

The Japan Times new year special

Donald Keene reflects on 70-year Japan experience

2015 marks 70 years since Japan's defeat in World War II. Renowned writer and prominent U.S.-born Japanese literature scholar Donald Keene, 92, looks back on Japan's postwar period, which he saw firsthand.

Donald Keene
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

My first visit to Japan was very short, only a week or so in December 1945. Three months earlier, while on the island of Guam, I had heard the broadcast by the Emperor announcing the end of the war. Soon afterward, I was sent from Guam to China to serve as an interpreter between the Americans and the Japanese military and civilians.

After four months, I received orders to return to my original command. I was aware that the original command was in Hawaii, but when the plane from Shanghai landed at Atsugi I felt a strong desire to visit Japan. Every day during the previous four years, ever since entering the U.S. Navy Japanese Language School, I had thought about Japan. I yearned to see it, but I was afraid of being caught if I violated orders. In the end, I persuaded myself that, now that the war had ended, my crime, if detected, would be treated as minor. I informed a naval officer at Atsugi that my original command had moved to Yokosuka. He believed me and I was safely in Japan.

The drive from Atsugi was bleak. As the jeep approached the city of Tokyo, buildings grew steadily fewer until all that were left were smokestacks and sheds. Once in the city, I found the building where the other interpreters were quartered, and was told by my friends that there was an empty bed. They described the destruction they had seen in various Japanese cities, but they had not yet realized the terrible significance of the atomic bomb.

They all agreed that it would take at least 50 years for Japan to recover its pre-war status. Nobody spoke of a possible revival of Japan. This may be why only 20 or 30 of the thousand or so young men trained in Japanese by the Navy and Army attempted to find a career which involved knowledge of the language.

My second visit to Japan was in 1953, this time in Kyoto as a graduate student. I chose Kyoto not only because of its history, but because it had escaped bombing. My wartime friend, Otis Cary, then teaching at Doshisha University, found an ideal place for me to live. I intended

to study at Kyoto University, but in fact, I did not spend much time there because the professor so seldom appeared. As it grew colder in the unheated classroom, I felt less and less ready to wait in vain for the professor, and was glad to spend my time in Kyoto sightseeing instead of shivering in a classroom.

I enjoyed wandering at random in the city, fascinated by the names of places I knew from works of Japanese literature and history. The streets were surprisingly quiet, probably because at the time there were no privately owned cars in Kyoto, only company vehicles. I was delighted one day when I saw two elderly ladies happening to meet while crossing in the middle of Kawaramachi, the busiest street in the city. They politely removed their haori jackets and bowed to each other, not in the least worried by possible traffic. Of course, not everything in Kyoto was

so pleasing. I saw slum areas not only around the railway station but in the middle of the city, and there were many boys eager to polish one's shoes. But I managed to accept these sad results of the long warfare that the Japanese had suffered.

I was captivated not only by the city, but the surroundings and I visited every temple on the tourist map. I enjoyed

‘The extraordinary outburst of major literature was largely the result of the freedom that had come with the end of Japanese military rule.’

Donald Keene

walking along streets with rows of shops, all selling the same article, whether bamboo baskets, stone badgers, or dusty secondhand books. Most of these shops no longer exist, victims of progress.

My main occupation in Kyoto was studying Japanese literature, but on one occasion I was asked to be a “reporter” at a conference sponsored by the Institute for Pacific Affairs. My task was to make summaries of the statements made by the distinguished people who attended. About half the participants were Japanese; the rest were Americans,



Canadians and British.

The Japanese, mainly economists, were convinced that Japan's future was dismal. They were sure that if there were any improvement in the economy, it would result in demands by workers for rises in pay, and if they obtained more money, this would make Japanese goods more expensive. They seemed to believe that cheap prices were the one factor in

cluded Osamu Dazai, Yukio Mishima, Kobo Abe and Kenzaburo Oe. I wonder if there has ever been such a group of novelists working at the same time. I was fortunate to know almost all these writers and became friends with several.

Not only literature, but drama of many varieties flourished during the postwar era. I went regularly to Osaka to see bunraku. The performers — singers, puppet operators and shamisen players — have never been equaled since then.

