

# Japan: A Foreword

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Traditional Japanese culture—with its ink landscape paintings, its nature poetry, and its cultivation of life-energy (*ki*)—viewed humans as part of an all-encompassing universe. The traditional Japanese words for this unity were “heaven and earth” (*tenchi*) or “all living things” (*ikarumono*). The concepts of *tenchi* and *ikarumono* did not set people apart from other “sentient beings,” including animals, plants and often even mountains and trees in that category. The Japanese aesthetic, as in the *bonsai* tree and Zen temple gardens, seamlessly merged the forms of rocks and plants with human artifice. The Shinto gods, too, existed around and within the mountains and trees.

Matsushima, the array of tiny “pine islands” off the north-eastern coast, is one of Japan’s “three famous views.” The islands were so beautiful, wrote the seventeenth century wandering poet Basho, that he could not compose a haiku worthy of them. In 1980, when I first took the little tour boat out among the Matsushima islands, I, too, was entranced by their beauty. Barely clinging to jagged granite rocks, the islands’ crooked pines stretched out over the sparkling sea. “What could better express the Japanese aesthetic?” I thought. Then, looking southward, I saw about a mile away, amid the woods on the bay’s far shore, a giant power plant belching smoke. Why, I wondered, would Japanese authorities not better protect the setting of their precious analog to Yosemite?

I eventually realized that Japan’s spiritual values and nature aesthetics are personal, not public or political—that is, they rarely become the rallying cry of popular movements that criticize government and corporate policy, nor do they have much effect on public policy. Public policy and public space have always been controlled by a small elite of officials in the government ministries, an elite that has generally favored economic growth over the preservation of nature. Accordingly, the strong nature aesthetic so evident in Japanese culture has remained largely expressed in personal space—temples and shrines excepted.

In the West today, personal concerns readily translate into public action, but Japanese culture has until recently discouraged the public expression of personal preferences. The Japanese feudal system ended only in 1868. Before that, to a greater degree than in European feudal systems, the Tokugawa state forced the people to bend before, rather than stand against, the winds of power. Japan’s rulers instituted a rigid status system and demanded unquestioning loyalty, justifying this hierarchy as part

of a Confucian ethic. Nor, with some notable exceptions, did Japan's other spiritual traditions, Buddhism and Shinto, offer consistent criticism of the secular order.

Nevertheless, over the past two centuries, popular movements have occasionally arisen in Japan. In the feudal era, peasant villagers and townspeople had a healthy disrespect for their samurai masters, often seeking to evade their control, tax collections, and status regulations. In times of famine, when rice merchants hoarded grain and the government did not stock the emergency granaries, nascent peasant resistance sometimes erupted into fierce revolts (*hyakusho ikki*).

Following the arrival of Commodore Perry's famous black ships (in 1853), the Meiji Restoration of 1868 overturned the *ancien régime*. Faced with the Western threat of colonization, the new government imposed a "social revolution" from above, destroying feudalism and introducing Western-style institutions, but centralizing control over the population and land. Over the ensuing 140 years, in its race to catch up with the West in terms of military, economic and technical power, the state kept a tight grip on public space in Japan. Its narrow focus on economic growth pushed the aesthetic moment so treasured in Japanese spirituality into ever-smaller private spaces. Though the government established national parks, urban and village public land steadily diminished. Today, Tokyo offers the smallest per capita area of public parks of any major city in the world.

The lack of space for nature in Japan's public infrastructure arises from its lack of another kind of public space—the political space devoted to civil society. The western term *civil society* represents the arena of free association and democratic opinion formation—the public sphere. In the feudal era, Japanese cities were allowed to develop an independent artistic culture that sometimes obliquely criticized the elite (a common phenomenon among authoritarian regimes), but this freedom did not extend to the political realm, to a sense of citizenship, with its civic rights and responsibilities. From the start of Meiji, the modernizing elites permitted only limited democracy, keeping the political reins firmly in their own hands. Popular movements in the Taisho Era (1912–1926) pushed open the door of democracy a bit wider, but rising militarism slammed it shut again. In practice, if not in their hearts, ordinary people remained largely conditioned to "leave it up to the ones above" (*okami*).

