

Young Workers, Aging Laborers Giving Old Kotobuki a New Life

高齢化が進む「ドヤ街」で進む、新たな街づくりの試み

東京の山谷、大阪の釜ヶ崎地区と並び、日雇い労働者が暮らす簡易宿泊所が多く集まる横浜市の寿町で、住民の高齢化が進んでいる。施設などに移る高齢者も多く、宿泊者の減少に悩まされてきた宿泊所の経営者は、地元NPOとともに、地域の環境改善と新たな宿泊客を誘致する取り組みを始めた。

By Hiroshi Matsubara
Asahi Weekly

Once a vibrant hotbed of cheap inns for day laborers during Japan's post-war development era, the Kotobuki district in Yokohama's Naka Ward now seems a haven for older people who stand and chat on the streets all day long.

But if one looks closely, signs of the district's ongoing metamorphosis become visible on every street corner — in the herds of foreign tourists, flowerpots on corners and young employees working alongside former laborers at restaurants and welfare facilities.

One such example is the "Columbus" *okonomiyaki* (Japanese pancake) restaurant, located just outside the district, one of three major day laborer communities in Japan, along with Sanya in Tokyo and Kamgasaki in Osaka.

Starting this month, former laborers will work in partnership with young workers — all school dropouts who once spent reclusive lives in their homes — in the kitchen and hall serving *okonomiyaki*. The restaurant, opened in November, is operated by a group of venture companies and nonprofit organizations that assist school dropouts.

The project is designed to employ aging day laborers at a workplace less physically demanding than construction sites or factories, said Mami Iwamoto, director of the group.

She added that Kotobuki's care-free atmosphere and tradition of

mutual assistance makes it an ideal place for young dropouts to rehabilitate themselves before re-entering the real world.

"Kotobuki has a long history of accepting the socially vulnerable and capacity to accept young people who find it difficult to live in an increasingly competitive mainstream society," Iwamoto said.

Residents of Kotobuki live in some 120 cheap inns crammed into the area. These residents, once manual laborers at construction sites, factories and docks in and around Yokohama, are now approaching the twilights of their lives.

深刻な高齢化

More than half of the 6,300 long-term occupants of cheap inns are estimated to be aged 60 or older, and about 4,900 receive public welfare assistance due to aging or chronic illness, according to the Yokohama city office.

With those too aged to live alone moving to nursing homes and other facilities, the number of long-term residents also dropped by 100 in the past decade, city officials said.

Now threatened by declining occupancy rates, inn owners are scrambling to attract new customers, including thrifty business travelers and foreigners who want cheaper accommodations amid the rising yen.

Young members of local NPOs, who have long worked in the district to provide affordable meals, free clothing and recreational events to former day laborers, also are assisting the transformation.

In early December, Gustav Axland, a 24-year-old Swedish backpacker, checked into a typical cheap inn room, measuring three tatami mats,



1 寿地区内のヨコハマ ホステル・ヴィレッジのオフィスでチェックインするゲスト・アックスランドさん

2 NPOのスタッフと元日雇い労働者が共に働く「さなぎ食堂」では、ポリウムたっぷりの定食が300円で食べられる

撮影: 松原 央

at the Yokohama Hostel Village office in Kotobuki.

In a joint venture with four local inn operators, the office, set up by local college students and NPO members in 2005, manages and rents out 70 hotel rooms to tourists for ¥3,000 a night.

"As soon as I got in this area, I felt (it is) a little bit like a ghetto, but the room, location and staff workers are all nice for the price," Axland said.

"I never stay in a place like here in Europe or the United States, but because this is Japan and it is safe, I wouldn't mind staying here."

In its peak month of August, the company last year served 556 customers, including 236 foreigners from 27 countries.

Initially, it attracted only about

100 customers a month, the group officials said.

Stimulated by the hostel village's success, other inns have also renovated their interiors and posted Internet ads to attract new customers.

Many inn operators have also installed flower and plant pots on street corners, while some have even turned empty roofs into grass-filled flower gardens.

進む新たな街づくり

Last March, the operators of the decades-old Hamamatsu-so inn refurbished their fourth and fifth floors in traditional Japanese style, and renamed it the catchy "Zen" to attract tourists.

The occupation rate has jumped from about 60 percent to 95 percent, said manager Kosetsu Iwamoto.

"With former day laborers rapidly aging, inns now need costly overhaul to make it barrier free, such as the installation of elevators, and owners who cannot afford extensive reform have no choice but to attract new clients," Iwamoto said.

"So far, things have turned out very successful, thanks possibly to the fading negative image of Kotobuki in recent years."

What has helped Kotobuki shed its negative image is years of effort by NPO workers and day laborers to improve the area's living conditions.

At the restaurant Sanagi Shokudo, opened by a group of college students in 2002, NPO workers and laborers staff the kitchen to offer nutritional hot meals at affordable prices from ¥300.

With the help of food donations from convenience store chain Lawson Inc. and individual monetary donations, the restaurant now plans to extend *bento* delivery services for residents who are too aged or ill to leave their rooms.

As at the *okonomiyaki* restaurant Columbus, the increasing number of young societal dropouts also work at local hotels on cleaning crews.

A 65-year-old former dock worker admitted that he did not like to see so many outsiders coming to the area, claiming that he has seen people staring at him curiously throughout his life.

"But I came to realize that a lot of people actually care about us, and it is something very rewarding when you get old," he said.

vibrant...inns 簡易宿泊所が集まる 活気のある場所	is...to ~することを目的に している	rehabilitate...world 本当の社会復帰を果 たす前に少しずつ目 分を社会に慣らす	are...lives 人生の黄昏(たそが れ)の時期に差し掛 かっている	amid...yen 円高が進んでいる中 で	ghetto スラム街	renamed...Zen" 宿泊客受けする Zen (禅) という名前に変 えた	young...dropouts 社会からドロップア ウトした若者
ongoing metamorphosis 進行中の変貌(へん ぼう)、変わって いく様子	workplace... factories 建設現場や工場労働 ほど肉体的につらく ない職場	socially vulnerable 社会的に弱い立場の 人たち	threatened...rates (宿泊所の部屋数の)稼 働率の低下に危機感 を感じて	checked...mats 地域では一般的な安 い宿泊所の3畳間にチ ェックインした	have...gardens 何もなかった屋上を 芝生を敷き詰めた屋 上庭園に改装した	costly...free バリアフリーにする ための、多額の費用 がかかる全面改修	has...life 人から白い目で見ら れることをしょっち ゅう経験してきた
school...homes 学校からドロップア ウトして自宅に引き こもっていた若者	carefree...assistance お互いをあまりせん ざくしない雰囲気と 助け合いの伝統	increasingly... society ますます競争が厳しく なっている一般社会	are...to ~をしようとして必死で 努力してる	in...operators 4つの宿泊所の経営者 と提携して	refurbished...style 4、5階を改装して伝 統的な和のテイスト を取り入れた	fading...Kotobuki 寿町から悪いイメー ジが消えてきている こと	something... rewarding とてもありがたいこと

tab は米口語で「勘定書」の意味がある。多額の税金を使う米自動車大手数済策についてマケイン上院議員が懸念を表明した。Reuters 通信の記事が同氏の発言を、"I find it unacceptable that we could leave the American taxpayers with a tab of tens of billions of dollars. ..."と伝えていた。