Kabuki and noh were performed by actors who became legendary. However, the most popular play was “Twilight Crane,” by Junji Kinoshita, based on a Japanese folk tale. This work deeply moved audiences at a time when Japanese traditions seemed to have been negated by defeat in the war; Kinoshita's discovery of modern meanings in the old traditions made audiences understand the value of what had seemed to be a disgraced culture.

I joined a group in Kyoto of people who worked in various arts. All were eager to revive Japanese culture and the starting point of their discussions was often “Twilight Crane,” as a model of the use of Japanese traditions in new art.

Painting was stimulated by exhibitions of works from foreign museums. Some painters were attracted by their first experience of avant-garde modernism. I remember a painting created by an artist who made a toy car drive around on a canvas. Black paint leaking from the car became the painting.

This work did not inspire my admiration, but I shared in the excitement of the artist's freedom to paint whatever he chose.

In 1959, after another stay in Japan, I wrote “Living Japan,” a book intended to introduce Japan to non-Japanese readers. I did not expect it to be read by Japanese, but it was translated and sold unexpectedly well. Japanese readers were intrigued to learn about life in Japan of 10 or 20 years earlier than I had described. The changes in Japan that occurred even in a short period were startling and people quickly forgot the past or remembered it with nostalgia.

Some things changed completely. In 1959 there was not a condominium in Tokyo (or anywhere else). Almost everyone lived in private houses. Statements I made in my book on the basis of what I had seen or heard from friends came to be mistaken or even absurd because conditions changed drastically.

For example, I wrote that several Japanese employees were needed to do the work of one stenographer in an American office. I had evidence for this statement, but it soon became untrue, and I naturally could not imagine what one Japanese stenographer could now do with a computer.



Clockwise from top, Tokyo, which had burned during the war, has arisen from the devastation over the past 70 years; Donald Keene is seen at a house in Kyoto's Higashiyama in 1955; Two “maiko,” or apprentice geisha, pay a round of visits to their teachers of traditional Japanese arts and tea house owners during the annual summer “hassaku” event in Kyoto's Gion district on Aug.1. KYODO, COURTESY OF DONALD KEENE



Donald Keene (front center) poses for a photo with Haru Reischauer (front left), wife of then U.S. Ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer (third row, left), renowned author Yukio Mishima (second row, right) and others in front of the U.S. Ambassador's Residence in Tokyo upon receiving the Kikuchi Kan Prize in 1962. COURTESY OF DONALD KEENE

The beautiful houses in Gion grow fewer each year and will never be replaced. The side streets lined with Japanese-style houses are either mixed with dreary apartments or totally destroyed. Kyoto streets on a Sunday are now jammed with cars. No old lady is advised to cross a street without caution. Greed and a demand for convenience have taken the place of beauty.

But, I tell myself, the people of Kyoto are probably healthier and lead more agreeable lives than the people I knew 60 years ago. I have resolved to remember this whenever I feel like complaining about changes.

Donald Keene is a professor emeritus at New York's Columbia University and a famed scholar of Japanese literature. Born in 1922 in New York, he has written numerous books on Japanese literature, history and culture, including “Meiji Tenno,” a biography of the Emperor Meiji. In 2008, he received the Order of Culture (Bunka Kunsho), which is given by the Japanese government to those who have greatly contributed to Japanese art, literature or culture. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake in March, 2011, Keene moved to Japan permanently and became a Japanese citizen in 2012.

New Year Special

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Major genomics program underway

British government project may lead to custom treatments

Ken Sasaki
LONDON
KYODO

A revolutionary project by the British government will get fully under way in 2015 to realize "personalized medicine" for cancers and rare diseases by analyzing as many as 100,000 genomes from patients and their relatives.

The project is aimed at promptly detecting mutations in genes that cause diseases and pinpointing their origins. It will enable the development of new treatments and drugs matching the individual nature of diseases.

A genome is a set of genetic information handed down from parents to offspring and is recorded in a double helix-structured deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA).

