

Component 1, Part 5

Japan's Rural Cultural Landscapes

Parts [1](#) and [2](#) provide specific examples of Mather and Karan's characteristics of the Japanese cultural landscape. Part 5 further examines the cultural landscapes of Japan through a focus on its rural landscapes. This approach provides an opportunity to extend our analysis of Japanese cultural landscapes beyond Mather and Karan's characteristics. However, viewers are encouraged to look for evidence of these characteristics in the following images.

As a result of post-World War II urban growth, Japan's rural areas have become abandoned and forgotten places. From 1950 to 2000, the percentage of the Japanese population living in rural areas declined from 63 percent to 21 percent (Karan, 2005). The loss of population in rural Japan has been so great that some places have been identified as "depopulated areas" and made eligible for government assistance.¹ The landscapes of depopulated areas often reflect this abandonment (Figures [5-1](#) and [5-2](#)). With continued population loss, rural Japan has slowly receded into the background of contemporary Japanese society and has been largely forgotten by most urban Japanese. Today, these areas are seen as quaint repositories of traditional Japanese culture. Likewise, in the minds of Americans rural Japan hardly exists because many Americans are led to believe, based on media images, that the country is entirely urban.

Since Japan's urban population is crowded onto the country's few coastal plains, its rural population is limited largely to small, fragmented pieces of flat land found mainly in the mountains. In Japan's mountainous areas the amount of flat land is severely limited (Figures [5-3](#) and [5-4](#)) and where it does exist it is utilized (Figures [5-5](#) and [5-6](#)). However, in some locations floodplain development is not allowed ([Figure 5-7](#)).

Japan's rural landscape is dominated by a rectangular land division pattern, called the jori system ([Figure 5-8](#)). This system started in 645 CE and has influenced the spatial geography of rural Japan (Karan 2005). Fields were originally separated by canals and ditches at right angles to each other and oriented along the cardinal directions ([Figure 5-9](#)). Over time, these field lines also became the routes of roads, further determining the geography of rural areas. In some areas, the main axes of the jori system are aligned with local geography rather than cardinal directions ([Figure 5-10](#)).

Another landscape feature of rural Japan is the tendency for rural homes to cluster together, rather than be dispersed in isolated homesteads (see [Figure 5-8](#)). To maximize the amount of agricultural land, homes are typically clustered at the base of hills or together in the middle of the fields (Figures [5-10](#), [5-11](#), and [5-12](#)). It is important to note that this is not characteristic of Hokkaido's rural landscapes. Due to a larger land base, lower population densities, and later agricultural settlement, Hokkaido's landscape is characterized by a more dispersed settlement pattern, with isolated farmsteads in the middle of the fields ([Figure 5-13](#)).

One cannot talk about rural Japan without addressing the ever-present rice field. Rice fields are a ubiquitous feature of the rural Japanese landscape. Between 1985 and 2004, rice production declined steadily from 11.6 million tons to 8.7 million tons and the planted area declined from 2.3 million hectares to 1.7 million hectares (<http://www.stat.go.jp/data/nenkan/pdf/z07-1.pdf>).

However, my impression from anecdotal evidence is that most of the land going out of rice production is in urban and suburban areas, because rice is by far the dominant crop grown in rural areas (Figures 5-14, 5-15, and 5-16). Despite the decline in areas under rice production, about 41 percent of Japan's cultivated land remains under rice (Karan, 2005). The importance of rice (and more broadly agriculture) to the rural landscape has been emphasized by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. According to the ministry, one of the roles agriculture plays in contemporary Japan is the development of favorable landscapes. At their Web site they state: "It is the agricultural practice in rural areas that maintains and conserves these landscapes. Moreover, the beauty of the landscape moves and comforts visitors and the residents by appealing to their aesthetic senses" (http://www.maff.go.jp/soshiki/kambou/joutai/onepoint/public/ta_4e.html). In mid-May 2006, when I visited Japan, it was the beginning of transplant season in central and southern Honshu. During this time, rice seedlings that have been grown in plastic trays in greenhouses or dedicated fields (Figures 5-17) are transported to the fields (Figures 5-18, 5-19, and 5-20) and planted by machines (Figures 5-21 and 5-22) and by hand (Figure 5-23) (to see one of these rice planting machines in action, go to http://pictures.nicolas.deleurue.org/japan/20040501_Rice/).

