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Contesting Space in Postwar Tokyo's Sanya Day Labor District

by

Akira Omino

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Author: Akira Omino

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Calle de Filosofía y Letras 88

04360, Copilco Universidad

Coyoacán, Ciudad de México

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Abstract

This article examines a series of day laborer riots that occurred between 1959 and 1962 in Tokyo's largest day laborer district, Sanya. In doing so, it attempts to understand how local social changes were related to the riots. This paper argues that these riots represent a radical reaction on the part of Sanya's day laborers to the complex macroeconomic changes accompanying the era of high-speed growth. These changes, intimately related to the domestic construction industry, transformed Sanya into a profitable urban space in which capital could be invested and value generated.

Resumen

Este artículo examina una serie de disturbios de jornaleros que se produjeron entre 1959 y 1962 en el mayor distrito de jornaleros de Tokio, Sanya. De este modo, se intenta comprender cómo los cambios sociales locales se relacionaron con los disturbios. Este documento sostiene que dichos disturbios representan una reacción radical por parte de los jornaleros de Sanya a los complejos cambios macroeconómicos que acompañan a la era del crecimiento de alta velocidad. Estos cambios, íntimamente relacionados con la industria de la construcción nacional, transformaron a Sanya en un espacio urbano rentable, en el que se podía invertir capital y generar valor.

Contesting Space in Postwar Tokyo's Sanya Day Labor District

Akira Omino

Introduction

This paper examines a series of day labor riots that occurred between 1959 and 1962 in Tokyo's largest day labor district, Sanya. Thereby, it attempts to elucidate how the macro-economic trends of postwar Japan's high-speed growth era transformation transformed local society in Sanya. In the 1960s, Sanya was one of Japan's largest day labor districts.¹ Such districts are referred to in Japanese as *yoseba*, or specialized urban spaces where day laborers congregate to seek employment principally in the construction and dockworking industries. The riots that occurred in postwar Sanya were carried out primarily by local day laborers.

More than mere labor markets, *yoseba* are also residential communities where day workers live and socialize. Sanya and other day labor districts are home to scores of low-cost boarding houses, where occupancy fees are collected each day. In exchange for a minimal payment, guests are provided with a cramped single room and basic bedding.² Low-cost boarding houses are referred as *doya* in Japanese.

¹ Postwar Japan's "three large-scale day labor districts" (Nihon sandai yoseba) are Sanya (Tokyo), Kotobuki-cho (Yokohama), and Kamagasaki (Osaka). Currently, only Kamagasaki continues to function as an actual day labor market.

² Recently, many of Sanya and Kamagasaki's *doya* have been converted to tourist hostels.

Accordingly, urban day labor markets are also known as *doyagai*, or low-cost boarding house communities. This article is particularly concerned with Sanya's role as a *doyagai* community. Specifically, it explores how the social relations surrounding Sanya's boarding houses changed during and as a result of Japan's era of high-speed growth. Thereby, it attempts to understand how local social changes were related to the riots that took place in Sanya during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This paper argues that such riots represent a radical reaction on the part of day workers in Sanya to the complex macro-economic shifts accompanying the era of high-speed growth. Those shifts, which were intimately related with changes in the domestic construction industry, transformed Sanya into a profitable urban space, where capital could be invested and value generated.

The first chapter examines the expansion of postwar Sanya's *doyagai* and its role in the Japanese construction industry. Then, chapter two examines official reform efforts targeting Sanya and the response of local laborers to such efforts. Lastly, the third chapter analyzes how contemporary social activists interpreted the radical actions of day workers by focusing on the writings of Sanya-based activist Kaji Daisuke. The analysis carried out herein will demonstrate the utility of a radical perspective when examining the history of postwar Japanese society.

Postwar Sanya and the Era of High-Speed Growth

In the late 1930s, Japan's Ministry of Home Affairs investigated conditions in Tokyo's day labor markets in an effort to elucidate the distribution of labor resources within the empire. An official report pre-

pared by Ministry officials identified Sanya, a district home to scores of low-cost lodging establishments, as the nation's largest, most vital day labor market. Unfortunately, however, Sanya was badly damaged during Allied air raids targeting Tokyo. Those air raids destroyed much of the local infrastructure, including many of Sanya's boarding houses.

