

Sanya Street Life under the Heisei Recession

Tom Gill

The two great spherical gasometers of the Tokyo Gas Senju Pressure Regulating Station glowed green in the arc lights. The red gate of a tiny Shinto shrine was lit up in a little grove opposite the security office by the main entrance. Across a narrow street, the Tokyo Gas regional headquarters, an imposing seven-story building, looked over a broad manicured lawn to the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp. building with its moonlit tower, bristling with satellite dishes, and the white cube of the post office parcel forwarding center. In the heart of Sanya, Tokyo's most celebrated slum district, industry immaculate.

It was quiet as a grave. I almost tiptoed as I walked round the corner to the Tamahime Labor Office, a branch of the Ueno Employment Exchange. There, in front of the closed and battered metal shutters, a dozen men were asleep beneath filthy futons. Five more were sharing a bottle of *shōchū* (distilled liquor) and a plastic-wrapped meal from a convenience store, talking in low tones.

I joined them, and they passed me the bottle. Hayashi from Chiba Prefecture, aged 43, looked younger, dressed in a clean blue boiler suit. Ōhata from Iwate Prefecture, aged 46 but looking a decade older, was large and rubicund with close-cropped hair and a towel wrapped around his head. Sada from Kumamoto Prefecture, aged 54, appeared about 70 with his wizened, collapsed face and two or three tombstone teeth. He sported a green cap and dirty light-brown jumper. Nagata from Hokkaido, perhaps in his 40s. Bald as a monk, no teeth, dribbling, speech almost but not quite incomprehensible. Glasses askew. Shō-chan, a Tokyo-born Korean, 52, looked about 70 and pretty ill: face weathered from years of sleeping rough, shock of white hair shooting in all directions, turned-up eyeballs, racking cough. Lear on the heath.

All parts of Japan were represented, and Korea and Britain too. "It's just like the United Nations," remarked Hayashi. We proceeded to debate the North Korean nuclear problem, the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton administration, and

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of course, the recession. All those present agreed that it was the worst recession they'd ever known—much worse than the recessions caused by the oil crises in the 1970s.

These men are day laborers, and they used to make a viable living doing construction work. Accommodation is relatively cheap in the flophouses of Sanya, and in good times a man can make enough to pay the rent, eat, and drink *shōchū*—the three basic requirements of the day-laboring life. But Sanya has not known good times for nearly three years now, and there is a steady exodus from the flophouses to the street.

"I haven't had work since the end of last year," said Ōhata. "I've been sleeping rough for a couple of years. I've had TB every winter—that's where I find shelter, in hospital." He was surprised when I expressed sympathy. "It's all right, I'm fine now!" he reassured me.

