

# **Down But Not Out: Homelessness in Japan**

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Whenever I introduce the topic of homelessness in Tokyo, I am frequently asked two questions. The first is, "Are there really homeless people in Japan?" The second, which inevitably follows once I answer the first in the affirmative, is, "How did you become involved with them?"

I begin with these questions because, even more than their answers, they reveal a lot about the popular perception and context of homelessness in Japan. The questions, and the tone of curiosity with which they are asked, demonstrate two sorts of common sense that many of us have about Japan. First, they demonstrate the widespread assumption that all people in Japan are middle class. Second, they demonstrate the assumption that homeless people are culturally, socially, and in many other ways simply different from mainstream society. I am sometimes asked if the homeless in Japan are even Japanese at all. "Aren't they all foreigners?" No, they are not. Since many of us think of Japan as an orderly society, we have a hard time imagining homeless people in Japan. And because many of us think of homeless people as inherently disorderly, we have a hard time imagining them as Japanese. Opening a discussion of the homeless in Japan, then, necessitates that we think critically both about what we assume we know about Japan and about what we assume we know about the behaviors and identities of those who live in the so-called margins of society.

## **Background**

The first national government survey of Japan's homeless people was conducted in 2003 and lists 25,296 homeless persons living in Japan, with 5,927 homeless living in Tokyo's 23 wards. The majority of homeless people in Japan are men over fifty years of age, with an average age of about fifty-six, who have been living in tents, train stations, parks, riversides, and on the streets for an average of forty-nine months. Women reportedly make up only three percent of the national homeless population; however, some activist groups estimate even higher percentages of

up to ten percent. Some activists have also pointed out that the national survey, by identifying homelessness as a male problem and by counting only those living on the streets as homeless, insures that both women and the total number are undercounted. Because homeless people are mobile and sometimes hidden in temporary dormitories, on friends' futons or in cheap motels, it is clear that official counts cannot be exact. Still, even as they may disagree widely on the total number, both government and advocate polls report that the number of homeless people in Japan has been steadily increasing since the early 1990s. Many of the recently homeless in **Tokyo** fell out of an informal day-labor system that flourished in postwar Japan. This was a system in which men would assemble on the street in day-labor neighborhoods in the early morning, and job brokers from construction companies and other industries would come down the line and hire them for a day's worth of manual labor. The men who gathered in these neighborhoods were often those who, in their youth, were lured from the countryside by the vast job opportunities in the city. These were also the men who built the city's high-rises where salarymen work. But in the 1990s, many laborers found themselves jobless. This was due to the economic decline, the shift to a service economy, an influx of young foreign workers, and their own advancing age. Still other men became homeless due to failed loans or corporate restructuring.

The history of homeless women in **Tokyo** is much less well documented; however, in my own research I found that most women came to the streets from broken marriages and prolonged states of poverty and/or illness. Since there is little work opportunity for those without a fixed address, and since most landlords demand that six months' rent be paid in advance in order to rent an apartment, once one becomes homeless, there are very few possibilities either for gaining steady employment or obtaining a permanent residence.

In many parks throughout Tokyo, homeless people lived in tents that they constructed out of blue plastic tarps. There were approximately three hundred such tents in Ueno Park, Tokyo's largest public park, when I conducted research in 1998-1999. Most homeless people lived alone, but if we include the number of persons sleeping on benches, under awnings and on the surrounding streets, there were approximately 1,000-1,200 homeless people in the Ueno area. Homeless

people in **Ueno Park** supported themselves through what they referred to as "doing homeless" (hōmuresu o suru). Doing homeless included recycling, scavenging, occasional day labor, resale, and maintaining neighborly relationships. Homeless persons who lived in **Ueno Park** did not panhandle. Most, also, did not attend the church-run soup lines that came to the park several times a week and attracted up to 1,000 persons from the surrounding areas. These were not simply economic choices; rather, they reflect the moral meanings of "doing homeless." Homeless people in **Ueno Park** prided themselves on their self-sufficiency, honor, and perseverance. In other words, for them, doing homeless was not just about pursuing particular types of labor; it was about approaching their work with discipline. That is, they had standards they set to live by and that they pushed their neighbors to live up to—standards of virtue, hard work, sincerity, perseverance, and obligation to others. To accept a handout would betray their sense of self-reliance and other virtues connected to doing homeless with honor and dignity. Doing homeless and homeless people's explanations on how it should be done, then, are grossly at odds with the popular perceptions of homeless people as lazy, disaffiliated, and beyond the moral values of society.

