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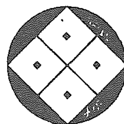
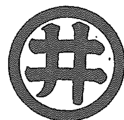
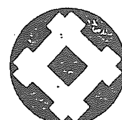
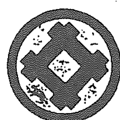
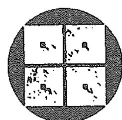
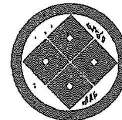




PEASANTS REBELS WOMEN AND OUTCASTES

The Underside of Modern Japan

Second Edition

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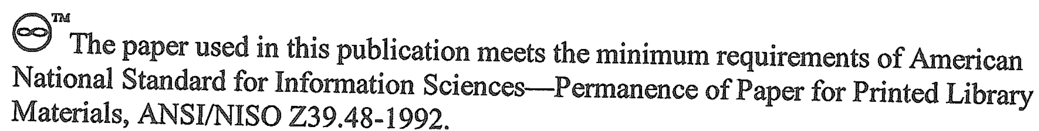
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husband, and return in a taxi cab. "When I think of us farmers who worked day after day, from morning to night, and barely stayed alive, and then think of the young people today, I wonder if they will be able to make it as farmers."[22]

Excerpts from Fuki no Tō by Yamashiro Tomoe

The hardships that prewar farm women, particularly young wives, had to survive are attested to by the following account of the life of an oppressed village woman. The author, Yamashiro Tomoe, came from a rural community in Hiroshima prefecture, got involved in social reform movements, married a Marxist labor organizer, and was imprisoned from 1940 to 1945 for harboring "dangerous thoughts." After the war, she played an active role in agrarian reform and antiwar movements, and began to write about people she had met in prison (as well as about the plight of rural women in general). One of the people she met in prison, a woman who was serving time for arson, is the central figure in the following story. Told like a folktale, the story depicts the hardships and abuses that the woman underwent as a young wife in a farm family. The values, attitudes, and way of life described in connection with the mother-in-law, and the husband's mistreatment of the woman, are not exaggerations or fantasies but the reality of life in many prewar Japanese families. Mitsuko, who appears in the story, is the author.[23] She was locked in the cell next to the woman prisoner whose life story was then gradually revealed to her. Filling in the gaps in that story, she wrote the following "non-fiction novelette."

BOG RHUBARB SHOOTS *Yamashiro Tomoe*

There used to be a song called "Ballad of the Bog Rhubarb Shoots." Here are the words:

The rhubarb shoots *(tō)* will be ten years old *(tō),*
The nursemaid is seven, she is an orphan.
The baby is a big, big boy,
The precious, precious little heir to the family.
Lullabye baby, lullabye baby,

Go to sleep and grow up to be a big boy, go to sleep,
Your bed is being warmed by a charcoal brazier.

The rhubarb shoots on a snowy night,
I had a dream about my wedding day.
It was spring, cheep, cheep, cheep!
I was wearing a colorful ornamental hairpin.
Cheep, cheep, chirp, chirp.
I shall be the first to marry,
I twirl my parasol, round and round.

This is how it was sung in some places, but the words could be changed any way one wishes. The tune can be changed too. One could sing some parts as if a storyteller were intoning it; other parts can be sung like a popular song or like a school song that children sing. If we put all the parts together we have a story. And this is the story.

A poor peasant woman and her daughter, were living in the hills on the upper reaches of the Gō-no River. The mother worked the fields by herself. She didn't remember when they started, but she found herself suffering stomach pains. Her condition got steadily worse and in the spring of her daughter's seventh year, before the camellias bloomed, she died.

One of the first things the daughter had learned was that bog rhubarb shoots were good for stomach trouble. So from an early age she went about hunting for rhubarb shoots. Once she nearly had a fatal accident when she reached out for some shoots growing behind icicles formed by the waterwheel. She fell down into the gap between the waterwheel and the stone wall. On another occasion she crawled up a cliff to pick some shoots and tumbled down it when the snow began to slide.

The girl loved her mother, so she did not mind the cold when she went out in the winter hunting for shoots. But, in spite of her efforts, her mother finally died. Her relatives got together and decided to send her out to work as a nursemaid. She was only seven then. Her family's house, yard, bamboo grove, and rice fields passed into the hands of other people. When she left home, the bamboo grove in the back of the house where she would no longer be living was covered with camellia petals. Overgrown rhubarb shoots could be spotted, and the flowers, as beautiful as ornamental hairpins, were in full bloom.

Her aunt took her to the home of an old, prominent family, known throughout the region, to work as a nursemaid. The spacious yard was

enclosed by a white wall. The baby she was hired to take care of was the family's precious little heir. Carrying the little baby on her back, the girl would sing the song of the rhubarb shoots. The baby seemed to like the song and his mood improved whenever she sang it.