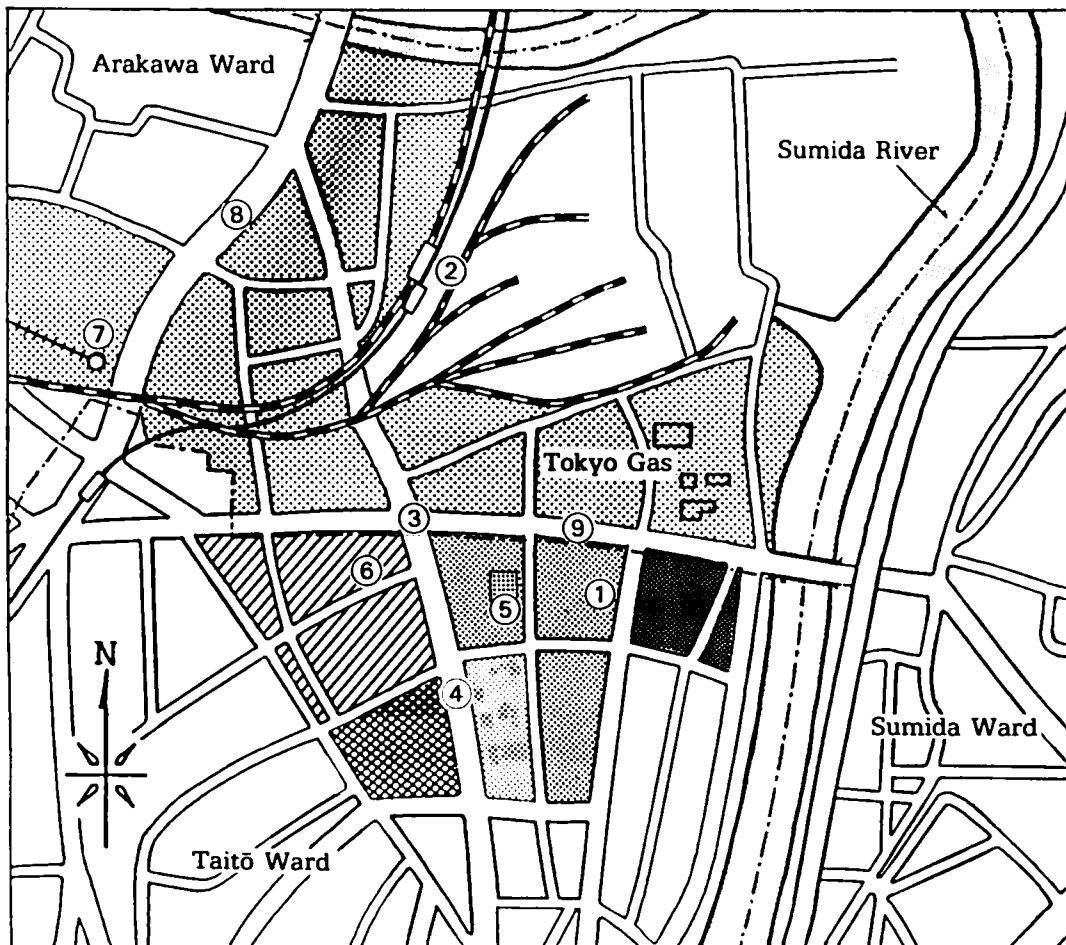
The meeting passed a unanimous motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Hata Tsutomu, and in politicians in general. A large proportion of the jobs that come to Sanya are in public works, and each year the day laborers there eagerly await the passing of the budget that releases funds for public works. The crisis triggered by Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro's resignation held up this year's budget by three whole months. Viewed from the streets, this chaos and inaction in the face of economic disaster is not so much weak leadership as a vicious stab in the back.

I asked about their families. Nagata and Shō-chan couldn't answer, and the other three said they'd had no connection with their families for many years. This is the almost universal story of Sanya: a story of men without families. Some have abandoned their natal families; others have been abandoned. Some are too ashamed to go home; some find the phone hung up on them when they try to call. Many have once been married but do not even know if their spouses or children are alive or dead.

"Do you masturbate?" asked Hayashi, apropos of nothing. "We're all great masturbators here, especially him" (indicating Ōhata). "That's how we keep warm at night. I'm the only one that can afford women; I go to Yoshiwara about 10 times a year. Oh, it's lovely . . . but it costs ¥20,000 a time. Here, take a look at this." He had two pornographic playing cards, showing naked foreign women, which we eagerly admired. "Sada here wets his bed," added Hayashi. "What a stink!" As if reminded, Sada struggled to his feet and wobbled away to relieve himself in the gutter.

We lapsed into a silence broken only by Shō-chan's consumptive coughing. Then: "Do you remember Endō?" said Hayashi to Ōhata. "Yeah, I remember him." "Do you know he threw himself in front of a train?" "Yeah, I know. You've told me a few times. Here, have another drink."