## **Homeless as "Others"**

Typical news headlines about the homeless include such titles as, "The Other Japan," "The Other Side of the Coin," "Down and Out in Tokyo" (or Osaka, or Kobe), and, perhaps most poignantly, "The Unsalaryed Man," which plays on the term "salaryman" as Japan's prototypical (male) worker. These headlines, which invert the symbols of Japaneseness (and Japanese masculinity), serve to reduce homelessness to a negative identity. The homeless are, by popular headlines at least, what Japan and its archetypal salarymen are not.

These representations have a real effect on the lives of homeless people in Tokyo. Certainly this imagery of otherness helps explain why homeless men are often targets of violence. There are reports of school children and others striking homeless persons with rocks, throwing firecrackers at them, stabbing them, setting them on fire, and verbally harassing them. While there are also reports of homeless people committing abuses against each other, one rarely, if ever, reads of a

homeless person behaving violently toward a local resident. Still, these same residents frequently complain, especially when protesting a shelter rumored to be built in their neighborhood, that the homeless make local areas unsafe for women and children. Such complaints further exemplify the way in which homeless people are popularly viewed as "others" to be feared.

The Japanese government also participates in this view. While there are welfare, health, and day-labor related policies that may apply to some homeless individuals, usually the very sick or the very old, there is currently almost no policy that specifically addresses homelessness in Tokyo. The metropolitan government persists with a hands-off approach towards the issue of homelessness. Traditionally its policies have been aimed at cosmetically hiding or containing homelessness to day-laborer neighborhoods, while preventing them from spreading into other neighborhoods. For example, wooden blocks are nailed into the center of park benches to keep homeless people from sleeping on them, and water to public drinking fountains is turned off to discourage homeless from gathering there and bathing.

The government also, amid much protest, evacuated hundreds of homeless people from one corridor of a busy train station in **Tokyo** to make room for a moving sidewalk that would help commuters get to work a minute or two faster.

Unlike in the U.S. or the U.K., where the president or royal family may, especially around Christmas time, schedule photo-ops to exhibit themselves aiding the homeless and the poor, Japanese government officials and members of the imperial family do not participate in such activities. The "special clean-ups" that the authorities conducted nearly every month in **Ueno Park** and other parts of **Tokyo** exemplify their approach. State and local officials chose a day each month to remind the homeless people squatting in tents that they were living illegally in the parks. They then issued a warning: the homeless must evacuate by a certain date or risk being dispossessed of their belongings. On the assigned day, park management, police, or local officials would survey the area to make sure all the tents had been removed. Yet the homeless people living in the area, while usually following the instructions to move out on the specified

day, simply returned to their sites and rebuilt their tents as soon as the officials retreated to their offices. The next month they would all repeat the performance.

## "Doing Homeless"

These special clean-ups, while seen as a means of maintaining the health of the parks by the local authorities, were seen more simply as part of "doing homeless" by the homeless people themselves. While they might not have agreed with the authorities, many homeless persons took pride in their ability to complete the clean-up with efficiency and style. Some would even harshly critique their neighbors during the event: "Look at how much unnecessary stuff he has," one man scornfully pointed out regarding a neighbor. "And look at the state of his boxes: what are we to think of his state of mind?" These criticisms reveal much about how these men believed homeless should be done.

Homeless people in **Ueno Park** usually used the word "homeless" in a phrase with the verb "to do": *hōmuresu o suru*, literally "to do homeless." And their description of how homeless was to be properly and virtuously done made clear that homelessness was not a mere survival strategy. It was not just a means of getting by. It was more complicated than that. Doing homeless was the means through which homeless people rejected their social marginality and displayed their morality, hard work, determination, honor, perseverance, and manliness. Doing homeless in this way, a way that allowed homeless people to live up to mainstream values and establish standards of behavior for themselves and their neighbors, demonstrates that people living in the margins do not necessarily oppose mainstream values. Thus, homeless people's narratives of doing homeless call into question many popular ideas about homelessness as a form of deviance, a survival tactic, or a rejection of the broader society.

The phrase "doing homeless" not only challenges the popular association of homelessness with idleness and deviance, but forces the question: how is homeless done? In some ways, this is best answered by starting with how it is not done.

Because **Ueno Park** is up on a hill and was historically called the "mountain" or yama, homeless people living in the park referred to themselves as "people of the mountain" (yama no ningen). And they distinguish their identity as "people of the mountain" from other homeless people who lived more nomadically-"down there" (shita no hō)-in other parts of the park or city where permanent tents were prohibited. As people of the mountain, the homeless in Ueno viewed themselves as having a work ethic, a sense of pride, and a livelihood that contrasted with that of the homeless who lived "down there." Often it was pointed out to me the way in which people from shita no hō queue for soup lines, don't cook with stoves, have dirty skin, don't do laundry, and make no effort to "properly" do homeless.