Accordingly, Sanya's postwar history begins with the construction of temporary housing for local residents, repatriates, and demobilized soldiers whose dwellings were destroyed during the war. At the request of the city government, housing relief efforts in Sanya were directed by the Asakusa Association of Budget Hotels, an organization comprised of northeastern-Tokyo-based inn and boarding house operators.³ In the immediate aftermath of the Pacific War, the Allied General Headquarters (GHQ) pressured the Tokyo authorities to provide housing for homeless city residents. The issue of homelessness was particularly acute in Sanya because of its proximity to Ueno Station, one of Japan's largest railway terminals. In the immediate aftermath of the Pacific War, scores of homeless men and women flocked to Ueno Station in search of food and shelter, ultimately occupying the Station's underground corridor as their sleeping area. During the period in question, the underpass essentially functioned as a free boarding house, where scores of impoverished city residents sought shelter and scraped by shining shoes and collecting cigarette butts (Otani, 1948).

³ In 1958, the Asakusa Association of Budget Hotels was renamed. Thereafter, it was referred to as the Johoku Association of Budget Hotels (Johoku Ryokan Kumiai).

In an effort to address the problem of homelessness in Ueno and other parts of northern Tokyo, the city authorities constructed a series of temporary shelters and entrusted their operation to members of the Asakusa Association of Economy Hotels. These shelters were intended primarily for homeless persons possessing the ability to work. Once the shelters were complete, members of the Association of Economy Hotels visited Ueno Station and invited individuals sleeping there to come to Sanya. Initially, local shelters were under government authority. As the postwar reconstruction process advanced, however, the shelters were privatized. At the same time, scores of newly constructed lodging establishments began to appear in the area (Matsumura, 2000; Economy Hotel Hoteiya, 2017).⁴

Let us now examine how postwar economic development affected local society in Sanya. When scholars discuss the postwar Japanese economy, they frequently refer to the concept of “Japanese style management,” a system of labor relations based on three principles: lifetime employment, seniority-based compensation, and enterprise unions. Although that system is credited with driving postwar economic growth, it fostered a paternalistic system of human resource development and led to creation of an exclusionary labor market, which alienated casual workers lacking established contacts with employers. At the same time, however, rapid capital accumulation required a vast pool of casual laborers, who could be employed

⁴ Economy Hotel Hoteiya is a lodging house run by the son of the former head of Sanya's association of boarding house proprietors, Jinnosuke Kiyama. The full transcript of a speech given by Kiyama at a Tokyo Asakusa Rotary Club meeting in 1970 is available on Hoteiya's official blog. Images of Sanya in the 1960s and 1970s are also posted on the blog.

when demand increased and dispensed with when it declined. The construction industry, in particular, was heavily dependent on such casual workers. Employers in the industry turned to day labor markets, such as Sanya, in order to satisfy their fluctuating demand for casual workers.

To this day, a vast pool of casual labor and related system of employment subcontracting remain indispensable features of the Japanese construction industry, enabling companies to adjust the scale of their labor force in accordance with the demands of individual construction projects. Generally, casual laborers working in the construction industry are hired via a system of multi-layered subcontracting in which labor brokers known as *tehaishi* mediate contractual relations between subcontractors and workers. This system enables small and medium-scale construction companies to rapidly adjust the size of their workforce, while reducing outlays for permanent employees. This system advantages employers at the expense of day laborers, who are frequently exploited by the labor brokers upon whom they depend for employment. This fraught nature of relations between brokers and laborers has led to a serious conflict between the two parties.

An analysis of the complex factors that catalyzed and shaped the riots in Sanya, however, must not focus solely on the frequently fraught relationship between day laborers and labor brokers. It must also include an analysis of living conditions in day labor districts. This article reveals that conditions in such districts underwent a dramatic change in the mid-1950s.

