

Mini-Series: Work and life in farms - Various movements in Japan

Part 2: Preservation and inheritance of traditional culture – reflections on the basic lifestyle

In Tama, Kawasaki city, Kanagawa prefecture there is a public museum called “Nihon Minka-en” (museum of old Japanese houses). It was established in 1967. Some 20 traditional houses and other old buildings are preserved in the open grounds of this museum, and in its exhibition hall one can get some basic knowledge about traditional Japanese houses. Inside the preserved houses items used on a daily basis in olden times are displayed, such as farming equipment, weaving machinery, and tools made of straw and bamboo. Open classes and demonstrations of making these traditional tools are held all year round at this museum, in collaboration with some local cultural societies e.g. “society for preserving traditional tool-making techniques” and “society of traditional paper making”. Today, while traditional rural villages engaged in primary industries are disappearing due to the shift in the country’s industrial structure, these societies are trying to preserve and hand over traditional manual techniques which used to be common in such villages. For this purpose they collect data on traditional tool-making techniques from all over Japan, and hold classes and demonstrations on a voluntary basis. I took part in a class on straw/bamboo craft making and Japanese paper making. The process of making such items using natural materials was a refreshing and enjoyable experience as it was something new for me. However, traditionally, people used to do paper-making in winter when the water is very cold, and straw/bamboo crafts were made at night after a day’s hard work on the farm. So “enjoyable” wasn’t probably the right word to describe such work for the people of the past. Still, it was nice to see all those who were participating in the class, working earnestly and enjoying the activities. The organizer of the class was, however, lamenting the absence of young people in their society to hand over the traditional techniques to.

In Niigata Prefecture there is a small settlement with some 20 old-style houses on the bank of the Nou River, 15km upstream from its mouth by the Sea of Japan. This is a heavy snow area with as much as 6m of snow piling up during winter, but the traditional thatched houses have survived so many harsh winters till today. However, as the residents of the settlement became older and the local population declines, more and more houses have lost their owners and have deteriorated. These traditional houses, made of natural materials and perfectly adjusted to the climate of Japan, are free from negative effects to human beings or the environment and their thick beams, bamboo-made ceilings, wooden flooring and traditional fireplace create a special soothing atmosphere. In the past when village life was still lively, specialized craftsmen and the villagers used to work together to build and maintain their traditional houses. Such collaboration contributed to forming a tight local community in which human relations were closely interwoven. One of the traditional dishes of this locality, “bamboo sushi” is made of locally available marine and farm products, and it is really delicious. They used bamboo leaves to preserve the sushi during summer, and this delicacy used to be served on auspicious occasions. Every aspect of village life was linked with farming, and developed into special local culture and tradition through the interaction of the people.

Recently, while more attention is being paid to the issues of food security and “alternative lifestyles”, new concepts and trends have emerged such as “food and agriculture education”, “slow food movement”^{*1}, “shin-do-fu-ji”^{*2} and green tourism^{*3}. However, the major trend of the world still inclines towards the over rich consumer society where cheap commodities of foreign origin flood the market, purchased, briefly used and thrown away as people’s lifestyles become westernized. Such a lifestyle, needing to burn fossil fuels, keep air-conditioning on all the time and live a comfortable and convenient life in the closed space of modern apartment buildings, is too far away from the basic farming life. The word “culture” comes from “to cultivate”. Traditionally culture has been nurtured, preserved and inherited along with agricultural, silvi-cultural and aqua-cultural life-styles, but after the Second World War most of us have distanced ourselves from such fundamentally cultural activities. However, I believe that our national or cultural identity can still be found in traditional culture which is today being fast forgotten. Only by reconsidering the basic lifestyle and preserving and inheriting our traditional culture, could we start understanding the real, humane, life-full lifestyle. I feel that such a lifestyle would eventually reduce the negative pressure on the environment of this planet, and can show us the direction that all countries in the world should head for in the future.

*1: A movement started in northern Italy in 1989. As opposed to fast food culture, the “slow food” movement aims at enjoying food slowly, eating traditional high-quality stuff while protecting small-scale local producers. It tries to reconsider the entire lifestyle of today through food.

*2: A Buddhist term meaning that it is better to live on food grown within one’s own locality, since one’s body and the surrounding soil are considered as one unity.

*3: Recreational activities to come close to the nature and culture of rural farming / fishing villages through interaction with local villagers. “Taiken minshuku” (local inns for real experience) offer one mode of green tourism.



Open class on traditional paper-making



Traditional Japanese house



Bamboo sushi (the local delicacy)