Their "improper" and "bad" behaviors were then associated with having less pride, determination, and commitment and, therefore, with being lesser persons, lesser homeless, and lesser Japanese. Those homeless people from the mountain in **Ueno Park** who went to collect food and recyclables in the nearby shopping arcade at night often complained to me about homeless from "down there" passing through, making a mess of the businesses' trash, and jeopardizing the relationships they claimed to respect with the shop owners. They viewed these ill-mannered "bums" ('kojiki') as undisciplined, unable to scavenge properly, and unconcerned with human relationships. For example, Kokusai, a person of the mountain who called himself a "tent lifestyle" (tento seikatsusha), explained how his lifestyle was different from a lifestyle of sleeping on the streets:

The color of their face is different; it is darker from being in the sun and from not bathing. They don't have a stove, hot food, or a change of clothes. One can tell just by looking who has a tent or not.

Kokusai's neighbor added that those without tents were always constipated because of their bad diets and could not sleep because they had no fixed schedule or place to rest. Indeed, the very rhythms of their bodies were seen as unpredictable and disrupted by their nomadism and instability.

By contrast, people of the mountain insisted that they themselves, whether they labored, recycled, or scavenged, did so properly (shikkari suru) and with perseverance and diligence (ganbaru). I spent many hours listening to ways in which one could better tie newspapers, more efficiently crush cans, or perfect the method of sifting through garbage. This is significant because the virtue of ganbaru or "to persevere" was an activity that many people in Japan, including the former governor of Tokyo, claimed that homeless people, in particular, did not do. Governor Aoshima once pronounced about the homeless, "They have particular views of life and philosophy. They want to be left alone." In other words, the governor declared the homeless responsible for their situations and suggested that it was precisely because homeless people did not persevere that they "became" homeless. Yet, rejecting this sentiment, one man I met in Ueno argued, "The only reason we are here is because we ganbaru. That is the only reason we are alive."

In fact, among the tented homeless in Ueno Park, it was precisely productivity and activity that lent legitimacy to putting up a tent in the park's limited space. While the general population may view homelessness itself as an illness and the homeless as socially unfit, the Japanese homeless persons I talked to judged some of those among themselves as too weak or ill and therefore too unfit to do homeless in Ueno Park.

For example, consider the situation of two park residents, whom I call Neko and Kita. Both had tents in **Ueno Park** during my research. Neko had been living with her "husband" since her arrival six years prior (the husband had been there already for four years), while Kita arrived more recently, a few months into the research. Yet, despite her seniority and growing despair, it was Neko who was losing legitimacy and support from her neighbors in the park. Neko was from a rural hamlet of Aomori Prefecture in the northernmost part of Honshū. She was seventy-six years old and just over four feet tall. She was very energetic, kept a cat for a companion, sang folk songs almost constantly, and was well liked by those around her. "Cute" (kawaii) was consistently used to describe her. However, Neko had severe arthritis and a bladder control

problem which necessitated more and more of her husband's care. After a brief attempt to "pick up" another woman to care for Neko, the husband left the park without a word.

This left Neko to fend for herself. Her husband had made their money by selling frankfurters and snacks at a stall in front of the park shrine on the weekends, but Neko had no income of her own. Nor could she, with her arthritis, easily raise and lower her tent daily as the park management required, not to mention complete the more strenuous "special clean-ups" each month. Even changing her clothes, doing laundry, and cooking became difficult chores. In other words, she could no longer do for herself. She had no one to take care of her and little money to pay someone to do it. She was living mostly from church handouts, which marked her desperation.

Most people of the mountain refused to eat at soup lines because they felt the church insulted them by making them listen to long sermons, feeding them soupy rice (that they called cat food), and, worst of all, by giving to everyone anonymously, thereby denying homeless people's humanity, which the people of the mountain located in their abilities to maintain mutually reciprocating human relationships. In true human relationships, they insisted, food is mutually exchanged and given with words of acknowledgment such as "you must have had a hard day" (otsukaresama deshita). But the church makes you sit, orates a long sermon, and gives to anyone who will listen. Thus, those on the mountain view those who line up, who merely receive without giving back anything and who do so in anonymity, as void of humanity, perseverance, and pride.

And now they saw Neko lining up several times a week. Still, at first thinking her husband would come back, Neko's neighbors took pity on her, commiserated with her view of her husband's irresponsibility, and helped with her tent and meals. After all, the couple had seniority over other residents due to their age and tenure in the park. However, when it became clear that Neko's husband had left for good, the neighbors retreated. They felt it was Neko's responsibility to do for herself. She was seventy-six years old, with illnesses that made her one of the few easy candidates for the scant state-supported welfare services.