The lady of the house provided the girl with a kimono every Obon and New Year's. By the time she finished her term of service, at the age of seventeen, she owned a formal gown and a muslin wrapper. When the term of her service was up, she was taken by her master and mistress to a far-off village in the mountains to marry into a family that lived on top of a high stone embankment.

One of her daily chores as a young wife was to fetch water from a well eighty-six feet deep. There was a clump of bog rhubarb on top of the cliff near the well. Every year when the shoots began to sprout, the young wife would think of her mother and her stomach trouble. Late in the spring, when the rhubarb shoots blossomed into flowers that reminded her of ornamental hairpins and the leaves turned into little umbrellas, she would think of the spring when she had had to leave her home and of the spring when she had come here as a young bride.

Her husband, Uichi, was six years older than she. He was a clever man, unusual for a person living in the hills. He kept saying, "I don't want to spend my whole life as a dirt farmer." Many young men from this area left the village to become policemen.

There was even a little ditty about policemen who came from this village.

Are you from Onuka again, Onuka village policeman,
  A retired policeman is a useless person,
Pension, pension, it'll choke you to death.

Uichi wanted to become a policeman too. But he did not apply for a run-of-the-mill job. He applied to go to the northernmost part of Korea as a border guard.

They had been married for three years and had one child. Now Uichi was off to Korea. The night before he left, he told his wife, almost in tears, "I'm doing this for our child. If you love our child, though it may be years before I come back, work hard just as if you were a maid serving out a term contract. Do my share of the work too. I am determined not to come back until I get my pension."

Her father-in-law was a hardworking man who went out in the fields early in the morning, before the stars disappeared, and worked until it got so dark that he couldn't see the tip of his nose. He was strong and healthy and never got sick. In the spring he couldn't wait to go out to cut brushwood, and in

the fall, until he got busy with the harvest, he spent all his spare time cutting brushwood. Year after year he took care of two to three, sometimes four to five, oxen. He used brushwood and other greens to make compost, and, whenever he left the house, he transported manure to the hillside fields. He was taciturn and seldom said anything, unless it was about his work.

Once in a while he would say, "I don't care what I eat or wear. I have no desire to hold any sort of position in the village. I have no wish to see anything. I have no hobby. Making the soil produce better crops is the only pleasure I have in life."

When the young wife first came to this family, her mother-in-law told her, "There is always a chance that we will get sick. There are times when one is racked with pain or scabies. So we have to work while we're healthy. After I came to this family I worked hard and underwent a lot of hardship. This was how we managed to get the property we now have. I expect you to work hard too. I don't intend to work hard by myself and let you, the young wife, have an easy time of it. Now that you've joined our family, I want you to work hard and skimp and save with me."

When the mother-in-law stepped out of the house, she did not go beyond the village boundary, because, she said, she didn't want to waste any human manure. Whenever the young wife left the house, her mother-in-law would tell her, "If you feel like relieving yourself while you're out, be sure to run into our field." On the rare occasions when she bought fish, she would save the tails and fins and paste them on the wall as "charms." She cooked the heads, intestines, and bones until they were charred black, and mixed them with bean paste. She would say, "Now, when dirt-poor peasants like us eat fish, we have to use everything this way. Otherwise we'll be damned. So watch what I do carefully."

Every year when the time for school graduation approached, the mother-in-law would say, "I hear so-and-so's family will soon have one less mouth to feed. They're lucky!" On such occasions she and the grandmother, now over sixty, would start an argument. The old woman would repeat in a broken voice, "You keep saying you *have* to feed me. There are too many mouths to feed. Do you resent having to feed people so much? Do you want to cut down on the number of people who eat? Don't you want to feed old people? Don't you want any old people in this house?"

The mother-in-law had many bags made out of rags. She used these bags to save threads, even if they were only an inch long, bits of thread that had fallen under the hand loom, lint that had accumulated in sleeves. She saved anything that looked like a piece of thread or cotton. She would then sell them to ragpickers for 1 or 2 sen, or find some use for them. She would tell her daughters and the young wife, "For dirt-poor farmers, unless we women

are frugal we won't be able to acquire any property. Unless you follow my example, you won't be able to keep your household going."

Whenever the young wife tried to wear the kimono that she had been given by her former employers, her mother-in-law would say, "It's wasteful for a wife of a family like ours to wear a kimono that's as nice as that. I hate to see you wear it." And, whenever her daughters tried to clean the house, she would say, "This isn't the temple or a doctor's house. If you have time to clean house, go out and work."

When the young wife had her baby, the mother-in-law said, "I had seven children. I didn't stay in bed for three days. No one said to me, 'You did a fine job.' Soon after childbirth I would carry a three-*to* [1 *to* equals 4.76 U.S. gallons] sack to the watermill and didn't ask anybody to help me. When I was in bed I was given just a slice of pickle. That was enough."

