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For New York's Japanese, a Desire to Meld Into the Mainstream

By **SAM DOLNICK** and **KIRK SEMPLE**

The earthquake in Haiti last year sent New York's Haitians streaming into churches and politicians' offices. The 2005 quake in Pakistan had leaders of the city's mosques coordinating planeloads of relief supplies.

But among Japanese residents of New York, the response to the catastrophic earthquake and tsunami back home has so far been small, scattered and often private — a reflection of the population itself.

"We don't have a community here," Makiko Morita, 40, said as she shopped for groceries on Monday at Sunrise Mart, a Japanese market in the East Village. "We do not really stick together."

Here in a hub of [immigration](#), where even the smallest ethnic groups cluster together and assert their identity to win clout and find comfort, New York's Japanese are unusual in many ways. A disparate, fluid population, they have settled thinly across the region, without a focal point, like, say, Chinatown.

There are few prominent religious or civic leaders. The organizations that exist tend to be directed at helping the elderly or promoting Japanese arts, but there are few with broad-based constituencies. The [New American Leaders Project](#), a national group dedicated to assisting immigrants in politics, said it knew of no first- or second-generation Japanese immigrant who holds a statewide office in New York or a citywide one in New York City.

Part of the reason are the small numbers involved: There are about 20,000 Japanese in the city, compared with 305,000 Chinese, and a total of 45,000 in the region, according to census estimates.

The Japanese in New York are better educated and more affluent than most immigrant groups. The median income for Japanese people over age 25 is \$60,000, which is \$10,000 more than the citywide median. About 65 percent have at least a bachelor's degree.

Yet they tend to be transient. Many are business executives or other white-collar workers who have been posted here for three to five years. There are also university students enjoying time abroad and artists drawn to the city's cosmopolitanism.

"I feel free here," said Shinsuk Chikata, 32, who came to New York three years ago to study modern dance and is now training to be a [yoga](#) teacher.

In interviews over the past few days, numerous Japanese residents said they preferred to integrate into the city — frequenting Japanese restaurants and cultural events, certainly, but as part of New York's swirling mainstream, not as foreign visitors.

"I don't really have a lot of Japanese friends — on purpose," said Chiaki, 25, who is looking for work in fashion marketing and asked that her last name not be published for fear that it would jeopardize her visa. "I have my pride in being Japanese, but I am totally a New Yorker."

Still, Japanese expatriates here say they have been wired into the unfolding disaster. Many said they were keeping in close touch with family and friends through [Twitter](#) and other social media. Some, like Hitomi Kasai, a 52-year-old nurse, are wondering whether to return to Japan to help victims. New relief efforts are being started in New York every day.

Ms. Morita said she planned to join other young mothers on Saturday in a small rally at Union Square to show solidarity with the victims. A Japanese pub in the East Village is organizing its first fund-raiser, a night of traditional music, its manager, Mickey Yuji, said. The [New York Japanese Church](#), an evangelical Christian congregation in Tuckahoe, is planning a yard sale.

These modest relief efforts have sprung up organically, in most cases without the coordination or guidance of community-wide leadership. When Joe Suzuki, the church's pastor, was asked for the names of Japanese leaders in the region, he said: "That's the question I want to know as well. I don't really know someone who has good connections with many Japanese people."

Consulates usually serve as clearing houses for immigrants, but the Japanese consulate in New York has not yet had a mechanism for accepting donations, though officials said they were creating one. In the meantime, it is deflecting calls about contributions to a few groups, like the [Japan Society](#), a cultural organization that has taken the lead in local relief efforts. The group said it had raised \$249,000, and was planning a benefit concert on April 9.

The [Japanese-American Association of New York](#), founded more than a century ago, said the current crisis had galvanized many of its 800 members. The group, which helps older immigrants and offers scholarships, has been raising money for victims. But it cannot accept online donations, and its leaders acknowledged that the group could play a more central role

among the Japanese in New York.

“There are a lot of people who don’t know what J.A.A. is, which is disconcerting to us,” said Susan Onuma, a past president.

To bring young Japanese together, Stann Nakazono, a filmmaker, co-founded a group called [Japanese-Americans, Japanese in America](#), in 2004. “There were different organizations, but there wasn’t one central spot you could go to,” he said. “We’re trying to rectify that.”

The city has its vibrant pockets of Japanese residents: The largest are in Astoria, Queens, which has roughly 1,300 residents, and Yorkville, on the Upper East Side, which has about 1,100, according to census estimates.

The sushi restaurants and sake bars along St. Marks Place and Ninth Street in the East Village probably form the most prominent outpost of Japanese culture, though the census estimates that only 500 Japanese people live in that neighborhood. Another cluster of Japanese businesses — corporate offices, markets and cafes — sits near the Japanese consulate and [Japan Society](#) in Midtown East. In the suburbs, Westchester and Bergen Counties have significant populations of about 5,000 and 6,000 Japanese, respectively.

The closest thing to hubs are the Japanese markets, most notably the [Mitsuwa Marketplace](#) at a mall in Edgewater, N.J. A visit to the store can feel like a trip to Japan — aisles offering dried seafood and every variety of soy sauce, while a Ramen soup restaurant, snack bars and even a travel agency are housed in the store.

Perhaps the most familiar of New York’s Japanese residents are the business executives posted here short term. They tend to live in Midtown or in the suburbs, and they can often be found eating long meals together in expensive restaurants where English is rarely spoken.

During a recent lunch at Robotaya in the East Village, three executives from Fujitsu, an information technology company, discussed their international lifestyle, which can have them living in Tokyo one year, New York the next and then London. None said they were especially interested in building a Japanese community overseas. “We want to be closer with the local people, since we have an opportunity to live in New York,” said Sumito Sugata, a financial services executive.

A block away, Mr. Chikata, the yoga student, described his circle in Jackson Heights, Queens, as a mix of artists, dancers and photographers, both Japanese and American. “I’m gay, and in Japan it’s very hard to be myself,” he said. “I want to stay here.”

Mr. Chikata is part of a long trail of Japanese artists, like [Yoko Ono](#) and [Takashi Murakami](#),

who have embraced New York's creative spirit, said Thomas Looser, a professor of Japanese studies at [New York University](#).

Yumiko Komiya, 26, came to New York a year ago hoping to become a professional tap dancer or a graphic designer. She works in a Japanese restaurant, but she said she was far more interested in exploring the city than communing with her countrymen.

"We don't like to be together," she said. "We tend to follow the culture of New York, where we live."