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Assignment in Japan

Sun Goddess More Approachable Than Geisha Girls

Visit to Shrine
Is ChaucerianBy PETER DESBARATS
(Second of a Series)

The night before Ed McNally and I left Montreal for Japan, I was introduced to a wise Jewish lawyer in Montreal who once had visited the Orient. He looked up from his desk, chomped on his cigar and grinned.

"My boy," he said, "if you don't come back with good memories, you should spend your old age eating straw."

The average North American male thinks of Japan as some sort of Moslem heaven. When he talks about Japan, his expression is a mixture of leer and wistful smile. When he returns from Japan, he looks smug.

Everyone expects him to talk about Japanese women. Okay, okay.

Edo-san and I travelled by fast Japanese hydrofoil boat from Nagoya to Toba, then drove to the shrine of the Sun Goddess Amanoteru Omikami at Ise.

It was a perfect spring day. The road leading to the temple was a nave columned with the trunks of cedars. Hundreds of Japanese walked on either side, laughing and talking. In Japan, a visit to a shrine has none of the long-faced pomposity of a Christian pilgrimage. It's Chaucerian. Particularly the Shinto shrines, open to the sun, often just simple enclosures glimpsed as white entrance veils move aside in the wind, discourage solemnity.

If youngsters take water from the sacred springs and throw it at each other instead of drinking it properly, no one seems to mind.

We were standing in the place where the Japanese nation was born. From the Sun Goddess descended the first Emperor, Jimmu Tenno, in 660 B.C. The present Emperor in Tokyo is believed to be a direct descendant. When the Crown Prince was married several years ago, the bride and groom visited the shrine shortly after the wedding to report the event to Amanoteru Omikami.

Western historians may doubt the veracity of the Sun Goddess theory but they believe that Japan originally was ruled by women. Edwin O. Reischauer, the Harvard professor who is now U.S. ambassador in Tokyo, has said that Japanese women "in the earliest times enjoyed a position of social and political dominance over men" but "gradually sank to a position of complete subservience to them." They became "socially and intellectually mere handmaids of the dominant male population."

She was born in Alberta but spent most of her life outside Canada. She spoke with a marked English accent. It was one of those curious jet-aircraft conversations, midnight over the Aleutians, extremely personal without even an exchange of names.

"Many foreign women have trouble keeping male servants in Tokyo," she said, "because they tend to treat them as they would in the West."

"You always have to remember that a 15-year-old houseboy, regardless of his personal loyalty, considers himself immensely superior to you simply because he is a man."

"It makes me furious," said the young Canadian girl who had been living in Tokyo for six months.

"When I get on a train, the men often will get up to offer me a place. But they would never think of doing it for one of their own women, even if she were carrying groceries in her arms and a baby on her back."

Women work hard in Japan. On farms, they share field

work with the men. They clean streets in cities and do road maintenance in rural areas. In some cities the sidewalk "shoeshine boys" are women old enough to be grandmothers. At the Noritake china factory in Nagoya, 2,000 of the 4,000 employees are young girls who spend at least eight hours a day, six days a week, performing monotonous assembly-line jobs with incredible speed and precision. They enter the factory at 15 or 16 years of age, after nine years of compulsory schooling, for a starting salary of about \$30 a month.