Sanya's growth was driven by an increase in demand for construction labor during the postwar reconstruction and subsequent

period of rapid economic expansion. Official statistics from 1953 indicate that there were 100 local boarding houses and 6,000 nightly lodgers. By 1964, however, the number of lodging facilities had eclipsed 200 and nightly lodgers numbered approximately 15,000 (Johoku Labor and Welfare Center 2017, p. 13).⁵ Buoyed by rising demand for casual labor, the number of low-cost lodging establishments in Sanya increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As many laborers resided in such establishments, an analysis of relations between lodging houses proprietors and their occupants enables us to examine the structural features of local society in Sanya. In addition, such an analysis should offer insights about the relationship between postwar macro-economic trends and the frequent labor riots that took place in Sanya. That said, this article does not seek to demonstrate that riots in Sanya were merely the result of socio-economic contradictions. Such an argument would be oversimplified and reductionist. Rather, it aims to explore the social formations and relations underlying day laborers' radical practice. Although the low-cost boarding houses in Sanya are legally classified as tourist accommodation, in reality, many such boarding houses functioned as permanent housing for Tokyo's day laborers. Although Sanya's day-laboring population was comparatively fluid and should be distinguished from the neighborhood's permanent residents, it is essential to keep in mind that *doya* occupants were part of the local fabric and developed distinct modes of utilizing and occupying local space.

⁵ These numbers represent just only the flophouses that were admitted to the Association of Economy Hotels in Johoku Area (Johoku Labor and Welfare Center, 2017). This suggests that there be not a few unregistered flophouses in the district.

Local Reform in Sanya and Day Labor Riots

So, what sort of conditions gave rise to the series of labor riots that occurred in Sanya around 1960? During the 1950s and early 1960s, affairs related to local boarding houses were dominated by a small group of influential boarding house proprietors, who served as unofficial local bosses. This chapter examines the social relationships established by those proprietors in order to identify how rapid macro-economic growth transformed the structure of local society in Sanya. As the development of urban day labor markets was intimately related with the broader expansion of the postwar Japanese economy and construction industry, Sanya represents an ideal case for studying how macro-economic trends impacted local society.

In postwar Sanya, a small number of boarding house proprietors came to exert powerful influence within the local social structure. Members of that group owned multiple boarding houses and, in some instances, ancillary businesses, such as dining establishments. According to a survey conducted in 1963, there were 220 local boarding houses and 143 proprietors. While 110 proprietors operated just a single establishment, a group of four particularly influential individuals controlled dozens of local boarding houses. The most influential of those individuals, for example, owned 17 local *doya* and served as chairman of the Sanya Neighborhood Improvement Council. Another owned 10 lodging establishments and a diner known as the *Asahi shokudo*, while also serving as head of northeastern Tokyo's Association of Budget Hotels. The other two influential local proprietors each controlled seven lodging establishments (Tokyo Sanya Welfare Center, 1964). These four individuals were directly involved in several

incidents that directly contributed to day workers' dissatisfaction and ultimately prompted them to riot.

The series of riots that occurred in Sanya between 1959 and 1962 reveal that relations between laborers and the boarding house proprietors upon they depended for shelter were growing increasingly strained in the late 1950s and 1960s. The fraught nature of those relations, in turn, prompted local laborers to take increasingly radical action to aggress their grievances. The following table lists the dates of riots that occurred in Sanya between 1959 to 1962. Let's examine the state of local society in Sanya during the period in which the riots took place.

Table 1. The Dates of the Riots in Sanya (1959-1962)

1959	October 22 / November 20
1960	January 1 / July 26 / August 1 / August 3-5
1962	November 23

Source: Own elaboration.

In a 1987 study, Imagawa Isao examined the transformation of local society in Sanya during the 1960s. He boldly asserts that local social changes were ultimately the product of efforts to modernize local boarding houses and thereby increase the neighborhood's capacity to provide shelter to casual laborers.⁶

⁶ Isao Imagawa (1987) is a freelance writer who researched Sanya's postwar history. His rigorous study is one of the most important studies of postwar Sanya's development. For more detailed arguments on the relation between the riots and the "modernization" of flophouse districts, see the chapter three in the book "Illegal mass actions in Sanya area."