The U.S. Occupation (1945–1951) refashioned many of Japan's institutions in a democratic direction, but power relations and culture changed more slowly. After World War II, most Japanese people strongly supported rapid economic growth, seeing it as the only path to industrial jobs, prosperity, a "cultured life" (*bunka seikatsu*), and national pride. Many people believed that, in their resource-poor country, disciplined work and cooperation under state and corporate leadership was the way to attain these goals. This conviction only strengthened the long-standing Japanese reluctance to criticize government policy. When labor unions, students, and leftist parties protested too much, the authorities weakened or suppressed them.

In the decades after World War II, the paternalistic government distributed some of the benefits of economic growth to all classes, but it did little to control the environmental costs. The government's policy priorities were power plants and booming

factories, not clean air and water. When polluting industries entered communities, they not only destroyed the old ways of life, they made people sicken and die. Such hardships left people disillusioned about the virtues of unregulated growth.

In the 1960s and 1970s, popular frustration peaked. Throughout the nation, quiescent villages and neighborhoods erupted into environmental protest. Minamata was the site of one of the first and most potent of these movements. Photographs of its victims, crippled by mercury poisoning brought on by decades of negligent industrial practice, became symbols of the nation's pollution problem. Disease victims and their supporters challenged the power of business and the state, and went on to win their cases in court. Starting in the mid-1960s and peaking in the early 1970s, a tidal wave of such locally based movements swept Japan, eventually forcing the government to pass effective environmental laws. This wave of environmental protest actualized the democratic potential of the new constitution introduced by the Americans in 1946, giving ordinary people a sense of political empowerment.

Still, when people dared to protest publicly, political elites and even fellow citizens condemned them for failing to observe the traditional Japanese virtue of loyalty to the elites. Indeed, as we see in the chapter that follows, even while suffering the horror of mercury poisoning, the Minamata victims were criticized by society for daring to blame the polluter, a local factory of the powerful Chisso Company. In many pollution cases in other parts of Japan, local residents just grumbled around their dinner tables. Only after someone of high local status decided to take a leadership role would ordinary people band together in public resistance.

Organizing a movement was not easy. Environmental movements usually had to contend with local conservative political "machines," similar to those of old Chicago's Daley machine or New York's Tammany Hall. Local "bosses" (*bosuteki sonzai*), as the Japanese called them, doled out patronage from above: local construction projects, wedding and funeral attendance, and bribes placed on the family altar, all in return for votes and loyalty. If you joined a protest movement, the local boss leaned on your aunt to pressure you to quit. In short, as these examples show, Japanese society and culture posed many informal as well as formal obstacles to the emergence of local citizen advocacy groups.

By the mid-1960s, however, concerns surrounding pollution's effects intensified and overcame customary restraints on political protest. The number of protest movements grew rapidly, peaking in the early 1970s and resulting in a raft of new environmental legislation. With surprising efficiency and much more rapidly than in the United States, Germany, France, or England, these laws and subsequent regulatory action quickly reduced the most visible air and water pollution.

This wave of protest movements permanently altered Japanese political culture; yet few young people adopted the environmental movement as a lifestyle or career. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese economy gained increasing momentum and most young male high school and college graduates were eager to join the ranks of the newly affluent "salarymen" and enjoy the new possibilities of self-indulgent consumerism. Only in the 1990s, after the vast bubble of prosperity collapsed, did the major-

ity of Japanese people begin to entertain “post-materialist” values. Although support for such values was still not high in Japan compared to some other countries,<sup>1</sup> the public became increasingly willing to sacrifice economic gain for the sake of preserving the environment. Moreover, more people recognized a public right to a healthy and beautiful natural environment.

