



End of an Era ...

As I sat at my bench this morning working on my latest print, I had a ringside seat at a rather unusual event - I watched my neighbour Tamura-san being buried in his back yard.

For those of you unfamiliar with Japanese customs, I hasten to explain that this is a completely serious story. Tamura-san died a few weeks ago, and this morning he was quite literally buried in his back yard, in the family plot. Our area is semi-rural, and many of the larger land-owners have a family grave plot in one corner of their land.

In the Tamura family case, the plot is quite extensive; it exactly faces my window, and I can clearly see eleven stones, six of which are a multi-generational type, so I think we are looking at around 150 years of history at least.

A buddhist priest arrived earlier in the morning, and my printing was accompanied by the sounds of his bells and chanting as he gave a service for the family, friends and relations. Once they were ready, they then made a procession from the house out to the burial plot. A workman had been here early this morning to prepare the hole, which he simply scraped out with a hoe in the bare ground behind one of the stones.

The people gathered around then blocked my view, but I have attended these ceremonies before, and knew what they were doing. The contents of the urn would have been tipped out into the hole, and the urn itself then broken and the fragments placed on top. The priest may then have placed some prayer slips in the hole before the group took turns each pulling a bit of dirt back into place. As they all headed back into the house for refreshments, the workman cleaned up a bit, tamped down the soil, and drove off.

I have no idea if the family will be commissioning a new stone. They may do that, or perhaps they will simply have his name carved on one of the existing stones; we'll see.

For the family over there, losing their husband/father is of course a very major event, but even for me over on this side of the river, there will be changes. The largest potential change is that in order to pay inheritance taxes, the family may be forced to sell part of their land. Perhaps the bulldozers will be arriving in a few months, putting an end to my beautiful green view.

Even if such a disaster is avoided though, there will definitely be changes, and indeed, this is already under way. Tamura-san made it a point to keep his land 'in shape', trimming trees (very heavily) and keeping the weeds and wild grasses at bay. I didn't always agree with him on this, as he was a 'slash and burn' man, and each time he made a pass over his property, my view was a brown wasteland for the next few weeks, until the vegetation struggled back to life.

But we are now in late July, and as he was ailing for some months, the land has not been touched since last autumn. Myself and my staff are enjoying the wonderful view of a landscape covered with wild flowers, deep grasses, and sprouting trees. We are kind of hoping that the son - the new Tamura-san - will perhaps leave it alone. He doesn't seem to have much interest in the land, and we never see him in the garden at all.

Our guess - and it is only a guess - is that he won't do any work on it himself, but will call in a maintenance company perhaps once each year, presumably in the fall. They will fan out across the land, cut down everything in sight that isn't an actual 'tree', burn the piles, and then retire from battle.

I suppose it's perhaps just as well. I don't want my staff sitting there looking out the window all day!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>