

A SKETCH OF THE JAPANESE LANDSCAPE

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Every mid-August and again at the end of the year, up to thirty million Japanese leave metropolitan areas for their old homes in villages all over the country. These two occasions, that involve the closure of many factories and offices, are the times when people's pockets or bank accounts are somewhat fat with bonus money, when people send gifts to their bosses and kin. *Bon* in mid-August is the Festival of the Dead, while *kure* in December is the time for every faithful citizen to somehow settle old accounts, wishing a new fresh year upon him- or herself and upon the family. It is as if modern Japanese society all at once, though only for a few short days, struggles to become aware of its native roots.

Trains become packed with people, highways jammed with cars. Through the windows of the air-conditioned home-bound trains and cars the passengers see landscapes, that as the vehicles travel further, grow greener and richer in natural features that become more abundant. The ceremonial home coming from the big cities has always meant this revival in the awareness of old fields, mountains, rivers, and coastline. Getting closer to the birth- place has meant becoming sensitive to nature; remembering the tasks that parents and other villagers carried out in the fields, while working with seasons, weather, soil, water, and all sorts of vegetation, insects, animals, in short, all things physical. It has also meant that the travellers are temporarily allowed to again become "native," at home with their particular dialects and conventional, "unscientific" ways of thinking. "*Sato*" or "*mura*" (village) connotes a stubbornly old way of life where people have been bound by the labor-intensive mode of agricultural production. It connotes low educational skills and all the other contradictions of

modern Japan. It is not unusual for parents to almost masochistically admire a young one who went to the big city to become a student or an office clerk. This young one, however, would make a poor show in the world where the parents work and live. Yet these *mura* have long been the homes of Japanese. They, together with the surrounding nature, survived World War II which took many lives of people in their youth. The ancient Chinese poet Tu Fu's words, "The country defeated, yet remains the mountains and rivers" echoed all through Japan for a while, precisely expressing what people actually saw. So, during the post-war reconstruction of the national economy, city dwellers away from home sang many popular songs almost always with sad melodies of this or that old home country.

It was at about this time that ethnologist Yanagita Kunio pointed out that the big cities and factories had pulled so many people so far away from their villages that many Japanese were no longer able to keep in mind those peaks and hilltops which had once been within daily sight, and perceived as the locations from which their souls would ascend to rest. It took some years even for this great folklorist Yanagita to pursue and discover that the nationwide custom of lighting fires on mountains constituted a part of the ceremonial procedures to welcome then send off the souls of the dead. Through numerous works, Yanagita, with his consistent oral historical method and critical stance toward the superficial application of Western styles, tried to awaken the people to the treasure of native knowledge, and to its legitimacy. The forgetfulness of the Japanese people of, among other things, some of the meanings of their annual connection between the dead and living (*Bon*) suggested that the "homing" sense, not only of the dead but also that of the living, had already become severely confused.

The passengers returning to their old villages also easily recognize that the panorama through which the cars are moving, and their destinations, in the old country, were much more beautiful only a few years ago, and that the degradation of the landscape evidently started some thirty years ago. If not self-deceiving, a grown person would understand clearly, though perhaps not through detailed analysis, that he himself who works in the metropolitan economy belongs to the force which has brought about this change in landscape. It may seem that the more he works for the good of his family — what else does an ordinary man work for? — the more he sees the beautiful scenery of his country turn into characterless construction sites. His old village itself, if he still has one at all, might look very different, with paved roads for automobiles and new tunnels which enable the once isolated villagers to communicate with other parts of the world more easily; it might also have a brand new reinforced concrete "community center," "community gym," and other facilities perhaps built with money donated by a power company to obtain the villagers' consent to build a nuclear power plant that can just in one day sell more than enough electricity to pay for those buildings. Unfortunately, the buildings

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look alien to this village, and mar its particular mood and traditional community customs. Furthermore, the huge plant occupies the site of once lush pine woods or dunes where the citizen remembers he and his playmates once played and adults once worked. At least on the surface, it seems that the old community's original way of life has not contributed to these new things, except for the villagers' habitual craftiness of bartering for a price they can brag about. Their virtue of keeping the community unanimous in action, works in favor of super-capitalism.