Sanya



- ① Tamahime Labor Office ② Minami-Senju Station ③ Namidabashi ④ Sanya Dōri
 ⑤ Tamahime Kōen ⑥ Sanya Labor Center and Jōhoku Welfare Center ⑦ Minowabashi
 Station ⑧ Nikkō Kaidō ⑨ Meiji Dōri

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Minami-Senju (1, 2, 3, 5, and 7 chōme) | Kiyokawa (1 and 2 chōme) |
| Nihonzutsumi (1 and 2 chōme) | Higashi-Asakusa (2 chōme) |
| Hashiba (2 chōme) | |

I

Why were these five men in this particular place on this particular night? The Sanya district of eastern Tokyo, located near Minami-Senju Station, has a long history of accommodating the single men who form the traditional underclass of Japanese society. It dates back to the Edo period (1603–1867), when it was the main venue for public executions. In the lee of the station there is a large stone statue of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, where people used to pray for the souls of executed criminals. The main crossroads leading into Sanya is still called Namidabashi, the Bridge of Tears—though there is no bridge there today—because of its old role as a place of tearful and final farewells. The main street leading through the town is known as Sanya Dōri, but the portion of the street near the old execution ground is called Kotsu Dōri (Bone Street). Other parts of Sanya have enjoyed much better days: Tamahime Kōen (Jewel Princess Park), it is rumored, was once an aristocratic trysting place, and the famous Yoshiwara pleasure quarter was in the Sanya district from the 17th century through the 20th century. Now it is just next door. The famous Edo-period restaurant Yaozen was in Sanya.

But that was a long time ago. Today, Sanya is known as a center for day labor, supplying industry—chiefly construction—with cheap, flexible manpower. Some 70 percent of Tokyo's day laborers live in and around Sanya, making a population of about 10,000. They are mostly accommodated in the 197 flophouses dotted round the area. Prices per day run from ¥800 to ¥1,100 for a bed in a room shared with several other men or from ¥1,300 to ¥2,500 for a very small individual room. Since a day of unskilled day labor usually brings in ¥10,000 to ¥13,000, and skilled work up to ¥20,000 or so, life in Sanya is perfectly viable so long as there are jobs. During the bubble years, many of the flophouse owners renovated their premises, dolling up the rooms, installing color television and air-conditioning, and hiking the rent. There is even a luxury flophouse in Sanya, with a carpeted reception lounge and a stone open-air hot-spring bath on the roof. It charges a once-unthinkable ¥4,100. Today, the bubble has burst, the jobs have gone, most of the upmarket flophouses are half-empty, the cheap ones are bursting at the seams, and there are some 400 men sleeping on the street every night. Another 300 or so sleep a short distance away at Ueno Station.

Every major city has a district like Sanya. The two other biggest are Kotobuki-chō, in Yokohama, which has some 8,000 day laborers and welfare cases living in flophouses, and Kamagasaki in Osaka with some 25,000 men living a similar lifestyle. Each of these districts has its own characteristics. In Kotobuki-chō, for instance, the flophouses are nearly all owned by Koreans and there are numerous Korean and Filipino migrants in the work force. Sanya is almost exclusively Japanese-owned and there are very few migrants around. All three districts have a history of street rioting, but Kamagasaki is the most politically volatile: The men there live under constant surveillance from 15 police video cameras deployed in public, outdoor locations. A protracted court case brought by local citizens protesting this gross infringement of

their privacy recently ended with the judge ordering just one of the cameras to be removed. Sanya is also heavily policed, with a giant police station in the middle of the district, known simply as *manmosu*, or “the mammoth.” Kotobuki-chō, by contrast, has a far more relaxed atmosphere and only a small police station on one corner.

These diverse districts have two major functions in common that distinguish them from other sectors of urban Japan. First, they are centers for day labor, or *yoseba* (literally, a “gathering place”). Second, to accommodate the laborers they have large numbers of cheap hotels known as *doya* (a piece of street slang that reverses the usual word for accommodation, *yado*). From this comes *doya-gai*, a town with many *doya*. In practice, by and large, *yoseba* are *doya-gai* and vice-versa.

The authorities have always been embarrassed about the *doya-gai*. They seek to keep them out of the public eye, and many mainstream Japanese are actually unaware of their existence. One popular government tactic is to simply remove the *doya-gai* from the map. Sanya, for example, ceased to exist as an administrative entity in a boundary revision in 1974.