So she would bring only one meal to the young wife in bed. After the baby was born she would constantly repeat, "I sure hate to see a young wife wasting her time feeding the baby. She could be working the loom and making some money." No one in the house criticized her when she talked like this.

About the time that Uichi was getting ready to leave for Korea to serve as a border guard, there were twelve people in the household: old grandma, over sixty; the father and mother, about fifty; a daughter who had been married and come back, now over twenty; two marriageable daughters of nineteen and sixteen; three sons who were still in school; Uichi's baby boy; Uichi himself; and his wife.

Now, brave Uichi had gone to a far-off land, hoping to work till he got his pension. The old grandmother, still in good health, took care of the kitchen and did some spinning. People used to comment on the diligence and good sense of the father-in-law and mother-in-law. They were convinced of this themselves and worked hard as pillars of the family. The four young women—the three daughters and the young wife—worked at the loom day after day, whether it snowed or rained, in order to earn money. The boys who were still in school would take care of the baby or would wind the thread on the spindles. They just took it for granted that this was their job. Neighbors used to say, "Everybody at your place works hard, as if you're on the battlefield. You're bound to get rich."

The four young women worked the loom from early in the morning, while it was still dark, until midnight. The sound of looms filled the air of the valley. In one day they would weave three bolts of plain striped material. They would weave one bolt of patterned cloth with sixty designs or one to one and one-half bolts with forty designs. The young women earned a reputation as hardworkers, and the neighbors spoke enviously of them as the money-bags of the family.

The young wife was more skilled in weaving than the three young daughters, and she came to be recognized as the best weaver in the village. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law were pleased with her work. But because she was such an excellent weaver, they begrudged her taking any time away from the loom. They would complain, "Our young wife takes a lot of time in the toilet." Or, "She sure takes a long time feeding the baby." "She's so dumb. She's doing the washing again. It's better for the family if she let's the old woman do the washing, and does some weaving instead."

As a result, the young wife could not get away from the loom for a single minute. She didn't get a chance to vary her daily routine by doing some housework. And she had no one to talk to about how she really felt. So she began to mutter to herself. "If a young wife doesn't have any parents, she isn't appreciated for all the work she does. The more they like her work, the less time they allow her to waste. I can't even wash my underwear very often; I feel guilty if I do. It's hard to have to weave all the time."

Although she muttered to herself this way, she never uttered a single word of complaint to her in-laws. She always slaved away at the loom looking cheerful. No one told her how much money her work was bringing into the family. When she asked her mother-in-law, the older woman refused to answer. When they were asked to do weaving for other families, they would stretch the thread out and make an extra foot of fabric by not making the weave as tight as it should have been. When the young wife asked to have the extra piece to make an apron, her mother-in-law refused to answer yes or no.

Whenever the mother-in-law heard from her neighbors, "At so and so's, the wife's parents brought over a present to celebrate their daughter's pregnancy," she would say, "That must make them proud. Our wife didn't bring a single thing with her, not even a sash." When she heard stories about other young wives in the village, she would repeatedly utter mean words like, "I hear so and so's wife brought some beautiful kimonos, and dressers and bureaus with her. I hear wives are supposed to bring enough clothes with them to last a lifetime. I wonder what our wife plans to do about clothing for herself." Then she would end by saying, "I feel sorry for our grandchild. His mother doesn't have a single bureau. She can't even take her son to visit the boy's grandparents. He hasn't received a single thing—not one piece of baby clothes, or a paper carp [to celebrate Boy's Day]—from his maternal grandparents. He has nothing to show off to the neighbors. They must all be sneering at him. What a pitiful situation."

On these occasions the young wife would think, "If only somebody would say to her, 'Don't complain endlessly about the wife. When she was brought to this house as the wife, you knew that she was an orphan.' " But no one would say even that much on her behalf. There is a saying that parents bestow

on their children seven blessings. She didn't want seven blessings. All she wanted was one person to whom she could divulge her feelings. Someone who would be like a parent to her. Such were the thoughts of the young, orphan wife. Then she would remember her husband Uichi's words before he left for Korea. So she continued to endure the hardships of the household, even though she was seldom permitted to hold her baby and her husband was not present—all this for the sake of her husband and her child.

With the passing years, her child grew. In other families, parents would put delicacies in their children's mouth. But here she was bound to the loom from morning to night. Now her son would quietly bring back wild, red berries that he got from his grandfather, who found them among the brushwood, and drop them in *her* mouth. When the boy put a berry in her mouth with his cute, tiny hand, she felt a warmth in her breast that she had not known before, and her eyes filled with tears. Not until the little boy could walk around did anyone offer her a single chestnut or nutmeg that was being roasted by the fire. Now the little boy would bring tasty things for her to eat. This made her very happy.