The home-bound passenger's mind works very delicately and subtly, with its depth tangled and aching, as he *comes home* his senses once again grow closer to nature, his old naturalistic knowledge revives, while all his ambivalent emotions towards the poverty of the village returns. At the same time, he, an economic soldier of the metropolis, is *seeing his home dying*, all its traditional native knowledge being lost in the process of the denuding, dumping, and flattening the land. Who can deny that he might even be calculating the tricks that would best preserve his heirship: some piece of land which would make good money through the hands of real estate brokers? For we know all too well that if he desires to own a place to live in a major urban residential area, he will have to throw in an entire month's income or more for every square meter he buys. But then, who can calculate in terms of money either the attachment to, or loss of, one's native home?

At this desperate moment, a "national identity" is sought by worried nationalists, an identity which would ensure that even after the extinction of their native homes in the hinterland, the people could continue to work obediently for some metaphysical belief which unifies the nation.

The ecologists are also alarmed by this weakening village tradition. In the twenty years between 1960 and 1980¹ the number of people working in agriculture and that of young successors who took up farming as their calling decreased sharply: in 1960, the agricultural labor population was 13,120,000, about 30 percent of the whole labor population, and in 1980 it was 5,430,000, less than 10 percent of the whole (1985: 4,440,000!); the number of successors was about 80,000 in 1960 and only 7,000 in 1980. From the end of the war to 1960, Japanese farmers produced about 80 percent of the grain consumed by the country's population. Today they produce only 30 percent. The feed grain produced was about 2,000,000 tons in 1960, but only 220,000 tons in 1980. As a whole, the nation's self-sustaining ratio of food, including aquatic products, is about 50 percent in terms of calories, the lowest among the advanced industrial nations.

A graphic example of this situation would be a bowl of ordinary *udon* (noodles) a typical Japanese dish. Noodles are made of wheat, 90 percent of which is imported mainly from North America; and *shoyu* (soy sauce) which is the main ingredient of soup, is made of soy beans, along with wheat and other grains, 95 percent of which are imported from North America and China. If you want to have a bowl of *kitsune* (fox) *udon* with

a few pieces of *abura-age* (fried *tofu*), which is believed to be a favorite of the fox, you are again adding another imported item to your basic *udon* dish, because this Japanese *abura-age*, or *tofu*, is also made of soy beans. There is nothing purely Japanese-made about a bowl of *udon* except the water.

This situation is surely threatening to the ideals of present-day Japanese ecologists whose criticism of economic practice and of industrial society sometimes resembles that of the pre-war Agrarianists,² in spite of the fact that the ecologists' arguments are derived more or less from modern experts' trained in the doctrines of the law of entropy and the closed system of the biosphere.

Before the period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s, even during the pre-war period of "enriching the country and strengthening the army," it was quite reasonable to claim that Japan was an agricultural country. Throughout the regime of the Tokugawa shogunate, in fact ever since the establishment of the Yamato Imperial court as early as the 5th century, agriculture, especially rice, has been the key to the central government's rule over the country. (A prominent vestige of this history is the fact that the currently ruling Liberal Democratic Party has been kept in power by the solid bloc of votes from the farming and fishing communities, whereas its vast legal and illegal election campaign funding comes from big business. The reader may have noticed, in the trade liberalization issue, the Japanese government's stubborn protection of rice, which has even gained acknowledgement from GATT.) Whatever the regime, the people — feudal peasants and their descendants — have never stopped growing rice in paddy fields even during the years of desperate starvation and infanticide, and the years of losing men to the wars.

