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The Last Page: In Japan, Living with History

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in japan, living with history

By John Roderick '36

When the hurly-burly of today's world overwhelms me, I hobnob with the rustic ghosts of centuries past in my restored old farmhouse on a hill overlooking Kamakura, the ancient capital of Japan.

The house's steep snow roof, massive posts and beams, wide wooden floors and split-bamboo ceilings take me back 269 years to the tiny hamlet of rice farmers in the mountains 350 miles from here, where it was born.

The event on that distant day in 1734—43 years before the birth of the United States—was a jubilant one because the house also was built for the village chief, Tsunetoshi Nomura, who doubled as the village's nature-worshipping Shinto priest.

The entire village turned out to raise its roof and cover it with thatch. It was July, but to appease the fierce fire god they stuck a poem inside saying, tongue in cheek, that the house was covered in snow and ice. The dreaded deity got the message: the house has survived not only fire but earthquake and flood unharmed.

The place: Ise in Fukui prefecture, 400 miles west of Tokyo. Its scattering of farmers all lived in such farmhouses, called minkas, now a sadly disappearing style of rural architecture more than 2,000 years old.

I became the owner of this splendid old pile 37 years ago, thanks to my surrogate Japanese family, the Takishitas (the name means "under the waterfall") of Gifu prefecture. They took me, an American journalist and recent wartime enemy, under their wing in 1963, five years after I joined the Associated Press staff in Tokyo.

When their youngest son, Yoshihiro, familiarly known as Yochan, discovered I yearned to own a house of my own but lacked the means, he and his family found the neighboring Ise minka for me. I got it for a token U.S. \$14, a price I could well afford.

It was a gift from its owner, Tsunemori Nomura, affable descendant of its original owner. A cultural treasure, it was about to be sunk in the reservoir waters of a huge earthfill dam then under construction. He gave it to me when I agreed to move it out of harm's way.

Parting with it was, for him, an almost unbearable sorrow. His ancestors, officers of a brave but doomed military clan called the Heike, had hidden, lived, ministered and died in Ise since finding refuge there following their 12th-century defeat by Japan's first shogun, or supreme military ruler. His capital: Kamakura, where I now lived.

What followed was a labor of love. The Takishitas and many of their neighbors helped dismantle, move and rebuild the huge old house on my hill overlooking the capital of the Nomuras' old conqueror.

Yochan, a law graduate just out of college, supervised the entire project. Rebuilding and modernizing it took only 40 days.

I did not say so then, but I was dismayed at the prospect of living in this enormous old relic. It was cold, dark and dank, innocent of heating, bathing, plumbing or proper kitchen facilities.

Once it was resurrected in Kamakura, Yochan's genius turned this ugly duckling into a resplendent swan with a simple maneuver. He placed the front entrance on the bleak unlucky north and its rear on the south. He then replaced its windowless blank wall with floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors, letting a flood of light and warmth pour into my once gloomy living room.

That did it. For the first time, I was able to see the noble proportions of my old minka and the dark beauty of its sturdy posts and beams. It marked the beginning of my love affair with old minkas.

I now saw how centuries of smoke from the box-like fireplace had turned posts, beams, bamboo ceilings and floors a lustrous mahogany color, like that of a lovingly rubbed meerschaum pipe.

In the years that followed, I spent many idle hours contemplating the extraordinary interior of my minka and the movable feast outside my glass living room doors. I feasted my dazed eyes on the pine, plum and peach trees immediately outside changing with the seasons, and then the city of Kamakura on the bay below looking like the painting on an eight-panel Japanese folding screen.

Determined to make my minka not only livable but comfortable, Yochan created a modern kitchen, bath and toilet and, bowing to my Western clumsiness, introduced chairs, tables and beds to save me from sitting and sleeping Japanese-style on the floor.

But for 14 years, because of my continuing modest savings, we did without the essential of modern living in a cold climate: central heating.

We survived this chilly inconvenience through the glorious and transforming music of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms and the Beatles—composers



unknown to the minka's original owners—pouring out of our new sound system.

In the years since it rose on my Kamakura hill, much has changed. Yochan, my adopted son now married to the beautiful and aristocratic Reiko, has become an architect famous for restoring minkas like mine. He has put up three others nearby, one housing his collection of Japanese and Chinese antiques. He is the author of a new book, *Japanese Country Style* (Kodansha International), displaying the minkas he has restored since mine in 1967.

Despite its jarring move from remote village to old capital on the sea, my minka continues to grow old gracefully. Requiring few repairs, it seems likely, barring war or folly, to live well into the 22nd century.

Drawn to its beauty and unique architectural style, hundreds of Japanese and foreigners have trooped up our hill to savor its old beauty. Among them: the elder George Bush, the former queens of Denmark and Greece and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Often, in the eloquent silence of my living room, I think I hear the voices of the Nomuras and their neighbors talking of the weather, the harvest, fishing, the hunt, the phases of the moon and the religious mysteries of the deep forests.

It is then that the lovely old minka speaks to me of a time when nature and the rural community, not profit, smokestacks and the disturbing evening news, informed everyday life.

Compared to the fear, frenzy and futility of our day, it seems like a lost golden age.

John Roderick '36 is an Associated Press special correspondent. He spent 39 years with the AP, reporting from bureaus in Palestine, London, Paris, French Indochina, Tokyo and Beijing. Roderick lives in Hawaii and Japan. This article is reprinted with the permission of the author and The Associated Press.