

# Changes on Street View and Customer Orientation of Ethnic Market Cluster Area

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The Shin-Okubo district in Tokyo has grown into Japan's best-known multi-ethnic shopping street, while foreign entrepreneurs have become key builders of the street. This study traces how their businesses have reshaped street views and the shift of target customers between 2015 and 2025. Using longitudinal shop-type surveys, multilingual-sign analysis, to reveal a decisive visual shift. Korean, Chinese, and other languages are used for the storefronts on their trilingual signs, which now dominate façades where was once oriented mainly to Japanese patrons. Findings clarify the mechanisms behind the “messy but magnetic” atmosphere perceived by local managers and show how language, retail mix and civic events interact to brand an ethnic cluster.

*Key Words: Street View, Ethnic shop, Multilingual Signage, Shin-Okubo, Customer Orientation*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

New comers in an unfamiliar place from foreign countries tend to create a community for sense of identity.<sup>1)</sup> They would gather in specific areas and open shops eventually as the community grows, particularly in those cities which have larger number of populations as immigrants. For instance, Tokyo's Roppongi and Ōkubo are known for international businesses and diverse cuisines<sup>2) 4)</sup>, while Osaka's Namba and Umeda host many foreign-run establishments<sup>3)</sup>. These areas offer supportive communities, a customer base familiar with foreign products, and easier access to imported goods. Such hubs attract both locals and tourists, making them ideal locations for foreign entrepreneurs to thrive.

There are several waves of Korean immigration to Japan occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, driven by historical, economic, and political factors. Especially in the 1980s, with Japan's rapid economic growth, new waves of Korean migrants arrived to work in various industries. During the time there is an increase in Koreans coming as students or professionals under more relaxed immigration policies.<sup>4)</sup>

The Ōkubo area in Tokyo started turning in the 1980s and 1990s. This change was driven by an influx of immigrants, particularly from South Korea, seeking affordable housing and proximity to central Tokyo. The area became a hub for Korean culture, with businesses such as Korean restaurants, grocery stores, and entertainment venues flourishing.<sup>4)</sup>

In the 2000s, the popularity of K-pop and Korean dramas flooded into Japan along with the Korean wave, and created further development at the same time in the Ōkubo area, attracting Korean immigrants, Japanese or other foreigners who are interested in Korean culture to visit.<sup>4)</sup>

Given the background explained above, it is clear that the communities built by the foreigners are broadening and becoming more noticeable. With a concentration of Korean, Chinese, and broader Asian enterprises has turned the main street into an ethnic industrial cluster whose shop signs and façades constantly evolve, it became difficult to ignore. Hence, it would be crucial to investigate more about the street in order to build a better environment and society.

### 1.2 Objective

Given the background above, the objective of this research aims to discover the emergence of foreign culture. Through the language and color used for the signboard, it reflects the shifts in target customers and the intention hidden in the design.<sup>5) 6)</sup> With tracing a ten-year span it is possible to tell how foreign culture had blended in in an ethnic market cluster area.

The following subjects are aimed to reveal in this research:

- (1) To observe the physical changes in the signboard.
- (2) To analyze how the target customer shifted from 2015 to 2025.
- (3) The visualization of the shift on signboard through maps.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Ōkubo Area



Fig.1 Location of the ethnic area (large scale) <sup>9)</sup>

Ōkubo is located in the Shinjuku city of Tokyo prefecture. The Shin-Ōkubo station is considered as the center of the ethnic store cluster. The cluster has its wide span in the Ōkubo 1-chome, Ōkubo 2-chome, Hyakunin-cho 1-chome, and Hyakunin-cho 2-chome

Table. 1 Population of the ethnic area in 2017 <sup>4)</sup>

District	Foreigner	Japanese	Foreigner Percentage
Hyakunin-cho 1-chome	1771	2611	40.4%
Hyakunin-cho 2-chome	2117	2984	41.5%
Ōkubo 1-chome	2232	2481	47.4%
Ōkubo 2-chome	3510	5534	38.8%

