

Matsue: Timeless Charm Still Resists Change

The city of Matsue in western Japan developed as a castle town after a feudal lord built his residence there in the early 16th century. Matsue is now the administrative and economic center of Shimane Prefecture, although with a population of only 140,000 it is one of Japan's smaller prefectural capitals.

What it lacks in size, however, Matsue easily makes up for in beauty. Surrounded by the Nakaumi Sea to the east, Lake Shinji to the west and the Sea of Japan to the north, the city boasts a spectacular natural environment. Moreover, since Matsue escaped damage during World War II, it retains the appearance of an old castle town. Matsue therefore enjoys a reputation in Japan and overseas as a very traditional Japanese town that, being steeped in history, enables visitors to forget for a while the hustle and bustle of modern life in the big city.

Gateway for culture

The district including Matsue, which goes by the name of Izumo, faces the Korean Peninsula across the Sea of Japan. In the past, therefore, it served as a gateway for the entry into Japan of continental culture and the place where ancient Izumo culture blossomed. (For an



A sunset at Lake Shinji

account of Izumo, see the Outing column in the January/February 1990 issue of the *Journal*.)

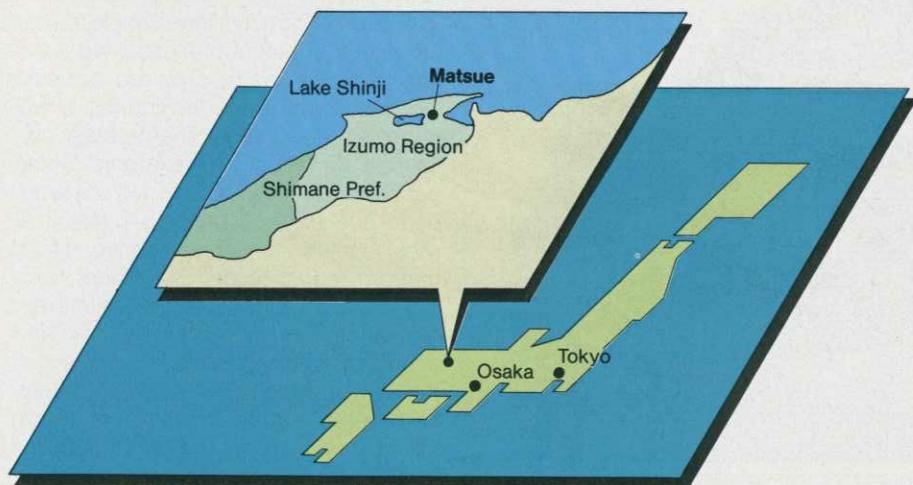
In ancient times, people from the continent crossed over to Japan, settled in Izumo after being attracted by its outstanding environment, and taught local people the advanced agricultural and production techniques of the continent. When word of Izumo's beauty reached back to the Korean Peninsula, other emigrants followed. Over the centuries Izumo's role as a gateway faded into history, and ancient Izumo culture came to be handed down from generation to generation in the form of myths. To this day shrines in the district are still dedicated to the ancient gods.

Exactly 100 years ago, in the summer of 1890, another foreigner discovered Matsue—Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who settled down there, enchanted by the city's beautiful scenery, friendly people and traditional culture. Hearn wrote about Matsue in numerous books, essays and letters, and called it the "chief city of the province of the gods."

Born in Greece, Hearn emigrated to the United States, where he worked as a reporter for the *Inquirer* in Cincinnati and the *Times Democrat* in New Orleans and also tried his hand at writing. Shortly after arriving in Japan, he moved to Matsue to take up a position as a secondary school teacher. Later Hearn married a Japanese woman and became a Japanese citizen, taking the name Koizumi Yakumo—*yakumo* being a word used in old poems to depict Izumo.

In an essay carried in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891, Hearn described the beautiful sunset seen from the banks of Lake Shinji, not far from his home in Matsue, as follows:

"There are no such sunsets in Japan as in the tropics: the light is gentle as a light of dreams; there are no furies of color; there are no chromatic violences in nature in this Orient. All in sea or sky is tint rather than color, and tint vapor-toned. I think that the exquisite taste of the race in the matter of colors and of tints, as exemplified in the dyes of their wonderful textures, is largely attributable to the sober



and delicate beauty of nature's tones in this all-temperate world where nothing is garish.

"Before me the fair vast lake sleeps, softly luminous, far-ringed with chains of blue volcanic hills shaped like a sierra.... The sun begins to set, and exquisite astonishment of tinting appear in water and sky.

"Dead rich purples cloud broadly behind and above the indigo blackness of the serrated hills—mist purples, fading upward smokily into faint vermilion and dim gold, which again melt up through ghostliest greens into the blue. The deeper waters of the lake, far away, take a tender violet indescribable, and the silhouette of the pine-shadowed island seems to float in that sea of soft sweet color...."

The beautiful natural scenery that Hearn described so exquisitely a century ago remains to this day, thanks in great measure to the deep warmth that the local people feel for nature. In *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* and other works, Hearn wrote with affection not only about the natural environment in and around Matsue but also about the simple life of the local people and their customs.

