

**Field Trip Report: 2024.04.27**

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Joint Degree of Transcultural Studies

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**Beginning**

After an hour and a half train ride from Kyoto's Demachiyana Station, I got off at the Sakaisuji Line's Zoo Station (Doubutsuen-Mae Station) and stepped out onto the exit, where I was greeted by a large intersection of pachinko parlors and buildings of various heights. The old buildings with cracked and discolored walls were mostly cheap hotels and apartments, and next to them were newer hotels catering to tourists. I felt a sense of incongruity when seeing the weird coexistence of the old and the new.

**First half of the Fieldwork (10:30~12:30)**

The fieldwork began with a brief introduction to the village by Mr. Sen Arimura. After a 30-minute lecture on the town's history, we headed out to the main intersection near the station. Ginza-dori, a former lodging district, was lined with Chinese real estate, cheap apartments and hotels, and coin locker shops for day laborers to store their luggage. I could see a few foreign tourists on the street, but the majority of the people were men over 50.

**Airin Labor Support Center (11:00)**

Once we got away from the main street, the foot traffic thinned out considerably, and the streets were deserted, with the occasional middle-aged man in a hood eyeing our group with warying gaze. In the front yard of the Airin Labor Assistance Center, which has been open since the '70s and has been a gathering place for day laborers, there was a feast of discarded appliances and other illegal trash. In one corner, there was a tent made of bamboo poles and plastic bags. It is currently unoccupied, but is said to be used as a home for those opposed to the center's reconstruction. The feast of garbage graves that circles the building's perimeter and stretches for hundreds of meters is said to shape Kamagasaki area's image as a "dirty homeless town".



The building of the temporary labor center next door was very empty. The day labor job market opens at 5 a.m., so it's no surprise that it's empty around noon. The bulletin boards of the center offered a variety of information about free job training and job certification, free dormitories, and other livelihood support services, but the one that stood out was the missing person board. The board looked desolate, with only papers showing just a name, age, and place of origin of the missing person, no contact information for relatives. Most laborers in the area have no family, guarantors, or registered address, so if they go missing, it's hard to find any trace of them, and after a while, they're officially considered dead. In other words, the existence of 'individuals' as members of society is erased, regardless of whether they are alive or dead.

### **Airin Shelter (12:05)**

Not far from the municipal housing was the Airin Shelter, a city-led program for homeless people established in the 2000s. Although it was government-funded, from the outside it was very rundown. We walked through a board-and-batten entrance into a room filled with bunk beds. The facility can accommodate more than 500 people, most of whom are men in their 60s and older. Thanks to the indoor ventilation system, there was no stale odor of a shared dormitory, and it was very clean. In particular, the restrooms were very clean, because the facility's guidelines are to keep sanitary spaces clean for human dignity. This was an interesting example that disproves the common view that public facilities are poorly sanitized. However, there were no facilities (such as restrooms) for women, nor the presence of female workers. Are there no female day laborers? Is there no day labor market for women? Or are they just not common, at least in this part of the area?



## Second half of the Fieldwork (13:40~15:40)

Back near the station, we had lunch, and then resumed our exploration of the village. We passed by a playground where children could play ball, a hospital that provides free medical care to uninsured workers, a public bathhouse that had recently been equipped with a women's bath due to the influx of female careworkers, and a kindergarten for children from low-income families, including Vietnamese migrant workers. Along the way, I saw a few people sitting and smoking on the side of a quiet road. There didn't seem to be any cafes or restaurants open during the day. Our group, which included a number of foreigners, was an unusual sight on this quiet street, and we often received curious (or uncomfortable) stares from locals passing by us.

## Ohana Private Welfare Center (14:10)

The privately-run Ohana Welfare Center offers private rooms for 36,000 yen per month with no deposit required. It's a small room, about 2 square meters with a low ceiling of just over 2 meters, but the residents are guaranteed their personal space. In the shared lounge on the first floor, we could meet two retired workers and hear their life stories.

### Mr. O (76 years old, lived in Kamagasaki for 60 years)

Mr. O, who moved to the Osaka area after graduating from junior high school and entered the labor market through collective employment, said he was laid off from his company after the bubble economy burst and lost all of his severance pay to drinking and gambling. Before moving into the facility, he spent three years homeless at a train terminus. He now lives on pension and welfare funds. He said he has been enjoying writing haiku very much and laughs cheerfully, saying that his happiest moment is now, when he feels stable in the community.

### Mr. N (72 years old, lived in Kamagasaki for 50 years)

Mr. N also entered the workforce at a young age as part of collective employment. He used to work in a TV factory and now volunteers to organize traffic and tend flower beds near the station. He lost contact with her family a year ago and doesn't know why. His greatest happiness now is that he is more stable compared to the past.



I was impressed by how cheerfully both of them talked about their difficult past. It was a moment when I realized that I was trapped in a prejudice that they must have lived a negative and pessimistic life based on the shadow cast by the image of day laborers and poverty.

### ***Backpacker's Hotel Toyo (15:15)***

Our last stop was a guesthouse near the station. The walls and stairs were covered with hand-painted artwork by artists from all over the world, sometimes in exchange for free accommodation. When we visited, one foreign artist was working on the walls. As I walked around admiring the colorful paintings, I wondered how much the hotel's visitors knew about the history of the area. The interior of the hotel is certainly eye-catching enough to draw travelers in, but it's unclear if that interest will extend to the surrounding affairs. Is the hotel simply an 'event' venue for visitors to have an unusual experience, or is it a place that sparks interest in local issues?



### **Wrap up and Reflection**

At the end of the fieldwork, we gathered in the office (Nishinari Plaza) for the short lecture and Q&A session. We were able to learn about the welfare activities of local organizations for the social activities of low-income people in the area, including the homeless. The social workers, including Mr. Arimura, agreed that the biggest challenge is to change the negative image of the area. They said that younger generations hear about the stigma of the area and spread a partial image of the things they see during their visits on social media, reinforcing the negative image of the area.

It's definitely a matter of stereotypes. Once you have a stereotype, you see what you want to see, regardless of whether it's true or not. Cigarette butts littering the streets, run-down buildings, garbage dumps, middle-aged men wandering the streets barefoot - these fragmented images shape the image of a neighborhood. However, ironically, there are forces that thrive on that negative image. There were people who were protesting in the park against the reconstruction and revitalization of the town, and when Kamagasaki became a desirable place to live, they lost their reason to fight against the very thing they have been fighting against. So, paradoxically, they are afraid of change because they can only keep their place if the town stays the way it is.

Overall, my image of Kamagasaki is: A place where the new and the old coexist, where people with different ideas support the community in their respective places, where there are more things that are invisible than visible, a place that is always new and lonely at the same time. What new things will I encounter the next time I visit?