Let us examine this process. It is essential to keep in mind that efforts to reform Sanya's built environment were undertaken in an effort to establish local order. In September 1959, Sanya's local residents established the Sanya Neighborhood Improvement Council. Council members included not only members of the neighborhood association, but also the owners of local shops, restaurants and lodging houses. In 1959, Council members voted to exclude gangs and prostitutes from the area and to report local criminal activity to the police. The Council's efforts were strongly supported by the police and local authorities (Yomiuri Shimbun, 1959).

The movement's primary target was the gangs and prostitutes who used low-cost lodging facilities to engage in criminal activity. At the same time, however, the Council's efforts also targeted the local day laboring population. For example, an article from *Vigilance* (Jikei), a magazine intended primarily for active police, reveals that requests from "upstanding local residents" prompted an increase in the number of patrolmen assigned to the Sanya area. Although the article fails to specify which local residents submitted the request, it notes that most occupants of local boarding houses were day laborers, street vendors, street performers, pimps, and unlicensed prostitutes. In addition, it states that most occupants had criminal records (Sunaga, 1960). In contemporary discourse, therefore, boarding house occupants were clearly distinguished from local inhabitants and classified as potential criminals.

The prevalence of such views and the related community effort to establish local control in Sanya no doubt contributed to the police mistreatment of local day laborers that ultimately provoked labor riots. The riots prompted an immediate response from the police. Af-

ter the first riot in 1959, a large-scale, well-protected police box was installed in the area. Opened on July 1, 1960, the new outpost was equipped with floodlights, loudspeakers, a fire hydrant, and wire nets that protected windows from rocks and other projectiles. At the time of the police box's opening, the Johoku Association of Budget Hotels donated chairs, desks, and other items. News of the donation, in turn, angered day laborers and prompted them to take further action. In July and August 1960, rioters targeted the newly-installed police outpost. For many day laborers, local "improvement" efforts were clearly motivated by a desire to improve public security and intensify control over the local day laboring population (Imagawa, 1987).

Entering the fall of 1960, rioting subsided and tensions eased for a period of two years. On November 23, 1962, however, day laborers once again took to the streets after police intervened in a dispute between a customer and employee at the *Asahi Shokudo* diner. Rioting ensued after officers chose to detain only the customer, who worked as a day laborer. During the November 1962 riot, crowds targeted both the local police post and the *Asahi Shokudo*, destroying the latter in the process. Initially, the diner was owned and operated by the local association of boarding house proprietors. In 1962, however, the association's chairman assumed sole ownership of the enterprise. Under his direction, meal prices increased while food quality declined. This prompted many customers to criticize the decision to privatize the diner (Asahi Shimbun 1962).

These were not the only issues, however, that prompted laborers to riots in 1962. The construction of a large, modern lodging facility known as *Palace House* also played a role. The plan for the facility was originally proposed in 1956 by a group of five local board-

ing house proprietors. The initial proposal included plans not only for lodging facilities, but also an on-site medical clinic and leisure facilities, including a movie theater (Mainichi Shimbun, 1956). The facility that actually opened in 1962, however, was quite different. It provided little more than lodging and none of the additional amenities initially planned. To make matters worse for the worker, Palace House's nightly occupancy rates were significantly higher than those charged by local boarding houses. That prompted an overall rise in nightly room rates, as established lodging houses raised their fees to the level set by the new facility (Asahi Shimbun, 1962).

The aforementioned issues formed represent the backdrop against which labor riots occurred in Sanya. Projects carried out in the name of local improvement led to intensified police control in Sanya and prompted boarding house operators to seek profit at the expense of local day laborers.