As of August 1, 2022, Shinjuku City reported a foreign resident population of 38,622, accounting for 11.2% of its total population of 345,858. Although there are no available detailed data for Ōkubo 1-chome, Ōkubo 2-chome, Hyakunin-cho 1-chome, and Hyakunin-cho 2-chome, these neighborhoods are known for their significant number (around 40% for each) of foreign residents, particularly from Asian countries. <sup>7) 8)</sup>

### 2.2 History

After the World War II, Ōkubo was widely regarded as a slum, its landscape dominated by makeshift, unlicensed shanties. Most inhabitants were Japanese, with a small community of Korean and Chinese laborers. In the 1950s, people from Korea and North Korea began to move into the burnt-out Shinjuku area, and the construction of a Lotte factory in Shin-Ōkubo attracted even more Koreans. <sup>10)</sup>

Ōkubo has transformed into a multicultural ethnic area over the past few decades. In the 1980s, the neighborhood's affordable housing attracted Korean, Chinese and Southeast Asian students and laborers to move in, leading to the establishment of numerous ethnic businesses. <sup>11)</sup>

The area gained further prominence in the 2000s with the rise of the Korean Wave, attracting fans of K-Pop culture. Nowadays, Ōkubo is mostly known as the “Korean Town” for its extensive Korean community, provision of authentic cuisine, K-pop merchandise, and beauty products. <sup>12)</sup>

In recent years, people from various countries, including not only Korea but also China, Vietnam, and Nepal, have begun to gather in Shin-Ōkubo, transforming the area into one with a multicultural atmosphere. In this way, Shin-Ōkubo has changed over time into a town with many different faces, and is now loved by many people as a town with a unique atmosphere where multinational cultures mix together. <sup>12)</sup>

### 2.3 Previous Studies

There are researches on ethnic commercial districts which have focused on the roles that multilingual signage and streetscape play in shaping the cultural identity, consumer orientation, and urban spatial dynamics of immigrant communities. These studies contribute to understanding how ethnic entrepreneurs visually communicate their presence, appeal to diverse customer bases, and negotiate cultural representation within urban spaces. Existing literature can be categorized into several interconnected strands.

#### (1) Researches on the Shin-Ōkubo area

In KIM's research (2020), interview survey is conducted to analyze changes in the spatial distribution of ethnic businesses and their connection to the tourism-oriented transformation of Koreatown. The study examined the social changes observed in the process of presenting ethnicity as a regional resource to external audiences. It also explores how ethnicity-based regional revitalization has reshaped the local economy and community structure. <sup>13)</sup>

In WANG's research (2020), questionnaire survey was conducted to clarify the relationship between residents' attributes, behaviors, and their perceptions. The research investigated how residents of the Ōkubo area perceive ethnic shops, how they understand the impact of these shops on the growing popularity of ethnic tourism in the region, and how this understanding influences their feelings toward the community. <sup>14)</sup>

#### (2) Researches on the analysis of longitudinal

### evolution of façades

TEH (2013) studied 729 buildings in Gujo Hachiman (2000–2010), finding that renovation patterns varied by location, use, and resident perception. Central areas preserved tradition, while outskirts saw more vacancies. Changes were shaped by personal needs, generational shifts, tourism, and local policies.<sup>15)</sup>

Ieda (2021) studied 602 ground-floor façades in Gujo-Hachiman (1999–2020), classifying them into ten types. While 70% of wooden machiya remained, tourist-heavy areas saw more modern cladding and vacant lots, showing selective modernization for visibility over full gentrification. The study offers rare long-term data but lacks links to signage policy or local incentives.<sup>16)</sup>

Utsumi (2020) studied Tran Phu Street in Hoi An, showing how different store management types affect traditional streetscapes. Long-term local shops preserve aesthetics, while short-term lessee-run stores introduce flashy signs and dense visuals for tourists. This shift has fragmented the urban landscape, prompting a call for unified design policies to protect local character amid tourism growth.<sup>17)</sup>

