
Town and Country

Some seventy miles or so along one of the main routes which fan out from Tokyo, you will come to Sano Plain. It is a wide basin surrounded by mountains, steep but wooded to the top, a serration of smallish peaks, above which the cap of one of Japan's elegant volcanoes, white for several months of the year, adds the final tourist-poster touch. Here and there, in the dark evergreen of the wooded mountain sides, are a few gashes of yellow where the erosion which followed reckless war-time logging has not yet been repaired. On the lower slopes are the large square patches of the upland fields, light green in June, darker in September, sere in the autumn and white for the rest of the year from the acres of vinyl sheeting which farmers have recently learned to use. There is nothing very traditional about any agricultural practice in Japan today, least of all about the new crops imported from Europe in the last century.

The railway line across the mountains from Tokyo was a considerable engineering feat in its day. Now, beside it, sweeping across valleys, gouging out mountain sides, banked on the vast mounds of raw spill, are the concrete masses of a new four-lane express-way due to be opened in a few years. Whichever way one approaches it, it is hard to say where the city of Sano begins, so tightly packed are the surrounding villages in this intensively cultivated and increasingly industrialized plain, and so continuous, now, the settlement between one former village centre and another. But the Sano city centre is unmistakably

a city centre, and one that befits a prefectural capital. The station forecourt is a broad expanse of tarmac with flower beds and fountains and a great knobbly globe of concrete topped by chunky crystals of coloured glass – the city's homage to modern art. The broad street leading down from the station to the shabby 1950-vintage prefectural offices and a glittering 1970s prefectural library, past the two six-storey department stores and countless souvenir shops, is a divided highway with flower beds down the centre. In the middle of them, just below the station, stands the city's homage to representational art and to history – a great green-bronze figure of the sixteenth-century warrior whose family ruled the district for centuries and who might, had he not finally lost to the Tokugawa in the wars of the late sixteenth century, have made Sano the capital of Japan. Three times life size he sits in full armour on a low stool, legs planted wide apart, the horns of his fearsome helmet tilted forward, glowering at his decadent descendants.

Shinohata, the village of this book, is some twenty-five miles further on from Sano, northwards up the valley of the Isokawa river. The train, followed once by a five-mile walk, nowadays more often by an eight-mile taxi ride, is one way of getting there. The electric trains of today are a far cry from the battered coaches and leaky steam locomotives of twenty years ago. And the expresses – painted bright red, to distinguish them from the yellow and green semi-fast and the dull blue stoppers – take less than half the time to climb the thirty miles up the valley to the water-shed and over the next prefecture. Everything about them is trim and dapper; the stylized flourishes of the white-gloved guard, for instance, as he waves the flag for the train to start from Sano station, or the precise unfumbling way the conductor, in equally clean white gloves, clips one's ticket, arms slightly raised, ticket held at correct angle and correct distance from the body, clipper engaged and operated in a sharp single movement. Equally neat and trim are the uniform dresses of the girls who come round with their refreshment baskets, equally exact the way in which each of their packed rice lunches has its strips of pork and fish pâté and pickled radish and ginger laid in a tasteful pattern on the rice. Even the aerosol-scrawled slogans from last week's strike have been nearly scrubbed off from the sides of the coaches and now only faintly proclaim the solidarity,

and eventual certain victory, of the working class. And last week's striker is now today's conductor, carefully adjusting a slipped antimacassar in one of the 'green coaches' – what used to be first-class coaches until, fifteen years ago, the railway authorities decided that 'green' and 'ordinary' sounded better than first and second class in this egalitarian age.

Progress is slower if one travels northwards up the valley by bus. Ten years ago, when the trunk road was first completely metalled all the way into the next prefecture, there were express buses, but no longer. Now, the roads are so crowded that 'express' would be a mockery. No society in history has ever been so rapidly motorized, and few societies have had such trouble adapting to the motor-car, as Japan with its dense population and tightly packed settlements. Sano and its surroundings show all the signs of improvised adaptation. No other road in the city has the amplitude of the central station road. The ones through which one edges out to the suburbs are just wide enough for two streams of traffic. Pedestrians need better protection than a mere sidewalk can provide in these narrow streets. Steel girders, set on stout iron posts, run along a couple of feet from the ground to mark a yard-wide strip on either side reserved for their safety. Some of the main crossroads have what is here known to everyone as a Sukuramburu – what American traffic experts apparently call a 'scramble', but here with a difference. When all traffic stops and all pedestrian lights go green and the crowds at the corners surge forward in all directions, loudspeakers play the tune of a well-known children's song about walking home hand-in-hand in the sunset, a tune redolent of innocence and safety and the benevolence of kindly paternal authority.

