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Reizei family, custodians of *waka*, soul of Japan

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Ask a Japanese person what bird they associate with plum blossoms, and they will answer “*uguisu*” (bush warbler). Moreover, the two together will make them think of spring. As a motif they can be seen in paintings, kimonos, tableware and even crafts like tea ceremony utensils. “This is the beauty of Japanese *kata*, or ‘form,’ which has its roots in *waka* poetry,” explained Tamehito Reizei, the current head of the Reizei family.

Waka, an ancient form of poetry consisting of five lines in a meter of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, played a foundational role in the development of what is now known as the Japanese spirit, influencing everything from the tea ceremony, *noh* and incense to the modern Japanese lifestyle.

The Reizei family, whose estate is located on the north side of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, has been involved with *waka* poetry for 800 years. Their ancestors include Fujiwara no Shunzei and Fujiwara no Teika, revered



The Reizei residence was built in 1790 and is Japan's only imperial court noble house that has survived in its entirety. KOUTAROU WASHIZAKI

poets during the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods. *Waka* was considered essential learning for the emperors and shoguns who ruled the nation, and as a family of the noble class, the members of the Reizei family have long taken responsibility for it in several ways. The first is their upholding of the Reizei school of poetry. Every month, they hold a *waka kai* poetry gathering for both teaching and researching *waka*. This includes the *kata*, formal rules that govern the way the poetry is composed and recited, plus related etiquette.

“*Waka* is different from the art that arrived from the West after the Meiji Restoration, which is all about the free expression of the self,” Tamehito explained. “Things that are expressed in *kata* are not necessarily real. Japanese people immediately understand ‘bush warbler in a blossoming plum tree,’ but few have seen the real thing. Japanese people understand this not through logic, but as a feeling. This same feeling is what we mean when we say something is very Japanese, and it seems difficult for foreigners to understand.”

His wife, Kimiko, the eldest daughter of the 24th head of the family, Tameto Reizei, explained it this way: “*Waka* was originally something that was dedicated to the gods. In the old days, festivals were a function of government, and the emperor played a role in line with the unity of church and state. People prayed for a good harvest or health, and beautiful words thought to be pleasing to the gods were selected and refined. The *waka* forms developed as a result.”

The second role played by the Reizei family is to administer several important annual poetry rituals. Highly formalized, they are held at certain times throughout the year, such as New Year's Day, Setsubun on Feb. 3

to herald the coming of spring, and the summer festival Tanabata on July 7.

“From the Heian Period until the Meiji Era (1868-1912), the world of *kata* developed in the imperial court. Clothing and etiquette were decided according to one's rank and station, and knowledge of these rules was itself seen as proof of nobility,” Tamehito said. “The diary ‘*Meigetsu-ki*,’ which was written by our ancestor Fujiwara no Teika, records that lifestyle in detail, and attests to his passing the *kata* down to his descendants.”

In addition to intangible cultural assets such as *waka* and annual rituals, the family is also responsible for many tangible cultural assets. These include five National Treasures, including “*Meigetsu-ki*,” and 48 Important Cultural Properties. The family residence itself, including the Obunko storehouse, where artifacts are kept, has also been designated an Important Cultural Property. While the costs of upkeep for these is significant, very little support is received from the national and local governments, meaning the majority must be paid for by the family. When the peerage system was abolished at the end of World War II, the family lost what government income it had, and so subsequent family heads have had to take jobs in the private sector.

Having poured their own resources into preserving these cultural assets, the associated tax burden soon became unmanageable. At one time the tax office even advised the family to sell the property. In the end, though, they established a “public interest incorporated foundation,” the Reizei Family Shiguretei Bunko Foundation, in 1981. The foundation now carries on the long family mission of preserving both its intangible and tangible cultural assets — a mission their ancestors upheld even during the Meiji Res-



KOUTAROU WASHIZAKI

toration in 1868, when many other noble families chose to follow the emperor when he relocated to the new capital city of Tokyo. Still, fundraising remains an issue. Conservation costs for the ancient books and manuscripts, and the ongoing construction of a new storehouse, Kita no Okura, is expected to be paid by the Reizei family itself.

“I asked the Agency for Cultural Affairs for the government to bear the cost, but they declined. After all, there are no votes in supporting education and cultural heritage,” Tamehito said. As a result, fundraising is a never-ending task. Meanwhile, although the Agency for Cultural Affairs initially recommended they build an air-conditioned concrete building for the Kita no Okura, the Reizei family chose traditional mud-wall construction.