When the snow was still deep, the little boy picked some bog rhubarb shoots from the cliff behind the well and said to her, "Mama, would you like some rhubarb shoots?" This surprised her. How did the little hands and feet manage to climb the steep cliff and reach out for the shoots? What did he see and how did he feel when he went after them? His mother mulled this question over and over while working at the loom. Ever since the boy had been a little baby she had sung the bog rhubarb song to him. He wanted it sung over and over. He never got tired of the song. She would tell him that she used to sing the song to motherless children, explaining to them, "The bog rhubarb shoots say, 'It's cold but we have to be patient for just a little while longer. Let's lift up our spirits and wait for spring. I'm an orphan left in the snow. But I don't cry. I don't cry that my feet are cold. I'm taking good care of my feet and keeping them warm. So you just wait and see. I'll be the first to make strong, beautiful flowers bloom.' " Maybe that was why the little boy went hunting for rhubarb shoots. Maybe it was because, sitting at the loom during the cold nights and early mornings, she was thinking, "It's about time for the rhubarb shoots to peek through the snow." Maybe her thoughts were transmitted to her son. Whatever the reason, he, with his tiny hands and feet, had climbed the steep cliff and picked some rhubarb shoots for her. She took them in her hands and stared at the shoots for the first time in years. She felt as if she were back in her childhood, as if the days and months of the past ten years would pour out of her throat in the form of a lullabye. While working the loom, she thought, "Maybe the spring of my life is still coming."

Then she thought, "Even if the song comes out, maybe my spring never will. Maybe the song will burst out and tell me that my spring will never come!"

Earlier, in the spring of the year when her term of service as a maid was up, and she was about to set out for a strange home to be a young wife, she had had a pleasant fantasy about her new life: It didn't matter if the new home turned out to be in the hills with only three houses. She didn't care if her husband turned out to be a charcoal burner or a woodcutter. If she could live in her own house with her husband, she would endure any hardship because life would be so joyful. She would do her best and cook and wash.

Now she had been married for ten years and for most of those years she had lived apart from her husband. She couldn't even hold her child in bed. From early in the morning till late at night, she banged away with the reed on the loom. When people asked her "Why do you work so hard?" she would reply, "My husband asked me to. And it is to build up the family property and help my husband get ahead in the world." But now she knew that if she were asked, "Will all this hard work bring happiness to you and your husband?" she would not be able to answer that it would.

Why couldn't she reply positively, she whose husband left home to earn a living? There hadn't been a single day when she didn't think about the difficult work that her husband was undertaking as a guard along the northern frontiers of Korea. When he left home he told her she had to wait until he qualified for a pension. Now, he wrote in his letter, "I can't quit simply because I can get my pension. I am determined not to return until I have become the most successful person in the whole village. I want to become a police inspector. This will take another ten years. You'll have to wait until then." When he had left for Korea she had understood why he did so. Hence, she was able to wait and work patiently; but now, when her husband notified her that it would be another ten years, she felt distressed.

When Uichi became police captain, he sent home his picture. He had a mustache, wore glasses, and had on white gloves. He looked like a different man from the person who used to farm at home. He looked like someone his wife could no longer approach. She wondered if this splendid figure would like his weaver wife, who had grown gaunt through lack of sleep. While she was working at the loom, she began to feel unsure about this.

The following lullabye tells of this wife's life and feelings. Her voice sounds like the small rivulet that runs deep in the mountains of the Chūgoku Range [in western Honshu Island]. It is sad and strained.

I wonder if spring has come nearer to me?
I didn't ask him to,

But my child has picked some rhubarb shoots
growing in the snow for me.

When Mitsuko heard this song from somewhere nearby, she began to think of her own village, which she had not seen for a long time. Her village too was a place where the villagers built high stone walls for their houses, and dug deep wells. When Mitsuko was a little girl, her mother and older sister would work at the hand loom when they were not busy on the farm. Perhaps for this reason Mitsuko imagined hearing, together with the song, the faint sound of the reed on the loom that used to come through the sliding doors of her house.

Whose voice is it that's singing beside the stone wall? Is it Mii? "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. I'm in the first grade. Oh, I'm so happy, I'm so happy!"

The singer's voice turned into that of a young girl's. Mitsuko could picture the strawberry plants beginning to spread out in the spring, along the stone wall facing south in front of the house. Mitsuko imagined herself with Mii and his friends, standing by the stone wall. It seemed to her that her cold, unheated cell with its temperature of fifty degrees, and the hunger pains that came from having eaten only some barley mixed with soybeans, were beginning to ease. She felt warmer. The neighbor who was singing the song was a prisoner too, just like her. She almost forgot that they were in solitairy, separated by a wall, and tried to imagine the story that was being told by the ballad.

THE HOUSE

Hardworking Uichi who used to think about his family and think about his wife,
Must have become blinded by his uniform with gold stripes and by his success.
He has forgotten his wife, who is getting thinner and thinner.