Riots and Laborer Solidarity

As described in the introduction, Sanya was not only a casual labor market, but also the site of low-cost lodging houses. In the final chapter, let us consider how local residential patterns and living conditions related to local riots. Japanese sociologist Eguchi Eiichi surveyed the living conditions of Sanya's day laborers in the 1960s. He describes boarding house life in the following manner:

[In a *doya*,] the only thing provided is space for sleeping, keeping oneself warm, and storing a small amount of personal effects. There are rarely facilities for cooking and eating. As such spaces are not provid-

ed, guests have to leave the *doya* in order to procure food and dine. Generally, they rely on the restaurants and merchant stalls located in the vicinity of local boarding houses. Furthermore, visitors are strictly prohibited, so guests have no other choice but to leave their place of residence in order to meet friends and acquaintances. Commonly, they do so at the growing number of local television-equipped coffee shops, along heavily-trafficked roadsides, or on benches in Sanya's few small parks (Eguchi *et al.*, 1979, p. 176).

As explained in the foregoing quote, *doya* offered little more than a place to sleep and day workers had to seek food and other daily necessities outside their lodgings. Such restrictions were a defining feature of life in boarding house communities, such as Sanya. For boarding house occupants, such communities were more than simply districts in which large numbers of low-cost boarding houses were permitted to operate. Japanese poet Terashima Tamao, who lived and got to work in Osaka's Kamagasaki day labor district, describes *doya* life in the following manner.

To live in a *doya* means that one has only a place to sleep. Eating, drinking, relaxing, and resting are also vital parts of life. Laborers, however, have to seek such things outside their place of residence. This means that day laborers do not live on the single tatami-mat that they rent each night but rather in the broader community of Kamagasaki, where they drink, dine, chat with their friends, watch TVs at coffee shops, and gather in *Sankaku-koen* (Triangle Park). In short, the dining and living spaces commonly found in single-family houses are replaced by the whole of Kamagasaki. Though Kamagasaki is

very much a city itself, day laborers see the entire community as a living space to which they return after work. *Doya* serve merely as bedrooms (Terashima, 2013, p. 120).

This citation provides a vivid illustration of life in the cramped boarding houses of postwar Japan's day labor districts. Although Terashima's quote concerns Osaka's Kamagasaki district, the description contained therein is applicable to other day labor districts, including Sanya. Day laborers treated their districts of residence as living spaces. Such districts as composite spaces where lodging houses, diners, coffee shops, and other facilities combined to satisfy the needs of local laborers. In such districts, however, day workers existed as passive consumers who depended on services provided by local boarding house operators and other permanent neighborhood residents. Accordingly, the behavior of local residents powerfully impacted the lives and livelihoods of the day laborers that found shelter in such districts. Though Sanya's labor riots tended to be portrayed as groundless disturbances fomented by outsiders, they were tied to structural conflicts between boarding proprietors and their occupants.

Day workers' riots garnered significant attention from the media and the general public and were characterized as spasmodic outbursts against the police rather than the consequence of deeper structural issues. Specifically, most observers attributed the riots to rough police treatment of drunks and interventions in quarrels between laborers.

For example, Sanya's first labor riot, which occurred on October 22, 1959, was sparked by a confrontation between police officers and an inebriated day laborer. The drunken worker approached a police

box in Sanya and asked for a cup of water. The police, however, refused his request. In response, the worker protested and confronted the officers. Doing so, in turn, resulted in his arrest. As the worker was being placed under arrest, 150 onlookers gathered around the police box and began to protest the officers' treatment of the laborer, which they considered excessively brutal. During the melee that followed the arrest, a patrol car was badly damaged. This initial incident touched off a series of riots in late 1959 and 1960. What is more, the number of rioters increased with each protest, eclipsing 3,000 by August 1, 1960.

Although the media and general public believed that the initial wave of riots was sparked by police mistreatment of laborers, some contemporary observers opposed a spasmodic view. One such individual was social activist Kaji Daisuke, who settled in Sanya after the riot on November 11, 1962. After arriving in Sanya, Kaji established an association for day workers called *Sanya Dojin* (Sanya Day Workers' Collective), which published a monthly magazine entitled *Gekkan Sanya* (*Monthly Sanya*). His ultimate goal was to construct an autonomous day workers' community and system of mutual aid independent from the economic interests of boarding house proprietors. In order to achieve this aim, *Sanya Dojin* founded a common facility named *Minnna no Ie* (Our House), which provided a common dining room and accommodation for day workers.

