

TITLE: HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN JAPANESE CULTURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICISATION IN JAPAN

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Introduction

After being defeated in the Second World War, Japan managed to recover from its losses and took a fast pace of renewed industrialisation efforts in the decades that have followed. As a result of such swift development process, the country has faced severe ecological deterioration. Together with the global environmental problems that rose to the international political agenda, the establishment of an environmental policy was required. However, Japanese society underwent an extraordinarily slow pace of environmental politicisation compared to its western counterparts.

The environmental consciousness in Japanese society rose slowly, in a problem-solving, pragmatic manner, and resulted in a mainly apolitical path to environmental solutions and corresponding state-led policies. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the underlying cultural and religious reasons of this nature of environmental politicisation in Japan. The paper will be focusing mainly on the perceptions of human-nature relationship in Japanese culture and the perception of environment by Japanese society, which leads to the environmental policies and politics described above. However, some comparisons with the Western -specifically West European- culture, religion and environmentalist thought will also have to be drawn.

Environmental Politicisation and Activism in Japan

Japanese society has much less interest in politicising the ecological issues compared to its European counterparts. Most Japanese would emphasise their love of nature and underline how Japanese society cherishes the beauties through *hanami* (cherry blossoms) in spring and *momijigari* (maple leaves changing colour) in autumn, practices *ikebana* (traditional flower arrangement) and gives the nature great weight in their daily life. Yet there is hardly any force or effective actor in the political scene that pushes for legislative or proactive solutions. General awareness about the environment is regarded as 'seriously low' (Park, 272), generally as a result of improved quality of the immediate environment.

Starting with 1990s, the Japanese society had the chance to "indulge its taste for wood as a form of interior decoration and as a paper-hungry society, for reading and wrapping" due to the increase in the overall economic well being, at the expense of many of the forests of the South East Asia and other tropical forests, while maintaining its own status as a 'green archipelago' (Park, 318). When we look at the environmental protection as an objective for the European Community, on the other hand, we see that it is regarded as "all-embracing, and encompassing the economic, social or aesthetic sides of environmentalism" (Kraemer, 52), which we can regard to as 'Western humanitarian triumphalism' (Simmons, 155). Japanese perception of environmental problems is very practical if not pragmatic, unlike this Western view. According to Lam, unlike the new style political Green parties of Europe, Japanese Green parties are weak, as LDP and JSP have been dominating the political arena since WWII. He further claims that NET and

other political parties will remain as local parties and “a marginal political force”, and their influence upon the Japanese society, restricted to changing the image of politics and offering new alternatives to the electorate rather than altering any actual policy decisions (Lam, 1999).

The two distinguishing factors about the Japanese society are that they are less worried about the environment, and more unresponsive to environmental activism than any other nations. The citizen groups are restricted in their actions by this general public apathy and unwillingness to address issues beyond local, health-related problems (Barrett & Therivel, 7-9). For that reason the only non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that we come across in the arena of environmental politics are the international ENGOs (Environmental NGOs) such as Greenpeace Japan, Friends of Earth or World Wide Fund for Nature. Local protests focus on problems that directly affect the citizens' health and immediate physical environment in the short-run, and then local governments take initiative. Apart from these small-scale local issues, formulation and implication of all environmental policy has been on the shoulders of the governments (Gresser et. al., 245).

When there is need to take immediate action, Japanese citizens protest and come up with solutions, but the movement does not go beyond that specific problem it initially emanated from. The problem-solving approach of the Japanese society is most eminent in such political behaviour, which was mostly prevalent in 1960s and 70s. These

movements remained regional and issue-centred and did not ask for a holistic revision of the governmental policies. Therefore there has been almost no pressure on the Japanese governments regarding their environmental policies that came from their constituencies.

McKean underlines in her book *Environmental Protest and Citizen Politics in Japan*, that Japanese environmentalists define responsibility for pollution narrowly, as an economic rather than socio-cultural problem. She defines the Japanese environmentalism as “weak, victim-oriented and fragmented” (McKean, 141). Kuriha also suggests that the contamination of the environment was recognised as ‘industrial pollution’ in Japan (Kuriha, 168). As a result, institutional framework in Japan does not support the local governments with sufficient autonomy (Kuriha, 178).

