

5.

Japanese Sento



SINCE THE 18TH CENTURY, THE SENTO, or bath-house has been one of the most essential facilities of Japanese city life. I love the humorous story “Ukiyo-buro” written by Shikitei Samba in 1809 (*ukiyo* means the floating world and *buro* means the same as *furo*, or bath). He vividly described the activities in a bath-house from morning to night. A lot of the characters in this novel were ordinary people, such as a carpenter, a plasterer, a shop-keeper and a market-stall holder. They were all living in their small terraced houses in *shitamachi*, the traditional shopping and residential district, where the tiny houses were built in crowded rows and the price of land was so high they couldn’t afford to have their own bathroom. Actually, this is similar to the city life of ordinary people in modern Tokyo.

I couldn’t help smiling when I read one scene in the story. A father, who was a carpenter, came back from his work and took his little son to the public sento. The little boy had a toy, a small china tortoise in his hand. I felt they were very similar to parents and children in our modern age. As I recall my childhood in the 1930s, I remember how we used to go to the bath-house in just the same way as the people of the Edo period did. When I was very little, my father took me to the sento with him, and I used to play with toys such as a small bucket, a dipper and my baby doll, which I would wash and put clothes on to keep it warm. All of these toys were made of celluloid. The whole situation and the atmosphere were similar to city life before the Second World War.

Nowadays, although the public bath-house is necessary in city life, a lot of sento have disappeared because since the 1960s dwellings have been built with their own bathrooms. Also there has been a change of lifestyle in the cities caused by the modernisation for the Tokyo Olympics of 1964 and Japan’s great economic growth. The number of public bath-house users has fallen, too. For a sento to survive it is necessary that it has at least 150 visitors a day and it has become difficult to

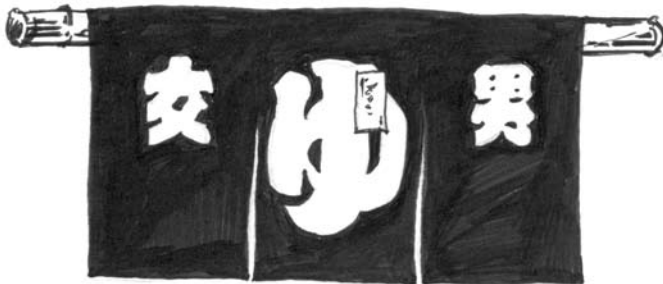
achieve this. In addition, there is the rising cost of fuel every year. So the sento has experienced great financial hardship.

Recently public bath-house managers have had to change and diversify to cater for users' needs. Some of the bath-houses moved into bigger buildings, so a lot of people were able to drop in after finishing work. Another way to survive was by changing the image of the bath-house and renovating sentos to become spas, which included beauty treatments or karaoke bars. I recently saw one of these transformed bath-houses in Asakusa, a popular entertainment area in Tokyo. Who could ever imagine taking a bath in this part of the city? But now people visit a public bath-house there named Matsuri-yu (matsuri means festival, *yu* is a bath). The customers wear *jinbei* which is the traditional Japanese costume to relax in at bath time, and the sento makes it specially for them. The *jinbei* consists of knee-length shorts and a short-sleeved, kimono-style jacket made of cotton. It is worn in summer at festivals, or simply for enjoying the cool of a summer evening. At this Asakusa sento there are different kinds of bathing, such as a sauna, a bath with jets and an open-air bath. After bathing the customers can have a meal there. It's little wonder that young people haven't had the experience of bathing at a bath-house. My grandchildren who were born in the 1980s are a good example. In the 1930s, folk would go daily to a public bath-house because most small houses in Tokyo didn't have a bathroom.

In the 1930s, in my childhood in Kita Ward, in the north-east of Tokyo, we moved three times, and every time we found a public sento near our home. It was very easy to find one by looking for its tall chimney, always the sign of a sento, and also its unique architecture with a high gabled roof and skylight windows. There was always a curtain, or *noren* at the entrance with the word "bath-house" written in Japanese. This curtain was small, made of blue cotton with a design such as the simple symbol or character for steaming water or the big letters "YU". When customers went through the doorway, they had to bend a little to pass under the curtain.

Of three sento I knew I recall
Chujoh-toh the best, where I used to
go with my family for 10 years from

CURTAIN AT THE ENTRANCE: LEFT FOR
WOMEN, RIGHT FOR MEN. IN OLD CHINA,
THE RIGHT WAS SUPERIOR.



the age of six. Chujoh was the name of a beautiful princess in the legend, “The Origin of The Temple of Taima”. This was the story of a temple in Nara Prefecture. In the legend the princess was the daughter of a priest and she became a nun. She wore a garment on which was embroidered a big lotus to convey to people the truth of Buddhism. The second part of the name, *toh*, is the sound of a Chinese character meaning hot springs. Chujoh-toh looked every inch the typical public bath-house.