Over the years the traditions and customs that Hearn described have mostly disappeared, but visitors to the district still get a feeling of the hospitality of the local people. If you spend a night at an inn in the city, the owner will probably say "oshizukani" (have a quiet time) when bidding you good night. This expression puzzles even Japanese visitors, because in Tokyo and other large cities people usually say "goyukkuri" (take your time). But the Matsue expression reflects well the character of the local people, who place enormous importance on tranquility in their lives. It is true that Matsue did not suffer any damage during the war, but it is also certain that without this characteristic of the local people, the city long ago would have lost its natural scenery and its appearance as a quiet old castle town.

Step into history

Matsue Castle stands on a hill in the center of the city, its 400-year-old tower blending with the old samurai residences surrounding the castle to give visitors the feeling that they have stepped back a few centuries in history.



The 400-year-old tower of Matsue Castle

Photo: Shinya Sakamoto

Hearn, who described the majestic tower as "looking somewhat like a huge pagoda," used to visit the castle frequently, going to the top of the tower to take in the spectacular view of Matsue and Lake Shinji. The old samurai residence on the edge of the castle moat that he lived in has been carefully preserved and, like the neighboring Lafcadio Hearn Museum, is open to the public. Hearn described his house as "a katchiu-yashiki, the ancient residence of some samurai of high rank." The owner himself had actually built the small and simple gardens on three sides of the house that gave Hearn so much pleasure—"the simple pleasure of squatting on the shaded veranda over-looking the gardens...." No doubt visitors to the house these days share Hearn's feeling for Matsue's nature and people when they gaze at the garden from the veranda, just as he did.

Looked at from a different angle, the local people's love of old-fashioned ways and traditions can be criticized as being too conservative and lacking the ability to absorb new things. The problem can be seen in tourism, for example. Some people agree that Matsue, with its wonderful scenery, hot springs and historical sites, should not be developed into a modern tourist resort. But others point out that the vast majority of visitors are elderly folk. Few young tourists come, and young residents of Matsue tend to drift away to the big cities. Matsue is keen to develop as an international tourist city and to invite academic facilities and advanced information industries, so



The samurai residence district is carefully preserved as a historical and cultural asset of the city.

Photo: Shinya Sakamoto

that young people will find the city more appealing.

But blending the old and the new is no easy matter. As Hearn wrote nearly 100 years ago: "...the ancient peace and the ancient charm seem doomed to pass way. For impermanency is the nature of

things, more particularly in Japan; and the changes and the changers shall also be changed until there is found no place for them,—and regret is vanity. The dead art that made the beauty of this place was the art, also, of that faith to which belongs the all-consoling text, 'Verily,

even plants and trees, rocks and stones, all shall enter into Nirvana.'" ("In a Japanese Garden")

Toshio Iwasaki
Editor

Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry

Table Talk

Hokkaido Restaurant Okhotsk

Just as Chinese and Arabs who depend on mutton for much of their nutrition have scores of names to describe sheep according to their stage of growth, sex, shape and the color and quality of their wool, so the Japanese, whose principal source of protein for centuries was the sea, have many different names for fish. Yellowtail, or *Seriola quinqueradiata* for the scientific-minded, has only one name in English. But people in Tokyo have four names for the yellowtail, including *huri*, according to its size and stage of growth, while people in some regions have as many as six.

Since ancient times, salmon has been the king of all large fish eaten in Japan. It was caught in great abundance in the rivers of the north and off the northern coasts. Today the Japanese consume a third of the estimated one million tons of salmon and trout hauled in annually all over the world. And even today, shoals of silvery salmon swim up the rivers of northern Honshu and Hokkaido to spawn in their place of birth, a scene which has come to herald the arrival of autumn.

Naturally, the salmon has been given different names in different regions. The people of Hokkaido call it by different

names according to the very time and place where it is caught. The indigenous Ainu people who settled in northern Japan in prehistory called the salmon *kamuy-chep*, meaning "fish of the gods" or at times *shipi*, "the genuine fish."

There are many ways of preparing salmon, at least 200 in Japan alone. People in Hokkaido, especially, know how to eat every part, from the head to the tail fin. And the bones? Of course, they use the bones to make delicious soup stock.

Ishikari-nabe, a heavy stew of salmon and vegetables cooked in an earthen pot and served piping hot on the dinner table, is probably the most popular of all Hokkaido salmon dishes. The Kindaitei restaurant in Ishikari-cho, Hokkaido, first opened in 1880, is said to have originated it. The vegetables and *tofu* bean curd, cooked together with chunks of salmon in a soup flavored with potent *miso* soybean paste, taste best when eaten in the freezing cold winter of Hokkaido, where the skies are sprinkled with snow crystals like diamond dust.

If you want your Ishikari-nabe without stepping out of Tokyo, however, you can enjoy it at Okhotsk. Located in the midst of a bustling business district, Okhotsk opened its main restaurant in Ginza more than 20 years ago, and now has three chain restaurants in the central part of the city and a branch in Sapporo, Hokkaido.

It's nice to try the frozen sliced red salmon *sashimi* known as *ruibe* (from Russian for fish) with wine or beer. Or you might try the six-dish course menu (¥5,000) to sample a full range of the ingredients native to Hokkaido. The course changes from month to month, and includes Ishikari-nabe in the winter. If your wallet is fat enough, and your stomach in need of stretching, there are many other courses you can try.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

Address: Hibiya Kokusai Bldg., 2-2-3,
Uchisaiwai-cho, Chiyoda-ku
Tel: (03) 3501-1021

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