The wife would sing this to herself as she worked on the loom. Her in-laws had managed to get all their children married off and had fulfilled their responsibilities as parents. Now they were full of plans to tear down the old house, with its straw roof, and build a new one with a tile roof. Wherever they happened to be, in the fields or by the fireplace, the would say,

"The best thing that a human being can do is build a house."

"In this world what counts is the house. The house fixes the family's standing in society. It fixes a person's worth."

"You can't tell when a person will get sick and have to call in a doctor. They say the doctor looks over the house carefully while he is taking your pulse. That's for sure."

"They say the priest looks over the house carefully while he is intoning his chants at a funeral. That's for sure."

"They say when the priest fixes a person's place in the nether world, he makes up his mind while he looks over the house carefully. There's no mistake about that."

"The house, the house. Everything depends on the house. When Uichi comes home we'll build a new house. We'll build a new house. We'll build a new house. We'll build everything we ever wanted. We've always been looked down on by others. They wouldn't speak to us politely. We won't forget that. Never! We'll build a new house and get even with them. We'll show them what we can do."

This is what they said day and night. Now, Uichi's wife was the only person working at the loom. When her son entered the first grade, she sang,

First grade, oh, first grade!
My son is in the first grade.
I too am in the first grade.

She looked forward everyday to her son's return from school as she worked skillfully with the reed.

When the child entered the second grade, she sang, "Second grade, oh, second grade," and passed each day joyfully as if she herself had moved up to the second grade. In this way six years passed by swiftly for her and her son. She used to sing and hum:

There's nothing as wonderful as a mother and child,
There's nothing as wonderful as a child.
My husband is starting to forget me,
But I have a son.
He is a kind boy. I wonder who he takes after?
No one has ever said the kind of nice things he says to me.
He learned to ask early in life:
"Are your feet cold? Is the fire in the brazier by your feet
still warm?"
He would ask me these questions day and night.

But her mother-in-law never told her to go and see her son perform in a play or take part in school games. Occasionally, when she told her mother-in-

law that she would like to, the woman raved that she had insulted her, and was in a bad mood all day. So Uichi's wife never managed to see her son take part in sports or school plays.

When teachers came on home visits, her mother-in-law would say, "Someone like you, who knows nothing except how to weave, would disgrace the young boy if you spoke to the teacher. You'd better stay in the back room." Everyday she would sit by the loom and imagine herself saying, "Teacher, how is my son? Will you please take good care of him." But she never did get the chance to say this to the teacher.

The first time that she got to go to the school on account of her son was at his graduation ceremony. The school yard was full of peach blossoms. The children sang:

The months and the years have come and gone, and
  now six years have passed.
We are now ready to receive our diplomas.
Nothing can match the happiness we feel!

Ever since then, whenever spring comes and the peach blossoms flower, Uichi's wife imagines she can hear this song, and tears flow.

Uichi who was far off policing the northern frontiers of Korea and working for his own advancement never mentioned his wife in his letters, but he would say he wanted his son to go to college and become a high-ranking government official. Send him to the prefectural middle school, he would write. Because of his father's wishes, Mii went to a middle school far away from home to take the entrance examination. The prefectural middle school had a reputation for being difficult to get into, but Mii passed the entrance examination on his first try. When Mii left for school, his mother went over the mountain pass and saw him off at the station. She felt the station was a sad place, and the train was a heartless vehicle. After the train left the station, she crawled through the fence, threw herself on the rail and placed her ear on it. She kept her ear there until the train disappeared around the corner of the distant hill and she could no longer hear the rumbling sound that echoed deep down inside the rail. When she finally got up, two soft rice cakes fell from the fold of her kimono and landed on the railroad bed. These had been handed to her by the mother-in-law to give to Mii to eat on the way to the station.

Her mother-in-law had been saying for some time, "I expect Mii to be by my bedside when I die. We're giving the family property to Mii. I don't begrudge Mii anything that he wants to eat. I don't feel tired when I think I'm working for Mii's benefit." She kept saying this while she was pounding the rice to make the rice cakes. She made the mugwort rice cakes before

dawn. The boy's mother had intended to give them to him, but she had forgotten, she was so enraptured by what her son was saying to her on the way to the station.

The air around the rail where the two green rice cakes had fallen seemed to simmer in the heat, and the midday sun was glistening on the wheat field near the tracks. In the far distance, where the two railroad tracks merged into one, the haze made everything look blurred. While she was looking in that direction she began to feel sad again. She pressed her head on the rail once more and began to weep.

Around sunset she headed toward the mountain home where neither her son nor her husband would be home, and where there was no one she could talk with freely. Her feet and legs, used to working the loom year after year, began to feel heavy. Her legs, which for thousands of days had pumped busily, millions of times began to feel as if they were giving way. She felt as if she were walking all by herself into a dark hole on her tired legs. Her heart was heavy with apprehension and sadness.