It is somewhat misleading to think of *doya-gai* as slums. Slums in Europe, the United States, and most parts of Southeast Asia are family places. But there are no barefoot children or tired mothers hanging out the wash in Sanya. Overwhelmingly, the population is male and single. Also their accommodation, mostly in tiny two- or three-tatami-mat rooms in cheap boarding houses, is quite distinctive.

Another traditional feature of the *doya-gai* is the presence of *yakuza*. They have two main lines of business: working as street-corner labor recruiters who round up workers to the specifications of the employers and take a cut of each man’s wage; and servicing the population by running gambling games (chiefly dice, and betting on horse, bicycle, and powerboat races). Some *yakuza* also deal in drugs.

There are many alcoholics and gamblers, and a few drug addicts, to be found in the *doya-gai*; also numerous eccentrics and some people with mental disabilities. Because of this, many Japanese who are aware of the existence of *doya-gai* look on them as a sort of cultural dustbin. They argue that distaste for physical and spiritual pollution, deeply ingrained in Buddhism and Shintoism alike, accounts for the striking absence of family life—these men are rubbish, men who have simply been thrown out. This view is summed up in the term *ubasute-yama*, sometimes used to describe the *doya-gai*, a reference to the old custom of abandoning women to die on the mountainside when they were too old to work and there was insufficient food to go round the family. This picture of the cruel family is only half true: I have heard from the owners of *doya* in Sanya that they are quite often visited by people carrying old photographs, trying to trace a missing husband, brother, or son.

A somewhat more positive version of this concept of the *doya-gai* as special cultural zones calls them *kakekomi-dera*, or temples of sanctuary. Here the idea is that a highly conformist culture like that of Japan needs some kind of exit, a place where people can go when the pressure to conform (and perform) is just too strong. Others need to escape more literally—from the law, or a loan shark, or a lover. A *doya* owner

in Kotobuki-chō once told me that he reckoned 80 percent of his tenants were using false names. There is a tolerance about the doya-gai that is not often found in mainstream society.

Nor is it quite right to think of doya-gai simply as places for failures, the Japanese version of skid row, though under the current recession, which began in 1991, the third year of this Heisei period, they are looking more like it every day. The fact is, there have always been men who came to the doya-gai because they wanted to, because they enjoyed the camaraderie and the freedom of being able to choose when to work and when to rest. Note the term: day laborers. Ideally, these men like to work by the day rather than by the week or until the end of a construction project. There is a venerable doya-gai tradition of working and playing on alternate days—something most white-collar workers can only dream of. Again, some day laborers would be better described as freelance artisans: They are skilled craftsmen, or *tobi*, daring men who specialize in high-level construction work. They sell their skills to the highest bidder and when there is a boom in construction, as has been the case for most of the postwar years, they can make very good money without sacrificing their independence to the whim of a large corporation. These men are certainly not failures or passive victims.

From the point of view of companies employing day laborers, the advantages are manifest. None of the heavy responsibilities of lifetime employment here. Construction is an industry prone to massive fluctuations in demand for labor—seasonal fluctuation, cyclical economic fluctuation, and indeed daily fluctuation caused by the weather. What could be more convenient than a work force adjustable by the day?

Like the families of some day laborers, the big corporations who ultimately employ them like to keep them at a distance. They maintain pyramidal hierarchies of subcontractors and sub-subcontractors and are not in any hurry to take responsibility in the event of an accident or pay dispute. The sub-subcontractors are often run by *yakuza*, who have their own way of dealing with these matters.

II

Three factors are now rapidly eroding the old freewheeling way of life of Japan's day laborers. One is the terrible toll taken on casual employment by the Heisei recession. In less than three years, the number of man-days of employment available at the public agencies in Sanya has fallen by more than 50 percent. Another is the aging of the doya-gai population, which is progressing much faster than that of the general population. The average Japanese day laborer is now just over 50 years old; some 20 percent are over 60. Third, many of the jobs they used to do are being taken over by younger foreign workers.

