

***Zainichi* Culture as Inclusive Driver of Multinational Enclaves in Osaka: The Case of “IKUNO Multicultural Flat”**

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Abstract

This paper examines community-based multicultural initiatives in Ikuno Ward, Osaka—Japan’s most ethnically diverse urban area. Focusing on the activities of IKUNO Multicultural Flat, it highlights locally funded programs supporting children, youth, and adults with foreign backgrounds through education, consultation, and community engagement. Despite the absence of government funding, these initiatives foster inclusivity and cultural exchange while addressing demographic and social challenges. The study suggests that such grassroots efforts offer a viable model for multicultural coexistence in historically complex urban communities.

Keywords

ethnicity; inclusivity; multinational enclaves; Osaka, Ikuno

Ikuno Ward, located in Osaka City, has the highest proportion of foreign residents among all urban municipalities in Japan, with 22.5% of its population holding foreign citizenship as of March 2024. This equates to approximately one in five residents. The ward is home to long-established “oldcomer” communities—primarily ethnic Koreans who migrated before World War II—as well as an increasing number of “newcomer” residents in recent years. In total, individuals with roots in 79 different countries reside in the area (Table 1).

Ikuno Ward also grapples with a range of complex social issues, including rapid population aging, a sharply declining birthrate, a school assistance rate more than double the national average (indicating relative poverty), and school reorganization resulting from the

diminishing student population. These challenges position Ikuno as a community at the forefront of issues related to multiculturalism, multiethnicity, socioeconomic vulnerability, and demographic decline.

Table 1: Comparison of the first three major nationalities of foreign residents in Ikuno Ward between 2025.3 and 2012 (Source: Residents’ registration record)

Rank	2025	Population	2012	Population
1 st	Korea	18,050	Korea	26,532
2 nd	Vietnam	3,833	China	1,612
3 rd	China	3,661	Vietnam	211
4 th	Nepal	1,586	Taiwan	130
5 th	Myanmar	645	Philippines	90

In response to these conditions, community-driven initiatives have emerged to reimagine

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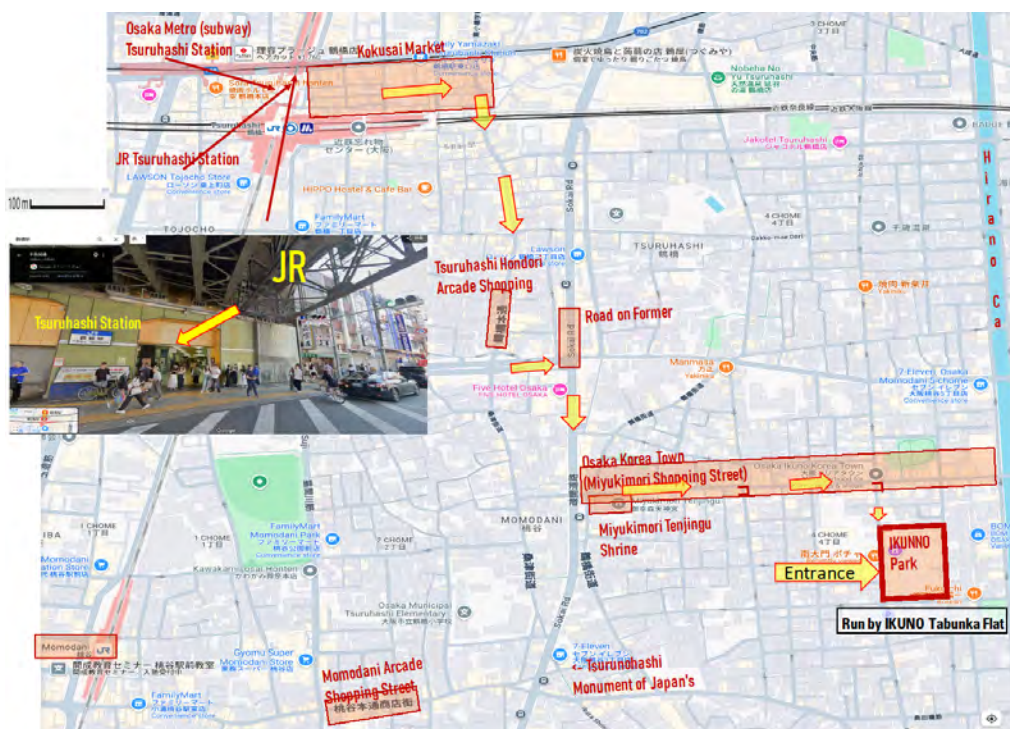
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local community-building while preserving the ward's historical and cultural legacy. One notable example is the work of the nonprofit organization *IKUNO Multicultural Flat*. The term *tabunka* in its name refers to “multiculturalism,” reflecting its mission to promote inclusive coexistence.

The selection of the site itself reflects the symbolic and historical significance of the area (Figure 1). According to Mr. Song Oh, the director of *IKUNO Multicultural Flat*, the decision to begin activities in this area was deeply tied to its unique historical background. The former Miyukimori Elementary School is located in a district where many Zainichi Koreans have long resided, including the well-known Korea Town, making it a highly symbolic location. From the perspective of the

South Korean government as well, this neighborhood holds special meaning, and for Zainichi Koreans it can be regarded as a kind of “Mecca.” Considering the recent diversification of Ikuno Ward, this area is a particularly appropriate place to serve as a hub for multicultural coexistence. In this sense, the historical presence and collective energy of the Zainichi community became a driving force behind the creation of *IKUNO Multicultural Flat*. Its practices are therefore grounded in the long-standing historical and cultural context of this community.