Certainly Neko had her pride, her neighbors thought, but it was time for her "to do what she had to do." "One cannot depend on others," Pū-chan, Neko's neighbor, complained. "She may be pitiful (*kawaisō*), but I have stopped helping her. Her tent smells horrible because she merely drops her clothes in water, without soap, and hangs them to dry. And the tent is full of roaches. I don't know what she's thinking." Neko, in losing her independence and her ability to do homeless, had lost her legitimacy and endangered her relationships on the yama.

Kita, on the other hand, was younger than Neko. He was sixty-two years old and three years away from receiving his work pension, which, unlike the ex-day-laborers, he had earned from his former job at an inn in a northern prefecture. But he left the job, and his home, after the death of his wife. He traveled around a bit, but had drained his resources quickly. He was staying in a room in Ueno when he first came to the park. He saw all the tents, talked to some people, made some friends, and thought he would give it a try. He did not drink alcohol, nor did he ever scavenge for food or even do day labor, but he was quick to offer a cigarette and sometimes, or so I heard, even a loan. He "did not cause a big nuisance" (*meiwaku o kakenai*). Most importantly, he did everything for himself. He was his own means of financial support and was able to raise and lower his tent and move it out on "special clean-up" days. Thus, even though he claimed that his plan was to return to his daughter's home in the north where she ran an inn, for the time being, Kita was self-sufficient, committed to his relationships, active on the yama, and, therefore, seen as legitimate by his peers.

These examples make clear that it was not the most downtrodden or the most down-and-out who were seen as legitimate homeless within the society of homeless. Rather, it was the most productive, disciplined, and active who were judged as fit to do homeless and who, therefore, gained local legitimacy. People of the mountain understood and pursued this sense of legitimacy through doing homeless, and through comparisons with those who they deemed truly downtrodden-those "down there" who accepted handouts or those who were no longer fit and needed outside support. Thus, while most claimed they did not need or want welfare or charity, they nonetheless recognized its importance for individuals for whom doing homeless was no

longer a viable option. Yet these choices were seen as less preferable, and those who opted for them were called "beggars" ('kojiki'), because these options reduced one's sense of independence and called into question the ability to do for oneself.

So homelessness was not just about scraping by. Commitment to both doing homeless and maintaining proper relationships lent legitimacy on the yama, not how bad one's past was or how devastating the nature of the problem that brought one to the yama might have been. The homeless claimed to treat their social relationships with utmost care as a way to express their commitment to the ideals of duty, obligation, and reciprocity. "If I quit [doing homeless and scavenging food]," one man insisted, "others will suffer." Commitment to "doing homeless" also brought praise. Onēsan, a woman living in the park, described her neighbor, with whom she was involved in mutual exchanges: "It's afternoon and he's sleeping. He drank too much sake at the cherry blossom festival. But he still goes out to work every night. In the rain, wind, or whatever. Even a salaryman might say, 'not today,' but this man, he goes to work everyday."

## **Rethinking Centers and Margins**

Homeless people in **Ueno Park** prided themselves on their self-sufficiency, honor, and perseverance. Doing homeless was about doing particular types of labor, and also about completing tasks according to particular standards of discipline and making sure that other residents of the park maintained those standards as well. It mattered to them not only that responsibilities were carried out, but that they were carried out the right way—that is, in a way that reflected the virtues of hard work, sincerity, perseverance, and obligation to others.

Given the popular perception about the "otherness" and marginality of homelessness, these narratives of doing homeless are challenging on two levels. First, they challenge conventional views of Japan which celebrate the home, corporation, and family as the central anchors of Japanese identity. Clearly, Japanese culture is more flexible. Second, they challenge common ideas about homeless people—ideas that imagine them to be idle, deviant, or simply struggling to

survive, by any means necessary. Clearly, homeless people are more diverse, and more engaged in that flexible Japanese culture.

The common sense views represented in the questions with which I began this essay can, if left unchecked, serve to reduce the homeless to mere outsiders and leave them out of our imagination of contemporary Japan. Indeed, it is easy to think that homeless people leave behind social norms as they struggle to live at the basest level of human existence. Yet, once we take a closer look, we can see that the reality is more complicated. We can see that overused metaphors of deviance, survival, and difference are not sufficient descriptions for understanding homelessness in Tokyo, as they do not consider homeless people's view of themselves, nor the possibility for those views to be rather ordinary.

## **Abby Margolis**

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