### (3) Researches on urban spaces reshaped due to foreign cultures

Teh's dissertation (2017) compares tourist streetscapes in four Asian cities using spatial analysis and signage data. Areas with high pedestrian integration saw a 150% rise in multilingual signs (2005–2015), while low-traffic streets remained stable. When tourists exceeded 40% of footfall, shopfront colors shifted from heritage browns to bright, LED-lit hues. The study links visitor flow to façade changes but doesn't explore individual renovation decisions.<sup>18)</sup>

Nambu and Ono (2024) examine how multilingual signage shapes consumer orientation in Ōkubo's Koreatown and Islamic Street. Analyzing 166 signs, they find Korean signs serve both informational and symbolic roles, attracting Japanese consumers by emphasizing cultural authenticity. In contrast, Islamic Street signage, mainly in Arabic and South Asian languages, focuses on community communication and religious identity. The study shows how differing signage strategies reflect each

group's integration level and function in urban multiculturalism.<sup>19)</sup>

Vandenbroucke examines multilingual signage in Brussels through field surveys and landscape analysis, showing how it reflects ethnic diversity and social interaction. Signs serve both as symbols of coexistence and as business tools to attract target groups. His approach offers a valuable model for studying linguistic diversity in urban retail settings beyond Tokyo.<sup>20)</sup>

### 2.4 Characterization of this research

Having the researches from TEH and IEDA as the base of this research, this research is characterized by its focus on the Ōkubo area. In the research, the main survey target would be the signboards of the shops opened in the Shin-Ōkubo shopping street. Delving into the dynamics of these businesses' customer orientation, exploring the shifts of the signboards from different viewpoints and features from 2015 to 2025. A significant emphasis is placed on the businesses' target in the area, whether the business changed recently or had been running for a long time. Examining the shifts of various features on the signboards in the span of 10 years. By collecting and comparing the photo data from 2015 and 2025, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the businesses' orientation had changed.

## 3. Target and Research Flow

### 3.1 Target

In this research, the target area should fulfill the following criteria:

- Condense commercial area full of stores or restaurants
- Ethnic area with high percentage of foreign stores
- With high percentage of visitors aiming for the ethnic stores or restaurants

As such, the Ōkubo area is considered as an appropriate choice for the research.

### 3.3 Target Area

The main street of the Shin-Ōkubo Shopping Street: along Ōkubo-dori from Tsutsuji-dori to Meiji-dori.



Fig.3 Target area for the research <sup>4)</sup>

### 3.2 Research Flow

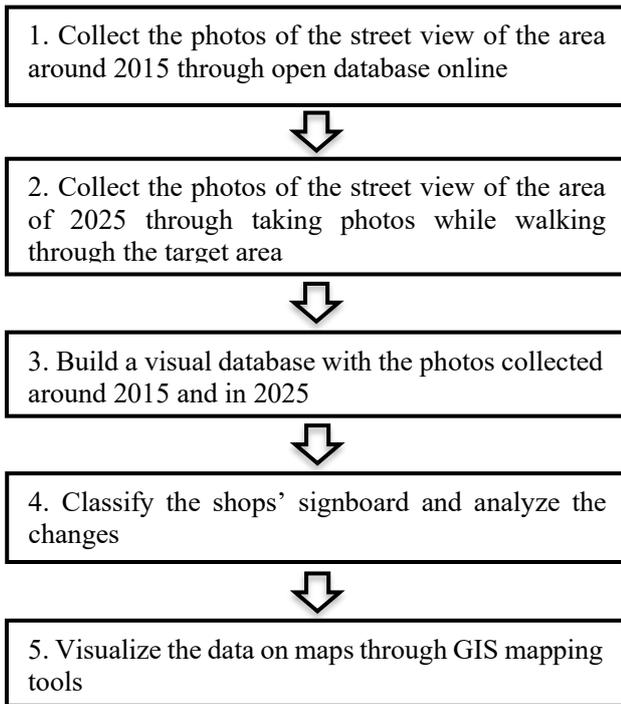
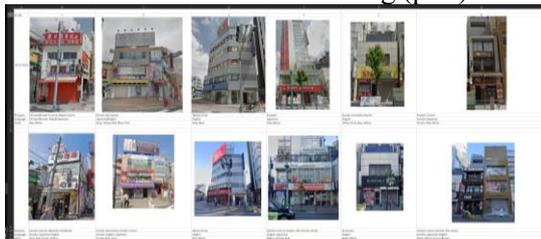


Fig.2 Flowchart of the Research

This research is mainly conducted by comparing the difference between the photos from 2015 and 2025. In order to do so, it is required to obtain the photos in the first place, then process to the classification and the analysis. Hence, this research is expected to be executed as shown in the flowchart above.