“Concrete buildings don't last for 100 years, so we would have to pay for renovations every few decades. In addition, it would

require air conditioning, which uses power, and that would present a challenge if the power were cut off,” Kimiko explained. “On the other hand, we know that earthen storehouses last for 400 years, with at least five known examples that have survived since the Edo Period. They have excellent fire resistance and durability, and self-breathing earthen walls keep the internal humidity and temperature within a natural range, making them ideal for storing cultural assets. Mud-wall construction techniques are also used in making castle walls, and so there is the added benefit of preserving those techniques for other applications at a time when they are rapidly being lost.”

Conscious of her family's long tradition of preserving *waka* poetry, Kimiko has recently made visits to more than 10 high schools in Kyoto Prefecture to pass on her knowledge.

“In our postwar education system, ‘being different from others’ is seen as a virtue, but

The Reizei family

A “house of *waka* poetry” whose ancestors include the poets Fujiwara no Shunzei and Fujiwara no Teika, both of whom were chosen to compile imperial anthologies of *waka* poetry during the Heian and Kamakura periods. A grandson of Teika named Tamehito first adopted the family name of Reizei.

The family is currently led by Tamehito Reizei, a position he gained when he married Kimiko, the eldest daughter of the family's 24th head, Tameto Reizei. In addition to inheriting the Reizei style of poetry and the administration of several important annual rituals, the family is custodian of ancient documents and classical manuscripts.

It is now the only *kuge* (court noble) house in Japan that remains in its original form (and is itself an Important Cultural Property). The Obunko storehouse, dating back to the Edo Period, is considered a sacred place on the estate, and even today only the family head and heir are allowed to enter. Tameto's grandson Nagisa Nomura is scheduled to succeed him.

with *kata* everyone is the same. So it now seems novel to young people. The *kata* are like a form of communal consciousness, and so people in the same space can feel the same way at the same time. I believe it also serves as a force that has supported Japan not just in its culture but also its economy,” she said.

It seems clear that knowledge of the *waka* poetry that has been handed down from ancient times is essential for understanding the modern Japanese spirit — and Japan as a whole.

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Shibousai Kitagawa

Chinese cuisine embodies spirit of Japan in Matsusaka



TAEKO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Matsusaka is a midsize city in Mie Prefecture. For many people today, the city's name most likely brings to mind Matsusaka beef, the epitome of marbled meat. In addition to cattle farms, the city is dotted with famous restaurants. This special region is home to Shibousai Kitagawa, a Chinese restaurant that is booked up a year in advance. A 20-minute drive from Matsusaka Station, the restaurant occupies a renovated traditional house that was once a sericulture farm, surrounded by rice fields.

Born in Matsusaka, owner-chef Yoshihiro Kitagawa attended a culinary institute in Osaka. After graduation, Kitagawa trained in several Chinese restaurants, where he gained a deeper knowledge. “Rather than a cuisine of subtraction, the concept is not to use anything superfluous in the first place,” Kitagawa said. “Based on that way of thinking, simple dishes are made with a minimum of ingredients and seasonings.” After honing his skills, he had the idea of going solo. He then purchased the traditional house that would become his current establishment, and opened a Chinese restaurant in 2015. His cuisine steadily drew increased attention, and more guests came from outside the prefecture.



Address
Shibousai Kitagawa
1020 Isedera-cho, Matsusaka-shi, Mie Prefecture
<https://m.facebook.com/shibousai.kitagawa/>

Therefore, Kitagawa started consciously incorporating local specialties into his course menu to spread the word about the attractions of Mie.

In Kitagawa's cuisine, which brings out the character of the ingredients using a minimum of seasoning, there is a subtly profound emotion that is distinctively Japanese. This

feeling is connected to *mono no aware*, often explained as an awareness and appreciation of all things and their transience. While based on the cuisines of Sichuan and Guangzhou, the dishes created by Kitagawa constitute a Chinese cuisine that is a Japanese original. It is a cuisine that cannot be experienced even in China — one that exists in this place alone.

KATSUYUKI ICHIMI MIE PREFECTURE GOVERNOR



As the governor of Mie Prefecture, I am extremely pleased that Shibousai Kitagawa has been selected as a Destination Restaurant for the 2024 list.

The Chinese cuisine prepared by owner-chef Yoshihiro Kitagawa, which makes the most of Mie's rich local ingredients, is sure to offer visitors new discoveries and emotional experiences.

I highly encourage you to visit Mie Prefecture and experience the unique and rich culinary charms that our region has to offer.