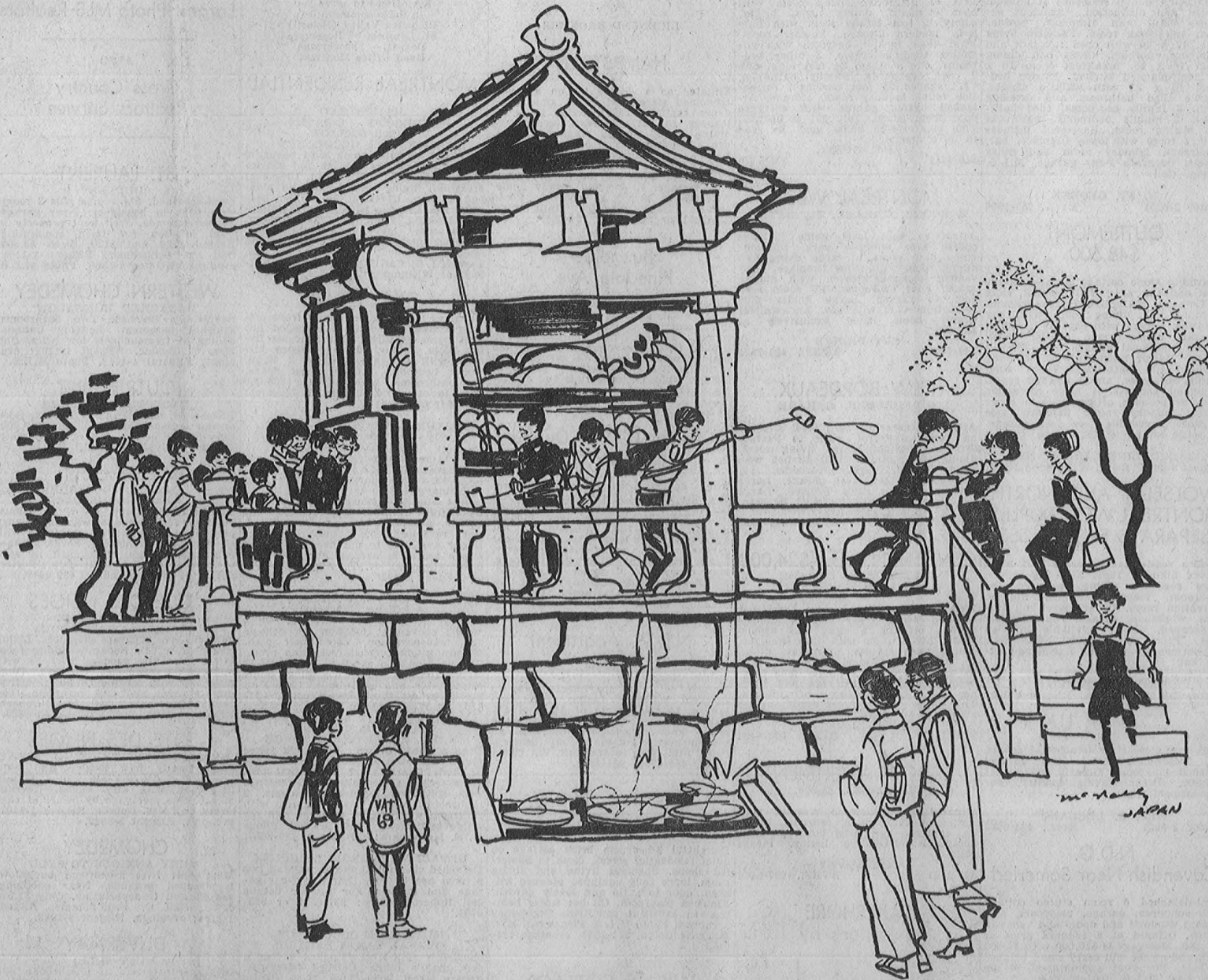
I watched young girls painting fine freehand gold lines on rotating dinner plates, hour after hour, a fresh plate every few seconds. At the main Sony radio and television factory in Tokyo, they sit for hours over microscopes soldering hair-thin wires and almost invisible specks of metal to transistors.

At a small one-dish restaurant in Tokyo, where you could fill up for 90 cents on deep-fried pork, soup, rice, beer and Chinese pickles, teenage girls worked behind the counter at a clip that would stagger the average Canadian waitress.

Japanese women work swiftly and with a classic economy of motion. To a greater extent in Japan than in any other country, the hands of women are responsible for fashioning the nation's spectacular postwar recovery. Watching them work on assembly lines throughout Japan, the word that keeps springing to mind is — deft.

When a bar hostess cannot speak English, she often switches to origami, the art of paper-folding. At the Club New Midori in Kyoto one evening, the younger hostesses were folding paper napkins into hats, baskets and human figures. Amaiko, a little older than the others, watched critically. Then she took my package of cigarettes, tore off a piece of silver paper the size of a postage stamp and quickly fashioned a perfect bird that measured no more than half an inch from beak to tail.