In 2003, American, European and Japanese scientists completed mapping the human genome, which has 3 billion pairs of bases. While more than 10 years and an estimated \$3 billion were spent to sequence the DNA of one person, the equipment adopted by the British project can now transcribe 18,000 human genomes a year for \$1,000 each.

With technological advances, genetics, or the study of the way particular features or diseases are inherited through genes passed down from one generation to the next, is nearing full-scale application to medical treatment.

Alysia Sherley-Price, an 11-year-old girl from Hampshire who enjoys music and playing ball, was found to have a rare mutation in the gene STXBP1. Alysia has motor skills matching her age, but is mentally 5 years old or so because the mutation hampers the neurotransmitters in her brain. The diagnosis gave her family a sense of optimism.

"We actually needed a diagnosis, so we could research it and see what can help her," said Alysia's mother Stephanie, a nurse.

Stephanie, 42, became aware of Alysia's delayed development before her first birthday. Alysia was confirmed with global developmental delay, a term that



A researcher operates a computer analyzing genomes in this undated file photo. COURTESY OF GENOME RESEARCH LTD./KYODO

describes delays in language, cognitive and many other or all skills, at 21 months old.

Alysia went through numerous medical examinations throughout her life to determine whether her development delay was attributable to brain damage, a difficult pregnancy or protective injections. In 2013 genomics eventually found Alysia's genetic mutation.

The discovery is a "move forward," said Alysia's father Edward, a 44-year-old business manager. "Lots of questions we had before, are now answered," he said, expressing hope that effective new drugs can be developed by utilizing data collected from a large number of patients like Alysia.

A lot of people are concerned that a "Big Brother Society," as described in Gorge Orwell's futuristic novel "1984," will be created if the government holds genetic and other personal information, Edward said. "But really, in our view, it's a health issue, it's a health screening."

While people who cooperated with research prior to the 100,000 Genomes Project, such as the Sherley-Prices, pin hopes on advances in treatment of difficult diseases, they also worry because genomics can also uncover disease risks

in offspring.

Kathryn Graham, 53, from Knebworth, Hertfordshire, is a former elementary school teacher who retired because she suffered from a disease called idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension.

The disease, which causes increased blood pressure in the pulmonary artery, in some cases occurs due to genetic mutations.

Graham's health began deteriorating rapidly after giving birth to her second daughter.

"Climbing the stairs could feel like conquering Everest," she said.

Her condition was classed as "end stage," progressive and incurable without a heart and lung transplant.

Graham worried that if her disease was the result of genetic mutations, her two daughters might have inherited them. She told them of the possibility when they were 18 and 16 years old.

At the daughters' urging, Graham accepted genetic testing, which found in 2013 that she did not have misprinted genes, a huge relief for her family.

Graham also had a heart and lung transplant in the same year, something that has enabled her to "run up the

stairs now."

Her 22-year-old elder daughter, Sarah, will marry in June.

If Graham had been found to have misprinted genes, the daughters may have given up on future childbirth, she said, adding that it would be unbearable to see her children in the same situation as she.

"I think I could cope with it being me, but not my children," she said.

Even if genomics becomes widely practiced, nobody should be "forced into" it and there should be choices for people, Graham said.

"A lot of patients don't want to know (if they have misprinted genes) because they don't want to spend all their lives worrying," she said.

The use of genetic information in huge quantities will totally upset the conventional method of treatment in which doctors prescribe the same drug for patients with the same symptoms, instead enabling them to find an optimum, personalized treatment for each patient.

Sir John Chisholm, executive chair of Genomics England, a company wholly owned by the British government and charged with conducting the project to sequence 100,000 whole genomes, forecast that the day will come when computers check types of disease from a patient's genome and clinical data and produce a prescription for the patient's doctor.

They will also calculate the inherited risk of diseases such as diabetes and help doctors work out instructions for eating and other lifestyle habits so as to prevent them, according to Chisholm.

When a baby is born, if the parents agree, a heel prick is conducted to collect a small sample of blood for testing for a small number of serious disabilities, Chisholm said.

