



Breaking Barriers of Gender, Age, and Nationality: How a Kyoto Coin Laundry Became a Community Hub

The owner of Kyoto Laundry Café, Rie (photo by the author)

The Vanishing Community Spirit

Do you have a place where you feel you belong in your neighborhood? Do you have opportunities to interact with the people in your town? Are you recognized by your fellow residents? Various factors, such as declining birth rates and aging populations, have led to a weakening of community bonds. Generational interactions have decreased, and mutual understanding has diminished. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the fragmentation of communities.

In these times, a unique initiative in Kyoto is presenting a "new form of community." In this two-part series, we'll introduce successful examples in Kyoto that alleviate isolation and contribute to community revitalization through interaction.

In the first part, we spotlight an innovative case where a "coin laundry" is used as a community hub.

Gourmet Delights at a Coin Laundry

Located in Mibu, Kyoto, an area known for its historical connection to the Shinsengumi, is the "KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE," situated beside the Randen Line tracks of the Keifuku Electric Railroad. Celebrating its fourth anniversary in 2023, this café features a classic brick exterior with a sign reading "Kyoto Laundry Coffee" at the entrance.



A standing sign reads "Kyoto Laundromat Cafe." True to its signage, "Kyoto Laundromat Cafe" offers not only laundry services but also a variety of beverages including coffee inside the shop. Of course, customers are welcome to enter for just laundry services or beverages alone. (Photo by the author)

Indeed, this is a place where you can both do your laundry at a coin-operated laundromat and enjoy a variety of drinks, including delicious coffee, as well as exquisite dishes at the cafe.



The stylish interior is inspired by beloved cafes in Brooklyn, New York. Here, you can enjoy drinks and food while watching the laundry machines spin. (Photo by the author)

Rows of washing machines, ranging from large industrial ones to smaller household sizes, line up neatly, totaling 12 in all. The drums spin around and around, and their sound adds an extra groove to the background music in the shop. It's truly enjoyable just being here! There's not a hint of the typical somber atmosphere often associated with coin laundries.



Various sizes and types of coin-operated laundry machines, totaling 12 units, are available, catering to different needs and preferences. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

The sound of the washing machines, isn't it nice? Many of our customers really appreciate that this place has the sounds of daily life, making them feel less lonely," says Rie (41), the owner of Kyoto Laundry Cafe. "It's not just about doing laundry; it's about feeling like 'life is in motion.' I myself am very fond of this concept.



Owner Rie personally brings coffee and dishes to the customers. (Photo by the author)

Rie is not only the owner but also a chef who prepares dishes alongside her mother. The "daily lunch specials," abundant in variety and nutrition, are extremely popular. The surreal experience of dining surrounded by washing machines adds an extra flair to the deliciousness.



Today's main dish for the homemade "daily lunch specials" prepared by Rie and her mother is hamburg steak. It's generous both in portion size and variety. Pizza and curry are also crowd favorites. (Photo by the author)

Rie is not the only one serving dishes here. They also host a "shared kitchen" where they provide assistance for cooking events and opening food and beverage businesses. On these days, you can also enjoy the culinary creations of future chefs.



Mr. Hattori, who runs "Paella and Spanish Cuisine Shero," is utilizing the shared kitchen for a day. He normally works for Uber Eats and is aspiring to open his own business. (Photo by the author)

Rie says, "Today, a chef who usually works for Uber Eats is running 'Paella and Spanish Cuisine Shero' for a day as a trial run for starting his own business. His cooking is incredibly delicious. Besides that, we allow the kitchen to be used for various themes such as bars, food stalls, food education, fair trade, vegan options, organic vegetables, and home-cooked meals by moms. We even had unique events where female scientists created chemically inspired dishes!"



A seafood-rich paella. One of the charms of Kyoto Laundry Cafe is that on shared kitchen days, you can enjoy menus different from the usual offerings. Be sure to check the schedule on social media! (Photo by the author)

A Variety of Events Unfolding

Kyoto Laundry Cafe hosts a diverse range of events, not only through the shared kitchen but also within the café itself. Here are some examples:

- Monthly "Laundry Marché" (Handmade market and workshops by various talented local individuals)



At the "Laundry Marché," various stalls line up. It seems many local residents are experiencing running a booth for the first time. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)



Workshops are also conducted at the "Laundry Marché." (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)



At the "Kids Marché," workshops that parents and children can participate in together are held. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

●Weekly "Foreign Language Café" (English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish)



Chinese exchange students and those who want to practice speaking Chinese gather to host a tea party. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

●Cultural School (Calligraphy with brush pens, French framing, Ukulele, Art therapy, etc.)

