

The Yoshida Shinden Story

Christopher Blasdel

The Isezaki-chō neighborhood of Yokohama is famous for, amongst other things, its shopping street. A little over a kilometer long, it houses such upscale stores as Uniqlo and Kaldi along with used book stores (at least half a dozen by my count), an antique store with an amazing array of used daily artifacts and minor treasures, a shop selling matsuri goods (flutes, percussion, lion masks and costumes,) and little stores selling traditional sundry items that are difficult to find in the more gentrified parts of the city, for example bamboo trays or old-fashioned brooms made from bamboo and straw along with other sundries that are essential to quotidian life in Japan.

At the entrance to this shopping street there is an enormous chrome sculpture. I'm not exactly sure what it is meant to symbolize, though the idea of "disorder" comes to mind. The frenzied explosion of protons and neutrons? A wave hitting the rocky shore?

Or perhaps it symbolizes the haphazardness of the local zoning laws, or maybe even the coming and goings of all the various examples of humanity in this area. This garish symbol of disorder, in the midst of all the high-rise condominiums that have popped up in the area, dominates the block in an almost endearing way.

The dining choices are equally rich. Small Chinese diners share space with steak houses, ramen stores, old fashioned *teishoku* set menu restaurants, Thai and Indian eateries and of course soba and sushi shops. If that does not suffice, there are always the more refined Italian and French restaurants which cater to more expensive tastes, but in reality nothing along this street is overly expensive.

Except for sex. Just off either side of the



bustling shopping street one encounters the world of the sex trade—the old brothels, love hotels, pachinko parlors and the many special service massage parlors. This area was infamous up until the last part of the 20th century as Yokohama’s red light district, and vestiges of the businesses still abound. Most of these establishments have their prices written up front: “¥40,000 for two hours,” “One-hour special, ¥25,000!” What one receives for these prices is not spelled out, but easy to imagine.

One sign, on a back alley just next to the main shopping street, is refreshingly explicit. Hanging on an old, dilapidated two-story building, this vertical sign spells it offering with a very clever visual depiction: “Hand Service,” written in katakana. A sign in the store window further clarifies “Ten minutes at ¥1500—the cheapest in the land.”

Along the edges of these back-alley ways lurk serious looking young men, dressed in the typical fashion of the yakuza. During my early morning walks, I often see these flashy males with scantily-dressed females hanging on their arms, stumbling out from these various establishments into the morning light. Whether these men are their pimps or boyfriends, I cannot tell, and the slurred conversations I overhear as they walk by offer no clues.

But there are more layers to the “back story” of this area, as I discover a very small shrine on the corner across from a “Soap Land” massage parlor (back in the 1980s they used to be called “Turkish Baths,” until the Turkish government complained and the generic name of these establishments was voluntarily changed to Soap Land. Who says the yakuza can’t be accommodating?).

The shrine has a large sign, upon which are written two poems, penned by the famous husband-wife poet couple of the early 20th century, Tekkan and Yosano Akiko. These names grab my attention, as Akiko is a favorite poet of mine and one of Japan’s earliest feminist poet.

Yosano Tekkan:
Someone who doesn’t realize
how the spades created



Yokohama's Shinden in the Spring of the Manji Era
can't be termed as one who knows Yokohama.



Yosano Akiko:
In the Meireki Era
The spades began digging
and the sea transformed into land.

What do these poems referring to, I wondered? I read more on the sign and discovered that this area, now so vibrantly commercial, had in fact been a shallow valley that opened to the sea and was populated since the Jōmon period. The sea then infringed on the land during the Holocene glacial retreat some 19,000 years ago, turning it into marshy inlet, somewhat resembling a hanging temple bell. Much later, a small, lateral spit of land formed at the mouth of the inlet, and a village was built: Yokohama (“Lateral Beach”).

In mid 17th century, a local building supplier, Yoshida Kanbē realized that the marshy land could be reclaimed from the sea and turned into rice paddies to feed the growing population of Yokohama. In 1656, the second year of the Meireki Era, he and the village laborers broke ground for the project with the *kuwa* (all purpose spade or hoe). They took dirt from the hills on both sides of the inlet to build a dam.



The marshy inlet before reclamation

den) appeared out of the inlet. The efforts of the villagers were indispensable to this project, but they attributed its ultimate success to the local *kami* and Buddhist deities.

Not far from the shopping street is located a large shrine, the Hie Jinja, which acts as the tutelary protectorate shrine for the whole area. During one of my morning walks I visited the shrine and started up a conversation with the head priest,

who was outside raking leaves. It turned out that we were both about the same age and both had studied gagaku around the same time, although with different teachers. The principal deity enshrined at Hie Jinja is Ōyama Kūhi no Mikoto, guardian of the mountains and waterways. He also oversees the martial arts and is honored as the god of sake brewing as well. Hie Shrine location is prime and, like most shrines, utmost important is given to the *feng shui*. It faces south, right at the confluence of the Ōoka and Nakamu-

Unfortunately, in 1657, a long rainy season and uncooperative sea washed away the dam and all their efforts in a period of eleven days. Yoshida determined that a dam made of rocks would be the only way to keep the sea from destroying the project again. The villagers, however, had had enough and resisted his efforts to restart the project. Yoshida was able to persuade them to try once more, however, and this time he enlisted the help of a civil engineer who brought in heavy basalt boulders from Chiba and the Izu Peninsula to construct the dams, which succeeded in holding the sea back. In 1659 (second year of the Manji Era), the new rice fields of Yoshida (Yoshida Shin-



After reclamation

ra Rivers—the nexus of the Yoshida Shinden reclaimed land.

I asked the priests if there were any descendants of the Yoshida family still around. “Yes, everywhere.” He replied. He also mentioned that just a few weeks ago they all gathered—several dozens of them—at the shrine to pray to their ancestors. All masked



and socially distanced, of course.

So, according to Tekkan’s poem, one can’t know Yokohama without grasping this bit of interesting history, literally hiding just below the surface of the Isezaki-chō shopping street. The creation of this new land required all hands on deck for Yoshida Kanbē and his army of laborers—a slightly different kind of “hand service” that can now be found in his reclaimed land.

The Isezaki-chō neighborhood is a palimpsest of humanity. Beginning from the Jōmon era, thousands of years ago and continuing through the public works of the feudal times, industrialization of the early 20th century and now the hustle and bustle of the information age. Then as before, the basic needs of food, housing and entertainment remain the same throughout history.



Isezaki-chō as viewed from one of the adjacent hills. This was originally a marshy inlet that was reclaimed for rice paddies by Yoshida Kanbē and the villagers. Today it is a thriving commercial and residential area of Yokohama, nearby the modern developments of Minato Mirai.