Ideological Construction of Environment and Its Relationship With Japanese Society, Culture, and Politics

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the Japanese “ideology” is critically examined and evaluated. While ideology very often is predominantly understood to cover political ideologies that the political parties and other political actors represent the more important ideology that is found in intersubjective practices is formed in everyday life and is rarely identified as ‘ideology’ or politics. Japanese conservatism and nationalism are able to flourish under the cover of normalcy which social institutions support. To analyse the “ideology” of Japanese environmental thinking is far from being simple task as there is no orthodox dogma and the opinions of the elites is divided. Environmental thought and research are not particularly popular in contemporary Japan and there are, for instance, examples of universities that have scaled down their environmental studies programs. Instead, we should look to the whole society to see how much importance is given to the environment and how it is done. In fact, Japanese contemporary art and culture often register environmental concerns. However, in politics and administration there is less optimism on those concerns being resolved.

KEYWORDS

Animals, Anthropocentrism, Culture, Environment, Ideology, Japan, Nationalism, Politics, Reflexive Modernity, Symbiosis, Visual Arts

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Japanese thinking on environment has developed in close interaction with both Asian and Western influences. However, Japanese society has constantly created new ideas and re-presentations of reality that reflect the actual environment and changes in society. Furthermore, the environmental thinking has served as an agent of change itself. The environmental conditions in Japan are markedly varied and quite different from any other places and it is no wonder that the nature/environment as well as animals have frequently been understood and depicted in ways that are quite different from the other centres of culture. In particular, it is worthwhile to analyse changing relationship to environment in the ways it is depicted in Japanese art and literature. However, artistic expression is also vulnerable to the ideological construction of past and present, and, as always with expression, ideas and depiction of ideas do not only stem directly from reality, such as physical nature,
or experiences of people, but may also be part of a political or ideological agenda to reconstruct the past or present.

It is not only in Japan where the nation-state has needed representations of cultural continuity, including those representing the physical environment. Romantic or nostalgic aesthetic nationalism is not a Japanese invention and Japanese nationalism in its more aggressive forms has not relied particularly heavily on visual iconography of Japanese environment/nature. In fact, the Japanese state has been rather clumsy in its efforts to ‘use’ high or low culture to its ends and arts certainly do not enjoy particularly strong support from the authorities and political/social elite.

However, the environmental awareness has been duly registered in Japanese art and culture after largely anthropocentric concerns about pollution and environmental risks to humans became widely voiced in Japanese society and Japanese politics since the 1960s. Instead of direct criticism of social, political and economic interests that contribute to environmental destruction Japanese environmentalist art and thinking are prone to promote various forms of symbiosis (kyôsei) and co-operation. More radical ideas of biocentrism and deep ecology are rarely voiced in Japanese environmental thinking and environmental movements. Meanwhile, older religious ideas about sanctity of nature and life are often ignored when modern ideological constructions of environment are created and reinforced in Japan. To understand why green or more “progressive” political ideas receive so little support in Japanese politics it is important to analyse the ideological construction of environment in Japan.

THE EVOLUTION OF JAPANESE RELATIONSHIP AND IDEOLOGIES CONCERNING THE ENVIRONMENT

The origins of nature-friendly Japanese culture are often identified with Shintô and Buddhism having a positive impact while those Western traditions of thinking that have advocated the human mastery over nature have often been rather simplistically juxtaposed with Japanese traditions in Japanese research. Shintô deifies nature and does frequently show respect to spontaneity of nature. Japanese Shintô has also adopted more than its share of ritualistic behaviour that does not always coexist harmoniously with the idea of spontaneous respect of nature as it is. However, Shintô has been able to maintain some of the purity of its directness by having been reluctant to write down its dogma. Shintô consists of many different traditions and layers and for many people there is no clear authority to provide canonised versions. The Imperial Shintô certainly was an attempt to hijack the tradition for dubious political ends, but for many Shintô continues its life as a rather harmless and distinctly non-intellectual intersubjective practice and tradition that connects the Japanese people and, does indeed, have something to do with the purity and beauty of nature as it appears spontaneously. In short, this focus on spontaneous observation of the beauty of nature has helped to establish a sensitive set of standards for Japanese aesthetic appreciation and arts. It should be pointed out that these standards surely do not apply to everyone in Japan and in the past the situation was not that different: within the landscape of rather rigid ideological constructions of feudal Japanese society even within each social class there were competing ideological elements to such views as the respect of nature and life in all its forms (for more on the role of Shintô and Buddhism in Japanese art and their connections with the environment/animals, Merviö, forthcoming 2018).

Meanwhile, Buddhism in Japan has interacted with Shintô and the syncretism has tamed much of Buddhist dogmatism that otherwise might have developed. The Buddhist influences and especially the teachings focusing on the respect of life in all its forms have had a major positive impact on Japanese culture. Buddhist art itself was primarily preoccupied with the humans here and in eternity. However, Buddhist religious thought and art introduced to Japan a fundamentally different way to give symbolic meanings to nature and animals. The Chinese art and literature certainly had a major refining impact on the emerging Japanese styles and continued to provide both themes and a set of quality standards for Japanese art and literature for centuries. However, the main message in Buddhist philosophy as
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