The landscape features discussed here (declining population, limited amount of flat land, land division system, clustering of residences, and dominance of rice production) have combined to create the rural Japanese cultural landscape. This landscape, like all cultural landscapes, is the result of the interplay between the cultural and the natural environment. In rural Japan, the result is that the landscape is both aesthetically pleasing and interesting. A variety of rural scenes that further exhibit some of these landscape features are displayed in Figures 5-24 through 5-32.

1 In 2000, Japanese legislators approved a bill to revitalize depopulated areas. The bill identified such areas based on a number of criteria including among others, the rate of population decline and the percentage of population over 65 (Diet enacts bill to revitalize depopulated areas 2000).

References

Diet enacts bill to revitalize depopulated areas. 2000. *Japan Policy and Politics*, March 27. Retrieved January 11, 2007, from http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0XPQ/is_2000_March_27/ai_61544245.

Karan, P.P. 2005. *Japan in the 21st Century: Environment, Economy, and Society*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Photos



Figure 5-1: Abandoned railroad and station, near Taisha (Shimane Prefecture)
The landscapes of depopulated areas are often full of abandoned buildings such as this railroad and train station.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-2: Abandoned railroad station, near Taisha (Shimane Prefecture)
Abandoned buildings in depopulated areas, like this railroad station, provide a rich inventory of structures that could be restored and developed for the tourist industry.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-3: Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)

Japanese rivers are short, with steep gradients. They occupy narrow V-shaped valleys before they enter the densely-settled coastal plains. In this scene, no flat land is available, and the road to the left and railroad on the right have been squeezed into this narrow river valley.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-4: Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)

Another view of the limited amount of flat land in many of Japan's rural mountainous areas.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-5: Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)

In this scene, buildings are wedged between the river and hills. Also, note how the river has been channelized.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-6: Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)

Note how the buildings are squeezed between the stream in the foreground and hills in the background.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-7: Inashi River, near Hirose (Shimane Prefecture)

Note the lack of development along the river's floodplain. It is unusual in Japan to see this much land go unused.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing

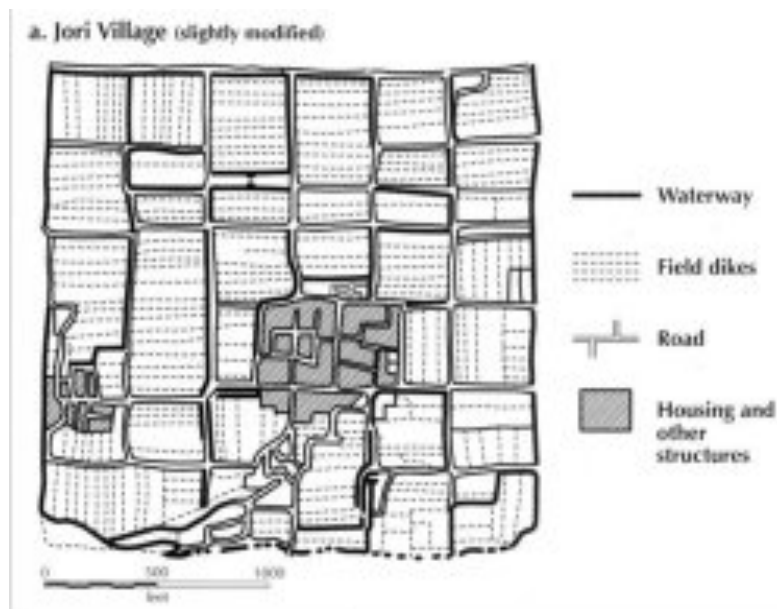


Figure 5-8: Jori system

The jori system of land division created a grid system on the rural landscape and influenced the spatial pattern of the road network. Also, note how housing and other structures are clustered together.

Source: Karan 2005, 207.



Figure 5-9: Northwest of Himeji (Hyogo Prefecture)
Here the jori system is aligned with the cardinal directions.
Source: Google Earth



Figure 5-10: Floodplain of the Inashi River (Shimane Prefecture)
Here the axes of the jori system are aligned with the local geography (in this case the northwest to southeast orientation of the Inashi River's floodplain). Also, note the clustered settlement pattern of houses and buildings. Houses are located at the base of hills or clustered together along roads in the center of the floodplain. Unlike the American Midwest, there are no isolated homes in the middle of cultivated land.

Source: Google Earth



Figure 5-11: Southwest of Tsuyama (Okayama Prefecture)

Note the spatial pattern of houses and buildings at the base of the hills maximizing the amount of agricultural land in the center.