### 4. Data, Results and Analysis

Table.2 Façade and the purpose, language used, and color used for the building (part)



Here are parts of the data collected from this research for preview. Data sorting and analysis are conducted with different perspective: Shop type, Language used, Color Used, Shift of language used, Shift of color used, etc.

In this research, three different standards are set to observe the changes of the shopping street from 2015 to 2025.

### 4.1 Changes on shop type

In the past 10 years, “Cuisine” has the most portion among all the shop types, which also had huge increase in amount. Shops providing living facilities had decreased.

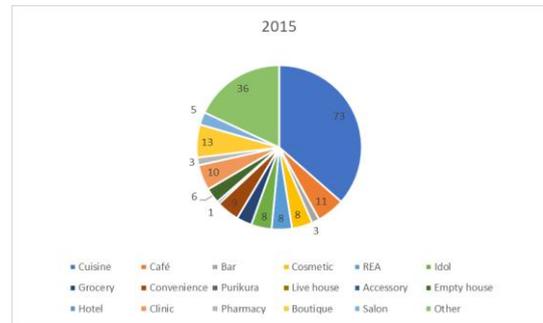


Fig. 4 Shop Types in 2015

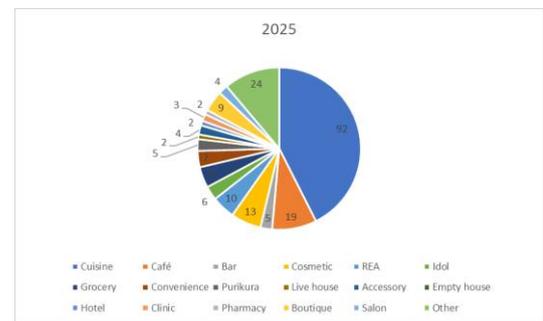


Fig. 5 Shop Types in 2025

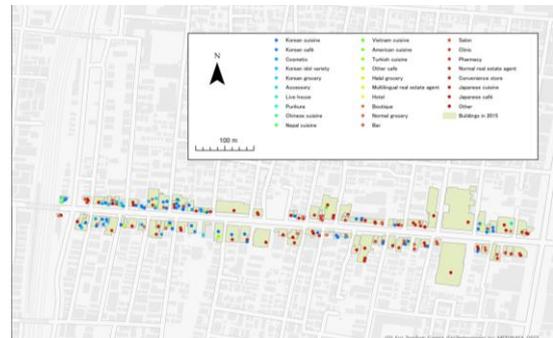


Fig. 6 Distribution of the shops or facilities in 2015



Fig. 7 Distribution of the shops or facilities in 2025

From the distribution, it shows that the west part of the street has slightly higher density of shops in both time period.

## 4.2 Changes on Language used on the signboard

Japanese is the most used language in both time period, although with its percentage decreasing. Also, it is noticeable that the usage of English and Korean is increasing.