●Inbound Exchange Meetings



Popular English events where people of various nationalities gather (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

●Music events

●Independent film screenings

●Kids cosplay events for occasions like Christmas and Halloween



On special occasions like Christmas and Halloween, both adults and children liven up the atmosphere with cosplay. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

- Share House (Separate building)
- Co-working Space (Separate building)
- Yoga Classes (Separate building)
- Band Practices
- Operation of the web media "Choichoi Club," which disseminates information about the Nishijin and Mibu areas

Indeed, the list goes on and on. The coin laundry serves as a new community hub. The walls are filled with announcements for upcoming events.



The walls are covered with flyers for events, almost every day hosting some sort of activity inside the shop.
(Photo by the author)

Rie says, "During lunchtime, we often have many moms bringing their children. Some people find this atmosphere 'pleasant,' while others may find it 'noisy.' We operate in the middle ground between approval and disapproval. We want to be a place that embraces the lively voices of children. Not only for moms but also for various people to feel welcome here."



The local families gather, turning it into a social gathering place. The image depicts Christmas Day. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

Well, I felt this development was quite surprising, given that it's just a coin laundry, you know?

Rie says, “Actually, precisely because it's a Kyoto Laundry Cafe, it could become a community space. There are invisible walls between people, inevitably. Even if you rent a venue and gather people, and suddenly say, 'This is a place for interaction. Please get along,' it doesn't necessarily happen. But here, you can do your laundry, there's food cooked by me or my mother, and there's always someone around. It's all part of daily life, so the barrier is low. That's why I think people gather here.”



Rie expresses, "Laundry and meals are both extensions of daily life. That's why interaction naturally occurs and sustains here." (Photo by the author)

During workshops and cultural schools, Kyoto Laundry Cafe maintains an open environment rather than closing off the space. This allows for numerous people to come and go for laundry and meals, which is a characteristic of the cafe. Depending on the time, there may be no age bias or it may become a multinational space.

Rie states, "It's called 'Blending Community.' In an era of diversification, it's important to 'blend.' So, we're trying to eliminate barriers as much as possible."



On the day of the "English Meet Up," as the sun sets, people from various countries gather, sparking lively conversations. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

Just like laundry spinning in a drum, Kyoto Laundry Cafe continues to generate unfiltered interaction, providing a space where everyone feels at home. So why did Rie envision turning a coin laundry into a community hub? The answer lies in her own experiences grappling with being a social minority every day.

A third-generation Korean resident in Japan, Rie, grappled with the question, "Where do I belong?"

Rie, also known as Rie Yamamoto, her real name being Rie Sae, grappled with the question "Where do I belong?" as a third-generation Korean resident in Japan. In her self-introduction, she describes herself as a "cheerful third-generation Korean resident of the city." Born and raised in Mibu, Kyoto, she graduated from the Department of Industrial Sociology at Ritsumeikan University and worked at a publishing company and a law firm. It was when she turned 27 that her identity began to waver.

Rie recalls, "Since my student days, I've had this concern about where I belong. I'm a third-generation Korean resident in Japan. My foreign registration card, which used to be mandatory, even listed an address in Korea. Yet, I've never been to Korea. I was born and raised in Japan, speak Japanese, and can't speak Korean. I often wondered, 'Where do I belong?' Looking back now, I think the desire to create a

place that welcomes foreigners and minorities had already started to sprout during that time."



Rie, a third-generation Korean resident in Japan, pondered, "Where is my place?" having been born and raised in Japan. (Photo by the author)

"Belonging." It's a crucial keyword when discussing Kyoto Laundry Cafe. At the time, Rie was feeling lost in terms of where she belonged. Then...

Rie shares, "I once left Kyoto and felt the urge to 'start over' in Korea, where my ancestors lived. It was sort of a 'soul-searching,' I suppose. I started to think, 'Maybe my place is in Korea.'"

With the resolve of "I won't return to Japan for at least 10 years" in mind, Rie bravely set foot in Korea in 2011, leaving behind relatives and connections.

She continues, "My parents opposed until the very end, warning me, 'Immigrants are looked at with disdain when they return to their home country and face struggles.' I also feared the consequences of opening Pandora's box within myself. Nevertheless, the determination to go to Korea gradually grew stronger."

A Career Woman in Seoul, but a Sudden Twist of Fate

Rie, who started working in Seoul, was highly valued for her ability to speak English and Japanese, albeit with limited proficiency in Korean. She worked for various major companies, including a travel agency and an advertising agency.

