

The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence Review

The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence by Gavan McCormack conveys a relatively current image of the current trials and tribulations of Japan.

The first thing the book discusses is the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake and the government's inadequate response times to the destruction. However, what is most interesting is that he analyzes the source not only of the collapsed structures, but also the bureaucracy that allowed it to be created in the first place. As McCormack points out, the bridges were made for maximum profit and minimum attention for safety. This promoted not only building first world structures with third world engineering techniques, but also overbuilding, which greatly impacted the environment around it. The Kobe earthquake allowed a spotlight to be shown onto the corruption in the construction industry that the Japanese had been suspecting all along.

The construction state problem in Japan not only points out massive frivolous money spending on construction and environmental issues, but also a much larger issue: change in the traditional Japanese attitude towards the protection of nature. The best example of this is given is the golf boom of the late 1980's. The Japanese followed quite possibly the worst example in terms of environmental treatment. The example set by United States. During the resort boom and golf boom of the 1980's through the mid 90's, Japan would bulldoze forests and displace tribal people from their land in the name of leisure. These events had huge impacts on the environment. This creates two large problems: increased carbon emissions because of fewer trees to absorb carbon dioxide and an increased dependence and depletion of imported lumber from the Third World. Moreover, the three to four tons of herbicides and pesticides used per year per golf course are also carcinogenic and petroleum based. This is bad for the environment and Japan's sovereignty as they become increasingly dependent on imported goods.

The golf boom was part of the resort boom, which can be seen as an attempt to redefine society to one where quality of life not quantity of production is more important.

The central idea of the boom was if Japan could reduce the rates of or eliminate karoushi, “death from overwork”, then it could be fully accepted by Europe and America. The elimination of karoushi was not successful and the attempted “leisure state” created a huge inflation of land prices due to land speculation. This created an almost dual currency in Japan: the yen and land. Despite this, Japan was still accepted by Europe and America because it finally caved in to the General Agreement of Trade and Tariff (GATT) for its historically protected rice market.

The long-term effect of this: Japan is encouraging the first-world’s dependence on the global resource base. The dependence is also compounded by the other first-world nations doing the same. By population change alone this is completely unsustainable. In the world today approximately twenty-percent of people live in the first world, “the North” and eighty-percent of people live in underdeveloped countries, “the South”. According to the demographic transition model, as a population becomes more educated and urbanized, their birthrate will fall. If we apply this to the world situation, the increasingly smaller and smaller population of “the north” will continue to rely more and more on the larger and larger population of “the south”. Naturally, there will come a point and time where “the south” will stop degrading its own environment and health for the sake of the first world nations, including Japan.

Perhaps the most interesting point mentioned in regards to rice farming in Japan, is that it is one of the few places in the world where rice farming is actually beneficial to the environment. As such Japan is considered ecologically rich. However, most of the traditional farming ended in the post World War II occupation. The focus was then turned to industrialization and rebuilding. The losses caused by this are not only environmental, but also cultural and political. By ridding of traditional farming, Japan has severed the link with its past unnaturally. This results in making any progress that involves uncertainties from the past slow and arduous.

What the GATT agreement ultimately means is a gradual losing of one's sovereignty. This is true though for all nations that choose to partake in the global economy. As McCormack argues in the Peace State, Japan must worry about its neighbors, Asianism, in addition to what it means to be Japanese. It cannot isolate itself from the world like it did during the Edo era. His solution of the Japanese purely defining themselves as different and unique pacifist state, while admirable, ultimately will not work. The disallowing of a regular military by Article Nine of the Japanese constitution removes sovereignty from Japan. This becomes even more important with World War II fading in the memory of the world, and Japan's lack of centrality in the United State's foreign policies due to the end of the Cold War. This is clearly shown by the attempts of the current administration to change the constitution and desires to create a new constitution. There is no doubt though that any modification that is going to happen, must answer the Article Nine question that lingers in every debate concerning Japan's involvement in military matters.