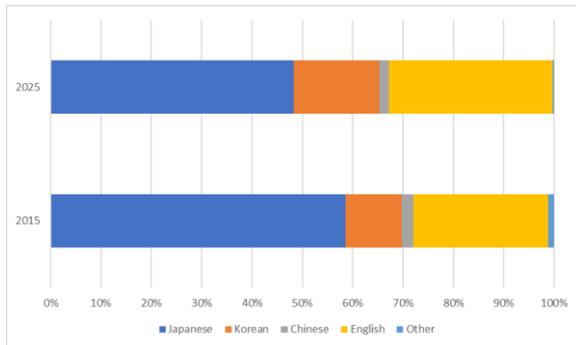


Fig. 8 Language used on signboard in 2015 and 2025

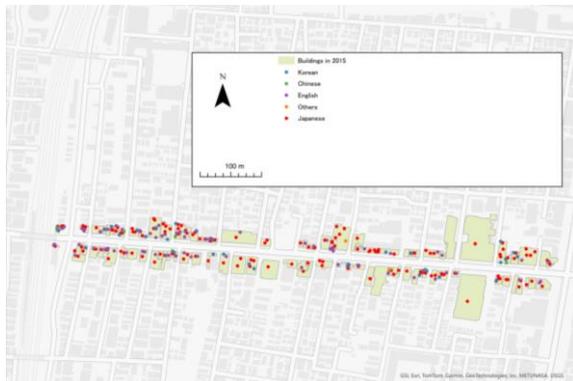


Fig. 9 Distribution of language used on signboard in 2015



Fig. 10 Distribution of language used on the signboard in 2025

From the distribution, it shows that the usage of Japanese is decreasing on the west side of the street. While the usage of Korean and English had increased significantly on the west side, while it is increasing throughout the whole street.

## 4.3 Changes on Color used on the signboard

From the statistical counts, it is hard to tell any tendency of the color used on signboard.

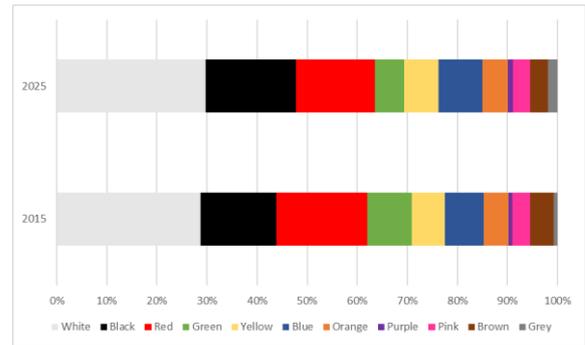


Fig. 11 Color used on signboard in 2015 and 2025



Fig. 12 Color used on signboard in 2015

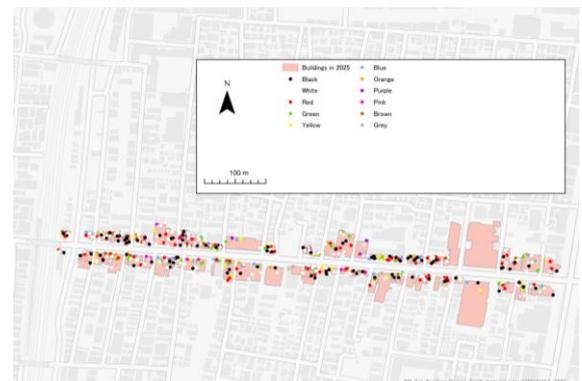


Fig. 13 Color used on signboard in 2025

From the distribution of color used, it is also hard to notice any tendency and pattern on the colors. The shops on the west side of the street used marginally more colors than those on the east side.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1 Conclusion

In this research, a study on the shop types and the signboards on the main part of the Shin-Okubo shopping street and the orientation of the target customers of the Shin-Okubo shopping street is conducted. Photo comparison and visualization on map is executed. As result, we can find:

- The orientation of the shopping street had become more towards the customers aiming for foreign ethnicities, especially toward Korean culture.
- Shops or facilities focusing on local residents had decreased.
- The usage of Korean and English is increasing among the whole street, and increased significantly on the west side.
- The multilingual signboards are increasing, especially on the west side of the street.
- The orientation of target customer is shifting toward a more international customer base.
- The shopping street is trying more to attract tourists and customers aiming for Korean culture.

## 5.2 Discussion

In this research, through field survey and photography comparison, the tendency of customer orientation and change patterns on the shops and signboards are revealed. With the result obtained from this research, it is possible to make further plans or policies to create a street view that has the uniqueness of Shin-Okubo while in harmony.

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