"In principle, the same could be done, and the genome could be taken from that," he continued. "So at birth, then, every child would have their whole genome recorded, and that would go throughout their lives. ... It's a piece of information that's going to be useful for the whole of your life."

As far as cancer patients are concerned, the project will compare genomes of tumors with those of healthy cells in order to determine mutations in the genes.



Alysia Sherley-Price (front right), 11, is seen with her family in front of their house in Petersfield in Hampshire, England, on Oct. 31. KYODO

For patients of rare diseases considered ascribable to genetic mutations, their own genomes and those of their closest blood relatives will be compared.

Some 75,000 people will be involved as two genomes per cancer patient will be examined. The project will sequence 100,000 genomes by the end of 2017.

Taking breast cancer as an example, Chisholm said there are "at least seven different types" of the disease. Genomics is making it possible to find the "best method of treatment" for each type, he said.

In fact, the completion of the project will enhance the effectiveness of medical treatment by making a drug for each type available and enabling doctors to take into account patients' separate constitutions for adverse effects.

In British society, there remain concerns about the government holding clinical and genomic information on individuals.

The project will collect data from people with their consent and ensure their anonymity. The leaking of data will be subject to a fine of up to £500,000.

But once digitized data are leaked, it will be impossible to recover.

"Lots of people are worried about insurance," Vivienne Parry, head of engagement at Genomics England, said.

"If you're on this project, you don't have to disclose this information to your insurer," she added.

The British life insurance industry has decided on a temporary policy to allow participants in the project not to disclose their genomic results to insurers.

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new year special

Activities to ring in year of the sheep



People can write their New Year resolutions or wishes on a colorful ribbon at Tokyo Midtown. Top: A "mochitsuki" (rice cake pounding) event will be held at Yomiuri Land with the park's mascot, Land Dog on Jan. 1. COURTESY OF TOKYO MIDTOWN, YOMIURI LAND

Mayumi Koyama
STAFF WRITER

Usually, the New Year holiday season in Japan is a time to spend with family and many people go back to their hometowns, while others stay indoors for television-watching marathons. Therefore, with the exception of some shopping areas, Tokyo is relatively quiet compared with the usual hustle and bustle. If you're staying in the capital and are looking for something to do, there are plenty of vibrant events taking place at the beginning of the year. The following events and activities are being held in the Tokyo area.

Roppongi Hills

From Jan. 1, Roppongi Hills will welcome visitors with big bargains, as well as some exciting events and food to cheer people into the New Year.

Restaurants in the complex will open from 11 a.m. to allow people a chance to reinvigorate themselves after hard bargain hunting. From Jan. 1 to 4, some restaurants will offer special items in the hope of bringing people good fortunes in the coming year. Popular hamburger restaurant AS Classics Diner will offer a burger resembling "kagami mochi" (mirror mochi rice cake), a traditionally decorated rice cake for ¥1,404. Eggcellent, a restaurant popular for its breakfast items, including eggs Benedict, will prepare a 15-layer stack of pancakes colored in the celebratory hues of red and white for the first 15 customers each day. Other, newly opened restaurants, including Brazilian churrasco restaurant Barbacoa, are also good options for a rest.

On the first day of 2015, the Hills Arena event space will resound with an upbeat atmosphere. A popular rhythmic Japanese drum performance by percussion group Dondoko will be held and traditional Japanese "shishi-mai" lion dances will be held from 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. Additionally, from 1 p.m., the first 200 visitors to the event space will be treated to a cup of sake. On Jan. 2 and 3, free workshops, including ones making New Year's decorations and doing calligraphy, will be held from 11 a.m.

The venue's iconic 400-meter-long Keyakizaka Galaxy illumination will continue to shine bright through Feb. 16 from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.

Please note that from Jan. 5 to April 24, the facility's museums and observatory areas will be closed for renovations.

Tokyo Midtown

Tokyo Midtown's New Year will start with a sake treat at Sake Shop Fukumitsu from 10:45 a.m. to noon on Jan. 2.



