

Tom Gill (2015)

Yokohama Street Life: The Precarious Career of a Japanese Day Laborer.

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Tom Gill's *Yokohama Street Life* was published as part of the *Asia World* series edited by Mark Selden that sought to chart the political, economic, social, cultural and historical dynamics of the region in a global perspective. Set in the Kotobuki area of the sprawling city of Yokohama, Japan, Gill returns to the area he conducted fieldwork for his PhD and subsequent book *Men of Uncertainty* (2001). This in-depth foray into the world of the *doya-gai* (cheap lodging area) or *yoseba* (a place where day labourers gather), inspired Gill to return, this time to chart an ethnographic account of one particular, and very special, day labourer.

Having lived for many years in Kanagawa Prefecture, in which Yokohama is the largest city, the areas Tom Gill describes are very familiar to this reviewer. Yokohama is a pristine coastal city and anyone who has visited it, with its impressive skyscrapers and clean and organised urban commercial landscape, may be surprised to read of an area in which conspicuous poverty and homelessness are prevalent. In *Yokohama Street Life*, Gill provides insight into such a district – a district that few visitors, not to mention Japanese, are likely to have experienced. At the heart of the Kotobuki district, for Gill, is one homeless man, Kimitsu-san, a 'resident' of a *doya* (flophouse / temporary lodging) befriended during the course of his earlier research.

Homelessness in Japan, even street homelessness, is rarely encountered and far more hidden from public view than, for instance, homelessness in a city such as Paris or London. Japan's homelessness is, arguably, unique and distinct. For instance, the discrete and well-maintained, often blue, tarpaulin 'homes' of much of Japan's street population, found under trees in a park or by a riverside, are fundamentally different to anything one would experience in Europe or the West. Homelessness in Japan has an air of privacy, of seclusion, and it is this that makes it all the more remarkable that Gill accessed this 'hidden' world for over two decades in order to bring us this illuminating narrative of one man's life in a day-labouring district.

The book begins with an exceptionally short Introduction in which Gill encapsulates the very essence of the volume:

Day labourers have a certain look about them – weathered faces, blue overalls, baseball caps, broken-down sneakers, sometimes a slightly crabbed way of walking from industrial accidents. From a distance they blend together. But seen up-close, and listened to at length, they emerge as unique individuals, each with his own story to tell. (p. x)

Reflecting on how Gill spent the years 1993-1995 researching in Kotobuki for his doctoral dissertation and consequent meeting of Kimitsu Nishikawa, Chapter 1 introduces the reader to life in the day-labouring district and that of Gill's subject matter, the man he describes as a 'self-taught philosopher': Kimitsu-san.

Chapter 2 gives an account of the genesis of the book. After accidentally bumping into Kimitsu again, some nine years later, Gill notes how things had changed in Kotobuki. At this point, day labouring had all but dried up and the average Kotobuki resident was now aged 56. No new blood came as they knew casual work here had long disappeared. Kimitsu himself was somewhat surprisingly able to claim a little money from the Japanese welfare system – *seikatsu hogo* ("livelihood protection"). This is notoriously difficult to obtain as those in Kotobuki are considered voluntarily homeless (prejudicial views of homelessness as laziness with bad habits abound) and an address is needed to make a claim – things had changed in the intervening period of Gill's visits as, previously, a *doya* had not been considered a residence (this was, however, amended later in the 1990s).

In this chapter, Gill presents Kimitsu as a fascinating, incredibly bright and well-read individual and also provides a little context to Kimitsu's situation, offering a narrative of the sometimes bewildering and contradictory sections of the Japanese welfare system that were set up to assist those that were homeless during this period. In Japan, this consists largely of a graduated step approach offering emergency (*ichiji hinanjo*), then interim accommodation aimed at moving people one step closer to 'mainstream living' (*jiritsu shien sentā*), then support for a few months once an individual has found employment. The maximum time one is allowed to remain in these facilities is typically two to six months, and the quality of service and intensity of support varies regionally (Okamoto and Bretherton, 2012).

In this section of the book, Gill's admiration and near reverence for Kimitsu begins to emerge:

One day I mused... Kimitsu Nishikawa is going to die... and a great big library is going to go down in flames. (p.27)

Gill then jumps forward to 2007 and the centrepiece of the book, the '2007 Conversations', which documents each of the 15 conversations Gill had with Kimitsu during what appears to be the investigative period for the book. Interspersed

with Kimitsu's drawings, Gill presents an insight into his subject's life-history, thoughts and motivations, allowing the reader to understand how he came to be part of the street life of Yokohama.

This clever, and often moving, chapter demonstrates how this exceptionally intelligent retired day labourer has navigated his way through his life of 66 years. It is here that Gill allows Kimitsu to articulate his past, his beliefs and the influences that brought him to where he is today. This chapter is very distinctive, and by way of its utter simplicity, ensures that the voice of Kimitsu – of a man with a life that many would shun as a meaningless existence – is at the fore; there is no unnecessary theorizing of causation, through which most homelessness voices are interpreted, no attempt to bend the material to emphasise structural causation or individual pathology. Instead, Gill offers a refreshing alternative, a more appropriate phenomenological approach, placing Kimitsu's experiences at the very heart of the book.