At the narrow entrance to the actual bathing area there were two doors, each hung with a very small curtain with a *kanji*, or Chinese character on it indicating which side was for women, and which side was for men. We took off our footwear on the duck-board, put it on the shelf along the wall, then entered the hall. Between the two doors was a platform about one metre high and on this sat a cashier with a big watch. This person, either a man or a woman, also looked after the customers’ various needs, and the customer paid the fee. I can’t remember exactly how much it was but it varied according to one’s age. Nowadays it is 420 yen for an adult, 120 yen for a child between 6 and 12 years old, and 80 yen for under children under six. When we wanted to wash our hair we had to pay more than the fixed amount and got a special wooden card that allowed us to use a large wash basin.

Inside, the hall with the wooden floor was divided into two parts by a tall wide mirror that was set into a wall. Half of the women’s area was a boarded floor and the other part was higher and covered with tatami, or straw matting. There were small beds for babies in the corner of the tatami area. A lot of rough wicker baskets for clothes were lying on top of one another along the left wall and there was a narrow wooden board area for resting on. There was a big *hibachi* (a Japanese heater that burns charcoal) and a kettle of herb tea, which was to keep us warm inside. It was said to be very effective for women. My grandmother believed it had



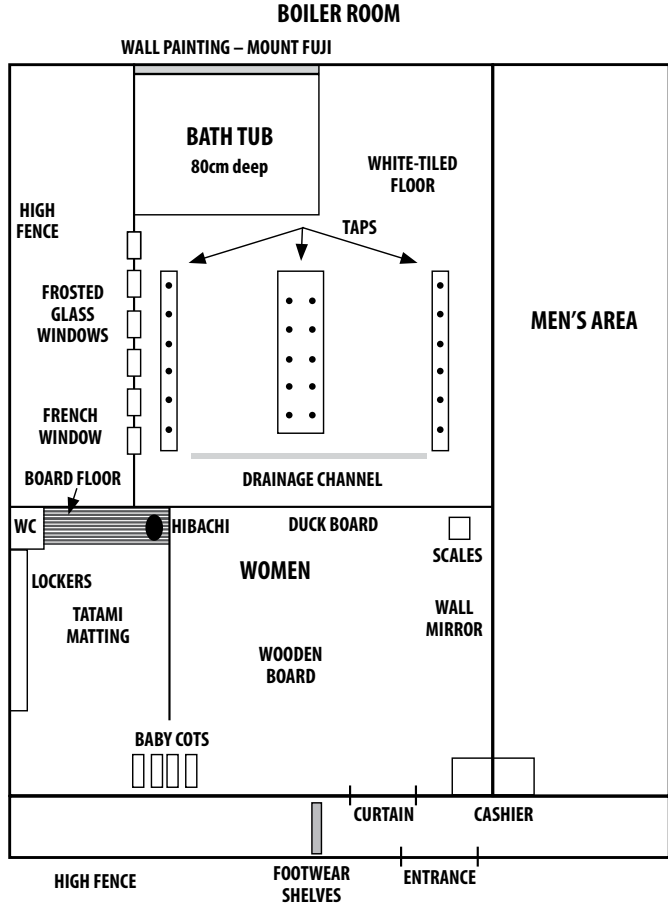
a medicinal effect. After taking off our clothes we went into the big bathing area.

At the end of the room there was a big bath tub which could hold up to fifteen adults. It was filled with hot green-coloured water, this colour coming from the spa powder which was specially used

A HIBACHI This one was in our dining-room for over 15 years. (Childhood drawing by the writer).

by Chujoh-toh. It had a subtle fragrance of wild flowers, which was popular with bathers. I liked it too. And on the wall at the back of the tub was a painted scene of Mount Fuji. Later I saw other public sento with similar paintings on their walls. The bathing area was about 20 square metres and on both sides of the bathing room was a long line of taps. Women and children were chatting, laughing and

CHUJOH-TOH
BATH-HOUSE



washing themselves in a happy atmosphere.

Usually my grandmother or my Mother took me and my older sisters to the sento after our supper in the evening. I had my own small wash basin and towel, and I carried a set of clean clothes. It was one of my secret dreams to swim freely one day in the big bath tub. Of course, the small children were asked not to splash too much in the tub. I enjoyed bathing. My younger sister had a small metal goldfish and a watering can and she liked to play with them sitting next to me while I washed her back to help my Mother.

Twice a year there were charming special events in every public sento and in the private ones, too. There was a festival on the fifth of May. This was and still is the Boys' Festival. It is also known as the Iris Festival. On that day they put the leaves of the iris into the bath tub, and the bathing area would be filled with the scent of the flowers. Another festival was on the Winter Solstice. On this day they put a lot of slices of citron into the tub (a fruit similar to a lemon and called *yuzu* in Japanese). Children receive mandarin oranges as gifts. Both of these festivals are held to bring everyone good health.

My grandmother had great faith in the herb tea Chujoh-toh offered. She used to drink a mug of it after every bath she took. She would sit relaxed on the *tatami* sipping it leisurely and ask me to join her. I didn't like the taste or the smell but she always told me that it was good for my health and she wouldn't leave me until I had finished the whole mug of hot, brown, herb tea.

After many years have passed and I am now as old as my grandmother was then, sometimes I am reminded of the herb tea and miss its strange taste and distinctive aroma. Even today that public bath-house remains for me a symbol of a happy childhood.



MOUNT FUJI PAINTED ON A WALL IN A SENTO.