Traditional Japanese "shishi-mai" lion dances will take place at Roppongi Hills on Jan. 1. COURTESY OF ROPPONGI HILLS

Visitors can have a drink of sake and the first 800 people will have it served in an original "masu" square wooden cup.

As in past years, attractions such as shishi-mai lion dances and live classical music performances will be held in the Galleria.

This year, a special rack will be set up on the first floor of the Galleria through Jan. 12. People can write their New Year resolutions or wishes on a colorful ribbon and tie it to the rack. After Jan. 12, the rack will be dedicated to a nearby shrine.

Hama-Rikyu Gardens

If weather permits, there will be Japanese traditional events in this quiet oasis in the midst of the vast Tokyo metropolis.

On Jan. 2 and 3, there will be New Year's events at one of the biggest traditional parks, Hama-Rikyu Gardens, which was used for falconry during the Tokugawa Shogunate. From 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., Japanese falconry demonstrations will be conducted in the inner moat area. In the morning, people can enjoy watching falcons dive from the Denstu Headquarters Building near the park. The demonstrations will last about an hour, so those interested should dress warmly.

In the open square, people can enjoy

traditional Japanese New Year's games, such as "hanetsuki," a badminton-like game, and spinning tops until 3:30 p.m. Park staff will be on hand to explain how to play the games.

At the park's cafes, Nakanojima-no-ochaya and Matsu-no-ochaya, Japanese green tea will be offered for ¥510 (from ¥720 with snacks) at Nakanojima-no-ochaya, and for ¥820 at Matsu-no-ochaya, including snacks and a tour of the tea house. For this occasion, Matsu-no-ochaya will open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and tea will be served to 15 people every 30 minutes.

Yomiuri Land

On the very first day of the New Year, the Yomiuri Land amusement park in Kawasaki will be open from 10 a.m.

Through some New Year's celebratory events, the theme park is set to welcome people to 2015 with a fun and exciting start to the year.

There is a pleasant surprise for some lucky people right at the front gate. From Jan. 1 to 4, people who were born under the same Chinese zodiac sign as 2015 will be admitted to the park for free. The zodiac animal for 2015 is sheep and anyone born in previous years of the sheep (2003, 1991, 1979 and so on at 12-year intervals) can show their identification at the entrance for free admis-

sion. From 1 p.m. on Jan. 1, a free "mochitsuki" (rice cake pounding) event will be held with the park's mascot, Land Dog, and the first 300 people can join. After pounding the rice, the fresh rice cakes can be tasted.

On Jan. 2 and 3, at 10 a.m., noon and 2:30 p.m., sheep will be brought to the park's grassy square and people can pet, feed and take pictures with sheep.

Roppongi Hills is connected to Roppongi Station (Hibiya and Oedo lines). For more information, visit www.roppongi-hills.com

Tokyo Midtown can be accessed directly from Exit 8 of Roppongi Station. For more information, visit www.tokyo-midtown.com.

Hama-Rikyu Gardens is 7 minutes from Shiodome Station (Oedo and Yurikamome lines) or 12 minutes from Shimabashi Station (various lines). For more information, visit [teien.tokyo-park.or.jp](http://www.teien.tokyo-park.or.jp).

Yomiuri Land is a 10-minute bus ride from Yomiuri-Land-mae Station on the Odakyu Line, or 10 minutes by cable car from Keio-yomiuri-land Station on the Keio Line. For more information, visit www.yomiuriland.com.

Looking back on, preserving traditional New Year's activities

Minoru Matsutani
STAFF WRITER

"Shogatsu," the term for the New Year's holidays in Japanese, is a time when people take the first three days of the New Year off to spend time relaxing with their families and engaging in traditional activities to remind themselves of their heritage.

Japanese children, especially those in rural areas, play some shogatsu-specific games. In urban areas, adults teach them how to play as they are becoming less and less familiar with those traditions.

Below are some examples of these traditional games.

Koma-mawashi (Spinning top)

As sung in the Japanese traditional song "Oshogatsu," in which the lyrics, "Let's

fly a kite and spin a top during oshogatsu," the koma, or top, is traditional entertainment over New Year's in Japan, along with kite flying.

