

# The Historical Representations of Place in the Military base Town of Koza

*The 'Reassessment' of U.S. Military Presence as a Developmental Resources*

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## Abstract

U.S. Military bases located in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan have caused various problems such as noise, accidents, crimes, and environmental damage. For military base towns, these problems have presented serious and long-term policy challenges. However, according to the 1996 final report of the Special Action Committee of Okinawa, substantial portions of several military bases are being “retuned” to Okinawa. In this new phase, issues of how to utilize the sites of bases and how to (re) develop areas around bases are emerging as new policy challenges for the pertinent towns. The author’s previous work (Yamazaki 2008), drawing on the political geographic theorization of ‘place’ by Agnew (1987), compared the developmental plans of three base towns and identified key elements to (re) developing these towns. One of the identified elements is the incorporation of town’s cultural uniqueness into development and the mobilization of ‘sense of place’ to encourage town residents to understand and actively participate in development. Following this work, this paper pays further attention to the mobilization of the sense of place in the Koza District

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of Okinawa City. Okinawa City attempts to systematically preserve and publically represent the postwar history of the district as a military base town and shows the possibility that the sense of place could be incorporated into redevelopment strategies. This paper explores how the memory and history of a military base town can be utilized as cultural resources to revitalize the District.

**Keywords:** *Developmental Resource, Representation, Place, Military Base Town, Koza*

## Introduction

In this paper, I would like to illustrate how a civilian society adjacent to a U.S. military base attempts to make use of its own militarized history and culture as developmental resources under severe economic decline. According to recent arguments about cultural economy, politics, and governance (see Radcliffe and Laurie 2006), "culture" is often used as a last resort for disadvantaged societies without other available resources. Although it is not easy to define culture in such a context, it conceptually includes unique rituals, customs, histories, landscapes, and crafts that can be mobilized and commoditized to sustain disadvantaged societies. The society and culture I mention here are embedded in a specific geographical settings or a place, that is a civilian society adjacent to a U.S. military base or a "military base town." So this paper focuses on how a military base town represents its militarized culture and history to revitalize and redevelop its society.

## U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa

For an examination of military base towns, Okinawa Prefecture in Japan offers an informative example (Figure 1). As a result of World War II, Japan allows a substantial amount of U.S. military troops to be stationed within its territory as a deterrent. 74% of the U.S. military bases in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa (Figure 2). Due to this concentration, many Okinawans have been suffering from military base problems such as accidents, noise, crimes, and a lack of usable lands caused by military bases. They have long desired the return of their lands occupied by the bases. The area of Okinawa Prefecture is only 0.6% of that of Japan. It is not difficult to imagine how densely concentrated U.S. military bases are on such tiny islands.

Besides, Okinawa's above-mentioned long-term hardship, Okinawa now faces new challenges. I call them post-"military base problems" (Yamazaki 2008). In 1996 Japan and the U.S. reached an agreement on the substantial return of military bases to Okinawa. Since then, military base towns have been working on how to develop sites of returned military bases or redevelop sites around unreturned military bases. In my previous study (*ibid.*), drawing on Agnew (1987), I identified three key elements for developing military base towns: the geopolitical/geo-strategic location of Okinawa, the local socio-economic conditions of each military base town, and a mobilization of place-based identity. Among them, this paper focuses on the third element: a mobilization of local culture and "placeness."



Figure 1: The location of Okinawa Prefecture.



Figure 2: U.S. military bases and installations, 2004.

Source: <http://www3.pref.okinawa.jp/site/view/contview.jsp?cateid=14&id=589&page=1>

### Study Site, Research Questions, and Theoretical Frameworks

To explore the effect of mobilizing local culture and placeness on development of a military base town, I chose as a study site the Koza District (formerly Koza City) in Okinawa City adjacent to the Kadena Air Base or KAB. Koza is the most typical military base town in Japan that is suffering from a severe socio-economic decline

with little hope for the return of the KAB in the near future. However, Koza has a unique history and culture constructed through the militarization of the town. Koza (currently Okinawa) City is located in the Central District of Okinawa Island surrounded by the KAB and other U.S. military bases (Figure 2). Koza was formed in front of the KAB, which is one of the largest U.S. Air Force bases in the Far East with two two-kilometer runways.

Conducting a study on Koza, I have the following four research questions:

- What kind of resources does Koza have for its re-development?
- How can Koza mobilize its culture and “placeness” constructed through militarization?
- How does Koza represent its place-based history?
- What kind of effects does the representation have on the town and people?

As I mentioned before, there are few options left for redevelopment with Koza other than a mobilization of culture. So this paper examines how Koza, or stakeholders in Koza, can mobilize its culture and “placeness” constructed through militarization and how Koza represents its place-based history. I will explore the effects of such cultural politics in my future works.

Before moving on to the examination of Koza, I will explain some theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this paper. This paper draws much on the theorization of place and placeness in Human Geography (Tuan 1977, Entrikin 1991, Massey 1994). Place has been theorized and conceptualized in various ways in the discipline but generally defined as a subjective space that is specific and concrete and connected with lived experience or as constructed through the activities of people living in the place and closely connected with the formation of their individual and collective psychologies. Placeness indicates various characteristics of a place and is recognized as such.

