

Foreigners' Roles in Preserving Historical Houses: A Case Study in a Rural Town in Japan

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Abstract

Historical houses in Japan are endangered, mainly because of financial reasons. Some foreigners take this situation more seriously than locals and play active roles in their preservation and utilization. The longevity of buildings in Japan tends to be short due to social and cultural reasons. The primary cause of this is the scrap-and-build practice in the construction industry that contributes to the country's economic growth. The real estate market in Japan finds little value in old houses, partly because of this commercial motivation and partly because Japanese culture has a higher appreciation for brand-new things. Unlike local people, foreigners find cultural value in historic or vernacular houses in Japan, and they are more used to self-maintaining their homes. Additionally, foreigners, especially those with a different ethnic appearance, draw public attention, and gain funding more than local people.

This article reveals such a case that occurred in a small rural town called Hino, in Shiga Prefecture. An American, who appreciated the traditional Japanese lifestyle, bought a 120-year-old abandoned house. He restored it using traditional construction methods and later moved into Hino, where he has lived for the last 15 years. He soon became the secretariat of the Hino Historical Preservation Society. His activities ignited his neighbors and created a movement of restoration, which made the environment better and drew in more new residents, especially young people. The number of abandoned houses in his neighborhood decreased remarkably, and community events and local businesses are revitalized with respect to the tradition of Hino.

Background

Endangered Historic Properties in Japan

A typical reason why historic homes in urban areas are demolished is that the land is more valuable than the existing erected houses. Subsequently, it makes more financial sense to build high-volume apartments or offices. There are developers who knock on the landowners' doors and solicit such conversions. Another reason is that the inheritance tax is so high that the heir cannot pay without selling the land. In such cases, the house needs to be demolished, because otherwise, the land value depreciates. In Japan, old or second-hand houses are valued much less than brand-new ones regardless if they are historic or not. In the case where the land value is so small that the property has no heirs, buildings become abandoned. They eventually decay and fall apart, causing trouble for the neighborhood. In 2018, there were about 8.5 million "unoccupied houses," which was approximately 13.6% of all houses in Japan at that time. Currently, this is one of the most significant social issues in Japan. Despite this nationwide trend, there is a rural town where the number of unoccupied houses is decreasing. The whole town is being slowly but steadily revitalized by its volunteer residents without any national government initiatives or grants.

Methods

Interviews and Observation

This report is based on in-depth interviews with key people from the Hino Historical Townscape Preservation Society. The first was for one hour on the 14 May 2019 with Mr. Yoshiyuki Uchiyama; and then on the 19 May 2019, Mr. Austin Moore was interviewed for approximately five hours, which included follow-up via emails. The author also briefly spoke with four town officials and four active residents, who have been contributing to the revitalization of Hino, to find out how it worked. All other data are from public announcements by the Town of Hino or are personal communication with town officials. Chapter 4, the History of Hino, primarily relied on the research by Yuga Kariya in 1993¹.

Overview of Hino Town

Location and Demography

Hino is a town in Shiga Prefecture, Japan, about 50 km away from Kyoto. The area is officially about 12,000 square kilometers, but most areas are forest and farmland. People live on about 5.7% of the land area, which mainly extends for a couple of kilometers along the historic main street that leads to the lost castle.

Despite its inconvenient location with little public transportation, the town has kept a population of around 22,000 since the 1990s. Although, the residents are aging, like in other rural areas of Japan. There are less than 900 students and pupils, half of which go to school outside the town. The younger generation has moved out and gone to the big cities seeking job opportunities, even though Hino was known for the success of its merchants. Only about half of the working people are doing so in the town, and the other half commute to other places.

For a rural town, there is a relatively large group of foreigners living in Hino. As of January 2019, 527 non-Japanese residents were on record. More than 40% of the inhabitants are Brazilians (217), which is by far the majority, followed by Vietnamese (115), Filipinos (47), Koreans (45), and Chinese (39). Those big groups may have come to Hino to work in the manufacturing industry in nearby cities, but the foreigners discussed in this article moved into Hino for different reasons.

Hino has a culture of independence from authorities, which probably derived from its history. When many other towns became merged into cities through so-called Heisei Municipal Mergers that were led by the national government in 2000-2010, it stayed as a town. Hino has also had an entrepreneurial spirit. An example of this is their pioneering actions in hosting groups of pupils from big cities for farming experiences, which have become popular in many other areas of Japan.

History of Hino

Research by Yuga Kariya, 1993

Hino was shaped as a castle town for the lord Gamou in the 16th century. After they lost their lord at the end of that century, it restarted as a merchants' town and flourished as such until the early 20th century. Hino merchants traveled around to do their business nationwide while keeping their family and luxurious residences in the town. Their home served as the headquarters

of the business, and their stores were located outside Hino all over Japan. Therefore, Hino had many upscale houses but few workplaces in town. Since there was no need for a storefront, and only women and children were living there, their homes had closed architecture probably for their security. Consequently, Hino architecture is known for its hidden internal luxury.

