

## On the Study Tour to Yamagata Prefecture, 21 – 23 August 2006

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I was part of a group of five Visiting Research Fellows who went on a Japan Study Tour accompanied by IDE Staff, covering some places in the Yamagata Prefecture and the following are my impressions of it.

On the first day after lunch we went to the Yamagata Prefectural Government Office where we listened to a welcome speech by the Director of the Commercial and Economic Exchange Division of the Commerce, Industry, Labor and Tourism Department and a detailed lecture on the economy by the Deputy Director which was followed by questions and answers. What emerged was that Yamagata Prefecture was trying out various measures to raise the prosperity of the prefecture. Yamagata has a high share of women in employment, outstripping even Sweden, known for the high level of female employment. While manufacturing is the top performing sector, agriculture and services sector are balanced. While Yamagata outstrips Hong Kong in terms of value added, the labor force size is just two thirds of the latter indicating the high value added per worker. Yamagata can boast of the development of a number of cutting edge technologies. Tourism promotion is an important issue for the local government as the prefecture affords skiing possibilities in winter.

Next we went to Higashine city suburbs to see the plant which converts used cooking oil into natural gas which can be used as a fuel. While the entire operation was essentially low tech, we appreciated the innovative approach which while producing fuel from waste was also contributing to lessening the environmental pollution. This was followed by a visit to the Yamedera Temple area where we saw it from a distance, as it was placed on a steep mountain side.

The next day we went to observe the Rainbow Plan in Nagai city. This project essentially makes compost out of biodegradable kitchen waste. The least that could be said is that it was an impressive affair. Kitchen waste is collected from designated points in the city, then dumped into a pit and mixed with reagents so that fermentation sets in. Then through additional processes, over a period of about three months, this is converted to compost which is nature friendly. Throughout the process artificial chemicals are kept out. The final produce is sold at highly subsidized rates to farmers, who are free to view the entire production process and be convinced of the authenticity of the product. It is reported that where this compost is used, the soil is alive with nutrient sustaining worms. The cooperation of the local government and the

willingness of the people to do orderly separation of kitchen waste are in no small measure important for the success of the project. A number of teams from outside, both domestic and foreign have studied this model.

The next stop on our agenda was to directly experience traditional flower dying. After listening to the master, we dipped our hands into the safflower dye and tried out our version of the possible pattern that could be made on a handkerchief. When everyone ultimately produced variegated patterns there were squeals of delight as we had produced our own design! The way the traditional arts of Japan are kept alive and valued in this world of rapid automation clearly stood out.

From here we proceeded to the park in Yonezawa city which houses the sedate burial ground of Uesugi Yozan and his clan. This austere Daimyo was revered for his contributions to his people. The towering cedar trees, some about 300-400 years of age, around the burial ground provide an impressive and yet peaceful ambience which resonates with "the weight of history".

The following day we visited Mr. Watanabe who practices organic farming and listened to his lecture and asked questions and followed this with a tour around his farm. In the face of shortage of labor, he has been successfully farming a part of his land organically against quite a few odds. He uses machinery to the minimum and completely avoids artificial fertilizers. Inspired by his work as many as seventy persons of a large number of people who so far came to study his model have settled in his village and are pursuing the same kind of agriculture. We wound up the tour with a visit to the Takahata winery where one could witness the production process of wine making.

What are the impressions of the tour? The first was the hospitality and politeness of the Japanese wherever we went. This is quite well known so I will not belabor the point but to be the one at the receiving end of it was something which one will remember for long. The second was the unending greenery of the countryside. This refers to not just the green landscape that one comes across in any country's countryside. What impressed one was that the greenery was *orderly* and not wild. That could only be so because a lot of labor was being expended on maintaining the greenery. Once again I marveled at the meticulousness and discipline of the Japanese as well as their sense of appreciation of beauty. The third was that despite the maddening proliferation of techno gadgets and stressful living in the urban areas, sanity was being sanctified in the rural areas through the preservation of traditional arts, organic farming, environmental friendly living, conservation of energy, respect for men of substance and the preservation of old values.

When I, who had hunted for the video cassette of Oshin in my earlier visit and had replayed it innumerable times, came to know that we were moving over the areas where Oshin's story evolved this tour brought a special poignancy and a renewed respect for the Yamagata countryside.