

From rags to riches, Japanese style

by Steve Givens
Feature Writer



Japanese men working in a fishmarket in one of the more prosperous sections of Tokyo. In five years, it is projected the

average Japanese worker will be making more than the average American worker.

Steve Givens spent last summer working in Shigeyuki Noguchi's fish market in Tokyo, Japan.

Shigeyuki Noguchi, a paunchy Japanese man nearing 40, saunters into his fish market every day towards noon. He jokes with his employees, who wear black rubber aprons, and inspects the glistening rainbow colored trout and mackerel heaped on chipped ice. He picks up a pink sea bream and smiles to see that it is of excellent quality, firm and fresh.

Noguchi is one of many Japanese who have made a small fortune over the past ten years, gaining wealth in proportion to Japan's ever expanding economy. Not too many years ago he lived in a one room apartment with three employees from his market and his mother. He rode a bicycle to work.

Today, times are much better. He drives an expensive German car to his shop. He has taken vacations to Hawaii and California. He proudly shows you around his \$250,000 house, small for the price by American standards, but nonetheless a house for a well-off businessman. He offers his guests Johnnie Walker Black and the finest Japanese teas. Recently he has bought a bar and a snack parlor with the money he has made from his market.

Ten young workers man his market, located in a shiny Western department store in one of the more prosperous sections of Tokyo. Housewives in French dresses and platform shoes stroll through the building lingering over imported wines or choice cuts of meat. An onlooker would think he was in Paris or New York except for the distinctly Oriental faces and conversations of the shoppers and clerks.

Noguchi's fish market, though, still retains some of the traditional appearances of the ancient trade. The workers wear cotton headbands called "hachimakis" and they shout the traditional welcoming chant "Irashai, isashai!" to passing customers, hoping to sell them some clams or sliced raw tuna. They slosh buckets of water over the fish, making the salmon and squid gleam.

Some of the fish in the shop are still alive and flapping. Workers struggle to gut squirming, uncooperative flounder and writhing eels. In Japan, the freshness of a fish is crucial: Noguchi sees to it that his customers get the freshest possible. For this luxury the housewives are more than willing to pay something extra.

Noguchi often spends the afternoon behind the shop smoking an American cigarette, keeping his various accounts straight. Bills must be paid and collected. He spits in disgust when the figures don't come out even. From time to time he curses "Chik-sho!" meaning "Crap!" In spite of his newly acquired wealth, Noguchi still has not learned the graces of polite society. He speaks in what would be the English equivalent of a Cockney accent.

At night he usually goes home to his wife and children, eats a sumptuous dinner and then visits local bars with his cronies. He pinches the bar girls, drinks a little too much and jokes about the harsher times when he wasn't so comfortable. He compares how much he makes with his friend the butcher or the vegetable market owner. His cronies suck their teeth with awe when he lets on how much he is making.

Once in a long while he gets up before dawn to buy the fish market's daily quota at the large Tsukiji wholesale fish market on Tokyo Bay. He winds through the crowds at

the busy market, bargaining for crates of fish which will be sold later in the day at his shop. But usually the manager of his shop does this chore while Noguchi sleeps.

These days Noguchi is in the process of drawing up plans for the renovation of his shop. He wants to line the floor with black tile and light the shop with cool, fluorescent lamps. Ultimately he wants for his market to be the most luxurious in all of Tokyo, a place where housewives with big incomes will buy the highest quality fish. He is well on his way to achieving that dream.

Noguchi is happy with his fortunes in recent years, as well he might be. He is looked upon as a local dignitary, in spite of his coarse language and lack of education. Younger men come to him for loans and he willingly apprentices the sons of his friends, promising them a fish market of their own if they work diligently.

Noguchi is by no means an exceptional success story. He is but one of thousands of aggressive entrepreneurs who have amassed small fortunes recently. Noguchi and others like him will keep pushing up the incomes of Japanese, until, as it is projected, the average Japanese worker will be making more than the average American in a matter of five years.

Fiddlers set new dates

"Little Fiddler's Grove," Harper A. Van Hoy's old-time fiddler's and bluegrass festival at Union Grove, North Carolina, has changed its dates this year from Easter weekend to Memorial weekend, May 24-26.

"We must get away from the confusion of past Easter weekends," Van Hoy said. The decision arose as a result of erroneous Associated Press reports which were circulated last year stating that one death and 80 drug-related arrests occurred at his bluegrass festival.

The festival will start Friday, May 24 at 6 p.m. with performances by guest artists and musical groups. Saturday's activities will include various workshops and the individual and band competitions. The Christian Harmony Hymn Singing and Psalter Concert will be held Sunday.

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My son, the postcard.

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