These three trends are sapping the independence of the men in the doya-gai, gradually turning spirited working men into homeless wrecks. How are the authorities responding to this difficult challenge?

As well as being renamed, Sanya has also been broken up. The current boundaries do not acknowledge that there is a distinguishable area in this part of Tokyo: The part east of Sanya Dōri is now mostly in Kiyokawa (meaning Pure River, though there is no river, and the district is far from pure), while the western part is in Nihonzutsumi and the part north of Namidabashi is part of Minami-Senju. Minami-Senju is in Arakawa Ward, while Kiyokawa and Nihonzutsumi are in Taitō Ward. Responsibility for employment and social welfare in Sanya is thus divided between two wards, besides the city of Tokyo and the national government, giving ample potential for bureaucratic chaos and buck-passing.

Casual employment is handled by two separate employment exchanges. The Sanya Labor Center is run by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, indirectly, through an external organization. Its shutters go up at 6:30 A.M. every weekday, and the principle is first come, first served. The men do not wait for the shutters to go up these days. The technique is to press one's head as hard as possible against the slowly widening gap until it gets through and then to sprint to the clerks' windows. They call it the Sanya limbo.

The Tamahime Labor Office is a 10-minute walk away, on the far side of Tamahime Kōen. Jobs are given out at 6:45 A.M., so one has to hurry to try both places. This office is run by the Ministry of Labor and attempts to allocate jobs fairly by a rotation system. The men carry numbered handbooks, and each day the numbers start from just after the last job allocated the day before. Even so, you have to be quick. A bell rings out and a young man calls the numbers rapidly and with great urgency, as if he were auctioning art treasures. Other young men in jeans and T-shirts rush around the bay in front of the job advertisements, grabbing handbooks from applicants and slamming them into wooden trays under each advertisement like basketball players making a dunk. Men who fail to find work submit their handbooks at a different reception, to claim the day laborer's dole: ¥6,200 a day, if you have worked at least 28 days in the last two calendar months. In better times, this arrangement neatly supported the one-day-on, one-day-off lifestyle; but very few men can get enough work to maintain eligibility these days. Staff administering the exchange say that fraud is widespread. They did not wish to be identified: They have had harassing phone calls and stones thrown at them in recent months.

On April 20, 1994, there were 14 jobs at the Sanya Labor Center and 119 at the Tamahime Labor Office. The latter included 65 jobs under a special government job-creation scheme, gardening and cleaning up at a municipal cemetery and on the verges of expressways. This program provides 39,970 man-days of work per year—about four days' work per man per year. There has been no increase since the onset of the recession. Many men stay away these days because they don't think it's worth the effort; even so, I observed some 500 job-seekers at the two venues. The day before, April 19, it rained in the morning. There were 10 jobs at the center and 13 at the office.

There is, of course, the alternative of informal employment via the yakuza. Several hundred men line the sides of Sanya Dōri for this purpose every weekday morning,

but again the situation is grim. Many familiar labor recruiters are no longer to be seen, and the minibuses that take men to the work site have almost disappeared. With fewer and fewer exceptions, there is work only for those who go directly to the same work site every morning. These men have entered into semiregular arrangements with their employers, sacrificing their freedom to work when they please, generally without gaining anything in the way of employment security, pension rights, or medical benefits.

III

The great majority of day laborers are excluded from the state pension and health insurance systems, which require regular contributions during one's working life. In principle, no one, however old, has a right to a state pension or health insurance in Japan: It must be earned. Thus day laborers who can no longer make even a basic living must turn to the social welfare system. Like the casual employment system, this works on a bipartite principle that has the effect of complicating procedures and blurring the issue of bureaucratic responsibility.



On a Sanya street corner, January 1960

The two systems are known as *seikatsu hogo* (social security) and *hōgai engo* (extra-legal assistance). The former is run by local authorities—Taitō and Arakawa wards in the case of Sanya—and is supposed to ensure a minimum standard of living for those permanently incapable of supporting themselves. The latter is run at the city level and is supposed to provide very limited assistance to those temporarily in need. There is no statutory obligation for cities to provide this second level of assistance, hence “extra-legal.” It is provided in the Confucian spirit of charity from a generous lord to his needy subjects.