Hino's success as a commercial town did not happen overnight. The town experienced a severe deterioration for about 15 years after their lord moved out of his territory in 1584. The General Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who had just united the country in the late 16th century, gave special permission to Hino residents to ease the situation. That permission included the right to travel to other places and an exemption from public services, which helped Hino merchants succeed as itinerant businessmen. They became wealthy and built the highest quality, elaborate, and durable buildings. Thanks to the wealthy residents who had plenty of exposure and contact with the outside world, Hino became a highly cultured town, despite its rural location. Nowadays, Hino residents still retain their culture of respect for their history and use this to educate their children.

Regrettably, Hino was also unable to resist the nationwide trend of rapid economic growth and modernization that occurred in the 1960s. Likewise, with the so-called "bubble economy" and skyrocketing land prices that happened in the 1980s, many historic houses were lost. According to a survey by Kariya, many Hino merchants' estates had remained in 1972, but most of them had disappeared by 1993.

Currently, out of approximately 9,000 wooden houses in the Town of Hino, each with different ownership records, there are less than 1,800 wooden houses that are made using traditional construction and built before 1950.

The Entrance of Mr. Austin Moore *Secretariat of HHTPS, the Catalyst*

Town officials became concerned with the situation and established an official group in 1999 to discuss the preservation of the townscape. The group became privatized in 2008 under a new name, "The Hino Historical Townscape Preservation Society (HHTPS)," run by volunteers with independent funding. The society appointed an American resident, Mr. Austin Moore, to be the first secretariat.

Mr. Moore grew up in a suburb near Boston, USA, participating in many preservation projects with his father, who was the president of the local historical society. He became interested in Japan because there were some artifacts in his house brought from Japan by Dr. Edward S. Morse, who was an eminent scientist and Japanologist. Mr. Moore studied the Japanese language at college and moved to Japan first as an English teacher in 1984. Since then, he has continued to live in Japan, working as an administrator and instructor for public agencies.

Mr. Moore has always lived in a historical house and fell in love with and later bought a 120-year-old traditional Japanese house in Hino. This house had been unoccupied for 13 years, and still contained all the furniture and commodities of the former resident. In Japan, it is customary to clear all interior finishes and decorations that the previous owner left in the house before the new owner moves in. Few people want to buy old second-hand items, especially those who can afford to buy a home. Similarly, in this case, the real estate mediator had already contracted a garbage collector to empty the house. However,

Mr. Moore canceled the collector's appointment, sorted out the legacies, and kept those that he thought fit with the aesthetic of the building. Americans are more inclined to opt for antiques, while Japanese people tend to appreciate brand-new things. (Fig. 1).

Restoration of the Historic Home *Challenges in Traditional Construction*

Mr. Moore was adamant about using traditional Japanese construction skills, but it was difficult to find artisans who had those skills. Although, he finally found a retired 78-year-old carpenter for the woodwork, and the carpenter was thrilled to have an opportunity to use his traditional craftsmanship again. However, they had to fight against younger apprentices and collaborating technicians who thought that traditional methods were too complicated and time-consuming. The traditional plastering was even more difficult. Mr. Moore had to go through trials and errors with several different plasterers, and he is still looking for someone who can handle his earthen walls. For plumbing and electrical work, he hired professionals and accepted modern equipment (Fig. 2).



Figure 1. Antiques kept as integral parts of the historical house (19 May 2019 by Arno Suzuki)



Figure 2. Modern equipment fit into a historical house (19 May 2019 by Arno Suzuki)

Maintenance

Responsibility and Cost

Mr. Moore hired professionals only for traditional wood-working, plastering, grass-mat flooring, plumbing, and electrical work, and he did the rest by himself. He replaced rice paper on 120 sliding doors, painted colcothar on all exterior walls, and undertook all the gardening, except pruning the tall trees that were higher than ten feet (Fig. 3).

The maintenance cost often becomes a financial burden on many historic home owners, because nowadays the traditional techniques are rare and extremely expensive (Suzuki, 2013)². The owner's self-maintenance skills, however, would reduce the problem, and it seemed more natural for Mr. Moore to spend his time and money taking care of his home. Most Americans understand responsibility and cost of maintenance, and Japanese people also benefitted from learning this habit. Mr. Moore still spent 1.5 times more money on the restoration than on purchasing the house and land together, and his restoration project is still on-going (Wallstreet Journal 2013)³.

Mr. Yoshiyuki Uchiyama

The Agent of "San-po-yoshi"

Mr. Uchiyama, a real estate broker from Kyoto City who mediated this house to Mr. Moore, was another key person to the success of townscape preservation in Hino. Mr. Uchiyama only sells historic homes to responsible well-mannered customers because he would lose his reputation if his buyer caused any trouble in the community. He becomes especially careful when he deals with rural areas, where the neighborhood relationship is crucial. Mr. Uchiyama trusted Mr. Moore even though he was his first foreign customer. Additionally, Mr. Uchiyama spent six months knocking on all the doors of Mr. Moore's future neighbors, and introduced him as the new resident. Thanks to this extraordinary effort of Mr. Uchiyama and to the patience of Mr. Moore to wait that long, the community welcomed Mr. Moore without any prejudice. Thus, Mr. Moore became the first "new-comer" in Hino in the real sense, that is, without any family or business relations there. Soon after moving in, Mr. Moore began contributing to the community, hoping to give back to his neighbors' warm welcome.



