

The winds of innovation blow over the terraced rice fields **Linking together 1,000 years of mountain village smiles**

Ultra-compact mobility solutions breathe fresh life into the footpaths that wind among Japan's rice field terraces. Here, in the Ueyama district of Mimasaka, Okayama Prefecture, former city dwellers are moving in... and bringing with them the winds of change.

**Okayama Prefecture
Mobility for Everyone Project: Ueyama Shuraku**



Photo: Aida Ueyama Tanadadan



Photo by Akio Takada



Photo by Akio Takada

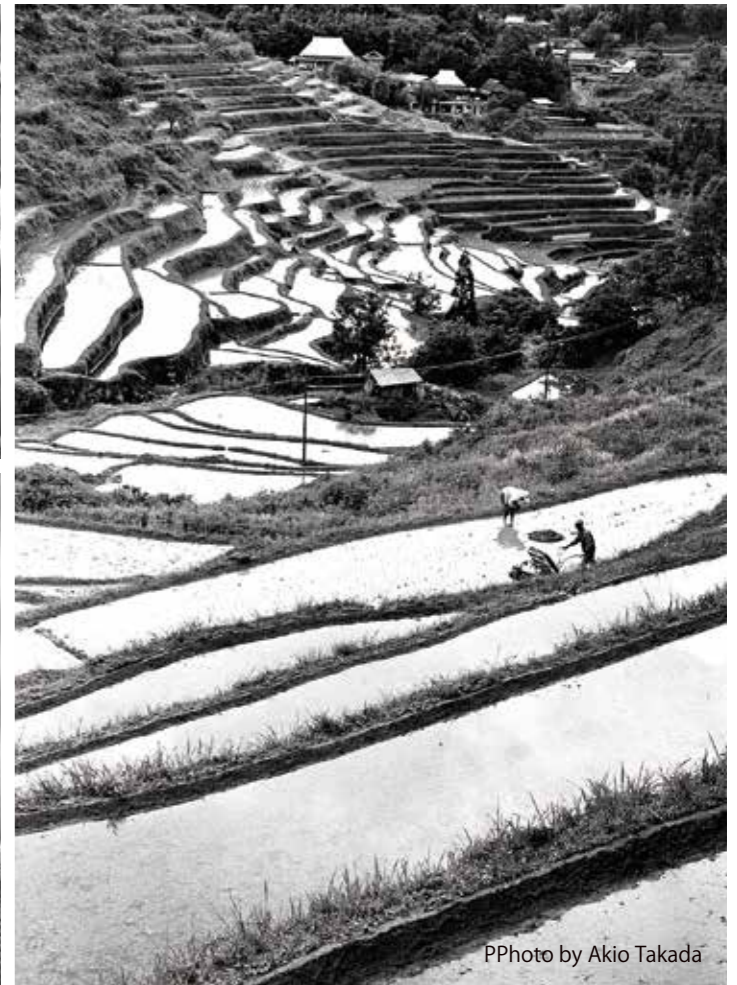


Photo by Akio Takada

We wanted a smile like that when we got older.

A group of young people moves from the city to a tiny village that has been cultivating terraced rice fields since the eighth century. The year is 2007. The village population is aging to the point that only around one in five residents is still in the prime of life. Many of the rice paddies have been left untended and are overgrown with weeds. The group has moved here with the goal of bringing this vista of ruined terraces back to life.

Aida Ueyama Tanadadan is a non-profit organization made up of members in their 20s to those in their 60s, though most of them are young adults. Shinji Umetani, who goes by the nickname "Ume-chan", is the leader of the group. He was drawn to this area by the warm smiles of the elderly people who live in the Ueyama district. Ume-chan and his group wanted a smile like theirs when they got older, so they made up their minds to live there, too.

Bringing back the ruined terraces was backbreaking work. No matter how much they cut the weeds in summer, they kept growing back. But after watching the young people silently toil away at the mind-numbing work, even the village elders who said it couldn't be done jumped in to help them restore the fields. Gradually, they started sharing their agricultural wisdom with the newcomers.

By 2016, they had brought about 2,000 of the 8,300 terraced rice fields in Ueyama back to life. It had taken them nearly 10 years. Terraced rice field villages are ground zero for Japan's depopulation trend. After the war, the young people from these villages started flocking to the cities in search of jobs.

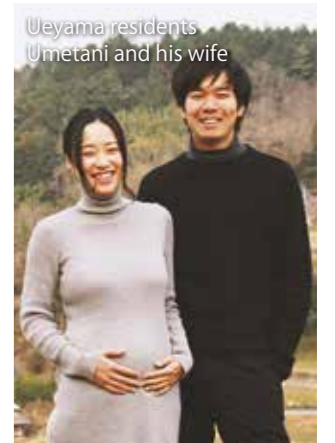
The rough mountain terrain of these areas demands that the terraced fields be maintained by human hands, making them particularly hard-hit by declining population.

Standing before the terraced fields he worked so hard to restore, Ume-chan told us, "The fields have to conform to the terrain, so they all take a different shape. Every last one of them is precious." Etsuko Suda was born in Ueyama, and has spent her entire life here. "People who live in Ueyama are notoriously critical about their rice", she tells us. Smiling, she adds, "We put so much effort into growing it, though, so I guess we have a right to be picky."

Perhaps it's something like the cutest children being the biggest handful to deal with. Thanks to the joint efforts of the village elders and the young people, the revitalized terrace fields have become incredibly precious. When Ume-chan's first child is born later this year, this rural mountain village will again be roused to life by the cries of a newborn baby.



Ueyama native Etsuko Suda



Ueyama residents Umetani and his wife

Mobility inspires a future full of smiles

In 2016, eight years after the young people moved to Ueyama, a fresh initiative came to the area. The Ueyama Shuraku Mobility for Everyone Project brought together the Tanadadan and the Minna no Shuraku Kenkyujo non-profit organizations as well as the city of Mimasaka, Okayama University and others to restore freedom of mobility to rural mountain areas that have lost much of their access to public transportation. In the process, the project aimed to breathe fresh life into the villages, bring more prosperity to the residents' lives and revitalize the region.

The project has been receiving support from the Toyota Mobility Foundation for about three and a half years now. During this time, 15 ultra-compact Cosmos vehicles have been field-tested in the area.

Standard vehicles have difficulty passing each other on narrow village roads, which are often steep and full of tight curves. Older residents find driving increasingly troublesome, causing them to remain shut up in their homes much of the time. The Cosmos, however, makes

navigating village roads easy, and the compact vehicles are inspiring more elderly villagers to get out and about. Ume-chan laughed as he described the results of this change. "When I'm out driving and pass by the older villagers, we inevitably fall into conversation—to the point that I often don't ever make it to where I was going." Toyota's ultra-compact mobility solutions may even be fostering communication in rural areas, bolstering people's sense of community in the process.

Of course, even the Cosmos has room for improvements. Solutions that help drivers accelerate more smoothly up steep inclines or more easily transport mowing equipment, for example, would make them even more user-friendly.

The young people have brought new life to the old wisdom of cultivating Japan's terraced rice fields, passed down in this region over the course of more than 1,000 years. Add the latest technology, and there is every reason to believe that we can introduce fresh value even in a future of depopulation and aging residents.