As school closures and consolidations progressed under the city's reorganization plans, *IKUNO Multicultural Flat* partnered with Retown Co., Ltd., to repurpose the former Miyukimori Elementary School site as a base



Maps Data: Google, ©2025

Figure 1: The location of Ikuno Tabunka Flat and its surroundings
(This map was delivered at the EARCAG Osaka Session on 15 February 2025)

for multicultural engagement. Following a successful public proposal, the organization began managing the site in April 2022. In May 2023, the facility reopened as *IKUNO Park* (Figure 2).



Figure 2: IKUNO Park

It is important to note that this initiative receives no direct financial support—not only from Osaka City, but also from other public entities such as Ikuno Ward, Osaka Prefecture, or the national government. Instead, the organization operates entirely on self-generated funds. In addition to paying over 400,000 yen in monthly rent for the use of the former school building, the organization must also bear the cost of utilities such as electricity and water. Furthermore, a wide range of independently operated programs require additional funding, including personnel expenses necessary for the planning and implementation of various community-oriented initiatives. To sustain operations under these financial constraints, the classrooms of the former school have been rented out to diverse tenants, thereby creating a self-supporting model of revenue generation.

Currently, *IKUNO Park* hosts a diverse range of tenants and organizations, including a café, a cooking school, an Italian restaurant, a taekwondo dojo, and a K-pop dance studio. Each tenant contributes to the facility's vibrant and pluralistic atmosphere while pursuing their own goals.

Beyond property management, *IKUNO Multicultural Flat* engages directly with local residents through inclusive, needs-based programs. As of January 2025, approximately 140 children and youth with multicultural backgrounds—many of whom face various challenges—are registered in the organization's programs. Support is provided through academic tutoring, consultations, and informal interactions, with the aim of offering both learning opportunities and a sense of belonging.

These young participants also engage in experiential learning, encountering diverse people and perspectives through a variety of activities. For students living farther away, online Japanese language instruction is available. During weekends and school holidays, the organization offers unique enrichment experiences such as rice planting, camping, and participation in university open-campus events.

Among its many programs, the “Children's Cafeteria” stands out. Operating twice weekly on Fridays and Saturdays, these community kitchens offer children not only nourishment but also social connection. Children attend for various reasons, including the opportunity to share meals with peers.

For youth with foreign backgrounds, the “*empathy-seed*” program promotes ethnic identity development and peer connection. Distinct from established Korean communities, many of these young individuals are geographically dispersed and have limited opportunities to engage with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds. The program provides a platform where participants—ranging from high school students to young adults in their 30s—can engage in open dialogue about their experiences of being minorities in Japanese society. Through these exchanges, they reflect on their own identities, deepen their understanding of self, and foster a sense of belonging. Notably, the program is driven by the youth themselves, who independently plan and organize events based on their interests and concerns. Adult staff

provide accompanying support through a non-directive, empathetic approach, enabling participants to take ownership of the process while ensuring a supportive environment. In this way, “*empathy-seed*” serves as both a site of empowerment and a mechanism for nurturing identity formation among young people with multicultural roots.

For adults, *IKUNO Multicultural Flat* offers training programs for those wishing to support children’s education and Japanese language acquisition. Participants include school teachers, experienced volunteers, and newcomers to the field. These programs foster mutual understanding and knowledge-sharing among participants.

In addition, the organization convenes roundtable discussions and seminars to share insights and practical strategies for cultivating a multicultural community. It also operates a multilingual consultation desk staffed by interpreters in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English, as well as specialists such as school social workers, certified social workers, and legal advisors.

A range of community development projects further extend the organization’s reach. For example, vegetables grown in the on-site community garden are used in the children’s cafeteria and sold to the on-site Italian restaurant, fostering a local food circulation model. The former elementary school library has been transformed into a community library where conversation is encouraged—a deliberate departure from conventional “silent” library norms, emphasizing human connection.

Collaborative efforts with diverse sectors continue to expand. These include multilingual storytelling sessions, child-friendly recreational spaces, and annual events such as *Crossing Fes*, where residents from different cultural backgrounds perform music and dance. Another signature event, the *World Night Market*, offers cuisine from around the globe and serves as a platform for aspiring food entrepreneurs. This initiative is linked to a broader project

supporting food startups, with the goal of revitalizing vacant housing in Ikuno through the establishment of permanent restaurants.

In these ways, *IKUNO Multicultural Flat* is collaboratively building what might be described as a “fortress of coexistence”—a community infrastructure that empowers individuals to discover, express, and take pride in their potential while fostering a peaceful and inclusive urban environment.

To summarize, *IKUNO Multicultural Flat* engages in a wide array of support activities: creating safe spaces for children, offering educational and language support, operating multilingual consultation services, organizing online Japanese classes, running community kitchens, and empowering youth with foreign roots.

These initiatives are not government-funded but are sustained through independent financial means. More than simply offering direct “support” to children, youth, and adults with foreign backgrounds, these programs contribute to the cultivation of a community ethos that values diversity and inclusivity. While questions remain about their long-term sustainability due to their non-governmental nature, such initiatives have thus far proven to be effective responses to the complex and contemporary challenges faced by historically layered urban communities.

Indeed, the historical coexistence of ethnic Koreans and Japanese residents in Ikuno has fostered a local culture characterized by deep interpersonal connections and mutual support. This unique regional ethos has not only enabled these grassroots efforts to flourish, but also expanded the possibilities for achieving multicultural coexistence. If such locally rooted practices can serve as a model, the experience of Ikuno may offer valuable insights for realizing a multicultural society across Japan. As evolving practices toward the realization of a multicultural and inclusive society, their potential continues to unfold.