Social security provides the recipient with a place to live and a small income, typically around ¥80,000 a month. The place to live is very often a room in a *doya*. Indeed, in Yokohama so many welfare recipients have been placed in Kotobuki-chō that most of the *doya* are permanently full and it is increasingly difficult for a self-supporting day laborer to find a room.

Who can get social security? A doctor’s letter stating that the bearer has a long-term illness or disability preventing him from working usually guarantees the success of an application; but people who are old or weak but lack any specific disabling condition must rely on the discretion of local officials. Here the difference between Tokyo and Yokohama is very great. The welfare officials at Yokohama’s Naka Ward office have a reputation for viewing applications sympathetically; those at Tokyo’s Taitō and Arakawa wards do not. Ultimately, this reflects political differences between the two civic governments. The city of Yokohama is one of the few places in Japan that recognizes the concept of the professional social worker. There is a special examination for those wishing to work in social welfare, and they are expected to have studied a relevant subject at university. By contrast, Tokyo, like the great majority of Japanese cities, conducts a single examination for all public officials. A few are then detailed to social welfare whether they like it or not. Most do not; it is a low-prestige posting. So when someone from Sanya shows up at the ward office, he is likely to be seen by someone who wishes he had a different job. This cannot be right; on the other hand, Yokohama is coming under mounting pressure to abandon its more enlightened system on the grounds that it populates the welfare offices with bleeding heart liberals who are a pushover for wily spongers. Several other cities that used to have the dual examination system have abandoned it in recent years.

The wide area left to official discretion puts enormous responsibility on the shoulders of the often young caseworkers in the social welfare offices. They have to make impossible philosophical decisions, such as whether a chronic alcoholic is a person with a serious illness or a silly fool, for instance.

Those who cannot get social security must rely on extra-legal assistance. In Sanya, this is administered by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government through the Jōhoku Welfare Center. The welfare center is in the same building as the Sanya Labor Center but is controlled by a different set of bureaucrats.

Assistance is handed out on the third floor, but every weekday morning and afternoon, the queue of applicants stretches all the way down the stairs to the ground

floor and out onto the street. The men start queuing at six in the morning, three hours before the center opens. They sit patiently in the half-light of dawn, cross-legged on scraps of cardboard, soot-faced and tousled. There is a fatalistic stoicism about these men; they take comfort in each other's presence. At least they are not alone.

When they finally make it to the third floor, they are interviewed by officials in tiny metal cubicles. Two kinds of assistance are offered: accommodation and food. The center has contracts for 60 beds a night with various welfare institutions and private boarding houses around Tokyo, for which it gets several hundred applications a day. The standard food ration is eight slices of bread and 200 cc of milk. The center operates on the principle that it is only there to supply *temporary* assistance; people who need help *every day* should go to the ward office and apply for social welfare. In practice, this means that they do not give anyone a bed for more than one night at a time and only give out the bread and milk to an applicant roughly every other day. If these "nontemporary" applicants have their applications for social welfare turned down—well, it's a different set of bureaucrats again and nothing to do with the Jōhoku staff.

For too many people, the result of all this is a demoralizing game of ping-pong with themselves as the ball. They get batted to and fro between the two aid-giving agencies, gradually sinking into despair as they spend more nights on the street and more days with little or no food. Eventually they fall ill, and either die or finally qualify for hospitalization paid for by social welfare. In many cases, this is an expensive business that probably ends up costing the taxpayers more than if a minimal level of assistance had been provided in the first place. Sanya abounds with rumors of shady private hospitals whose prime function is to quickly kill off sick and elderly welfare patients at minimum expense, and similar reports are coming in from other doya-gai, though I have yet to see convincing evidence of this myself.