Chapter 4 moves on to the post 2007 *Conversations* period and to document briefly Kimitsu and Kotobuki up until 2014. At this point, we find Kimitsu in a rather sad and sorry state having had a stroke and being looked after in a Red Cross hospital. The chapter is rather bleak at times as we see Kimitsu deteriorate, first physically but with his intellect and humour still intact, and then progressing to a state of mental decline, which for the reader of his philosophising and insight is a more difficult aspect to absorb.

Here, Gill turns to explore the recent changes in Kotobuki, applicable to other similar areas in other Japanese cities, exploring demographic change in an ageing population, the increase in welfare recipients (83% of the population as of 2011) and the broader changes to Japanese social welfare policy. He describes Kotobuki as "on its way to becoming a giant welfare centre" (p.102). This is a look, albeit too brief, into wider homelessness policy in Japan. As Gill notes, private landlords require a personal guarantor, which has always been a hurdle for housing homeless people and, thus, in recent times, *doya-gai* such as Kotobuki fit the bill perfectly for Japanese welfare agencies seeking to find homeless people accommodation.

The chapter moves on to 2013 with Kimitsu at the age of 74 and with Gill surprisingly reassessing his perception of the Japanese social welfare system, as it had kept Kimitsu, an ailing homeless old man, alive and in comfortable surroundings. His family no longer wished to know him and he was effectively alone and at the hands of the Japanese State.

Concluding in 2014, the chapter leaves Kimitsu-san suffering from dementia, being cared for in a hospital with nowhere else to go and with no access to supported accommodation for the foreseeable future. While unfortunately not expanded upon, this is possibly a more realistic vision of the Japanese welfare system than the previous view held by Gill (see Iwata, 2003).

In the final chapter, Gill acknowledges that it would be remiss of him to not apply his experiences with Kimitsu to the wider social context in modern Japanese society. Gill accurately notes how in post-war Japan, for some of those men who were unable to achieve typical aspirations of secure employment, housing and married life or who had failed to fulfil familial obligations, particularly in the case of those who are eldest sons, one of the few options was day-labouring. Becoming a day-labourer meant finding themselves to be exposed to the '*brutal*' practices of construction and dockyard industries, being used only as and when useful. Although where once the life of a day labourer meant homelessness and likely death on the street, Gill points to some of the positive changes in Japanese social welfare and how, in the end, Kimitsu himself was cared for by the State.

Importantly, this commentary chapter moves on to talk about current difficulties around insecure employment practices in Japan and compares the day-labouring life of those in Kotobuki with dispatch agency work, which is increasingly popular in Japan. The most significant difference being that the solidarity felt amongst day labourers is lacking in its contemporary equivalent. However, Gill's point seems to be that people like Kimitsu were once an anomaly in Japanese society but are now part of an increasingly expanding realm of workers with little security or status in the job market, claiming later that almost half of those in the Japanese labour market undertake *irregular labour*.

While this is an important addition to the narrative of Kimitsu, the content of this chapter would have served the book better if it had come earlier, before our introduction to Kimitsu, allowing the reader to understand the context in which we find him.

Yokohama Street Life provides a thoroughly fascinating insight into not only the life of Kimitsu, but the complex lives of many who find themselves in a position of homelessness, be it in a *doya*, on the street or in more hidden forms such as sofa-surfing. One of the real strengths of the volume is that it illuminates the simple fact that, like any other member of society, those on 'the margins' can still be passionate about philosophy and the arts. This volume presents a homeless human being and not a set of statistical associations or an ethnographic attempt to explore homelessness in terms of trigger factors or supposed sets of characteristics or behaviours. The book presents an antithesis to modern media with its all too common negative cultural imagery and assumptions about people on the streets and around homelessness *per se*, presenting intelligent and subtle insights into the lives, expectations, interests, vulnerability and precarity of those that find themselves marginalized in what, at first sight, could seem an exemplary model for urban living.

The book does have several limitations. There is little wider discussion of the literature – just a cursory glance at very similar titles and, while it is understood that this is a one-man ethnography, a broader discussion of current evidence would contextualise the narrative; this is something that is absent from the book.

The book is very similar to Gill's earlier work, *Men of Uncertainty*, and it is easy therefore to ask whether Gill should have broadened his approach to look at Japan's contemporary homelessness population. Homelessness in Japan has long been associated with day labourers (Ezawa, 2002) and these have been the mainstay of Japanese homelessness studies, but the context has shifted, particularly towards the oft-cited increase in young people who are homeless and the usage of 24-hour venues such as manga or internet cafés (sometimes referred to as cyber-homeless) as a form of accommodation. Of course homelessness stretches far beyond street dwelling populations and, while Gill does broaden the focus in Chapter 5 slightly, one could question his focusing on street / *doya* dwelling populations for the second time. While Gill's intentions are clear, even a brief mention of wider homelessness in Japan would have added depth to the discussion and allowed Gill to say more about how Japanese homelessness is changing.

Having said this, there is great virtue in what Gill has achieved in exploring the human dimension of homelessness in such detail. The book is an invaluable observation that would appeal not only to social anthropology academics or students but to anyone interested in aspects of social policy, sociology and political science.

› References

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