Until late-1990s Japanese society had an overall perspective of environmental issues that was restricted to “growth *versus* the environment” scope. Starting with the end of the WWII the governments of the Liberal Democratic Party and a highly organised business community decisively cooperated for rapid economic growth, which resulted in soil, water and most eminently air pollution. With the business groups falling short of recognising the need for environmental protection, in 1960s “a wave of environmental movements erupted in towns and villages throughout Japan” (Broadbent, 20). As a result, Japanese Diet passed the world’s strictest set of anti-pollution laws, which created the ‘pollution miracle’ in Japan. However, the protests against pollution wave left little in

the national political scene and alternative political parties could not find the sufficient support to prosper in Japan (Lam, 2000)

The action from the government came late, but was powerful. The main reason has been international rather than national pressure (Pharr and Badarcio, 246). United States and UN as well the Western media demonstrated Japan as a 'polluter's paradise' and rather than public opinion, the necessity to avoid this image primarily caused the improvement of the environment. What remained from the 1970s, was the Network Movement (NET) that slowly gained power starting with the 1980s.

A Cultural Explanation:

Conceptions of Nature and Its Implications on Environmental Issues

The analysis of Japanese perception of nature and environmental thought will focus on the basic ontological concepts of society and nature, as well as purity and pollution that are derived from "Japanese Civilisation: A Comparative View" by S.N. Eisenstadt. In Chapter 13, the author contemplates on "Japanese Culture or Cultural Tradition: Basic Ontological Conceptions and Their Impact."¹ The theoretical framework offered by this piece is essential in understanding the Japanese perception of nature and to a certain extent would help us analyse the environmental politics in Japan.

¹ Subsequent page numbers in brackets refer to this book and section.

The principle of harmony is a crucial concept in Japanese culture, not only influenced by Shintoism but also by Buddhist and Confucian traditions. However the interactions between these religions and the “japanisation” of the concept resulted in what John Pelzel calls “[one] that admits no distinction between good and bad” (320). This non-ethical but significant intuition of harmony stems from the lack of opposition between the regular dichotomies of other cultures, e.g. life and death, order and disorder, nature and culture, human and god etc. Since there is no confrontation between order and disorder, the elevation of harmony does not necessitate the suppression of humane sources of pleasure or imposition of a specific way of morality. Compromise between these dichotomies endorses the tolerance in Japanese society and the effects of their development on their physical environment.

Similar to the lack of confrontation between order and disorder, the basic understanding of universe in Shinto tradition describes a universe that flows between the opposite principles of purity and impurity. This acceptance of the very existence of impurity within the nature is very relevant to the human-nature relationship. As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney is quoted in the article: “With opposing forces simultaneously present, it is a universe in which negative elements are as integral as positive elements.” (322)

We should also take note of the purity and pollution related to this topic: Not only they are accepted as innate and ever-present in nature, they are believed to be closely related and should be brought together.

“Pollution and purity, like good and evil, are conceived, not as abstract absolutes, but in contextual terms. Transitions, especially those from pollution to purity, are of very great importance and are effected by a great number of mediatory figures and forces. [...] Many patterns of ritual behaviours focus on taboos, many of which can be violated as long as appropriate rituals restore the original state.” (323)

It can, then, be interpreted that the rituals that bridge the gaps between inside and outside, and bring back purity are seen as tools that will reverse the deterioration of the nature. The utilitarian ethic and the importance of acquiring technical skills is a part of this search for bringing back to original state, as has been underlined in the article:

“Such utilitarian orientations, emphasized in the practical rationality that developed throughout Japan’s history and the ideological discourse that developed especially in the Tokugawa period, continuously confronted the strong emphasis on one’s obligations to the natural, cosmic and social worlds.” (327)

This ‘practical rationality’ is also related to the short-term protests against local and health related environmental problems.

Environmental protests to be local and temporary can be explained by two concepts of Japanese tradition: Firstly, the acceptability of daily and simple pleasures in Shinto as well as Buddhist traditions constitutes the reason of these protests. When very significant components of a simple and happy life are threatened, Japanese environmental action is prompt. Examples are water, soil and air pollution and the responses to these degradations. On the other hand lack of protests against nuclear energy, for example, may well demonstrate that the protests are actually on the basis mentioned above rather than their ‘vitality’. In other words, the protests emerge not because these issues are vital but because they are visible and impeding simple pleasures of life. Shinto and Buddhist

traditions differ but complement each other in this regard: While the celebration of life, enjoyment, and pleasure in Shintoism justifies the protests due to the impediment of such pleasures, the Buddhist perception of lack of permanence justifies the changes in the environment. Therefore it can safely be said that what is protested is generally not the contamination and its cause, but its implications on human life. Once these implications disappear, therefore, the protests disappear without leaving a political institution or tradition behind.