The word koma, when used in haiku poetry, is taken as a descriptor meaning January.

Tops became popular entertainment at New Year's because toy shops worked to market them that way, according to the website of the Japan Spinning Top Museum in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture.

"In other seasons, there were many toys and things to do, but toy shops had



DANI/FLICKR

very few items to sell in winter," the museum says on the website.

A top stands up as it spins, and people associate it with the Japanese phrase of "standing on one leg," which connotes a person becoming recognized as a responsible adult. A top, therefore, carries a positive image and toy shops decided to promote tops at New Year's, according to the website.

After that, the "Oshogatsu" song debuted and newspapers and TV programs featured playing with tops as a New Year's activity, according to the museum website. Eventually, tops came to be regarded as a New Year's toy.

Tops are said to have come to Japan from China and the first written mention of a top in Japan was in a 10th-century document. The first time the shape of a top was clearly drawn was the 12th

century, according to the website.

The oldest top was found in Egypt and is said to date from about 2,000 B.C. to 1,400 B.C., according to the website.

Tako-age (Kite flying)

Kite flying is one of the traditional activities done over New Year's in Japan. It was a children's favorite at New Year's until a few decades ago, when computer games and other entertainment options became popular, leading to fewer children flying kites today.

However, convenience stores and toy shops still begin selling kites in mid-December, ahead of the peak demand period.

Kites are not necessarily a worldwide thing for New Year's. Only in Japan is it popular at the beginning of the year.

The reason for this is because the Tokugawa shogun in the late Edo Period (1603 to 1868) only allowed people to fly kites during the New Year's period, said Masami Fukuoka, the secretary general of the Japan Kite Association.

"Kites became extremely popular then. People had kite battles and sometimes kites fell on daimyo and aristocrats as they were traveling, and they got angry," Fukuoka said. "So the government decided kites should only be allowed over New Year's, when traffic was not so heavy. Also, New Year's is a special time of a year, so they probably thought ordinary people should be allowed to fly kites at that time."

While kites nowadays are solely for entertainment, they were used for military purposes when they were invented in China more than 2,000 years ago. On battlefields, people flew kites to measure the distance to their enemies and



A worker is surrounded by many decorative kites. ANOTHER SIDE OF YUKITA FROM ASAKUSA/WIKIMEDIA

attached whistles to them to frighten or confuse opposing armies, Fukuoka said.

Kites are said to have come to Japan from China in the Heian Period (794-1185) and were mainly flown as entertainment for aristocrats, he said.

Hanetsuki

Hanetsuki, traditionally a girl's activity, is a game in which two people each hold a "hagoita" wooden racket and hit a "hane," or shuttlecock, to the other person, who has to hit it back without letting it drop to the ground. Whoever misses traditionally gets black ink paint-

ed on their face as a penalty.

The hagoita looks like a short cricket bat with a wider blade. The shuttlecock is made with feathers and a spherical piece of wood.

It is believed that hitting a shuttlecock back and forth will help one to avoid bad luck or evil, according to the website of Japanese Culture Iroha Encyclopedia, and playing hanetsuki over the New Year's holidays is believed to ensure a year free of bad luck.

Also, flying shuttlecocks resemble dragonflies, which eat mosquitos, and thus it is thought that the longer the hane remains in the air, the greater the protection players will have from mosquitos throughout the coming year.

Hagoita are often sold around the end of the year as decorations as well. Expensive hagoita can cost tens of thousands of yen.

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The Japan Times new year special

Female entrepreneurs lead way in employing women

Yumiko Doi
KYODO

Long before Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared empowering women in the economy to be an essential pillar of his "Abenomics" strategy, Kyoko Higashiyama made it a rule in her company to create opportunities for women to land full-time employment and be able to work while raising children.

While the number of female entrepreneurs in Japan is still less than half that of males, many like Higashiyama, 42, are pioneers in their own right in creating business models that address social issues, such as the underutilization of women's skills and waning rural economies.

Higashiyama's Estrolabo is a small machikoba, or town factory, that specializes in precision metalwork drilling in Higashi-Osaka, Osaka Prefecture, a city known for its high density of factories. Of its four employees, three are mothers with young children still in elementary school, including two who are single mothers.