Rie says, "I was assigned to the global team of a multinational corporation. I planned art exhibitions for foreign artists and served as a coordinator for Japanese corporate sponsors. Every day was a challenge. The last company I worked for was a major entertainment multimedia company, which even streams content on Netflix. I worked with people from all over the world. I also worked as a part-time Japanese language instructor and contributed articles on 'recommended gourmet spots in Seoul' to web media. I worked tirelessly every day."



In Seoul, Rie handled international affairs and successfully led projects such as art exhibitions and video streaming. (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

Rie had been steadily building her career in Korea, enjoying fulfilling days. However, as a third-generation Korean resident in Japan, she still couldn't grasp the feeling that "Korea was her place."

In 2018, Rie suddenly found herself compelled to return to Japan.

Rie explains, "My father fell ill with cancer, and I had no choice but to return to Mibu. I had planned to stay in Korea for at least 10 years, but I have no regrets. I gave my all to my work in Korea, and my love for my hometown Kyoto deepened even more. I realized that despite being Korean, my place is still 'that place in Kyoto where I was born and raised.' Crossing the sea doubles your affection for your hometown."

Upon returning home, Rie took care of her father. However, six months after her return, her father passed away.

From a Desire to Contribute to the Community to Unfolding at the Coin Laundry

For nearly 40 years, Rie's father ran the "Sae Juku" learning institute in Mibu. "I want to contribute to the community like my father," she thought, "and I want a job that connects people." Instead of seeking employment again, she decided, "Let's start a business of our own." That's when the idea of opening "Kyoto Laundry Cafe" was born.

But why a coin laundry?

Rie explains, "When I was in Korea, I heard stories from backpackers traveling around the world that 'Copenhagen's coin laundries served as information hubs' and 'were places for international exchange.' Coin laundries as social hubs? That was intriguing, and it stuck with me."

Thus, after learning cooking while working at a restaurant, she decided to start a coin laundry that also offered food. In 2019, she opened Kyoto Laundry Cafe in her hometown of Mibu.



Preparing for the Grand Opening: Inspired by International Examples, Aiming to Transform the Coin Laundry into a Social Hub, the Plan Includes Fusion with Food and Beverages (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

Rie says, "We inherited the brick design from the learning institute my father ran. I wanted people to recognize that this is the daughter's establishment. Thanks to this interior, I often get asked by locals, 'Are you the daughter of the Sae Juku?' Many customers started coming here because of that connection. So, I can't afford to mess up (laughs)."

The Coin Laundry: Where Life's Dramas Converge

In 2019, when Kyoto Laundry Cafe first opened, it didn't yet function as the community space it is today. It was simply a relaxed place where people could enjoy laundry and food.

One day, an event occurred that underscored the importance of nurturing community hubs. It was—

Rie: "A regular customer, who always came to do laundry with her child, suddenly stopped coming. A few days later, her husband showed up and said, 'My wife committed suicide,' and asked me, 'I wonder if her last moments are recorded on the surveillance camera. I'd like to see.' With that, he requested. I prayed and visited their home. Then, I realized, 'Coin laundries really witness various dramas of life. Everyone is desperately living their lives.'"

Later, the surviving child visited the cafe for a meal with their grandfather. They spent some time recalling memories with their mother at this place before moving to another city.

Rie: "I pondered if I should have spoken to the deceased woman more. And I thought, 'I want to cherish this place more. Perhaps, through the interactions and encounters of various people here, some may find solace.'"



Realizing the significance of the laundromat as a gathering place for life's dramas, Rie took a moment to reflect on the regular customer who had tragically taken her own life. (Photo provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

Inspiring Encounters with Customers Sparked a Series of Successful Initiatives

Rie's approachable demeanor, as she personally serves drinks and dishes while striking up conversations with customers, has attracted many to Kyoto Laundry Cafe, leading to the initiation of various events and workshops.

Rie: "Through conversations with customers, ideas started flowing, like, 'Can we have a workshop on making Nanking sudare (bamboo blinds)?' And from there, we've had numerous events and classes. It's all about building connections through conversation."

One key figure in nurturing events at Kyoto Laundry Cafe is Kazumi Takuma, representative of "Ibashokafe," a gathering space for truant children and their parents, under the umbrella of Kyoto's Child Future Creation Project, "Pole Pole."

Takuma: "Initially, I came here to do laundry. It's rare to find a staffed coin laundry, and as someone who often struggles with using machines, I found it reassuring. Plus, the decaf coffee I enjoyed between loads was delicious, so I started coming regularly. Over time, I grew closer to Rie, and I shared that my child was a truant. I expressed my desire to create a place where truant children could gather on weekdays. To my surprise, Rie said, 'Then use our space.'"



