The Experience of Place in Japan

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Abstract

The geographical character of the island country of Japan is most striking in its contrast between extensive, rugged, and heavily forested uplands and its densely settled and intensively used lowlands, the latter supporting the bulk of the nation’s urban, industrial, and agricultural activities. Steeply sloping land constitutes some three-quarters of the archipelago; the contrast between the verdant, sparsely populated interior uplands and the remaining 25 percent of the country that is relatively level and supports the vast majority of Japan’s approximately 126 million people could not be more dramatic. The Greater Tokyo metropolitan area, for example, is the world’s largest. It is located atop the largest alluvial plain in Japan, the Kanto; and it is one of the most magnificent and expensive zones of human endeavor to be found on the face of the earth, with some 36 million people living within about a 70-square-kilometer radius of the central business district. Thus about one-quarter of the national population is located in an area representing less than 5 percent of the country. The contrast between upland and lowland land-use patterns serves as an essential backdrop for the presentation’s interpretive description of Japan’s spatially distinctive character.

Zusammenfassung

Raumerfahrung in Japan

Many travelers, artists, and citizens have remarked that there may be no more profound expression of human genius than that displayed by the carefully manicured Japanese landscape. Yet the Japanese are reminded on a daily basis that it is tectonic forces that gave birth to the archipelago. Ten percent of the world’s active volcanoes are located in Japan, and more than fifteen hundred earthquakes are recorded annually in the country. These hazards are unpredictable, as are the tsunami (giant ocean waves) associated with undersea crustal activity that also threaten the coastal lowlands, sometimes with catastrophic loss of human life (most recently and tragically on 11th March 2011, in Tohoku (Northeastern) Japan). Following a more regular but equally devastating historical pattern are the torrential rains and high winds of the annual taiju (typhoons) spawned in the Pacific by the interaction of high and low atmospheric weather patterns, by-products of the uneven heating and cooling of the world’s largest landmass and the vast Eurasian landmass. Nowhere in Japan is it possible to be more than one hundred miles from the sea, and as seasons change, the rhythmic interactions of island, continent, and ocean are inescapable. Like clockwork, all but the northern reaches of the archipelago are smothered by uncomfortably high humidity in late spring and summer, followed by downpours in autumn. For that part of the main island of Honshu abutting the Sea of Japan, the so-called modified monsoon effect reverses itself in the winter when cold Siberian air flows eastward, dropping heavy snowfall in Japan’s Hokuriku and Tohoku regions. One of the great contributions to modern literature is Kawabata Yasunari’s sensitive depiction of village life and relationships in the heart of this zone of precipitation, Yukiguni (KAWABA TA AND SEIDENSTICKER 1996).

Tectonic forces, then, give rise to Japan’s exquisitely beautiful uplands. The climatic cycles of rain, snow and frost, in turn, erode these surfaces, allowing swiftly moving rivers to deposit alluvium in the coastal catchment areas. This is the process by which Japan’s critically important plains are created and sustained, a consequence of geologic forces and patterns of weather stretching across the year, and the millennia. The cultural perception of the opportunities and dangers presented by this interaction of climate, mountains, and water is well reflected by patterns of land-use in Japan’s uplands and especially in the lowlands, where massive industrial cities and small-scale farms intermix to propel this ‘fragile superpower’. The qualities of mind experienced by those who dwell there can also be identified: a favorite example is the rich Japanese lexicon for describing falling rain, one type of which, kirisame, a misty (very fine) rain, like some exotic animal, is said to be found only in Japan; another is the Japanese fascination with sakura no hana, or ‘blooming cherry blossoms’, their short-lived and delicate flowers seeming to capture the ebb and flow of seasonal change. In these and countless other ways the very atmosphere of the country can be linked to its aesthetic heart.

The geographical character of the island country of Japan is most striking in its contrast between extensive, rugged, and heavily forested uplands and its densely settled and intensively used lowlands, the latter supporting the bulk of the nation’s urban, industrial, and agricultural activities. Steeply sloping land constitutes some three-quarters of the archipelago, the majority covered with spectacular stands of mixed deciduous and coniferous forests. Indeed, Japan is distinguished by the fact that it is the most heavily forested industrialized country in the world, and its long, 2,300 mile mid latitude sweep from north to south creates a variety of natural environments, ranging from subarctic to subtropical, which support larch, spruce, fir, pine, and cedar, as well as maple, beech, chestnut, oak, camphor, and bamboo. These forested uplands stand as testament to another age where one can still see the relic landscapes of historic Japan: the intermontane villages of Nagano and Akita, surrounded by fields of wet-paddy (rice) and sandwiched between abruptly rising slopes; the traditional towns like Itsukaichi (literally, ‘fifthday market’), whose names suggest the weekly or monthly cycles of commerce; the splendid wooden architecture of Shinto shrines, such as Ise, that house the spiritual antecedents of the Japanese people; and, rising above all else, symbolizing the natural powers shaping Japan, the unparalleled Mount Fuji, celebrated through the ages in art and poetry for its height and beauty.