Secondly, due to the utilitarian and pragmatic approach the human development is seen as 'adaptation of self to the environment rather than the opposite.' The Japanese conception of the world has been addressed as something to adapt oneself to rather than impose one's logic upon. Therefore "both the world and the subject are perpetually changing" (320). As a result the protests have never taken an overwhelming pace against the industry or the government.

The Japanese process of pollution politics is marked by differences from the Western examples on conforming to the national power structure through networking and following the bureaucratic means and subsequent 'trajectory of protest.' The trajectory of protest is present in all realms of life, however, rather than being restricted to environmental politics. It is therefore important to note that the far-fetched statement of environmental activism to be pacified by hostility can be misleading. It might be more appropriate to claim that Japanese perceive human development as a part of nature

hence protesting against industry and government strategies are obsolete. On the other hand, the protests do exist but in a practical and issue-particular context, where protesting is justified as it becomes a means to compromise and reconciliation between development and environmental protection, i.e. harmony.

The proximity of nature and culture as well as conception of social as an extension of natural can also help to explain the development policies of MITI under LDP governments in the sense that whatever is humane is also accepted as natural. As a result the environmental consequences of human development are not seen as evil or immoral unlike Western environmental thought. On the other hand, Buddhist perception of lack of permanence impedes the emergence of intergenerational equity question. When it is so much embedded in a culture that everything is temporary and 'nothing remains,' naturally there would be no incentive for conservation for the sake of future generations.

The relationships between human and nature, human and gods, and gods and nature have great implications in all environmental philosophies. The relationship between god and individual in Western traditions differ from that of Japanese traditions of Shintoism and Buddhism. Therefore the environmental movements in Europe emerged as a challenge to the human-centred stance of the established schools of thought, since all perceive human beings as superior to animals, plants and, unsurprisingly, inanimate objects in nature.

The origins of such this human-centred thought in the Western world are threefold, and will be analysed comparatively with Japanese tradition: Firstly, classical Greek humanism identifies the animal side of man that enjoys worldly pleasures, with evil and promotes overcoming this side with human rationality, 'our key superiority over animals.' This is in sharp contrast to the celebration of physical pleasure in Shinto tradition. The second source of anthropocentric (human-centred) thought is 'Cartesian dualism.' In Cartesian thought existence is justified through the ability to think, and human superiority is defined as the fact that we have souls while animals do not. Despite fragmentations within Buddhism, 'the soul' is not restricted to humans only. In Japan, the animals are rarely seen as subservient, inferior or worthless because they do not think while human beings do; unlike it was the case in Western countries until early-80s.

Finally the Judeo-Christian concept of *the great chain of being* purports that human beings stand between angels and beasts, are 'made in God's image' and are therefore inherently superior to animals (Taylor, 197-218). Unlike this conception, in the Japanese tradition the creative power of the gods are limited to recreation and the human beings are in continuous relationship with gods, and with nature, therefore the interactions are not on the basis of dominance. These three traditions of anthropocentric thought in the Western tradition were the reason of Western perception of human beings as the masters of the world. However, Japanese understand the place of humankind within the nature like a stewardship rather than being the masters or conquerors of it.

Conclusion

The close relationship between Japanese people and nature demonstrates itself in a number of traditional and ritualistic activities such as bonsai, hanami or ikebana, and the immense pleasure the society gets from the beautification of the physical environment, such as the world-famous Japanese gardens. The origins of these rituals are deeply embedded in Shinto and Buddhist traditions as they are interpreted in Japanese culture. As a result the Western frames do not necessarily explain the human-nature relationship in the Japanese context. These unfitting frames should not however lead us to the shallow and Euro-centric conclusion that Japanese society has little love for nature, on the contrary nature is appreciated and enjoyed, but not as politicised.

Environmental politicisation in Japan has been slow, due to the acceptance of human development as natural as the environment itself. Human beings are seen as stewards rather than masters of nature, and extraction and use of nature for the good of the humankind is acceptable and even favoured. As a result the protests do not directly target the polluting industries and the political structures that appease this degradation. They aim at correcting a specific problem and ask for initiative to be taken by the government or the local administration.

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