

The Pleasures of Mucking around the Venerable Towers of Shinjuku

By Corinne Bret

When one thinks of Japan one is always tempted to use the never-ending cliché of “marriage between tradition and modernity.” Japanese culture is teeming with a blend of contradictory images. The combination of bitter and sweet in certain pastries for example. Under the surface of the tongue is another taste one finds pleasantly strange. The notion of *omote/ura*, literally translated as in front and behind, the visible and the hidden which governs the actions and gestures of the Japanese people and which in business and political circles, translates better as facade and undercurrent or even candor and deceit.

This juxtaposition of differences refers to an esthetic of ambiguity — *aimaisa*. In Japan nothing is ever black OR white but is black AND white at the same time. The Japanese are not necessarily liberal or leftist. They can quite easily, without being scorned, be at the same time liberal and leftist. Were a hint of morality to diminish this ambiguity it would lose its strange flavor, its “innocence”...its innocence that wants to make good and evil co-exist.

If one can cause harm while intending to do good, or if one can occasionally find some good while having wished for a poor outcome, why separate the two notions? For someone raised in a Judeo-Christian culture and who knows the awkwardness of expressing oneself in an explicit manner, ambivalence smacks more of the truth. To be at the same time man and woman, adult and child, city and village, beautiful and ugly, fast and slow... OR stop the momentum of life, AND generate a kind of dynamism.

For me today, after 20 years experience in Japan, what is at the “heart” of this country? There is the



The east area of Shinjuku never sleeps — a Kabukicho crossing on a weekday night

Shinjuku district. Because it is here that the ‘marriage of contradictions’ manifests itself the best, emitting a chaotic life force.

Shinjuku... it’s the film of Tokyo played at high speed, and also a ‘still’ of the image of the megalopolis: living pieces of the city’s mosaic, loom up there in a maelstrom of the here and now transcending time and space.

This condensed version of the capital in a perpetual state of unfolding, this clone model which symbolizes the country in its entirety and which has become autonomous by some aberration, is a district assembled in a hotchpotch way by a crazy urbanist, most likely a parent of Roger Rabbit, the ludic rabbit. Shinjuku, designed by everyone and no one at the same time, was not born of some structured urban design, but of a big bang comprised of multiple forces and of eccentric tastes which were nourished

by the same ‘divine plan’: to attract, to seduce, to detain, to spur consumption. And it is this spontaneous ode to pragmatism, to organization and disorder which rules over its chaotic decor, since the beginning and throughout its history.

Shinjuku, literally the “new lodge” district, was during the Edo era a stopover point along the route which linked the capital to the Koshu region (today known as Yamanashi prefecture). This stopover created in the 17th century frequented by merchants and all kinds of travelers, had become a thriving center for business and prostitution a century later. It was shut down for ‘immorality’ by the Shogunate but reopened thanks to a policy of tolerance towards red-light districts which confined prostitution to certain areas at the beginning of the 19th century. Shinjuku includes as many low-class brothels as it does hotels and stores.

In the period between the two wars all social developments meshed together in this urban melting pot. Fashioned after Montparnasse, Shinjuku attracted from the 1920's, artists, writers, protesters, as well as "contemporary young men and women" who invented the fashion of the times. But also in the perimeter to the south of the station a real enclave of miracles filled with writers, peddlers, con-artists, and the homeless, an underground proletariat victim of the economic crisis. Flattened by the bombings of 1944/45, an impressive black market installed itself in front of the station, run by a man named Ozu, a ruffian, who lorded over the eastern section of the area and imposed his law for a period of about ten years.

From this period a united section of ramshackle wooden structures next to the railway track appeared nicknamed "shomben yokocho," the 'pissing street' (conjuring up images of the habit amongst men of urinating in the street, upright against a wall except if the owner of the wall has drawn a *torii*, the sacred gate, for even the most drunk of Japanese will never urinate on a *torii*!)

Today, the holes in the wall of "shomben yokocho" serve *yakitori*, *ramen*, and other popular dishes.

After the war, a certain Mr. Suzuki, president of the Association of Inhabitants of North Shinjuku, began to dream of creating for an enlightened public, a culture center with cinemas and theaters. Thanks to his efforts, the Koma theater opened its doors in 1956, and this part of Shinjuku was soon filled with a long string of restaurants, bars, cinemas and a music hall. Named Kabukicho, the place became "cultural" but in the larger sense of the word: nocturnal

activities igniting its streets, Kabukicho very quickly became the most bustling "red-light district" on the "archipelago". The area chosen by "the sex industry", the city that never sleeps.

It was also around this time, in 1948, that Golden Gai emerged, "the golden district", a minute space wedged in between Kabukicho and the sanctuary of Hanazono, submerged in several hundred lilliputian-sized bars run by drag queens or *mama-sans* which one might say are straight out of a romance novel. While toward the very beautiful Shinjuku Park, the area of "Shinjuku Nichome," a hive



"Shonben Yokocho" is still popular for its reasonably priced dishes

of prostitution until a law prohibiting such activity was brought in in 1956, developed into the male homosexual capital of the country. Today, still, "Nichome" is known for its men-only establishments.