Before moving to Sanya, Kaji spent several years living rough and working as a rag picker. Commonly, rag pickers were subordinate to employers who provided them with equipment, including baskets and hand-drawn carts, and purchased the scraps they collected. Known as *shikiriya*, these employers commonly provided rag pickers

under their control with housing, as well. This enabled them to exert total control over the lives of rag pickers and effectively exploit their labor. Generally, employers rented row house rooms for their employees. Rather than collecting room charges, however, employers recouped expenses by forcing rag pickers to sell their scraps at a rate that they mandated.⁷ In an effort to improve the lives of Tokyo's rag pickers, Kaji attempted to establish a cooperative union and establish independent residential spaces free from the influence of employers (Kaji, 1956).

The projects carried out by the *Sanya Dojin* were based on Kaji's efforts to assist rag pickers. For Kaji, the riots in Sanya represented an opportunity to establish an autonomous community for members of the city's underclass. In a 1962 editorial, Kaji wrote, "Day workers in Sanya are more than a mere mob. They seek solidarity as a means of self-defense. They are united by a shared belief that neither religion nor politics can improve their lives" (Kaji, 1962). After relocating to Sanya and establishing the *Sanya Dojin*, Kaji and his supporters worked to establish a network of relationships with Tokyo's outcast and Korean communities. Their activities were motivated by a spirit of solidarity that had taken shape in Sanya.

The cooperative projects that Kaji established were designed to address the daily contradictions faced by day laborers and grounded in laborers' shared experiences and lifestyle. For Kaji, the large-scale uprisings that took place in Sanya could only be understood by examining the specific issues that laborers faced every day in their com-

⁷ For further information on rag pickers in postwar Japan, please refer to Nonaka and Hosino (1973).

munities of residence. In other words, any attempt to understand the underlying cause of those riots should include an analysis of radical conflicts that took place between Sanya's permanent residents and the day laborers that sought shelter in the neighborhood's boarding houses. Kaji's assertion that laborers sought "solidarity as a means for self-defense" provides us with an important insight about the underlying cause of the riots and indicates that the factors that led laborers to take to Sanya's streets were more complex than a spasmodic view would suggest. Any effort to understand the riots, therefore, should begin with an exploration of the complex, multi-tiered logic of rioters themselves.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the Sanya day labor district developed rapidly during the postwar period in parallel with the expansion of the Japanese economy and construction industry. For Sanya, high-speed economic growth meant not only a quantitative expansion but also a qualitative change in the nature of social relations. Although Imagawa described these changes as a process of "modernization," it is clear that reform efforts also led to intensified local policing and encouraged local boarding house proprietors to seek profit at the expense of day laborers. It is clear, therefore, that labor riots in Sanya and other day labor districts need to be understood within the context of local society.

Although researchers have focused significant attention on the relationship between the postwar Japanese construction industry's growing demand for casual labor and the expansion of day labor dis-

tricts, very little research has been conducted on how the expansion of such districts impacted the structure of local society in places like Sanya. Growing demand for construction labor meant that new residents were constantly streaming into Japan's day labor districts. The fluidity of the population of such districts is likely another structural condition that helped to spark the riots. At the same time, however, research on the behavior of crowds tells us that they are conditioned by their surroundings, in particular the structural characteristics of local society. Although this paper did not go far enough in exploring this theme, it argues that a comprehensive examination of the complex conditions that gave rise to a series of riots in postwar Sanya should not be reduced to a bifurcated conflict between laborers and labor brokers, or laborers and a small number of influential lodging house owners. In future research on Sanya and postwar Japan's other day labor markets, I hope to more deeply consider how the national and global dynamics of economy penetrate and impact the lifeworlds of common people.

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