Public policy, however, often ignored this nascent environmentalism. Japan’s fiscal problems of the early 1990s led the country into the economic doldrums. The central government tried to revive the economy by spending vast sums on public works, but conservative politicians and general contractors, not the people, defined the character of these projects. As they had done since the 1950s, Japan’s huge general contractors used public funds to construct dams, seawalls, roads, tunnels, and buildings throughout Japan, many of dubious necessity and great ecological destructiveness. Moreover, according to one authority, “bid-rigging and political payoffs inflate[d] the cost of public construction in Japan by thirty to fifty percent.”<sup>2</sup> Some of the added costs found their way into the pockets of industry-friendly politicians as an incentive to dole out additional dubious government contracts. This led to a vicious cycle that produced what many Japanese call Japan’s “construction state” (*doken kokka*), driving up the public works budget (in 2003, over ¥9 trillion, or US\$75 billion) and leaving Japan with a government debt totaling 140 percent of its GDP, a world record. Construction projects on Lake Biwa and the Nagara River, described in this chapter, exemplify the results of this process—the radical transformation of Japan’s natural landscape. Pushed by such profit-minded elites, these projects went ahead despite reasonable criticism and popular opposition.

During the 1990s, the government’s inability or unwillingness to protect the public interest became increasingly obvious. In one telling example, the government fumbled its response to the 1995 Great Hanshin earthquake, leaving much of the emergency aid work to volunteers. In this time of economic doldrums, the government protected big banks and corporations while small business bankruptcies skyrocketed. The Ministry of Health and Welfare allowed HIV-tainted blood into the national blood supply. Concurrently, new environmental problems emerged: the ubiquitous huge trash incinerators built by the government to eliminate consumer waste spewed forth dioxin-laden smoke, polluting the soil. Toxic waste seeped into the water supply, raising fears of human hormone disruption. Increasingly, the public blamed the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with its strong ties to business, for these failures.

All these problems, along with the end of the Cold War, weakened the rationale for further extending the long rule of a single political party. In 1993, for the first time since its founding in 1955, the LDP lost control of both the upper and lower houses of the Diet, the Japanese parliament. After a year out of government, the LDP returned to power, but only at the cost of forming a coalition with its old nemesis, the Japan Socialist Party. The resulting political turbulence opened the way for important new policies. In 1993, the government revised the basic environmental laws to include the new ideas of national and global sustainability, while the 1998 Nonprofit Law gave

civil associations the right to incorporate. As a result of these changes, civil society took on a new shape. Japan's educated, middle-class urban society gave birth to environmental groups more like their Western counterparts, concerned not just with the quality of their own neighborhoods but with citywide, prefectural, national, and even global environmental causes. Inspired by the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro and supported by environmental activists nationally and internationally, the Nagara River protest movement, discussed in the chapter that follows, exemplified this new type of citizen activism.

The complex political and institutional changes of the 1990s further weakened the Confucian tradition of obedience and added legitimacy to citizen activism as a way to participate in politics. A new sense of civic capacity and responsibility empowered citizens to act not only on behalf of global environmental ideals but also to express in political form their own deeply held spiritual aesthetics of nature. That such personal values should enter the realm of politics represents something new in Japanese culture. Turning away from wholesale acquiescence to a paternalistic state, people are increasingly getting used to thinking of themselves as citizens empowered by democratic principles, an ethic that can now legitimately support even the public defense of natural beauty.

### Notes

1. R. Dunlap, A. Gallup, and G.J. Gallup, *The Health of the Planet Survey* (Princeton: George H. Gallup International Institute, 1992). In this survey of citizens of twenty-two developed and developing countries, the portion that valued environmental protection over economic growth ranged from 72 percent in top-ranked Denmark to 43 percent in bottom-ranked Turkey. The figure for Japan was 58 percent, and for the United States it was 59 percent—eighth and ninth from the bottom, respectively.

2. B. Woodall, *Japan Under Construction* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 48.