Just like craftsman at other machikoba factories, they work with extreme precision and care, maneuvering large machinery while reading complicated blueprints to drill holes as minuscule as 0.1 millimeters in diameter into metal.

"Sure, there is the pressure that I must not mess it up, but at the same time it also brings a sense of satisfaction," one of the workers, 35-year-old single mother Megumi Shiotani, said of her job.

Shiotani and her husband divorced when her daughter was just 1 year old. To make a living, she looked for a job, but was turned down wherever she went. Company after company told her they would not hire her because she had a child and would likely often take leave at short notice, causing an inconvenience.

Her encounter with Higashiyama res-



Megumi Shiotani, an employee at Estrolabo, operates machinery used in precision metalwork drilling at the company in Higashi-Osaka, Osaka Prefecture, on Nov. 14. KYODO

cued her from despair and exhaustion. "(At first) I was worried as I am rather clumsy with my hands," she recalled. "But when I saw how the other women worked hard on this craftsmanship, I also felt like giving it a try."

Shiotani has since turned into a skilled artisan at Estrolabo. She works from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., which enables her to make it in time to pick up her daughter, now in the third grade of elementary school, from after-school day care. It is Higashiyama's policy not to ask her staff to work extra hours or on holidays, so they can attend to their child-rearing needs.

Higashiyama launched her business at age 33, after an acquaintance suggested that she open a machikoba with only female workers.

While she herself is single, Higashiyama said she has seen many of her

friends quit their jobs after they got married or once they had children. Government statistics show that even today, about 60 percent of working women in Japan quit their jobs upon the birth of their first child.

"So I thought if I am going to start a business, I'd want to proactively employ women who are raising children or caring for sick or elderly family members, and make it a company where they can continue to work" without having to quit due to such commitments in their private lives, she explained.

Keeping her business running under such considerations is not easy, however. For example, Higashiyama and her only male employee — her elder brother — must shoulder the burden of any overtime needed to complete unfinished work by deadlines.

Finances are also tight. Despite having made a profit from the third year after opening the business, her company slipped into the red due to loans taken out in the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy and is expected to take another year or two before it can return to the black, she said.

Still, Higashiyama is optimistic and has set her vision further down the road. First, she started a business importing sundries, which has nothing to do with metal processing but will provide a means for staff members to work from home should circumstances require them to do so.

She also envisions expanding her staff to over 30 members by hiring people from different generations, so that they can have the flexibility to establish different work styles according to the needs and commitments at their stage of life.

Eventually, she would like to "let one of the mommy artisans take over as company president and I will become company chairman," she said.



Rina Sakai (front row, center), smiles alongside local rice and egg producers in Oshu, Iwate Prefecture, on Nov. 5. KYODO

Meanwhile, miles away in Oshu, Iwate Prefecture, another female entrepreneur successfully established a new business producing bioethanol from rice, making use of idled farmland and stimulating the local economy.

Rina Sakai, 41, used to work in the finance industry until she quit 10 years ago and enrolled in the Tokyo University of Agriculture to study brewing.

After being asked for help by Oshu municipal officials and local farmers, Sakai launched a project to make ethanol fuel from rice. They did manage to extract ethanol, but the production costs were way too high to make ethanol fuel a profitable business.

Then, something from daily life caught Sakai's eye — cosmetics. "The market for organic cosmetics is approaching ¥10 billion. There will be demand (for bioethanol) even if it's expensive," she thought.

Local farmers cultivated organic, industrial-use rice on paddies that had been left idle due to the government's rice acreage-reduction policy. The rice is then fermented at Oshu Labo run by

Sakai's company, Fermentation Co., to extract ethanol.

Branded as 100 percent natural ethanol from a traceable origin, it is sold to cosmetics makers at about ¥25,000 per liter. Demand from different outlets is growing, even though the market price of ordinary ethanol is only several hundred yen a liter.

Additive-free soap made from the rice lees after extraction is also enjoying brisk sales at department stores and other shops in Tokyo. Surplus lees are also provided to local poultry farmers in Oshu as feed, given its high nutritional value.