Try it some time.



Horseplay at the sacred spring of a Kyoto shrine interrupts a school excursion. Japanese regard childhood as a time for fun.

We shared the Tokyo Hilton—you have to say "Hilton" if you want to get there by taxi—with Gina Lollobrigida (the Japanese don't even try to pronounce that) while she presided over the opening of an Italian film festival. Edo-san spotted her in the lobby one evening.

"What do you think of that?" he said.

I glanced over casually. "Just another clumsy Western woman."

"What do you think of Japanese women?" asked the wife of the Canadian businessman living in Tokyo.

Her husband shifted nervously in his chair. I should have noticed the glint in her eye.

"I'm afraid that when I get home," I said, "at least for the first few days, most Canadian women are going to look a little too large, a little ham-fisted, a little..."

"That's perfect nonsense," she growled. "You just try to show me a Japanese woman that can raise five or six children, cook, make clothes, take care of the family budget, head the PTA, bowl, take ceramic lessons, play golf, keep her husband happy..."

"I would pit a North American girl against a Japanese girl any day. She's more versatile. She's more alive. She's more..."

"Will you stop smiling!"

I am not trying to imply that women are kept in some sort of peonage in Japan. Their position is changing. Before 1945, there were few opportunities for a young woman to receive higher education. But by 1960, the percentage of Grade 12 graduates who entered university was 22 per cent for men and 15 per cent for women. About 10 per cent of Japan's doctors are women.

Many marriages, particularly in the upper classes, are still arranged by go-betweens after lengthy family negotiations. But the girl has more freedom than before to reject the proposed groom. Once married, she is in some ways in a more secure position than her North American sister. At least she doesn't have to be simultaneously mistress, mother, boon companion, intellectual mate and big sister to a confused male who is trying to be lover, father, breadwinner, gay blade and pillar of the community at one and the same time. Influenced by American movies and television, Japanese

SKETCHES BY McNALLY

women often complain about the overbearing attitudes of Japanese men but one suspects that they are rather glad to marry men who provide and decide and expect to be obeyed.

What we would call infidelity in North America — and there is no way of knowing if it is necessarily more prevalent in Japan — is accepted to a great extent as part of normal male behavior. The divorce rate is relatively low.

If she has sons, a wife can look forward to a position of increasing authority as she grows older. The mother-in-law is a dominant family institution in Japan and a son's loyalty to his mother often is stronger than to his wife, even if it comes to a point of choice.

In contrast to Western life, the most difficult years for a Japanese woman are the first years of marriage. She acquires far more freedom and authority when she reaches the age when North American women are tempted to feel utterly useless and unwanted.

It was one of the most plaintive songs that I had ever heard. Someone at our table in the small club at Beppu, on the southernmost island of Kyushu, jotted down a rough translation of the lyrics on the back of a menu. It was the song of a businessman's wife, staring up at the advertising balloons above the store where her husband works:

"Today ad balloon in the sky
"Perhaps you are in the company
"I think you are very busy
"Oh, never the less, never the less
"I get angry, I get angry
"It is natural so."

But what about Amaiko, Reiko, Fumiko, Ginko, Yaiko, Sachiko, Mitsuko and so forth? If a tourist is wealthy or has prosperous Japanese friends with expense accounts

that are often larger than their salaries, he can spend a delightful evening eating, drinking sake and watching a geisha perform classical songs and dances. But geishas today are relatively rare and extremely expensive. The average Japanese and the ordinary tourist relies on her modern sister, the bar hostess. Even the smallest bar has hostesses, in kimonos or Western dress, who seat themselves beside customers, light their cigarettes, order their

drinks, laugh at their jokes and, at the end of the evening, escort them to taxis and bow as they disappear into the night feeling like sheikhs of Kuwait. Although it takes all kinds to fill a bar, many of these hostesses are reasonably intelligent and surprisingly proper young women, and a darn sight better company than the average North American female.

All right, Edo-san, let's head for the hills.



Kyoto bar hostess practises art of paper-folding.