The contrast between the verdant, sparsely populated interior uplands and the remaining 25 percent of the country that is relatively level and supports
the vast majority of Japan’s approximately 126 million people could not be more dramatic. Competition for limited resources is keen in the lowlands, and population densities are among the highest in the world. Most of these lowlands are actually alluvial plains, the largest of which are located on the Pacific side of the islands. As a consequence, a map of urban Japan coincides to a remarkable degree with a map of agricultural Japan, leading to a curious mixing of agricultural and industrial land-uses in heavily built up areas. By any standard of measurement, the Greater Tokyo metropolitan area, located atop the largest alluvial plain in Japan, the Kanto, is one of the most magnificent and expensive zones of human endeavor to be found on the face of the earth, as well as the world’s largest metropolitan area with some 36.7 million people presently living within about a 70-square-kilometer radius of the central business district. Thus over one-quarter of the population is located in an area representing approximately five percent of the country. There is no place like Tokyo anywhere else in the world, its scale and magnitude only partially suggested by the fact that it boasts a population density more than three times that of Chicago, Illinois. This contrast between upland and lowland land-use patterns serves as an essential backdrop for a description of Japan’s spatially distinctive character. By means of this perspective, apparently contradictory images of Japan are imaginable. Japan appears to be a pristine natural place, and, at the same time, it supports the kind of intensive development associated with large urban and agricultural populations. If a landscape of forest-covered mountains, villages, and religious markers serves to symbolize Japan’s interior uplands, it is the crackling energy of telecommunications, ubiquitous train and other transportation networks, and the bustle of crowded streets, sidewalks, restaurants, and department stores that characterize the great cities of the coastal lowlands: Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. To be sure, there are exceptions to any generalization, and Kyoto is one – an ancient city of tremendous religious and artistic significance, also located in the interior Nara basin. But for the most part such broad generalizations for the country hold true. The interior uplands display some type of balance between continuity and change. Coastal cities, by contrast, are the places where change is most dynamic, the traditional landscape seemingly under constant assault as its citizens strive to create, in the parlance of the times, some new and improved product: shin hatsu bai.

Geography and culture have conspired to reinforce the crucial importance of Japan’s coastal lowland plains. It is in these zones of intense human activity that one finds relatively large amounts of level land and the majority of the arable land, much of it devoted to wet-paddy agriculture, mainstay of the Japanese food supply. And it is there that one finds the inexorable pull of commercial, urban, and industrial development, and all the demographic consequences such development implies. With the vast majority of Japan’s population literally ‘squeezed’ into coastal lowlands, including a particularly heavy concentration in the Tokaido megalopolis located on the Pacific littoral stretching from Tokyo to Fukuoka, it is no wonder that the Japanese perceive their islands as being small and narrow (as they often remind themselves and outsiders). The geographical fact that Japan is a medium-sized country, in physical area even larger than a number of European states, does little to alter the palpable sense that it is a densely settled and overpopulated place. Even the awesome, modern-day transportation and communication technology that now so effectively links disparate places in Japan has yet to master the possibly insurmountable problems that accompany redistribution of substantial numbers of people to the corrugated upland terrain. Instead, as has been true for hundreds of years, the Japanese have elected to concentrate on extensive foreshore and bay head land reclamations as a means to resolve steadily increasing population pressures on a limited lowland base.

The voracious demand for land and energy to support the world’s tenth largest population legitimates the significance the Japanese and others attach to the assertion that Japan is a fragile superpower. But these resource management problems are not new. For centuries the nation has been concerned less with new land development than with land improvement to meet its needs for food.

The Japanese language is replete with terms and concepts that distinguish between the creation of something new and the steady nurturing of the productivity of what already exists. The processes of land ripening (jukuchi) and land improvement
(tochi kairyo) apply equally to reclaimed land and to the inherited arable land base.

A hallmark of Japan’s twentieth-century development is that it achieved self-sufficiency in rice production despite the fact that the arable land base has been decreasing because of urbanization and industrial development, particularly since World War II. The notion that efficiency is predicated on the achievement of economies of scale is well established in the academic literature, but what are we to make of this model when the Japanese experience documents that productivity benefits from more intensive, rather than more extensive, use of land? Constant refinement of what is, as opposed to what might be, seems second nature to the Japanese.

Nevertheless, the harsh reality is that Japan is not a self-sufficient country. Its stunning natural environment belies the tremendous competition for scarce energy and food supplies and by most measures Japan imports 80 and 50 percent of each, respectively, putting in context, for example, its drive to develop nuclear energy even in highly vulnerable areas, such as Fukushima, with catastrophic consequences that unfold in 2011 and well into the future. These twin Achilles heels in particular represent the country’s most pressing national security issues. The view that such supplies have been uncertain, and perhaps always will be, runs deep in the Japanese psyche. No one should ever underestimate this perception as one of the most important factors driving the country forward in its search for greater levels of social and economic efficiency.

In the final analysis, one can observe an intriguing connection between modern and traditional Japan with regard to its philosophical outlook on the precariousness of its situation, an outlook that transcends upland and lowland locations and unites the country as a whole. Their common feature is a pervasive sense, across the land, that life is transitory. The roots of this profound concept extend back to at least the beginnings of Japanese literature. It can be observed in The Tale of Genii, by Lady Murasaki (born 978?), perhaps Japan’s most celebrated work of literature, that there is one major natural disaster, a typhoon, remarkable not for its destructive power but for the emphasis it places on ‘the evanescent beauty of an autumnal garden’ (Seidensticker 1980, p. 31).

What does this insight tell us about the sense of place in Japan? That, given the unpredictability of nature, each passing season is to be savored for what it is: a lesson about, not a determinant of, human existence.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the permission of Oxford University Press to republish this revised version of the original, which appeared in Asian Art, Vol. 5, No. 2, Spring, p. 2–7, 1992.

References