Nevertheless, the structure of rural life really began eroding during the Meiji Revolution, that is, after 1868. Since that time, waves of centralization policies have repeatedly reached into the scattered villages. Let me list, rather randomly, some of these policies and try to discern the courses through which the Japanese view of nature has been transformed.

First, private ownership of land and the land tax system were introduced, which laid the foundation for a modern capitalist state. This, in principle, brought about a great deal of conflict in the villages, because the land had never belonged to individuals, rather it was at the same time the land of the family, of the extended family, and of the community *mura*. Possibly people had felt that rather than the land belonging to them, they belonged to the land, just as individuals belonged to their families. On the other hand, the government, which made a law giving itself a monopoly over all the waterways, decided to maintain the traditional customs of water usage in the villages, without which the cooperative community work of paddy field irrigation would have been impossible. In this way the Meiji government successfully secured for itself the agricultural foundation of the country.

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The role of *ro-no* (literally translated as “the old farmer” and referring to “the gentleman farmer” or “residential landlord”) might be better understood in the context of the tension between the native community structures and the nation’s rush to build a centralized market economy. The *ro-no* belonged to the class publicly acknowledged as the landowners whose interest lay not only in collecting farm rents, but also in caring about their villagers’ well being, for the *mura* was the indispensable unit of farming. Many of the landowners became national leaders, among other industrial heroes of the era, in actively inspiring the people toward building a modern nation which could rival those of the Western colonialists. It was quite natural for them as Agrarianists to advocate the refinement and renewal of traditional agricultural technologies, and to become ethnocentric ideologues who resisted the “westernization” of Japanese agriculture. About a half century later, this trend of pursuing utopia in small farming villages, in self-government, and in the solidarity of those villages was unfortunately co-opted into the arrogant dream of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. It was perhaps more tragic that, on the other side of the issue, many of the intellectual leaders who opposed the war had spiritually abandoned the small villages as a “backward” phenomenon which only restricted their own modernized free spirits.

Some of the other policies were adopted in the area of religion. For example, in the later years of the Meiji era, the government forcibly abolished the numerous *shinto* shrines of small communities. Within about fifteen years, 190,000 shrines, including the newly erected ones associated with the recently-concocted state-shinto and emperor system were reduced to 110,000 by consolidating 80,000. According to Minamikata Kumakusu, a folklorist and biologist who strongly opposed this policy, 2,923 of the 3,713 community shrines were abolished in the Wakayama Prefecture. The government’s intent was to destroy the villagers’ common meeting place, a place where their minds came together in the seasonal and daily rhythm of work and life to channel their religious worship into the glory of the imperial nation. The reduction was also aimed at securing lumber from the numerous sacred groves of the shrines for use in the developing cities. Wakayama and the neighboring Mie Prefecture were the regions where the most beautiful forests of Kumano were located, and where the consolidation of the shrines was most fiercely enforced. Minamikata, persistently speaking for the countryside, lamented the death of communal religion and of the huge ecological universe of Kumano as well.

It was not accidental that the explicitly erotic folk customs which usually climaxed in the big summer festivals also became the target of suppression. This, I believe, has certainly contributed considerably to today’s extremely sexist society where women’s sexuality is repressed to a minimum, and where men, such as members of *Nokyo* (the Agricultural Cooperative Associations), go on package tours to buy prostitutes in other Asian countries.

