



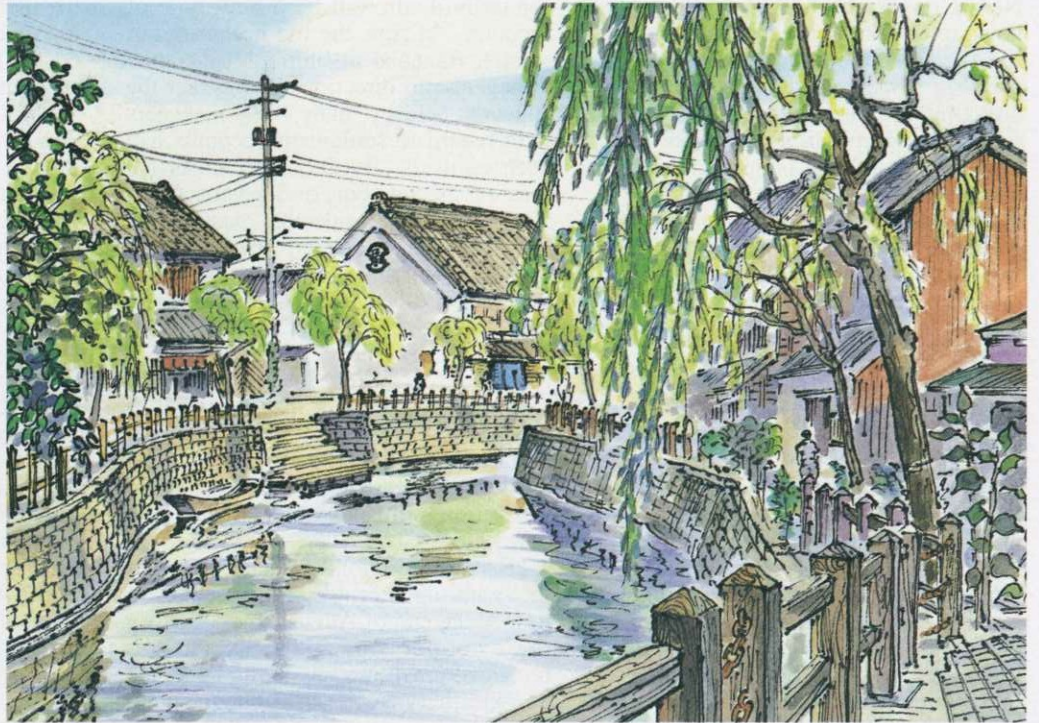
Saving Sawara

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

Recently many more Japanese citizens are traveling abroad than visitors are coming to Japan. Various government think tanks are busy at work trying to reduce this deficit by luring tourists to Tokyo as well as local towns. This has resulted in a great deal of “town and city planning” being mulled over to encourage more tourism. Yet recently I’ve been noticing that much of Japan’s new culture, its real vibrancy, is springing up not so much from big top-down projects, but from the creativity and energy of local citizens. This flowering can be seen in a number of towns which are developing spontaneously from within.

The town of Sawara, population of approximately 50,000, is a 90 minute bus ride from Tokyo (about 40 minutes by train from Tokyo Narita international Airport). A river flows through the center of the town with willow trees and lush weeds lining its water. Edo (1603-1867) and Meiji (1868-1912) period buildings line either side of the canal. Steps leading down to the river, once used to load sake and soy sauce for the trip to Edo (now Tokyo), are still in place. Nothing artificial has been done to open up this town to tourists – it remains pretty much the way it always has been. In a lavishly rebuilt and modernized Japan, this is almost too good to be true.

Baba Mitsuo’s family moved from Nara to Sawara in the 1680s. Still engaged in the family business that produces hand-made sake and *mirin* (sweetened sake for cooking), Baba has a special interest in the town’s history and preservation. In the early 1600s Sawara



was part of a popular pilgrimage route stretching from Edo to the Katorijingu Shrine in Sawara. But Sawara was best known as a main provider for the capital Edo. For example, in the latter half of the 17th century, about 12,000 to 28,000 tons of rice and 15,000 tons of sea products and other produce were shipped from Sawara to Edo each year. The town was extremely prosperous. As recently as the Meiji period, 35 sake and soy sauce businesses operated in handsome warehouses and stores throughout the town. Wealthy owners built elegant residences.

According to Baba, the town was so prosperous that Edo’s successful merchants, samurai and the cultured rich would travel all the way to Sawara to enjoy its culture and entertainment. The amusement included geisha highly skilled in the arts and brought about an

exchange of culture between Edo, the capital, and Sawara.

The origins of this entertainment came via Sawara’s flourishing commerce that was transported by boat. The boats carried local products and goods from Northern Honshu (main island) via Choshi, on to Sawara and Edo. Depending on the height of the river, boats were often stranded in Sawara sometimes for a month or more. When this happened, the boat crews and passengers had ample time to eat, rest and enjoy the many amusements of the town. The fortuitous combination of stopovers and the large amount of trade made Sawara into a lively port. The town’s prosperity started to decline only in the 1950s with the motorization of Japan.