The 13th of February 1985 was a fatal day for the Japanese sex industry: at midnight the neon lights went out and the new restrictive law for the red-light district was enacted with vigor, putting the brakes on the escalation of what one calls here "sexploitation." Kabukicho as well as all the other red-light districts on the "archipelago" were forced to curb

their activities. The old law of 1956 was no longer valid, so a new law was necessary to protect teenagers and put the brakes on pornography which had ended up by penetrating even the T.V. screen.

This strict repression, if it did not completely destroy the sex industry which continued to rake in billions of yen, had the effect of once again improving Japan's moral standard, in particular the media, beginning with T.V.: "sex" all but vanished from television broadcasts.

As for the street scene, the Japanese sex industry is debonair. As soon as one arrives in Kabukicho, preferably around dusk, when in defiance of blatant waste, the most beautiful neon lights in Asia light up, one is greeted by a myriad of multicolored signs.

A stellar 'landscape' of ideograms. The more dusk creeps in the more it shines, sparkles, shimmers, mirrors back its own reflection, sprinkling the sky with generosity. An illuminated fantasy land where one can stroll about without fear. However behind a facade of naive perversity, the sex industry owes its expanding dynamism to a sadder

reality, that of a common trait amongst Asians. Filipinos and Thais make up the majority of those who arrive by the hundreds in Japan with visas purchased with several million yen, and who are forced to repay the debt by an employer, a 'supporter' who garners almost all the money they make for the services they provide. But one can stroll around Kabukicho without seeing anything or being aware of this flesh trade, in part run by the *yakuza*, the Japanese mafia.

In 1966, with the station's esplanade completed, it quickly began to play a role that the authorities had not

foreseen. Student protesters chose this paved site, to give free reign to their anger in October 1968. A student center because of its proximity to Waseda University, and intellectual center, this area called Shinjuku provided the scene for literary works, theatrical performances and cinematic screenings, such as the film by cinema giant Oshima Nagisa *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*. The area is still a meeting place today, in front of a giant screen made of thousands of circuits which whirl and click around.

There one can keep abreast of the latest news around the "archipelago" and the world, participate in a rock concert or a brief television program, the entire place dotted with publicity spots.

In the eastern quarter therefore, Shinjuku has never stopped attracting all segments of society, all novelties, jazz in the first jazz bars and coffee houses of the period, contemporary art or thought, in its bars, cinemas and avant-garde theaters, not to mention the opulence of Kabukicho to enlarge the fortunes of its businesses. For here as elsewhere in Tokyo, the political clout of business people influenced the process of developing wealth: in order to serve the great Isetan department store, a subway station was created, as well as an underground walkway linking it with Shinjuku station, then its criss-crossing corridors dotted with boutiques which have branched out to become the largest underground commercial center in the country. The shops in the two-level underground city are linked, so there is no need for an umbrella to get through Shinjuku on rainy days.

In the western section, it was towards the end of the '60's that the area began to develop. While the eastern section was designed in an



The new City Hall, built in 1991, has become a Shinjuku landmark

anarchic fashion, the western portion of the station was mapped out meticulously — a symmetrical landscape with wide avenues dotted with concrete skyscrapers made of glass and steel. It is here that the new City Hall was built in the Spring of 1991.

Inspired by Notre Dame of Paris, this monumental specimen of post-modern architecture designed by the master of its style Tange Kenzo, is comprised of two towers of unequal height — one with 47 stories and 3 basement floors measuring 243 meters, the other with 33 stories and 3 basements measuring 163 meters — linked by a 41 meter structure. The entire 'monument' is swathed in a gray 'suit' comprised of fine geometric impressions evoking a salaryman's 'uniform.'

As in former times the strong fortress was surrounded by ramps

and a teeming populace. Shinjuku offers the same spatial organization: the seat of power (financial and administrative) in the western skyscrapers which jut out over the city, in the east, intense devotion to all kinds of social pleasures, ultra-chic displays in shop windows to the most free-thinking, most licentious of ways. Between the two, the vital link whose nine train lines and subways channel a daily population of more than 3 million passengers.

To the west of all its height and grandeur and honour rests the public domain, at its feet, however, the private lives and enterprises, brought to life by all the demons of a consumer society, reveal themselves, in piles of odds and ends: business, unemployment, those on foot, those without shelter, hobos, students, drugs, sex, the mafia, games, drunken salarymen, men and women from every country in Asia... the dynamism of Shinjuku bursts forth out of these eccentric unions both native and foreign, out of ugliness and beauty, out of rational thinking and conviviality. And Shinjuku does not need to confine itself to the east or west, spreading into the southern sector, into the neighboring area. And what if Japan's vitality, condensed into Shinjuku, was in the middle of weaving its 'tentacles' further afield? As for me, I cannot imagine living anywhere else besides the center which beats at the heart of the "archipelago."

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