The implementation of the mandatory school system was another policy that eroded rural culture. Its compulsory and exclusive use of the superficial standardized Japanese dialect instead of the rich local ones in addition to the imported meter-kilogram-second system, effectively neutralized the local vigour of the people and their technologies. Worst of all, most people have come to believe that the schools are the only educational institutions where the young can properly prepare for working in society. It is therefore obvious that people worship the technocrats who draw plans for distributing expertise below. Coupled with the specialization of daily work and the distance of the workplace from people's homes, the competitive ideology of the Japanese school system with its uniform examination standards has, especially since the rapid economic growth period, taken away the opportunities for young pupils to be involved in house-keeping jobs or to participate in house-building, (frame-raising used to be a communal occasion of ceremony). As a result, for example, few university students know the meaning of Japanese words like *genno* (hammer), *tagane* (cold chisel), *kajiya* (crowbar) and so forth. It is incredible to think that they cannot tell what a *kusabi* (wedge) is, although they have carefully memorized that *kusabi-gata-moji* (wedge-shaped characters, i.e., cuneiform) has something to do with Babylonia. Some don't even know the names of body parts such as *mukozune* (shin) or *fukurabagi* (calf). These have nothing to do with entrance examinations, but are important if people do physical work with their bodies and with tools. How can an average person acquire the knowledge for differentiating various kinds of birds or trees when he does not actually look at them or other living creatures? How can it be possible, even if the manifoldness of natural geography is emphasized in the context of ecological scholarship, that it will catch the alienated eyes of this generation? Hence, the favorite destination of today's massive number of young Japanese tourists going to the U.S.A. is Disneyland, instead of, say, the Grand Canyon or Yosemite National Park, names that no longer carry any magical significance for them.

Finally (and by that I do not mean that this is the last of the numerous attacks on people's consciousness), triggered by the flood of drastic changes made to old place names, the government implemented the "law to make the address system more efficient" in 1962. Although this was not the first of such trends since the Meiji period, it happened during the period of widespread land speculation, and has worked powerfully to destroy people's attachment to, and memories of, their home territories. Many of the minor names, every one of which had carried the memory of countless lives, were replaced by numbers; the mechanical naming of North-something or South-something, for example, was imposed on smaller, stranger names; a great number of local large and medium-sized cities imitated names of districts in Tokyo like Marunouchi, Chiyoda, Otemachi, Ginza, and Bunkyo regardless of their particular meanings. Chuo (meaning "central" in Japanese) was the favorite new name that was adopted in almost

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a hundred district rearrangements throughout the country. New housing developments were attributed such names as Sakuragaoka (Cherry Hill), Hibarigaoka (Skylark Hill), Midorigaoka (Green Hill) and so forth, even though there are no cherry trees, skylarks, or lush vegetation and even though they are sometimes located in valleys or damp landfills. There even appeared such names as *Fuji-Bireji* (the English word "village" in Japanese *katakana* characters) or *Hairando* ("highland" in *katakana*). These are no longer the names of places, but are instead names of commodities, similar to Seven Star or Hilite for cigarettes.

Over a century since the Meiji remaking of the country according to policies such as these, of seeking power which, it is believed, enabled the nation to avoid being drowned in the sea of world competence, Japan is now facing perhaps the final stage of the war between regaining its native home and the probability of cultural suicide.

Let me go back to the home-bound passenger. He might have already learned that the village's *triaichi* (common), the most ingenious preservation of tradition at the time of conflict between ownership and the right of communal use, has already been sold for a golf course with the unanimous agreement of the villagers. This certainly lowers the improbability for a community member to sell his own forests and fields, because now he need not fear criticism from others for double-crossing his fellow villagers and disrupting the harmony of the village. Actually, acre upon acre of beautiful forested commons have already been bulldozed and transformed into golf courses where rich people, who can afford to buy membership for a million yen or even twenty times that, toddle around after the ball, with their country wives who follow them as caddies wearing the sunbonnets they used to wear in the fields.

It is true that there are still farm fields across the country, and some of them look good. Every year, however, it becomes more and more doubtful as to whether the farmer will be keeping his land to continue farming or because he is just waiting for a better price, for sometimes two or three acres of paddy field are now valued at one hundred million yen, an amount he would never be able to earn toiling day and night as a farmer. In addition, the central government's policy of top-down control of agriculture seemed to have come to an impasse when it enforced the "production arrangement of rice" in 1971. Under its protection policy, rice had been overproduced, and the government announced that farmers would be paid for not cultivating it. With price increases kept more or less to a minimum, the farmer cunningly started looking for another's fields to buy or rent, so that he could grow more in order to sell enough to survive as a farmer. It was hardly possible in this situation to expect the traditional agricultural community to maintain itself. With this steady death of the native villages, the transformation of the home-country and of the landscape into commodities, and into, more menacingly, the objects of "sciences" came visibly closer to completion.