On the wall of the waiting room at the Jōhoku Welfare Center there is a poster advising people on how not to catch a cold. Among the tips, illustrated with easy-to-understand cartoons: "Get plenty of nourishment and water. Sleep peacefully in a warm room." At the bottom of the poster is a kind of signature: "*Yasashii machi, Tokyo*"—Tokyo, the kindly town. For some reason, people using the center seem to find this poster amusing.

Among the men waiting listlessly for an interview one morning was Hirata (not his real name), aged 46, short, wiry, with close-cropped grey hair and overalls. He is from the city of Kiryū, in Gumma Prefecture. "Why are you here?" I asked him. "*Ikiru tame*"—to live—he replied simply. "I've been in Sanya 13 years, but I've never known it as bad as this." Hirata was a yakuza for 10 years. He says he finally quit because he couldn't bear the shame he was causing his mother. But steady jobs are hard to come by for ex-yakuza, especially when they have several convictions for knifing people. And so he came to Sanya. Until this year, he says, he was doing well enough; but now the jobs are gone and Hirata is just another face in the welfare line.

I asked a group of four officials at the social welfare section of one of the ward offices dealing with Sanya—who also wanted to remain anonymous—if they thought there were any problems with the welfare system. The only one they could come up with was the pride of Sanya people, which stops many of them from applying for benefits for which they might be eligible. There certainly are people like that in Sanya, who would rather die than be a burden on the state, but my impression is that there are far more people bitter and frustrated because they are refused benefits and effectively condemned to die in the gutter. Volunteers working in Sanya estimate that about 100 people died on the street there last winter.

IV

There are people working to improve the situation. The National Union of Day Laborers has affiliated unions in Sanya, Kotobuki-chō, Kamagasaki, and other major doya-gai. They negotiate with employers over cases of industrial injury, nonpayment of wages, etc., and with local authorities over welfare provision. They also organize festivals, street demonstrations, and self-defense against the yakuza. The Sanya union is a militant left-wing group called the Sanya Sōgidan (Sanya Dispute League).

Nowadays, the Sōgidan's biggest single job is keeping people fed. Food handouts have traditionally been carried out during the New Year period when welfare agencies are closed down, but as I write (June 1994), the Sōgidan is still supplying free meals daily for some 600 people who would otherwise go hungry. This is unprecedented and an enormous operation for a group of a dozen or so unpaid activists (they generally support themselves by doing day labor), and they depend on donations in cash and kind. The great majority of the donations come from Christian groups, and this cooperation between religious and political activists is one heartening aspect of the current crisis. There are half a dozen Christian missions of various denominations around Sanya, but the Japanese indigenous religions are conspicuously absent.

The Sōgidan puts a heavy emphasis on self-help. Every afternoon trestle tables are set up in front of the Jōhoku Welfare Center, and 20 or 30 men set to work preparing the ingredients. The result, as often as not, is *suiton*—a thin soup with slices of onion and radish and balls of flour floating in it—a dish that all older Japanese associate with the chronic food shortages after the defeat in World War II. It is a far cry from the grandeur of the Yaozen, but it is something.

Solidarity is another important theme. On April 20, I joined a busload of 60 unemployed day laborers and Sōgidan activists on a trip to lobby a meeting of Tokyo's 23 wards to discuss policy toward the homeless. We were met at the government building in Kudan by 40 people who had made their own way from the cardboard city at Shinjuku Station. Our little band of protesters stood on the pavement in front of the government building. The Sōgidan flag was raised and rousing speeches delivered. Three busloads of riot police were on hand and we were inspected and photographed from every angle. As for the meeting, it was canceled, or "stamped



Faces of Sanya

Photographs by Morita Ichiroh





out” as the Sōgidan propaganda had it that night. An official I interviewed in Sanya admitted that the meeting was canceled to avoid the demonstration.

A few nights later, I joined a group of volunteers taking hot gruel around to the homeless people of Sanya. They dotted the parks, they lined the shopping streets, they emerged from every shadowy corner of the district. Nearly all were men; nearly all looked old.