Kazumi Takuma, who initiated the gathering space 'Ibashokafe' for truant children and their parents" (Photo by the author)

Kyoto Laundry Cafe served as a third place for truant children and their parents, offering a comfortable environment separate from home, school, and work. The 'Ibashokafe' gatherings began in February 2020, initially held once a month. As interest grew and more participants joined, the events expanded in scale, attracting corporate sponsorships and moving to larger venues.

The success of 'Ibashokafe' brought attention to Kyoto Laundry Cafe, gradually increasing its recognition. One supporter was Emi Awa, who organizes the 'Porepore' support group for parents of children with developmental differences.

Emi: 'My friends and I first visited because we heard about this trendy new café in the neighborhood. When we realized it was the location for "Ibashokafe" that we read about in the newspaper, we got to know Rie-san and became close. That's how we started hosting gatherings for parents raising children with developmental disabilities. We wanted to create a space where parents facing school enrollment challenges for their children attending special education classes or integrated support schools could express their true feelings. In formal meeting rooms, it's hard to admit when things are tough. There's often pressure to only speak positively. But here, we can relax and enjoy ourselves, making it easier to open up.'



Emi Awa, who organizes gatherings for parents raising children with developmental disabilities (Photo by the author)

Emi Awa and Emi Awa both named their gatherings "Pole Pole," a Swahili term meaning "slowly" or "gradually." This choice reflects the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere of Kyoto Laundry Cafe, which serves as a gathering place for those seeking a sense of belonging.

Kyoto Rainbow Pride member Yasue Iwamoto has been using Kyoto Laundry Cafe since 2021 to promote a space where LGBTQ+, racial, national, and disability diversity can freely interact.

"I initially came to the cafe as a customer," says Iwamoto. "Rie is such a welcoming person. The customers here are diverse, and connections are expanding. I found it really interesting. We used to hold LGBTQ+ gatherings at municipal facilities, but there were restrictions on weekends and holidays. Here, we can hold events on weekends, which is a big help."



Yayoi Iwamoto, a key member of "Soraniiji Kyoto," which promotes a space for LGBTQ+, racial, national, and disability diversity to interact, is also known as "やよいチャンネル京都" YouTuber.

Rie's welcoming attitude has led to the creation of various events such as workshops, markets, and night markets, which have now become the highlights of the neighborhood. However, creating these events was not an easy task.

Rie: "It's not just about having fun. There are also challenges. We have to be mindful of the noise during events and obtain road permits. We don't want to cause inconvenience to our neighbors. But despite the difficulties, I want to continue doing my best."



"Laundry Marché Day Market." The open car "Tuk Tuk" from Thailand is owned by Yayoi Iwamoto. She's offering rides to participants.



Laundry Marché Night Market (Image provided by KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE)

The Warmth of Pushing Someone's Back When They're Lost

Rie is not only busy with laundry and filling stomachs, but she also creates a whirlpool of people, constantly spinning them around. Where does her energy come from?

Rie: "My driving force is the joy I feel when I can give someone a push forward. When I hear reports from people who couldn't take that first step before, like 'I opened my own business,' 'I hosted an event,' or 'I became friends with that person,' it makes my heart swell with emotion. So, to be honest, I'm sleep-deprived, but that's why I can keep going."



"When I can give a push to those who couldn't take that first step before, it makes my heart swell with emotion," says Rie (photo by the author).

In the Edo period, residents of longhouses would gather around communal wells, enjoying lively conversations while doing laundry and drawing water. It was the original place for community interaction. I felt that the laundromat café Rie has created is a modern-day version of this gathering spot, revived in the Reiwa era.

Rie: "Both laundromats and cafes aren't essential to society, but it would be sad if they disappeared. It's okay to fail. It's okay to make mistakes. Creating an

atmosphere where we can support each other is possible in relaxed places like this.
That's why I want to cherish this shop."



to by the author)

(Pho

KYOTO LAUNDRY CAFE

Location: Eiji Mibu 1F, 10-1 Mibu Fuchida-cho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto City

Access: About a 4-minute walk from the exit of Saiin Station on the Keifuku Electric Railroad Arashiyama Main Line (Randen) / About a 4-minute walk from the North Gate of Saiin Station on the Hankyu Kyoto Main Line

Laundromat: 24 hours

Laundromat Closed Days: None

Cafe: 11:00 AM - 8:00 PM (hours may change)

Cafe Closed Days: Mondays

Phone: 070-8547-0728

<https://kyoto-laundry-cafe.com/>

<https://choichoiclub.com/>