Soon a letter arrived from her son. He wrote three times a month to his mother. Everytime she received a letter from him or wrote him, she felt a sense of well-being well up inside her.

Even after twenty years had passed, Uichi did not come home. His father and mother began to say he would probably not come back while they were alive. "We don't think he'll come back and build us a new house." So they decided to spend all their savings and rebuild the main house and roof it with tile. While the house was being rebuilt, the mother-in-law kept repeating, "When I came to this family there was nothing. Nothing at all. Soup with rye dumplings was a rarity. Fifty years have gone by since then. I turned everything that I could into money. Eggs, persimmons, everything. And I saved. We scrimped and saved. I would have used my fingernails as matches if that had been possible. This is why we can now build a new house. How could a dirt farmer build a new house without being as frugal as me?"

By the time she'd repeated this hundreds of times, the new house was finished. The mother-in-law said, "It's the fruit of our hard work. It's the product of frugality. Oh, it's bright and shiny! It's so bright and shiny, the house has a halo around it!"

When they moved in they had a house-warming party and invited the neighbors and celebrated with *sake* and fish. They cooked rice gruel and served it to everybody. It was the custom of this area to celebrate with rice gruel because rice cooked as gruel puffed up in size. It meant that the family property would increase in size with the new house. The in-laws and Uichi's married brothers and sisters greeted the guests who came to say, "Congratulations on the completion of your splendid house." Uichi's wife hitched up

the sleeves of her kimono and worked by the well. She did not go out to the front rooms of the house. Earlier, when they had celebrated the completion of the house's framework, Uichi's wife had not gone out to greet the guests either. On that occasion friends and relatives came with gifts. The big gift-givers brought a big box called *hokkai* and filled it with red and white rice cakes, *sake,* and rice. The neighbors would count the gifts and say there are so many *hokkai,* so many sacks of rice, so many barrels of *sake.* Then they would compare this with what other families had received when they had celebrated the completion of their framework.

Many days before, the mother-in-law had tried to figure out what people would bring. Every time she began to count the gifts that she expected to receive, she would say, "Really, a family should not take a wife who has no parents. On occasions like this, when a house that could be built only once in a lifetime is being built, she has no relatives to bring gifts. She should be ashamed to face our neighbors. We're going to build a fine house and leave it for Mii. It hurts me to think that the wife, who has no relatives to come and offer good wishes on this auspicious occasion, will be able to take advantage of the house."

On the day when the framework was completed, the day when the *hokkai,* rice sacks and *sake* barrels began to arrive, the mother-in-law's manner of greeting the guests changed like a weather vane. Relatives who failed to bring a *hokkai* could not elicit a single word from her, even if they happened to be her own children. She refused to say a word to Uichi's wife all day. Gisuke brought the largest number of gifts. He went to talk to the old grandmother in the shack near the well and said to her in a loud voice, "Old woman, aren't you dead yet? You didn't do much in your lifetime. You couldn't even manage to own a strip of land on the hillside. Your son's wife has done a great job. She's bought rice paddies and upland fields. She's even built a house." Then he cackled. Gisuke was the younger brother of the old woman's husband. He was an old man who had left home early and had become an ox dealer. He was rich and had built his own house in town. The old woman just laughed at what Gisuke had said and nodded. Gisuke said, "Good thing she's deaf!" and left the shack.

The old woman whispered to Uichi's wife, "Did you hear what Gisuke said? It makes me feel bad."

"Grandma, don't let it bother you. No one has worked as hard as you. I was only able to keep weaving without having to get off the loom because you wound the thread on the spindles for me. The money made from weaving has surely gone into building the house. You must know that. Don't feel bad about it."

The wife took the old woman's hands and wept. The old woman said, "What you say makes me feel better." Soon after the celebration, the old woman died in her old shack. She looked like a withered tree.

On the day the family moved into the new house, Uichi's wife, working at the well, thought about the old woman who had died in the shack. The people helping with the cooking gossiped about the kind of worker the old woman had been. The front rooms of the house, where people were drinking, were filled with gaiety as the guests rejoiced at the prosperity and wealth of the family.

When Mii was drafted into the army, the in-laws hoisted banners beneath the shiny tile roof. "Our house is magnificent; so are the banners. And we have put up many banners. We're going to leave this wonderful house to Mii," they said.

Twenty-four years after he left his homeland, Uichi came home, having reached the rank of police inspector because of his superior performance and many years of diligent service. Under the new tile roof, the family celebrated Uichi's father's seventy-seventh birthday and Uichi's success in life. Relatives, prominent members of the village, and neighbors all came and drank and sang boisterously. Uichi had on his formal police uniform with its gold stripes; his eyes were framed by gold eyeglasses, and the ends of his mustache were twirled upward. He said he wanted to perform the sword dance, and he whipped the halberd around while singing the frontier guardsmen's song. They say his appearance and voice frightened the villagers.