### **Koza as a Place**

I have found it quite useful to conceptualize Koza as a place. At the material and representational levels, Koza became a town inseparable from the military base and fostered a very unique placeness. At the material level, its militarized economy distinguished Koza from other places in Japan. After World War II, U.S. occupation forces constructed the KAB at the site of a Japanese military airport. The KAB attracted Okinawans freed from U.S. prisoner-of-war camps because it provided base-related job opportunities for landless Okinawans. Koza was spontaneously formed in front of Gate 2 of the KAB. It became a city in 1956 and prosperous during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. At the representational level, the name of Koza itself has its origin from the U.S. occupation. “Koza” is said to be a mis-description of a place name “Koja” by the U.S. military. The name of Koza was widely used even before Koza City was born. In Japan, Koza has become synonymous with a military base town. Several novels and movies were made to represent Koza as a military base town with its unique nature.

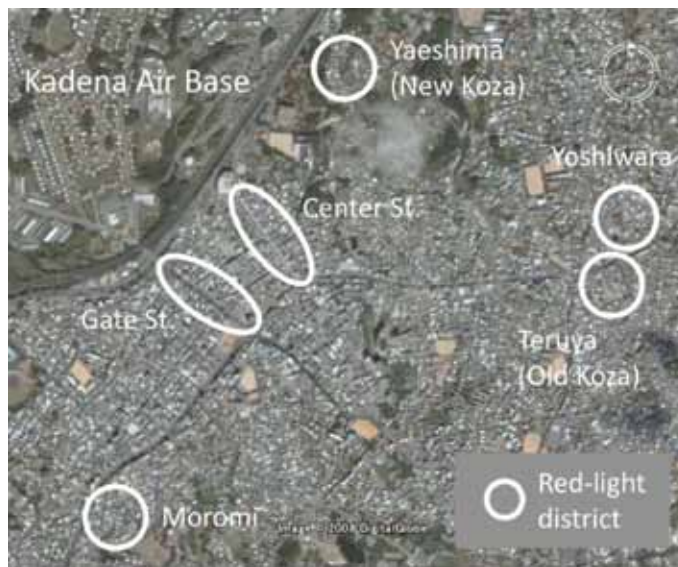


Figure 3: Red-light districts in pre-reversion Koza, Source: Google Earth®

Militarization usually manifests itself as a particular physical form or landscape. As the KAB was constructed, several red-light districts were formed in Koza (Figure 3). Most of the districts consisted of bars and restaurants patronized by U.S. military personnel. Names of district and establishments were often English. Many prostitutes from within Okinawa and other nearby islands worked in these districts. Among the districts, Centre Street, Gate Street, and Teruya or Old Koza flourished during the Vietnam War. The formation of the red-light districts created peculiarly Americanized urban landscapes which characterized Koza as a place (Figure 4).

#### Post-Reversion Urban Decline and Redevelopment of Local Resources

After the 27-year administration by the U.S. military, Okinawa reverted to Japan in 1972 with U.S. military bases remaining intact. The process of demilitarizing Koza began upon reversion. Koza made a declaration of “The City of International Culture and Tourism” as its new orientation. Koza was realigned into Okinawa City and attempted to get rid of its negative placeness as a military base town by renaming or Japanizing militarized place names: Koza City was renamed to Okinawa City; Gate Street to Kuko Street (*kuko* means airport, not air base, in Japanese); and Center Street to Chuo Park Avenue (*chuo* means center).

Due to the end of the Vietnam War and the rise of the yen after reversion, the size of the military base economy in Okinawa decreased and Koza began to suffer from suburbanization leading to a constant decline of Koza as the city center. Responding to this decline, Center Street was reconstructed and modernized as Chuo Park Avenue in 1985 but this project failed to stop decline. In 1997 a shopping complex “Korinza” was built at the northern end of the Avenue, but this project also failed. The Okinawa City government finally shifted its focus of redevelopment toward “local resources (*chiiki shigen*).” In 2007 a music theater and shopping complex “Koza Music Town” was built on former Gate Street. This is considered a core facility to develop local resources based on Koza’s militarized culture, which is



Americanized Okinawan music fostered in bars and clubs for U.S. personnel. As the facility was built, the City government officially reused the name of Koza for the facility and renamed Kuko Street to Koza Gate Street. Figure 5 is a photo of Koza Music Town on former Kuko Street. The street name is now shown as Koza Gate Street. I argue that changes such as these represent a re-appreciation of the militarized placeness of Koza.



Figure 4: Bars and restaurants on Gate Street in the early 1950s.  
Source: Okinawa-shi (1997).



Figure 5: Koza Music Town and the restored street name (Koza Gate Street).