It is this unprecedented loss of the native home, not just the scientific problem of environmental pollution, that the present day ecologists are now facing. If the task of learning and understanding nature is to be carried out only in the scientific and quasi-scientific terms handed down by a few experts who are good at talking about abstract universal laws, then it seems very probable that the ecologists are going to be helplessly isolated amidst a neo-nationalistic corporatism that addictively seeks only monetary profit in the world market economy, and will have neither spiritual ties to the land, nor practical knowledge of how to make a household remain in direct contact with nature.

This is, hopefully, why quite a few ecologists have decided to go back into the villages, to try to make themselves farmers. Needless to say, this is no easy task to adhere to, because of the low profitability of agriculture, on one hand, and the clannishness of the villagers against people from big cities on another. Times are changing too rapidly, clouding the eyes of the country people so that they can scarcely imagine that the country's future depends, not upon the power of money nor of science and technology, but upon the earth-bound way of living and working. The young ecologists find the landscape all the more tragic in discovering that the most weird proliferation of science and technology is somehow coupled with the spiritual endurance of the best people of the traditional kind. This endurance, even though it may be interpreted as the perverted pride of the non-violent powerless, has surely been the maxim of the old Japanese communities by which they have maintained themselves for centuries under the overwhelming power of past tyrannies.

The present-day novelist Minakami Tsutomu criticizes the exploitive nature of the city. He was born as a son of the coffin maker of a poor village on Wakasa Bay, where there was no electricity in many houses until 1944 but where today thirteen nuclear power generation units are crowded together. As a young acolyte of Sokokuji-temple in Kyoto from the age of nine, he learned that the Buddhist establishment, especially that of the Zen school, has long been the servant of the power class of society, scarcely reaching the sorrow in ordinary minds.

On the other hand, Minakami understands and shares the deep, almost predestined grace of the Wakasa people who have for centuries been serving the Capital of Kyoto with their labour and he wholeheartedly affirms the dead and living souls' silent, enduring attendance on the city culture. He seems to maintain that as long as the city continues to exist, and as long as its relation to the hinterland is inevitably there, it will continue to be the place to which the people's grace is devoted. It was not mere defeatism, but also loyalty to their families and pride in their work, that brought so many girls from Wakasa to work in dye factories and weaving shops in Kyoto, making gorgeous textiles for the rich, and returning home with tuberculosis and dying young. So, Minakami Tsutomu dares not take

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the same stance as other, more theoretical, critics in his opposition to the nuclear power industry.

Instead, he has returned home to live in Wakasa. People and home are the vessels of memory, which only ripens over the years of a life cycle — a person's growth — or over generations. It is not surprising that the people are still enduring, enveloped in the same web of sentiments as before, still serving the city, but in new and even more self-destructive ways, now selling it not only their rice and their daughters, but also their very homeland. For better or for worse, this is Minakami's home and these are his people. Immersed in this community, he takes his anti-nuclear stand.

The big question for which I do not have any plausible answer is how we are to make ourselves proper and competent before the uncompromising gap between the tempo and logic of the technological power complex and that of the rediscovery and restoration of "home" among ourselves. It seems certain, though, that making "home", perhaps the most basic of ecological processes, cannot be simulated or explicitly preplanned, nor can it be done with sentimentalism.

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Notes

1. This includes the so-called "rapid economic growth" period when Japan maintained a growth rate in excess of 10% a year. Ed.
2. Agrarianism (*nobon-shugi*) was an anti-industrialist, populist movement dating from the Meiji era. Ed.