Because she was urged to do so, Uichi's wife sang for the first time without hesitating.

The *myōga* [ginger] and *fuki* [bog rhubarb] are in our backyard,
Myōga brings good fortune, and *fuki,* prosperity.

All the guests exclaimed, "We weren't aware that the wife of this family had such a beautiful voice. It's as beautiful as a bell. Sing for us again. Let's sing and be merry."

Even before the guests left, Uichi began to say, "I'm going to build a storehouse and an annex to the house." Soon construction was started, and before two years had gone by the work was completed. The storehouse had white walls, and the living room had an alcove and open, raised corridors on all four sides. In this region, a splendid annex like this could be seen only in old established families. During the construction, Uichi never grabbed a hoe or plowed the fields with the ox. Whenever he had any free time, he went over the mountain to the town. Once he did not come home for ten days. He began to stay more in town than at home. If he stayed home for three

days, he would be gone for seven days. Neighbors began to gossip that Uichi was staying with a woman in town. The woman had been sold to Korea from this area to work as a hostess. She was good-looking and clever. She spoke well and was bright, so people began to think she was too good to be merely a hostess. She was soon chosen by a prominent government official to be his mistress. It was rumored that she used to send a lot of money home to her parents, and, consequently, that her parents were quite wealthy. When her patron died, the stocks and bonds and other secret wealth that he had acquired all became his mistress's property, and she came back to her home with it all. She had so many silk kimonos, she could wear a different one every day. Her bed linens were all made of silk, and it was said that her clothing and bedding alone made her a wealthy person.

Uichi had known the woman since his days in Korea. It was rumored that he had built the annex at her suggestion. Whenever Uichi came home, he abused his wife. He even beat and kicked her. When she was being beaten, his parents made no effort to intervene. Uichi's father would say, "Unless a person has that kind of willpower, he cannot go out in the world and get ahead." His mother would agree, saying, "That's how he scared the Koreans. No wonder they were afraid of him. He really can be rough." They seemed to admire what Uichi was doing.

Because Uichi always glared at her, his wife did not have the courage to ask him, even though she wanted to, if the rumors and gossip she heard were true. Then came the day when the rumors became a reality.

On the day that the new tatami mats were laid in the annex, Uichi said sternly, "I'm going to bring my woman here from the town and let her stay in the annex." His mother told Uichi's wife, "Go and clean the annex." So she started to wipe the new tatami mats. Uichi came rushing up to her and said, "You animal! How dare you step on the tatami with your frostbitten feet!" He grabbed her and kicked her off the raised corridor. It was neither clear whether his wife was angry or was trying not to get angry, nor whether she wanted to cry but was trying not to cry. She didn't scream or cry but muttered without opening her mouth, "Mii, Mii, Mii, Mii. Where are you? Which battlefield? Mii. . . ." She kept repeating this in a senseless manner.

It seems that Uichi's father and mother had known that Uichi was planning to bring the woman home. They must have known that her belongings would be delivered that day. They were in the storehouse busily cleaning it out.

Uichi's wife wandered about near the well and the back of the storehouse, gasping faintly, "Mii, Mii. What should I do, Mii?"

Ever since the day the family had moved into the new house, the mother-in-law had said, "We built a new house but we don't have the furniture to go with it. We don't have the kimonos to match it." On the day that the chests

of drawers and bureaus were delivered from town on an oxcart and transported one by one into the storehouse, Uichi's mother, who had never touched such splendid furniture, rubbed each one of them. When she saw Uichi's wife, whom she had exploited for many years, wandering around whimpering in a tiny voice, she screwed up her nose, grimaced, and said, "Go away, you crazy woman. We have no use for you."

Uichi's wife wondered if she had not lost her mind, and went near the well. There, some women from the neighborhood were saying, "He won his gold stripes by doing brutal things to the Koreans. He did shady things to get wealthy. The money he got made it possible for him to keep a mistress who herself has done shady, dishonest things. Nothing good ever comes of people who bring into their home someone who has earned the hatred of others. After all, there is a God. People who are hated will bring trouble by fire or by water. Just wait and see. Nothing good will come of this."

But when they saw Uichi's wife, they made no effort to include her in their circle and did not even speak to her.

Toward evening, the woman and her maid arrived from the town in a rickshaw. The woman stepped onto the new tatami in the annex with her pure-white silk socks and quietly closed the sliding doors. Uichi's wife could not remember anything about the house after that. The only thing she remembers is the laughter that came from the room in the annex.

She set the house on fire and grabbed the rope by the well that she had used for thirty years and slid down into the bottom, hoping to vanish from the world. She doesn't know how or by whom she was restored to this world. When she regained consciousness she was being questioned by the police.