MASATO TAKEGAMI MATSUSAKA MAYOR



I would like to convey my warmest congratulations to chef Yoshihiro Kitagawa for winning the recent award. I believe this recognition is due to the delicious meals and wonderful atmosphere he has provided, which have captivated many people. When I visited the restaurant, I too had a truly enjoyable time.

I hope that Kitagawa will continue to enjoy good health and that his restaurant will have even greater success in the future. I also hope that many more people will visit Shibousai Kitagawa to have an equally wonderful dining experience.



Maebashi's MDC paves the way in private sector-led revitalization

Sustainable Japan Award: Satoyama Excellence Award

MAIKO MURAOKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Maebashi, a city in Gunma Prefecture in the northern Kanto region that once had a thriving silk industry, boasts a rich history and culture. However, like many other provincial cities, it faced the challenges of urban decay as times changed. To address this, the Maebashi Design Commission (MDC) was established in 2019 as a private sector-led organization aimed at revitalizing the city.

The MDC received the 2024 Sustainable Japan Excellence Award presented by The Japan Times in recognition of its achievements, particularly the successful completion of the Babakawa Street Urban Design Project in March 2024, which has resulted in increased numbers of pedestrians and shops.

In a recent interview with The Japan Times, Shin Higeta, the director and secretary-general of the MDC, talked about the organization's work and how it has transformed the city.

In 2016, Maebashi introduced its vision, called *Mebuku* (to sprout) and described in English as “Where good things grow,” which served as the foundation for the Maebashi Urban Design Plan in 2019, outlining a strategy for revitalizing a 158-hectare area in the city center. “In contrast to government-led initiatives where policies may change abruptly with a change in leadership, we established the MDC to ensure that urban design was driven by the private sector,” Higeta said. The MDC aims to create a city where people can live, work and play, fostering a sense of community and sustainability with a focus on local characteristics and

resources.

However, when the private sector takes the initiative in community development, fundraising and unifying the will of the citizenry can present significant challenges. Maebashi has a history of overcoming these challenges. During the Edo Period (1603-1868), the area suffered a severe flood and fire, which resulted in the relocation of the domain's castle to the city of Kawagoe in Saitama Prefecture. Higeta said that Maebashi, once a thriving castle town, faced a period of nearly 100 years without this symbol of civic pride. “It was a period of disgrace. However, the silk industry started to flourish in Maebashi, enabling the citizens to independently rebuild the castle at the end of the Edo Period,” he said. This historical context is deeply ingrained in the people of Maebashi, fostering a strong sense of community and self-reliance as well as a culture of creating a city of their own under the leadership of the local business community.

To leverage the city's history and potential, the MDC is not intended to function like a local government or to assume all of the responsibilities related to the city's development. Instead, it creates prototypes by designing and developing small sections of the central area, and shares the consistent urban design concepts embodied in the prototypes to inspire diverse stakeholders in the city, including individual homeowners, to participate in the development and management of the city in their own ways.

The Babakawa Street Urban Design Project is one such example. This project transformed a central street into a pedestrian-friendly waterfront area, with the goal of reviving the formerly prosperous shopping district. The transformation involved removing asphalt and replacing it with brick pavement, installing wooden decks and benches, and creating a more inviting atmosphere along the river.

The process and results of the project not only enhanced the aesthetics of the area but also strengthened people's connections to the river and the city's history. “For over a century, since the city's heyday as a silk manufacturing center, Maebashi has maintained a water-control system for all the rivers that flow through it. This history of coexisting with rivers has made this project possible,” Higeta said.

Out of the project's total cost of ¥430 million (approximately \$3.2 million), ¥300 million was covered by donations from the local business association Taiyo no Kai. To secure the remaining funds, the MDC has explored innovative financing mechanisms including social impact bonds and Maebashi City Urban Design Funds, established using a support system created by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism through the Organization for Promoting Urban Development.

Higeta hopes that these efforts contribute to transforming the investment culture in Japan: “For institutional investors, investment should mean more than financial gain. It is a statement of their social stance and interest in the communities.” He further noted that the city can benefit greatly from its interactions with the business sector.

The MDC's achievements have garnered attention from other cities. Higeta believes that Maebashi's strategy can be replicated in other cities. “We could provide consulting services based on our know-how and IT solutions such as the use of AI-based pedestrian tracking and analysis in marketing. The financial gains from potential collaborations with other municipalities and areas can be reinvested into the continuous development and improvement of our own city,” he said. The flexibility to allocate resources in this manner is a significant advantage of being a private organization.

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Shin Higeta, director and secretary-general MDC

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