The other predicament that arises from an unmodified foreign made constitution concerning Article Nine and the possibility of Japan standing proud as a peace state is Japan's desire to join the United Nations Security Council. As long as Article Nine remains intact in its current form, Japan is not even sure that it can participate legally in United Nations peacekeeping missions. Furthermore, Japan currently cannot and in some cases chooses not to enforce its constitutional guarantees. There are two examples that are cited in this book that display a lack of interest of enforcing the freedom of religion and freedom of speech articles from the constitution. They are the case of a Christian member of the National Self-Defense Force being enshrined as a Shinto deity against his wife's wishes and the relentless hounding and assassination attempts for the expressing of thoughts about Japan's involvement in World War II that might not be favorable to the emperor. (p. 200)

This exposes the mass confusion, though it is often not seen as that, concerning Japan's role in World War II by the Japanese. It also questions the accepted fact, at least by the United States government, that the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were necessary to end the war. Although all powers involved in World War II committed atrocities, the only two powers that were greatly punished were Germany and Japan. There is a huge difference in how the two punished powers have lived since then. The Germans have accepted their wrong doings of the past and have tried to make amends by apologizing and giving yearly donations to various Jewish funds. Japan is in a completely different situation. It has neither offered a sincere apology nor has it compensated the victims of Japan's imperialization. It has not done so because it feels like a victim itself, because of the atomic bomb and the belief that all compensation was taken care of with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

The argument made by McCormack is one that will be hard for the Japanese to accept quickly. Because Japan has yet to change its view of its role in World War II from being a victim to an aggressor, official amends cannot yet be fully made. This will be an especially slow process because Japan is not convinced that it did any wrong. Many of the Japanese that lived and committed the atrocities believe that Japan was doing a good thing: ridding Asia of the western colonial powers. Although the intentions claimed to be pure, the reality is the Japanese ended up replacing the previous colonial overlords. Because of that, many Japanese including some people high in the Ministry of Justice believe that the reported atrocities committed abroad were a complete fabrication. The best example of this is the Massacre of Nanjing. In Nanjing, China, Japanese troops murdered, raped, and looted for over six weeks. Despite confessions by Japanese soldiers in Nanjing during the massacre and the confirmation of the extent of the massacre, the belief is ongoing. This is displayed even further by the cover-ups and scandals over events that happened within Japan. This is displayed in the instance of the cover-up of the

existence of the biological warfare research and development unit, Unit 731, in the “Shinjuku Bones” affair. In this event, thirty-five skulls and other bones were found. In spite of a request by the Shinjuku Ward to fully investigate the bones, the Ministry of Health ordered the bones to be hurriedly disposed of. However, because of public protest, there was a full investigation and it was discovered that the bones were of mixed origin.

This is further compounded by not fully addressing two other social disgraces during World War II: the issue of “Comfort Women” and “Abandoned Children”. “Comfort Women” were women that that Japanese Imperial Army kidnapped, tricked, and forced to be prostitutes for the Imperial Army throughout their empire. The “Abandoned Children” issue is when Japan left many resident Japanese children in Manchuria after the end of World War II. Chinese parents often adopted the children of Japanese blood. The reparation offered by Japan is nowhere near that required to fully redress the “Abandoned Children” or the “Comfort Women”.

The end of World War II also brought up many more issues with Korea and other nations that were given Japanese citizenship and considered Japanese during the war. How does Japan give benefits to veterans who are no longer considered Japanese? How does Japan make amends to, in excess of 42,000 South Koreans that were not repatriated to South or North Korea and were left to suffer in Sakhalin? Could any amount of money possibly right these wrongs?

I do not believe that McCormack factored in the potential for apologizing for politics and power alone. Japan has an expressed interest in joining the United Nations Security Council and Japan may need to compensate its World War II host countries before it can join. Any sudden compensation or apologies might have a difficult time being accepted sincerely by the recipients because of possible political motives. Japan could rid itself of most of its relation issues with its neighbors caused by the above if it were to accept its actions and give a heartfelt apology.

America could easily be blamed for the confusion of the official Japanese role in the war as a victim because they dropped the atomic bombs. However, given the underground complexes that the Imperial Army built that are still being discovered today. It is a fair assumption that Japan would have continued to fight even after an all out invasion of the Japanese mainland.

McCormack gives a balanced view of Japan, though at times it can seem quite critical. The criticism is constructive and at many times hopeful. Many of the problems that McCormack says affect Japan affect most first world nations. These include food dependence, environmental problems, and over-consumption. For any person that has a serious interest in modern Japan, then *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence* is a must read.