"This is a full-cycle ecobusiness that makes use of every bit (of the rice) to the fullest," Sakai said proudly.

A mother of two, aged 3 and 7, Sakai usually works from her home office in Tokyo and communicates by phone several times a day with the female staff at Oshu Labo to check on the ethanol extraction processes such as temperature control.

She also goes to Oshu in person about three times a month, leaving Tokyo in the early morning on the first Shinkan-

sen out and returning on the last train at night, while her husband takes care of the children for the day, she said.

Local farmers welcome the new business.

"For us farmers, nothing is more cruel than to be told 'Don't grow rice!'" said farmer Tsutomu Sato, apparently referring to the government's policy since 1970 of trimming rice production to keep surplus rice off the market to prevent prices from falling. "She saved us."

Similarly, Kunie Oikawa, who runs a farm stay, said, "Not only did she find a new use for our rice. She came to this land as a complete stranger, got us all united together and enlivened the whole community."

Sakai's business model of involving the local community in her endeavor has won various business contests both in Japan and abroad, and is beginning to gain attention. Her next goal is to apply her knowhow to utilize other idle farmland across the country.

"There are a lot of challenges, but I am excited about it," she said with a big smile.

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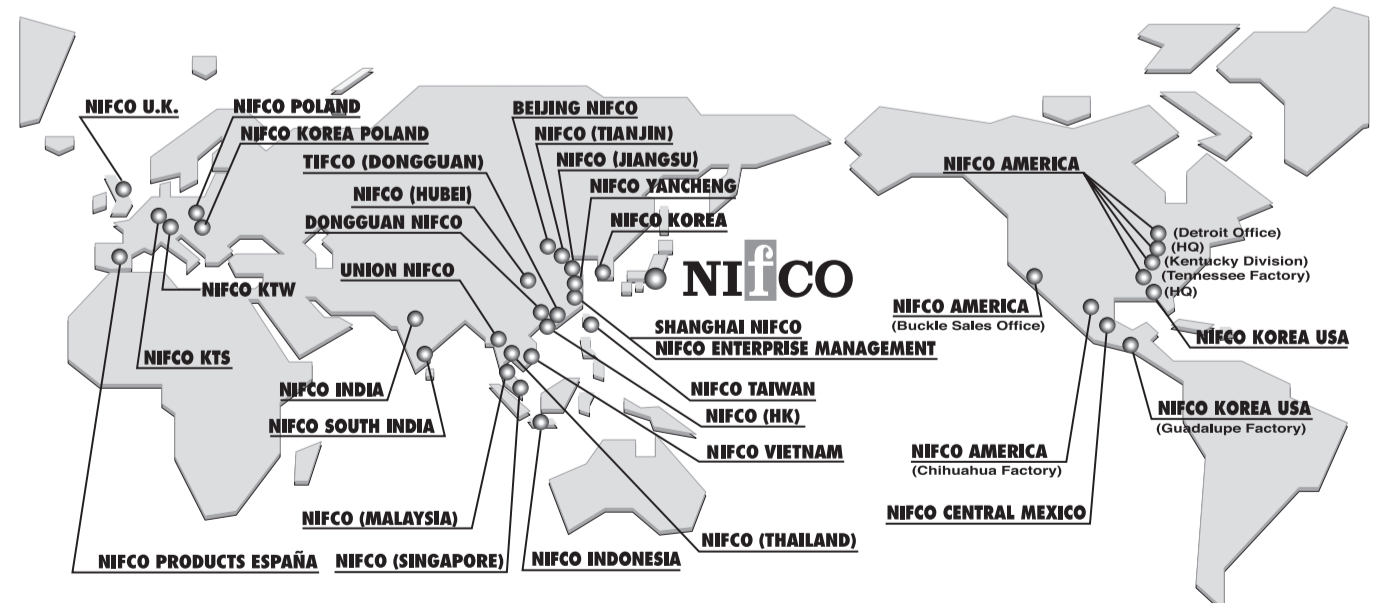


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