There are more than four separate groups in Sawara that are dedicated to

maintaining and bettering the town, hoping to preserve its connection with its illustrious past in the Edo and Meiji periods, while benefiting it economically. Unlike many towns in Japan which have gone on building sprees – museums, stadiums, theme parks and so forth – to bring in money through modernizing and attracting visitors, the citizens of Sawara are intent on shoring up their community and preventing massive building schemes from changing the town's friendly, connected lifestyle.

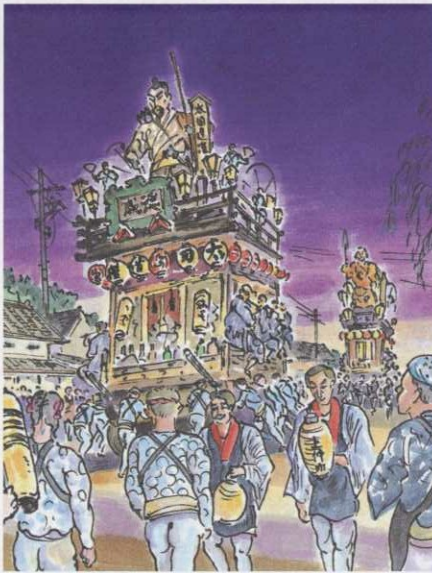
Komori Shuntaro, an active member of the Seinenkaigi-sho (youth society), which was formed 35 years ago, says his group launched off on preserving the town about 15 years ago. The Shuhari Real Estate Company is owned by his family and he is actively promoting the renovation and preservation of the town's many remaining historic structures. The group aims to do more than just straight preservation – they want to fuse old with new in a way that will save the traditional structures while at the same time make them comfortable and convenient to use. Komori feels that it is useless to preserve old warehouses, shops and homes exactly as they are, because they end up being close to movie sets – interesting to look at but impractical and difficult to use. The aim is to save the flavor of the town while at the same time keeping the traditional buildings in everyday use, not simply as places for tourists to visit.

His real estate office, which dates from the Meiji period, is a fine example of the direction they want to take. It has just been renovated in a way that has left as much as possible of the original structure, including wooden pillars and walls with the scratches of time. To this he has added thin modern light fixtures that call to mind the naked light bulbs of traditional vending shops and give it a warm and delightful atmosphere. An enclosed glass room for conferences was created that is appointed tastefully with designer furniture and exceedingly ancient scrolls and vases. The effect is modern, yet very Japanese. It is surprising how well the wooden pillars, *tatami* mats and paper *shoji* screens blend in with cutting-edge modern design. In

order to achieve just the right balance of old and new, Komori and his group consult with architects and designers from all over Japan and abroad.

Kase Jun-ichiro's group gets right into the river every summer to clean it out. They too are working hard on planning the town's future in a way that will not make it just another tourist site, but will be a place that people want to visit, nonetheless. In 1994 they began to receive money from the local government to help defray a small part of the enormous expense that owners must pay to preserve landmark buildings.

Two of Kase's buildings are under renovation and a warehouse is serving as the store for his family's *tsukudani* (fish and seaweed boiled down in soy sauce) business. Nine generations ago his family started out in the soy sauce trade, but gradually his mother's *tsukudani*



became their main business. Kase says it is enormously more expensive to live in and use these old buildings, what with constant repairs and lighting and heating costs, than to just tear them down and build anew. But he says, even though he loses money, he feels he should honor his family and their history as Sawara merchants. He feels that his ancestors are part of the house, shop and warehouse, so he wouldn't feel right tearing

them down.

Sawara sponsors two yearly festivals at the Suwa and Yasaka shrines. Whereas traditional festivals are still held all over Japan, a great number of them rely on participation by non-locals – enthusiasts of Japanese dancing or *mikoshi* (portable shrine) carrying – without whom the festivals cannot continue. What is unusual in Sawara is that almost everyone living in the town, young and old, participates in the festivals enthusiastically, and as in the past it is this local participation that knits the community together. Huge wooden hand carved floats sporting enormous figures are pulled through the neighborhood and along the river. Their thick, wooden wheels are levered with logs to turn the vehicles around corners – an amazing sight to behold. Inside the floats residents play a sophisticated type of ancient music as others dance alongside, whirling to the music, in the lovely shadows cast by candle-lit lanterns.

Everyone I talked to here says that it's because of the town-wide participation in the festivals that the community is still warm and tight. Visitors easily notice the unusually active, human-oriented feel of Sawara. It is said that one of the conditions that Sawara's youth insist on when they start working is that they can take time off during these two festivals to participate. This commitment and love of tradition is something truly special in Japan today.

At a time when the construction boom is virtually mowing down most old and not so old buildings to make way for the new and the few traditional buildings that are saved often have no function apart from tourism, Sawara residents are showing foresight and long-term vision in their plans to preserve and protect the connectedness of their town. **UJI**

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Kiritani Itsuo, her husband, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.