurazaka has a very special charm, being an area where geisha, temples and shrines dominated and are still adding something special to the mix. In her eyes the charisma of Kagurazaka is somehow vanishing, as new franchise izakayas, chain stores and 100Yen shops are starting to increase in numbers, dominating the landscape and changing the image of the neighbourhood as a whole, in which less and less native/ insider live and newcomers/ outsiders work.

In this sense, it does not surprise that since some years Kagurazaka is increasingly an attractive spot for cultural tours and events, attracting at some days huge crowds, especially during events like the Awari Dori Matsuri. The neighbourhood is similar to Yanaka often featured on TV and other social media. In the case of Kagurazaka, we can refer for example to the soap drama *Haikei Chichiue sama* which was broadcasted between January to March 2007. The weekly soap drama is set in an old prestigious *ryōtei* (Japanese-style restaurant) in the neighbourhood of Kagurazaka. The young *itamae* (cook for Japanese dishes) struggles with his life and work while the traditional restaurant and local neighbourhood are facing spatial and social changes. The drama shows the intimate relationship of the community that has been lost nowadays, asking how a local community can deal with the changes going. Since the broadcasting of the drama, many more media and other channels discovered the neighbourhood as an attractive spot in the ongoing hunt for new urban hot spots.

Most magazines which promote walks and tours around the area focus on the cobble-stone alleyways, which they describe as a unique and typical feature of Kagurazaka. When walking the alleyways, people also want to enjoy diverse activities as shopping, lunching and dining. Special editions promote the newest, most French or most cute restaurant or cafe. Especially female customers come to the neighbourhood to enjoy this kind of new highlights, sitting on one of the terraces overlooking the alleyway or even walking around dressed in kimono. Many rental services for this type of equipment opened to attract more visitors and the appeal of the local geisha school who consider themselves as elementary and not just historical part of the community. At night time, many couples and salary men are seen walking around Kagurazaka looking either for a high class dining place in one of the alleyways or for a cheap drinking place in one of the *yokochōs* near Iidabashi Station.

In this way, Kagurazaka is perceived as a space full of traditions and history but also a place for the urban elite filled with abundance, expensive restaurants and

living places for the rich, an urban image the emerging chain stores do not fit but nevertheless, they are growing in numbers and influence.

General Perception of Alleyways in Tsukudajima

In the last few decades, Tsukudajima was redeveloped into large scale residential high-rise complexes, yet one can still find reminders of old Tokyo once poking around the narrow alleyways. Many people which were interviewed, stated that they come to the area to search for traditional elements, to visit a local festival or to enjoy some monjayaki, the well known delicacy made in this area. Another traditional delight is *tsukudani* which are small pieces of fish cooked in soy sauce, yet just three tsukudani shops remain. To understand the perception of the alleyways, however, we have to deepen our understanding of the ongoing changes and how different people perceive them.

Asking longstanding inhabitants and locals how they would describe their daily life, most inhabitants of Tsukudajima would sketch an ordinary neighbourhood in which people still care about each other and share communal and neighbourhood activities organized around the sentō, the shrine or the different festivals. They would tell you that in this neighbourhood one can still find people who remember the life and urban scenery before the redevelopment. Occasionally, people stand around in the alleyway, stop by to take time for a talk or the maintenance of the personal greenery which creates a cosy and warm atmosphere. Yet, the participants of the interviews also describe a life which is threatened by the closure of family businesses as the basis of their existence in this area or the decline of the typical single-family and housing unit.

Modern, large scale developments as office blocks, supermarkets and apartment towers dominate the view, push the traditional everyday life along the narrow alleyways at the edge, until they will totally take over the space. With this in mind, it does not surprise that most people mentioned that the neighbourhood has lost many old features typical for the life in the alleyways. Thus, features like the small corner shop, street vendors or the call of the tofu men who entered the alleyways just before dinner time, have disappeared.

Talking to residents of the new developments, it appears that they consider the daily life in the alleyways and cheap wooden housing as old fashioned, exotic and somehow primitive as some houses still have no bath and people keep on going to the sentō. The new residents enjoy living a comfortable life surrounded by modern, safe facilities in which they know only some neighbours and even fewer locals who live along the alleyways. Yet occasionally some of them go to down to the local alleyway or local fish shop, as one person answered, “I like the diversity and friendly atmosphere there, and I also take my small son there, so that he can learn something about the traditional Japanese culture.” Most residents however never visit or do not care about the alleyway as they prefer to take part in new events like the annual flea market organized in their own residential block or other new facilities in the area. Newcomers argued that they do not consider themselves part of the old area and thus very rarely take part in the activities organized by the local neighbourhood association. Thus, newcomers show mostly no specific interest in the traditional alleyways which they might cross day by day on the way, yet they start to develop a new curiosity, when the area and its Shitamachi remnants are featured on TV, in books or in a new soap opera.

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