

Report on Field Trip to Kamagasaki

On our field trip to Osaka Kamagasaki on April 27th 2024 we got an insight into the lives of homeless people in Japan and the Japanese welfare system established to support them.

Kamagasaki is an area of the city of Osaka, which started out in the beginning of the 20th century as an area of cheap lodgings, consisting of small houses with low hygiene. By the 1950s the area had developed to a classical slum. In the 1960s the area changed: the small houses became lodgings and hotels for male construction workers, while families were sent off to the outskirts of Osaka. With the burst of the economic bubble in the 1980s, many people lost their job, could not afford lodging anymore and eventually became homeless. Since then, many social welfare organisations have found their way to Kamagasaki, supporting the homeless in the area. Labourers, Companies, NGOs, government and the community work together, to improve the situation of homelessness in Kamagasaki. As students of the Kyoto University, we got the chance to visit some of these establishments.

Our day started at 10:00 in front of a building which also serves as a language school for Vietnamese showing the multicultural background of the area. After a short introductory presentation to the area, we went out tour. Kamagasaki is noticeably less clean than other places in Osaka (and Japan overall). Many buildings look less taken care of, I saw several people on bikes with bags filled with cans, without shoes or even urinating on the street. But most obvious becomes the situation around the Airin Rodo Day Labor Unemployment Office. Currently being closed, it is surrounded by mountains of left behind items, such as rubbish, blankets, plastic, bikes and other stuff. Some areas are still personal belongings of homeless people and/or activists in the area. We were told, that this is the reason, the items can not be removed, since they could be private property. Coming from Germany myself, this respectful manner towards others belongings surprised me, as they would most certainly be removed in Germany, if they lay unattended on the side of the street.

The Airin Rodo Day Labor Unemployment Office, we were told, was founded in the 1970s. At 5:30 every morning, people looking for jobs come here to possibly be employed for the day. The work-offers are 90% at construction sites, with work starting at 8:00 and ending at 17:00. At the end of a workday, the workers are paid in cash. Alternatively, workers are hired for a certain period of time (e.g. 10 days) during which they live at the construction site during their period of employment. Hence, homeless people here are not generally living on the street: they stay at the construction sites or cheap hotels with rooms of the size of three Tatami, costing around ¥1200 per night. The guide described the lifestyle of the workers as similar to wanderers:

there is no constant, they change their work and their place to sleep every day. But since they do not have a permanent address, they are accounted as homeless.

The address is central to the social welfare organisations. Without an address, pension, healthcare and other social necessities can not be paid out to people in need. Hence NGOs in the area have made it their task, to provide homeless people with a permanent address in order for them to receive social care. For that reason, NGOs have made it their tasks, to provide homeless people with a temporary 'permanent' address. Therefore, former hotels meant to spend only the night in are repurposed to temporary residences. We visited one of these places and got the chance to talk to two of the residents. This specific place was a home for retired homeless, costing around ¥36000 per month. While the small rooms serve as the private space and address of the residents, the former atrium has also been repurposed as a common room to sit and store bigger belongings, as the rooms are tiny. The residents described the main advantage of the residence as a place of belonging, with neighbours and caretakers that greet them with a friendly 'welcome home'. I was also surprised, by how positive and energetic the men were although they experienced hardships that are difficult to imagine for me. However, they hardly considered them as such.

Instead they told us about their volunteer work and new-found hobbies during their time without residence. Both men were very active, although being over 70 years old. They described a new-found purpose in the writing of haikus, which was said to be a common hobby among the homeless men, and volunteer work in the area, such as cleaning public spaces and watering and planting flowers in flowerbeds around the train station. This is definitely noticeable work, because I remember telling a friend about the beautiful flowerbeds around the station on an earlier trip to the area and it made me really happy to know that this has been provided by the (former) homeless people in Kamagasaki. Both the haiku writing and the community work are supported by establishments led by NGOs. Seeing how purpose is such a big part of changing the homeless' life, I came to wonder, what type of purpose homeless people in Germany might have and how NGOs could support them. I do imagine though, that since drug and alcohol abuse is a huge problem among homeless in Germany, there might be many people who struggle to find a purpose outside their addiction.

Another interesting aspect in comparison to homeless people in Germany where the hygiene standarts at the Airin Shelter and other facilities. The Airin Shelter is a place where homeless people that could not find another place to sleep the night can stay. They are provided with a bed, shower room with shampoo, toilets, washing machines, detergent and a common room.

When entering the facility, I first noticed the fresh and clean smell. Homeless people in Germany are often connected to a bad smell, since there are not enough possibilities for them to keep themselves clean. We were told, that Japanese consider cleanness the basis to uphold human dignity, hence putting a great effort in supplying clean spaces for homeless people to wash themselves. I have also noticed, that this makes them more approachable and less disconnected from other people, since there is less of a threshold.

In the Airin Shelter we also learned, that the shelter is serving mainly men. There are less homeless women overall, since they tend to stay at friends places instead. If a woman comes to the shelter, she will be accommodated in the staff rooms until a better place is found.

Our group definitely received a lot of attention from locals and bypassing people. Some just stared interestedly or stayed to listen to the tour guides explanations, some started talking to us.

Overall, I have experienced Kamagasaki as a friendly and community-based place. Although it may appear less wealthy compared to other areas in Osaka, it is not a dangerous or unfriendly place as often portrayed online. Our trip has actually helped me to see homeless people in a different light, as hardworking, creative people that contribute greatly to the community.