Source: Google Earth



Figure 5-12: Rural area between Nagoya and Kyoto (Gifu or Shiga Prefecture)

This scene taken from the Shinkansen between Nagoya and Kyoto is another example of the clustering of settlements at the base of hills and on the edges of the fields to maximize the amount of agricultural land.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-13: Northwest of Otofuke, Tokachi Plain (Hokkaido Prefecture)
Note the dispersed settlement pattern with isolated farmsteads in the fields. Compare this image with Figure 5-10.
Source: Google Earth



Figure 5-14: Rice fields, Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)
A good view of the dominance of rice production on the rural landscape. Note the amount of human modification of the environment to facilitate rice production. First, even relatively flat valleys, such as this one require terraces to create a flat field to hold water during the growing period. Second, the stream has been channelized to help control water flow. Many Japanese rivers, even smaller streams, have been channelized because they are typically short with steep gradients that increase their speed and flow, furthering the need to tame them. Third, the ditch in the foreground helps to move water as needed. Also, most of the buildings are farm-related structures because, as stated earlier, farmers tend to live in clustered settlements and commute to their fields (note the vehicles by the buildings).
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-15: Rice fields, Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)
Another good view of the dominance of rice production on the rural landscape; however, note the field to the right that is not being used for rice production.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-16: Rice fields, Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)
These rice fields occupy the entire floor of this small valley.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-17: Rural scene, near Yasugi (Shimane Prefecture)

Note the two locations of rice seedlings in this scene: several bright green rows in the middle of the fields, and to the right of the small white truck next to the houses.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-18: Rice seedlings and farmer, Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)

This farmer has placed his trays of rice seedlings on his truck in preparation for transport to his fields.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-19: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Trays of rice seedlings (in foreground) have been brought to the field, the blue tarp removed, and are ready to be planted in the field.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-20: Rice farmer and planting tool, Hirose (Shimane Prefecture)

By dragging this tool along the bottom of the paddy field, the two parallel pieces of wood leave a line in the mud that the farmer uses to assure that rice seedlings are planted in straight, parallel lines.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-21: Rice planting machine, Togo, suburb of Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture)
The farmer in Figure 5-18 will transplant his rice seedlings with this rice planting machine.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-22: Rice planting machine in a field, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)
This farmer stopped for the day and left his machine in the field. Note the seedlings that have been transplanted in the foreground, the tray of seedlings on the machine, and the absence of seedlings in the distant portion of the field.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-23: Rice farmer and planting tool, Hirose (Shimane Prefecture)
By dragging this tool along the bottom of the paddy field, the two parallel pieces of wood leave a line in the mud that the farmer uses to assure that rice seedlings are planted in straight, parallel lines.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-24: Rural settlement, Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)
This settlement is located on the main rail line between Okayama and Yasugi.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-25: Koinbori (carp streamers), near Yasugi (Shimane Prefecture)
These streamers are found on the Japanese landscape during April and May to celebrate Children's Day on May 5. Specifically, they are flown by families with boys. Also, this photograph exhibits other features of the rural Japanese landscape including rice fields and clustering of homes.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-26: Rural scene, Chugoku Mountains (Okayama Prefecture)
How many of the features discussed above can you identify in this scene?

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-27: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Note the transplanted rice seedlings in these small fields and the garden next to the house.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-28: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

Note the traditional architecture of the buildings, transplanted rice fields, and vinyl plant covers.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-29: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

The cluster of homes in this scene and Figure 5-30 are in similar geographic locations, i.e., at the confluence of two streams. In this scene, a stream coming from the right to the left, and draining the small valley behind the clump of trees to the right, empties into a larger stream whose valley is occupied by the rice fields in the foreground. Note that these rice fields have yet to be planted.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-30: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)

The cluster of homes in this scene and Figure 5-29 are in similar geographic locations, i.e., at the confluence of two streams. In this scene, a stream coming from the left to the right, and draining the small valley where the homes are, empties into a larger stream whose valley is occupied by the rice field in the foreground. Note that this rice field has yet to be planted.

Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-31: Rural scene, near Taisha (Shimane Prefecture)
Note the clustering of houses, including several outbuildings and greenhouses.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing



Figure 5-32: Rural scene, near Asuke (Aichi Prefecture)
The house is in the middle with a garage to the right and outbuildings to the left and behind the house. Except for the rice field and architecture of the house, this landscape looks remarkable like central Appalachia.
Source: photo by Craig R. Laing