Paternal authority is also evident in the banners across the roads which proclaim what 'drive' is being urged on the citizenry this week – what particular form of exhortation, whether to protect wild birds, to buy savings bonds, to help the aged or to promote international friendship. In road safety week, the volunteer from the local ward's Crime Prevention Co-operation Group will be manning each of the pedestrian crossings which punctuate the steel barriers every two hundred yards or so. With yellow cap and yellow flag he is there to reinforce the message of the crossing lights (which people seem not much

inclined to disobey in ordinary weeks anyway), alternately holding out his flag at a ninety-degree angle to stop the flow of cars or people and then energetically waving them forward as if there was not a moment to be lost.

Every other shop in these streets glitters with plate glass, aluminium frames and often automatic sliding doors of a kind which less affluent or less gadget-minded societies reserve for airports and supermarkets. Shoe shops, electric appliance shops, motor accessories shops, chemists, jewellers and farm implements shops – even farm implements shops – are the most glittery ones with spinning, revolving, flashing neon strips shouting for attention in broad daylight.

Interspersed are the more traditional shops with open counters when the shutters are removed, built in the plain unpainted timbers which were the staple of Japanese traditional architecture. There are greengrocers and fishmongers; a carver of the wooden seals which each householder registers at the town hall and uses in place of the European's signature; a shop specializing in all kinds of traditional papers, for pasting on screens, for wrapping gifts, for presentation scrolls; a Japanese cake shop whose tasteful creations in rice flour and bean paste represent a still entirely distinct tradition from that of the bakery with its cream puffs and eclairs next door.

As one jerks and crawls out through the suburbs and the first rice fields come in sight, the road broadens somewhat, but still the new extensions to the town stretch out on either side. Clusters of tiny houses with roofs of bright blue and magenta and post-office red snuggle behind the ornamental trees planted in their few square feet of garden. There are tall blocks of flats; a two-storey golf practice driving range, a bowling alley whose neon says 'BOWL' just like its American original, a yard with wrecked cars piled six high. There are even a few used car lots to complete the momentary illusion that it is an American town one is leaving. But the rice fields ensure that such illusions *are* momentary. Glistening squares of water in May, a shimmer of the lightest green in June, rippling yellow in autumn and well-drained dry stubble for the rest of the year, these could only be Japanese rice fields. Nowhere else are rice fields banked with expensive concrete blocks, and nowhere else are rice fields, banked with such expensive concrete blocks (some of them in

this valley entirely re-created after a typhoon washed them away fifteen years ago – at a cost to public funds of over £1,000 an acre), left to grow weeds throughout the year. Until 1974 the government paid a sizeable non-cultivation subsidy to reduce production, and even two seasons after the policy was reversed their owners had not adjusted to the new situation.

The Isokawa river which gulped in those rice fields in 1959 becomes that kind of raging torrent only once in a generation or so. In August and September, when most of the water coming off the hills is trapped and dammed and gently led off into rice fields, it is the thinnest of trickles and only in the June monsoon or in the autumn typhoon season does it cover much of its broad bed – about 300 yards from dike to dike, even at the narrow point where it comes closer to the cliffs it has carved out of the valley's east side and forces the road to cross over to the west. The bed is a mass of boulders and rough mounds covered with miscellaneous rank vegetation interspersed with the tall screens and conveyor belts and storage heaps of numerous gravel works. Trucks clamber up make-shift roads over the dikes – concrete dikes in many places, thanks again to the Typhoon Disaster Recovery Grants – taking load after load away to feed the insatiable needs of Japan's construction industry. Japan's *per capita* consumption of cement has in recent years been the highest in the world. The face of nature is being changed. So much aggregate has been taken out of the river bed that some of the riparian villages are demanding compensation from the gravel companies because the water table has been lowered and their wells have dried up. 'They should worry!' would have been the reaction of the samurai official who wrote the official gazetteer of the district in 1814. Explaining that the river's name referred to its lack of a central channel, he went on, 'the river is the great curse of the district. It brings down so much sand and rocks that it fills up all its channels and the bed is constantly rising. The dikes have to be constantly raised. In some places the water level can rise to six or ten feet above the level of the surrounding fields and inevitably, sometimes, it breaks through, pouring sand and rocks onto the rice fields which it takes years to remove.'

As the valley narrows further up one sees ahead on the east side, above the line of the brown sandstone cliff tops, the broad

clean slopes of a volcano. Several tens of thousand years older than the more famous smooth-peaked volcanoes, its top has already fallen in to leave a jagged array of lesser peaks. Its lower slopes, though, still have a magnificently expansive sweep to them. The steep wooded foothills of another mountain chain gets closer to the west. Little signs pointing off the road announce the starting point of the route up to Buddha Peak, to Phoenix Peak, to Pony Peak. The frequent 'doraivuin' ('drive-in' restaurants) show that this is the holiday route – as do the equally frequent little three-or-four-hut motels, whose advertisements proclaim the comforts which young couples can expect to find. Some of them are uncompromisingly modern, with Motel Monte Carlo or Motel Arizona written in bold Roman letters. Others get the best of both worlds. Moteru Romansu is written in Japanese script. And it has the traditional shingle too – the 'upturned jellyfish' sign; a little circle with waving tentacles of steam which once meant a hot spring and then, because of the erotic mixed-bathing-and-pillow-geisha associations of hot springs, came to mean any hotel where one could take a girl for an illicit afternoon. There are garages and agricultural co-operative granaries, a factory recently established to employ the local sons who prefer to stay at home and make their future as part-time farmers rather than migrate to the industrial centres. Is it the holiday-makers or the commuters to the factory who are the reckless drivers? A barrier across the road bears a slogan in the seventeen syllables of a traditional haiku:

Crowded Japan.
Where are you going,
in such a mad hurry?

There are fewer rice fields, more steeply terraced, as the valley gets narrower: more dry fields climbing up the slopes, many of them planted with mulberry for silkworms. The small town centres which the main road passes through, or more often bypasses, get smaller now as the hinterland they serve contracts. A few miles from the head of the valley a side road turns off westward up towards the hills. It follows the little stream through some rice fields for about three-quarters of a mile until it turns round the corner of the plantation of young pine trees

to reveal a cluster of sixty houses nestling in the foothills of the mountains ahead – the hamlet of Shinohata.

My first visit to Shinohata was in 1955. I was doing a study of the effects of the land reform on Japanese villages. I had already spent some time in a northern village in a predominantly rice-growing area, formerly dominated by a single powerful landlord. I planned another spell in a western village with a more diversified agriculture and a strong owner-farmer tradition. To complete what inevitably had to be a rather small sample, I wanted to find a village in central Japan with several landlords of medium-sized holdings, in an area where forest land played a larger part in the village economy. Forest land not having been redistributed in the land reform, one might expect landlord power to be less diminished in such a village and older 'feudal traditions' to remain stronger. I went to the agricultural department of the prefectural offices in Sano and explained myself. Maps were brought out. The village at the top of the valley was declared the most likely to meet my requirements. I set off up the valley; two officials, kindly but slightly puzzled and still not quite convinced that a foreigner should actually want to live for a month in a Japanese village, remembered a land dispute which had to be checked up on in that direction and promised to follow a little later.

It was a very different road then. The tarmac stopped before it was out of Sano city. Between towns there was little traffic; groups of school-children going home from school stepped off the road at the approach of the occasional battered, jam-packed bus or a three-wheeled truck, and held handkerchiefs to their mouths until the dust had settled. Cyclists, taking home enormous loads of grass from the river banks to feed their cow, wobbled uncertainly around the potholes; bullocks plodded slowly along drawing carts piled high with farm produce, only a few of them with rubber wheels. There were few new houses to be seen, and those close to the roadside were made to look older and shabbier by their coating of dust. Shopkeepers of the village centres on the way threw buckets of water on the road to keep the dust off their goods in the open shop fronts, but to little avail. There were no drive-ins or motels; only, occasionally, a modest tea house-hotel in traditional Japanese style. The

roadside advertisements were not for colour television and cheap foreign holidays, but for durable farmers' footwear and for curry powders that made a little go a long way.

The officials, whose car could manage the wash-board corrugated road better than my scooter could, got there just before me, so that my arrival caused less consternation in the village office than it might have done. Of the seven hamlets which made up the administrative unit, it was soon decided that Shinohata was the one for me. The people there were known to be calm and equable in spirit, unlikely to be too disconcerted by the arrival of a foreigner or too busy to talk to him. I checked up on the land-ownership situation and decided it would do. But where would I stay? 'You mean you actually want to stay in the village?' Eventually my protestations about my familiarity with Japanese food and Japanese toilets were accepted, if still with some scepticism. In that case, the most obvious place, it was decided, was the house of the biggest former landlord. He would know all about looking after foreigners. Not quite the thing, I explained, to be closely identified with the landlords, if one wanted to get frank accounts of the land reform. Wasn't there a temple? Yes, there was, but that was out of the question. The office clerk who lived in Shinohata explained with some embarrassment that the old priest was deaf and morose, his wife a great trouble-maker and unreliable. The solution was the village shop. A pleasant family, generally liked. The old man would be tickled pink to have a foreign lodger, and since the daughter stayed in to mind the shop, there would be no problems about meals. The clerk got on his bicycle and went ahead to negotiate. Word came back that all was well and at dusk that evening I had my first glimpse of Shinohata, with the smoke from evening cooking fires curling out of the roof vents of sixty houses, and nothing to be heard when I stopped my scooter engine but the croaking of frogs, the sizzle of a late cicada, the rustling of the water in the irrigation ditches, the crackling of the fire in the bath-shed where it had just been lit under the iron bath tub, the whispering of the children who gathered at the gate through which the strange foreigner had just come, and the cheerful, if slightly apprehensive, greetings of the Yamamoto family.