And so we came to the men in front of the Tamahime Labor Office. No sign of Hayashi; probably he was only visiting the other night. Ōhata and Nagata had some gruel. Sada and Shō-chan were already asleep, the one curled up like a baby, the other with his arms and legs sticking out like a crushed grasshopper.

Ōhata, Nāgata, Sada, and Shō-chan will be dead on the street in a few more years. Life expectancy for those who live in the doya-gai is about 20 years less than for the Japanese population as a whole. Is it all their fault? Some day laborers saved money during the bubble years, forged good relations with employers, and are ready to weather the Heisei recession. In the eyes of a Margaret Thatcher or an Ozawa Ichirō (Japan’s most powerful politician), men who gambled and drank while others scrimped and saved have only themselves to blame. It is a question of responsibility: As you sow so shall you reap. Still, some of the other characters of the bubble years, such as the corrupt politicians, the real estate speculators, and the pliant bureaucrats—the people who engineered the boom and invited the bust—will live to a ripe and wealthy old age. Not everyone reaps as they sow; natural justice does not always work. That, surely, is when the state should intervene. I don’t mean handouts—I mean work. In a metropolis of nearly 12 million people, the city government is providing an average of four days of humiliatingly badly paid work a year for its many thousands of day laborers. Can’t the “kindly town” do better than that?

Conversation with a Sanya Man

"I'm 39 years old. I was born in a small fishing village in Miyagi Prefecture, the oldest of three sons. The oldest son is supposed to stay at home and maintain the household, but I wasn't cut out for it. I'm a case of what they call 'the spoiled oldest son' (*sōryō no jinroku*). Luckily, one of my younger brothers is a more dependable type—he's in charge of the family fishing boat now. My other brother's in the Air Self-Defense Force. They're both doing well.

"I used to be a bartender; my great ambition was to serve at one of the big international hotels. But you need good handwriting and a gift for foreign languages; I just couldn't make it. At 29, I was working in a revolving restaurant at the top of a love hotel, making ¥200,000 a month with no bonus and having to pay my own taxi fare home at 3:00 A.M. every night.

"My wife got fed up with me and left, taking our son with her. The boy is 18 now, and I haven't seen him for 10 years. I still hear a little news about him: He and my ex-wife live near my family home in Miyagi, and she goes to my parents for help with money sometimes. I haven't been back to the village in a decade myself; it's a conservative place, and I don't want to embarrass my parents any further.

"When the wife left, I abandoned bar-tending and came to Sanya. I learned to work as a *tekkin-kō* [the man who builds the framework of steel rods used in reinforced concrete]. I can make around ¥18,000 a day. If I can find 20 days' work in a month, that makes ¥360,000—pretty good money.

"I prefer 10- or 15-day contracts rather than single-day jobs; if you work by the day, you end up spending all the money the same day. But I wouldn't want to become a regular employee of some construction company: That way they can boss you around. Besides, the money's worse. Regular *tekkin-kō* only average about ¥16,000 per working day, and they get hit for tax, insurance, and social welfare deductions that the day laborer can usually avoid. Also, when there's a big project at a work camp, the regulars have about ¥1,500 a day deducted for accommodation: in a prefab dormitory, whereas we casuals get it free.

"On the other hand, when the work runs out, they still have an income and we don't. These days I'm struggling to find 15 days' work in a month and I'm mostly broke. I've even slept rough a couple of times. I have to admit day laboring doesn't look so good in the middle of a recession like this, but the trouble with the free lifestyle is that you get used to it—and then you can't change.

"Anyway, I don't think people really choose their occupations. Day laboring is my destiny. I'm a practicing Buddhist: My family has belonged to the *Sōdōshū* Buddhist sect for 15 generations. I still drink, gamble, and visit prostitutes; these things are immoral but necessary. If girls are forced into prostitution, that's quite wrong. But if they are doing it willingly, I can but be grateful to them.

"Thanks for the drink. . . . But you know, they shouldn't put ice in a martini like that. It dilutes the vermouth."