She set the fire, but she did not see what happened. The flames shot upward through the night already darkened by the blackout to guard against air raids. The main house, the shed, the storehouse, and the annex turned into pillars of fire. They did not have time to save the town woman's chests or dressers. They all turned into ashes. When Uichi's wife, now an arsonist, was told all this, she was bewildered. Because she had set fire to the house during the blackout, she was sentenced to ten years in prison. Because of extenuating circumstances, however, the sentence was reduced to eight years, and she was sent to the Miyoshi penitentiary to serve her sentence. Here, she was dressed in red like the other prisoners.

It seems that her son worried about her in spite of what she had done. She received one letter from him from China. He wrote, "Mother, it must be cold. Stay in good health. I understand very well how you must feel." It has been a year since then, but she has not yet received a second letter. She receives no letters from anyone else either. No one comes to see her. "My son, did you die on the battlefield in far-off China? Are you alive? I wish I

could find out. Even if it is by some indirect means. My son, your mother is greeting her fiftieth year on earth in this cold, snowbound penitentiary. They say there is no joy for people in the penitentiary. But even though I am past fifty, I still look forward to spring. For the first time in many years I've seen bog rhubarb shoots pushing up through the snow. I saw it in the penitentiary, on a snowy night, in my dream. I hear deep in my ears the song 'The *fuki* shoots are turning to *to.*' You remember the song."

This then is what the arsonist says in her ballad. She is singing for no one in particular. She sings as if she were singing for her own soul. Yet she sings with passionate feeling.

Mitsuko listens intently to the faint singing that can be heard amidst the ceaseless sound of the snowy wind. The frigid wind rattles the doors and windows of the corridor, sounding like the hurried footsteps of an invisible person as it sweeps over the dirt floor.

slum district of Tokyo a survey revealed that only one of 9 households read the papers. Shimonaka, *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari,* V: 49.

65. Yamamoto Akira, "Shakai Seikatsu no Henka," p. 329.
66. Okada et al., *Nihon no Rekishi,* XII: 159. Also Imai Seiichi, *Taishō Demokurashii* (Taisho Democracy) (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1966), p. 463; Tsurumi et al., *Nihon no Hyakunen,* V: 194.
67. Katō Ken'ichi, *Shōnen Kurabu Jidai* (Years of Shonen Kurabu) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1968), p. 117. And Imai, *Taishō Demokurashii,* p. 463.
68. Asahi Jyaanaru staff, *Shōwashi no Shunkan* (Moments in Showa History), 2 vols. (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 1966), I: 283.
69. Aida Yūji et al., "Nihon o Kaeta Hyakuichinin" (101 Persons Who Transformed Japan), in *Bungei Shunjū* (November 1972), p. 185.
70. Katō, *Shōnen Kurabu Jidai,* p. 128.

RURAL WOMEN

1. Yanagida, *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era,* p. 118.
2. *Ibid.,* p. 119.
3. Embree, *Suye Mura,* p. 97.
4. Segawa, *Mura no Onna-tachi,* p. 126.
5. *Ibid.,* pp. 142–43.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 120.
7. Shibata Michiko, *Hisabetsuburaku no Denshō to Seikatsu* (Life and Tradition in the Discriminated Hamlets) (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1972), p. 152.
8. Segawa, *Mura no Onna-tachi,* p. 144.
9. *Ibid.,* p. 17.
10. *Ibid.,* p. 145.
11. Shimonaka, *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari,* I: 246.
12. Segawa, *Mura no Onna-tachi,* p. 82.
13. Shimonaka, *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari,* I: 253–54.
14. Segawa, *Mura no Onna-tachi,* pp. 122–23.
15. Wada Kinji and Takeuchi Yoshinaga, eds., "Nōson no Haha no Rekishi" (History of Farm Village Mothers), in *Tsuchi to Furusato,* VII: 328–29.
16. Shimonaka, *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari,* I: 248, 256–57.
17. *Ibid.,* pp. 230–31.
18. *Ibid.,* pp. 240–41.
19. Wada and Takeuchi, "Nōson no Haha no Rekishi," p. 330.
20. Shimonaka, *Nihon Zankoku Monogatari,* I: 257.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Segawa, *Mura no Onna-tachi,* p. 132.
23. Yamshiro Tomoe, *Fuki no Tō* (Bog Rhubarb Shoots), in *Tsuchi to Furusato,* I: 224ff, 522.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

1. Nakamura Masanori, *Rōdōsha to Nōmin,* pp. 330–31.
2. Ann Waswo, *Japanese Landlords: The Decline of a Rural Elite* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 15.
3. Norman, *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State,* pp. 21–22; 52–53; 147–48, footnotes 24 and 25. J. W. Hall believes it was 20%; J. W. Hall and Richard K. Beardsley, *Twelve Doors to Japan* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 554. Waswo cites 27%; *Japanese Landlords,* p. 16.
4. *Ibid.,* p. 19.
5. Fukutake, *Japanese Rural Society,* p. 10.