Under a severe economic decline and the limit of usable space in Koza, the Okinawa City government has shifted attention to Koza's placeness or militarized culture and history. They now attempt to reassess what U.S. military presence has brought about to Koza and what kind of implication it has for people in Koza. In reassessing the culture and history of Koza, the Editorial Division of the History of Okinawa City has been playing an important role. It has collected and published postwar historical materials since the 1990s. The books they have published represent Koza's unique placeness constructed through complex and uneven social, economic, and political relations between Okinawans and the U.S. military.

### Historical Representation of Koza by Street Museums

Other than publication, the Editorial Division runs two street museums in the declined center of Koza according to Okinawa City's Master Plan and to reuse vacant stores. They are called "Histreet" which is a word coined from 'history' and 'street'. The name nicely represents "history on a street" or a combination of local history and place, suggesting that Koza's history is embedded in a street or place. Histreets are located on Parumira (Palmyrene) Street close to Chuo Park Avenue (former Center Street), which was once a symbol of militarized streets. The first Histreet was opened in 2005 with the entrance sign "NEW KOZA ST." This is a replica of the one put up at the entrance of Koza's first red-right district. (Figure 6).

Unlike the gorgeous prefecture and national museums in Okinawa, Histreet has free admission and is very accessible to local people as well as tourists. It exhibits many kinds of things and photos of incidents related to the postwar lives of people in Koza. There is no clear order in the exhibition so that visitors feel as if they were thrown into a toy box. But, local visitors can enjoy finding something they knew in the past. Therefore, this museum is often used for reminiscence therapy for the depressed elderly.



Figure 6: The façade of Histreet

The second Histreet (Histreet II) was opened in 2009. Its current exhibition is more specialized with photos and tools related to war and militarism. The representation of war and militarism is an important practice in the construction of Okinawan pacifist identity. For many Okinawans, World War II and the following long-term U.S. military administration still occupy a significant part of their memory and identity. So, the memory of people in Koza cannot be separated from such tragedies.

### Representation of Local Memory, Symbolism, and Pride

The representation of local memory is not limited to the inside of Histreets. It is possible to find various representations of local memory, symbolism, and pride in Koza. An example of such a representation is the A-sign program, which was carried out from 1953-1972. The A-sign program was a licensing system for bars and restaurants patronized by U.S. military personnel and their families. To obtain an A-sign, Okinawan business owners needed to meet strict hygiene and construction requirements. Since there were a great number of A-sign establishments in Koza, older people in Koza often recall various, positive, and negative, memories from the sign. Although the program was a means to control and sanction Okinawan behaviors and values such as prostitution and a sense of sanitation, it significantly modernized or Americanized the built environment and business management in Koza. Therefore, for some local business owners, maintaining an A-sign was something to be proud of. Current symbolic use of an A-sign indicates a preservation of the memory of Koza.

Figure 7 shows A-signs that are represented in various ways in Koza. (a) Is the photo of A-signs put up in Histreet with a replica of a drinking bar and captions explaining their history. (b) Is a real A-sign exhibited in a former A-sign restaurant (Restaurant Lima). On the other hand (c) shows an A-sign on the door of a former A-sign restaurant (Charley's Tacos) on Chuo Park Avenue (former Center Street). This A-sign was not issued by the U.S. military but by the Okinawa A-sign Association after the reversion. The Association maintained a similar program to certify their business standard for U.S. military personnel. (d) Is a picture of A-sign bars on a street painted on the shutter of a drinking bar on Parumira Street. The name of the bar is Kozakura named after Koza. (e) Is a Thai restaurant (SomChai) on Parumira Street. It puts up a D-sign on the window, which is an award certificate for the contest "Dream Shop Grandprix" for ideas to reutilize vacant stores. Various representations of place-based memory can be seen in Koza.

Taken together, what Histreets are doing is to temporally and spatially re-contextualize people's lives and incidents in Koza rather than to de-contextualize them in a well-organized museum "out of place." For local residents, Histreets represent Koza in their memories while for tourists they function as a gateway to know Koza. In addition, Histreets are not simply toy boxes. The staff of Histreets employs fairly rigorous methodologies to collect and represent historical materials. Their exhibitions are not made up. In this sense, Histreets are reliable reference points of Koza's placeness for people inside and outside the place. In sum, Histreets and other shops representing place-based memories on streets can be important elements to mobilize place-based history, pride, and identity, and revitalize the declining city center.



Figure 7: Various representations of an A-sign in the Koza District.



(a) Histreet



(b) Restaurant Lima



(c) Charley's Tacos



(d) Kozakura



(e) SomChai



## Conclusion

The author's involvement: Then what can I do for Koza as a political geographer? Based on my understanding and interpretation of the current difficult situation of Koza and in collaboration with the staff of Histreets, I am reexamining the postwar militarization of Koza by analyzing declassified military documents. My future works may shed new light on the relationship between Koza and the U.S. military. I am also conducting surveys on the preservation and reutilization of former A-sign establishments or militarized townscape. Rather than ethically judging militarisms inscribed in a place, I would like to explore how people living in a militarized place negotiate with their place-based memories for the future. Considering the current economic condition in which Koza is rapidly hollowing out and even physically disappearing, I feel that it is urgent to preserve and present the rich place-based history behind the A-sign for an effective revitalization of Koza.

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