Figure 3. Room and garden of Moore Residence (19 May 2019 by Arno Suzuki)

Good spirits seemed to influence others. Mr. Uchiyama became familiar with Hino after his efforts for Mr. Moore, and he continued to contribute to the town even though he was an outsider. He purchased two abandoned houses next to each other, restored them at his own expense, and let the HHTPS use them free of charge as their headquarters (Fig. 4). He knew this would not make him any profit, but he also believes in "returning to society." After contributing to the town like this, he got further business opportunities in Hino and saved more historic houses from demolition. This business style is precisely the goal of merchants in this area, namely "*san-po-yoshi*," which means "three-sided satisfaction; the seller, buyer, and the society are all happy." Good old-fashioned Americans also had a similar virtue of contributing to the society, which was perhaps the way Mr. Moore grew up.

Reaction from the Community *Resonance with Hino's Tradition*

Mr. Fujiwara, the owner of an antique shop named Kakufuku and whose family originated from Hino, is another indispensable 'player' in

Hino. He bought and saved a historic estate that also had no heir. The town took it over and turned into a museum and restaurant, which are now run by the help of volunteer groups of homemakers in town. Later, Mr. Fujiwara bought another unoccupied historical house and sold it for a low price, on condition that the buyer ran it as a soba noodle restaurant while keeping the authenticity of the traditional construction. He found a buyer, and now the soba restaurant and café seems to be one of the most popular establishments in Hino.

HHTPS maintains another historic property called Nishida Residence and uses it for local events. They hold a *rakugo*, or Japanese comedy show, gathering every year, as well as a series of lectures to teach the traditional culture. They make enough revenue to at least cover the expense of holding these events, without depending on any financial support from the government. In 2017, HHTPS called for crowdfunding to restore the wooden wall with *sajiki-mado*, which is a particular architectural element in Hino's townscape (Fig. 5). The campaign ended successfully, and they received

over a million Japanese yen, which is approximately 10,000 US dollars, from 62 donators. The list of donators included many Westerners, probably thanks to Mr. Moore's connection. The effect from the publicity of his restoration projects also may have worked.

Although HTTPS became privatized and financially independent, some town officials continue to cooperate with HTTPS's activities. Mr. Yasuda, one of the town officials, said Mr. Moore taught them the value of their heritage.

Continuing Revitalization

More New Comers and Local Businesses

Thanks to those volunteers' hard work, Hino has become revitalized, which has attracted new residents. Four uninhabitable houses and two unoccupied houses were in Mr. Moore's neighborhood when he came to Hino in 2004, but they all gained residents now. More foreigners have also moved into Hino; Mr. Sean Chumiecki from Poland moved into Hino in 2010, and Mr. Tom Vincent from the U.K. arrived in 2017. These two Europeans teamed up with a local liquor seller and started a

brewing company in 2018, in collaboration with the traditional Hino Festival. They distribute their beer nationwide, contributing to the promotion of Hino. Mr. Vincent moved into Hino to live in a historic Japanese house, which was again introduced by Mr. Uchiyama.

In Hino, the American attitude of independence and self-responsibility fit into Hino's tradition of autonomy and self-reliance and woke up the town's potential. In contrast, Japanese people have tended to depend on public supports for historic preservation, though taxpayers do not understand the value of such assets (Suzuki 2013). They also tend to believe that they must hire professionals for home maintenance, and as a result, neglect if they think it too expensive. However, for Americans, it is common to spend time and money to maintain their homes, and they do not mind expending, when they can afford it, for others' historic assets. Hino also had a culture of preserving its historic assets as well as supporting their artisans and cultural creators. May this story of fortunate synergy inspire those who faced with issues such as the aging society and unoccupied houses.



Figure 4. The meeting room of the HTTPS Headquarter (19 May 2019 by Arno Suzuki)

Endnotes

1. Yuga Kariya, “*Toshikeikan no keisei to hozon ni kansuru kenkyu* (Study on Creation and Preservation of Urban Landscape)”, doctoral dissertation submitted to Graduate School of Engineering (in Japanese), Kyoto University, Chapter 1, 1993.3, 5-76pp.
 2. Arno Suzuki, “Challenges in Preservation and Utilization of Houses in Japan with Misconceptions of General Public”, The 60th International Symposium on Traditional Architecture, full papers, Nanjing, China, 2013.11, 836-845pp.
 3. Yuka Hayashi, “A Home Suitable for a Samurai”, Wall Street Journal, Oct. 31, 2013
- Hino-cho (Hino Town) official website, statistical information page <http://www.town.shiga-hino.lg.jp>



Figure 5. Restored wall of Nishida Residence (19 May 2019 by Arno Suzuki)