

Top Engineer & Rural School Teacher

— Dr Saijo's double life means commuting 170 km each way



■ Shizen Gakuen

It takes 1.5 hours to travel by express train on the Chuo Line from Tokyo to Kofu City, the site of the Yamanashi Prefectural government, about 130 km west of Tokyo. There, Dr Saijo rides a car along a tortuous mountain road for about 1 hour to reach Shizen Gakuen High School (Academy of Human Development) in the mountains about 40 km north of Kofu City. With only a few farmhouses around, the place is far from the din and bustle of urban life, and one can hear birds sing and insects chirp. Shizen Gakuen High School is a private high school opened by Dr Saijo last year, and it has no graduates, yet.

The school has four distinguishing features. First, classes are very small. The total number of first-year students (aged 15 or 16) and second-year students (aged 16 or 17) is only 53, which is extremely small by Japanese standards. "We can develop the personalities of individual students only when we recognise the faces of all students, know their names and their personal characters. Only a small class can give real education." stresses Dr Saijo, who is chairman of the school.

Second, farm work is included in the curriculum as a compulsory subject. The school has rice paddy and dry fields in its

compound, and the students grow the farm produce they eat, learning the importance of labour through the hardships of farm work and the joy of harvesting.

Third, all the students live in a dormitory. No student is permitted to install a TV set in the dormitory. The number of washing machines is limited so the students must use washing boards sometimes. The students, who are assigned to cooking by turns, cook all the food they eat. Life at the school is full of inconveniences to the students who were accustomed to the amenities of urban life. But they learn the basic attitude of life that they should do whatever they can do on their own.

Fourth, the students are given sufficient time to think about people and themselves. The curriculum includes "human science" as a compulsory subject, which Dr Saijo teaches. Using philosophical and religious writings as a text book, he leads the students to ponder on "people" deeply. Furthermore, there is a "time of silence" for 2 hours after 7:30 pm each day when the students are required to examine themselves. They are neither allowed to sleep nor to speak with others at this time. They meditate, read books or write letters, each spending time usefully.

These school characteristics are based on the educational ideas of Dr Saijo. The main purpose of the school is to combine knowledge, education and human education to produce students with a spirit of independence and with personality. "I would like to see my stu-

"I think I have lived three times more than ordinary people."

says Dr Takashige Saijo.

The 63-year-old doctor is more than two times busier than ordinary people even today.

dents develop into people who know what people are and how they should live. There is no greater teacher than nature. I like to see them experience farm work in a natural environment and learn the importance of labour." says Dr Saijo, who founded the school using all the money he had. His words express his single-minded purpose in his educational work.

Dr Saijo is also Professor of Electrical Engineering at the Shibaura Institute of Technology located in central Tokyo. After spending the weekend at Shizen Gakuen, he leaves there at dawn on Monday morning for Tokyo, riding car and train. He teaches leading-edge electrical engineering at the institute, returning to Shizen Gakuen late Tuesday evening. After spending Wednesday and Thursday at Shizen Gakuen with students and teachers, he leaves again for Tokyo early Friday morning to lecture at the institute, and returns in the dead of night.

When Japan was defeated at the end of World War II in August 1945, the 18-year-old Saijo was already working for JNR at a substation in Matsumoto



■ Dr Saijo teaching at Shibaura Insutitute of Technology



■ Shizen Gakuen Students planting Rice
(Shizen Gakuen)

City, Nagano Prefecture. In those days, it was not strange at all for a boy to work in Japan. The young Saijo was filled with a burning desire for learning and attended a night high school to graduate. In 1953, he passed the university examination course at the Central Railway Institute majoring in electrical engineering. At that time, JNR had large numbers of able employees who had received no regular higher education, so it gave them opportunities to receive an education equal to that given by ordinary universities. After graduating from the institute, he worked for the Railway Technical Research Institute. After the post-war confusion, JNR was then engrossed in developing new technologies to construct the new high-speed trunk line (shinkansen) to ease extreme congestion on the Tokaido Line. In 1961, he entered the Electrical Engineering Department at Nihon University, and attended evening classes while doing research on power-supply technology at the Research Institute during the day. He graduated in 1965.

Now that Dr Saijo was a university graduate, he could work in a management post if he wanted, but he returned to the Railway Technical Research Institute to devote himself to improving the power-supply technology for the shinkansen, and to MAGLEV research. His doctorate was awarded for this research work. The super-conducting MAGLEV railway, which the research institute has been developing since the late-1960s, represents first-class Japanese technology. Dr Saijo was a central engineer in this project. JNR owes its success in achieving a world record of 517 km/h with the ML500 experimental car on the Miyazaki Test Line on 13 December 1979 to Dr Saijo, who was responsible for the test run that day.

In 1981, Dr Saijo was invited to teach at the State University of Texas as a professor; he resigned from JNR and went to the USA where he taught for 2 years. His encounter with Dr John Bardeen, two times winner of the Nobel Prize for physics, at the university, stimulated his thinking about Japanese education. Dr Bardeen was so keen on mathematics and science in his youth that he was no good at other subjects at all. Dr Saijo thought that under the Japanese education system where conformist education dominates, talented persons like Dr Bardeen would not have been permitted to enroll at a Japanese university. He realised that it was necessary to introduce education that respects personality in Japan.

When he was invited to teach at the Shibaura Institute of Technology as a professor, one of his children was unable to adapt to the tightly-regulated Japanese school system and refused to go to school. Determined to tackle the education problem squarely, he attended night graduate school to study psychology and acquired his Doctor of Arts degree. He thought it was impossible for the present Japanese education system to produce persons with a strong personality and creative ability. He felt, "Isn't real education supposed to encourage students to conform to certain regulations while enabling them to examine themselves critically, and to think about their relations with society, so that they may live their lives as they wish without regrets?" When his doubts about the Japanese education system reached a peak, he decided to establish the Shizen Gakuen High School. He travelled throughout Japan in search of a suitable site until he finally found a

deserted primary school in the mountains of Sudama in Yamanashi Prefecture, surrounded by an ideal natural environment. He raised funds by mortgaging his home in Tokyo as security, and collecting contributions from those who sympathised with his educational ideas. At the same time, he visited the Prefectural Government offices and the tax office many times to obtain approval which was finally given in April 1993.

This is how his double life commuting between Tokyo and Yamanashi twice a week started. Dr Saijo is full of vitality, but the financial condition of Shizen Gakuen, which started out burdened by heavy loans, is tough. He can do his hard work day-after-day because his wife, Tetsuko, supports him enthusiastically, living in the dormitory and caring for the students.

"Many people say it is important to give education that develops students' personalities. But few people put this principle into practice. I cannot say for certain how much this school will help students develop their own personalities, but I will do my best to provide an environment to achieve this." says Dr Saijo.

"I have lived twice or three times more than ordinary people." he says, looking back on his past life, "I owe what I am today to the many people I met, and I am grateful to them. I would like to live the rest of my life building a society where people live happily. All that I am doing now is in repayment to society." ■



■ Dr & Mrs Saijo talking with Students