

## Gaiatsu ("Foreign Pressure")

by Richard Evanoff

A few summers ago while at a demonstration and march to protest plans to blast a tunnel through Mt. Takao, I was approached by a reporter from one of Japan's dailies to give my opinion on the project. The tunnel is part of a spaghetti-style exit ramp that will join the existing Chuo Expressway with the proposed *Ken-o-do*, a loopway intended to link together the outlying areas of Tokyo. There is substantial organized resistance among Japanese residents in the area to the project and more than 3,000 people turned out for the rally at the foot of Mt. Takao and the subsequent march to city hall. My own role in the event was simply to sing a song I had written, "Talkin' Takao Mountain Massacre Blues," so I was surprised when the reporter asked me for an interview. After all, it's not as if I'm some kind of famous folksinger.

At the time, I was with the Japanese leader of one of the opposition groups and I told the reporter that he should interview the leader instead of me. The leader, after all, was far more knowledgeable about the issue than I was — and spoke better Japanese to boot. Nonetheless, both the reporter *and* the leader insisted that they wanted to hear what a "foreigner" thought about the issue. I was really thrilled to actually be *asked* to give my opinion, since most of the time when I talk it seems as if no one is listening. (I'm not sure if this a personal problem or one that is shared by environmentalists in general who, both literally and figuratively, often seem to be voices crying in the wilderness).

Coming from a culture where freedom of speech is a right and exercising it a virtue I proceeded to give my sincere and frank opinion. Seemed to me, I said, that the government was trying to push the project against the wishes of the people and that the main group which would profit from the project would be the construction companies. For rhetorical flourish (and to live up to the reporter's image of me as a folksinger) I quoted two lines of the song I had written: "The government takes our money in taxes/Then the crews come in with their dozers and axes." I'm not sure if he found the couplet amusing or not. The point, however, is not so much what my opinion was, but rather the fact that I — a foreigner in Japan with no right to vote and limited opportunities for political involvement — was being asked to express an opinion on a matter that many Japanese knew more about than I did. Moreover, this was not an isolated incident; I have often been put in a similar position in

my work as an environmental activist.

Jaded foreigners would probably tend to dismiss my encounter with the reporter as yet another example of the Japanese preoccupation with the question, "What do foreigners think of us?" And they're probably right. No other nationality in the world seems to be so self-consciously concerned about what other nationalities think of them than the Japanese. But there are, I think, solid environmental reasons for playing along with the game — and learning the rules so we can win it.

Most of us who have been in Japan for any length of time know that "expressing opinions openly" is often looked at negatively, rather than positively, in Japanese culture. It's sometimes assumed that persons who express their opinions openly are selfish "individualists" who oppose legitimate authority and disturb the harmony of the group. They are seen as attempting to forcibly impose their views on others instead of seeking consensus. This cultural fact makes it difficult for ordinary people who may actually *not* be selfish to challenge the legitimacy of people in positions of power who may in fact be selfish. In the Takao case, for example, the real selfish "individualists" are the construction companies who benefit from government contracts and the politicians who benefit from the political donations they receive from the companies — *not* the citizens who speak out against this cozy relationship.

So what is one citizen's voice against the vast political power of big government and the even vaster economic power of big corporations — especially when citizens who openly express their opinions are branded as "selfish" rebels bent on destroying "social harmony"? Oppression against environmentalists and other social dissidents can be real, and various forms of coercion and economic pressure can easily be brought against people if there is any chance that they will actually succeed in their protests. One of the probable reasons why housewives and retired people are more active in the environmental movement in Japan than office workers is not only because they have more time, but also because they don't have to worry about losing their jobs if they protest openly.

Another cultural fact in Japan is that ethical behavior is usually not reinforced by appealing to one's own "inner conscience" since this is looked at as unreliable, potentially egoistic, and also threatening to social harmony. Rather ethical behavior is reinforced by appealing to what *others* will think of one's actions. Furthermore, since Japan is not a high risk-taking culture — taking risks can lead to face-losing failure — there are enormous pressures to maintain the status quo rather than to imaginatively recreate the future. In Japan, more than most countries, successful precedents are crucial preconditions for future experimentation.

One can thus see how the opinions of foreigners fit into the scheme. Foreigners who give their opinions on environmental issues

in Japan are doing more than simply letting Japanese know "what foreigners think of Japan." Since it is sometimes difficult for Japanese activists to express their opinions openly, having a foreigner come out in support of their cause can add a certain legitimacy to it. "Foreign pressure" is thus a convenient way for Japanese activists to keep the nail of social change provocatively sticking up instead of seeing it pounded down by the hammer of corporate and governmental power.

The environmental movement is not the only movement where this phenomenon occurs. Japanese feminists, for example, often point to the relative (the word *relative* should be emphasized here) degree of gender equality in Western countries to bolster their own cause, implying that Japan is "behind" in its attitudes towards women and needs to "catch up." Japanese women, standing alone, might simply be dismissed as cranky complainers. A (relatively) successful model to compare themselves with gives them leverage.

We should be aware, however, that the appeal to "foreign pressure" can also be used to legitimate regressive policies. The Japanese military knows that increasing the defense budget would not go over big with Japanese voters — ergo the cry that Americans are putting "foreign pressure" on Japan to increase its defense spending. Many people, including most Japanese, are unaware that Japan already has the seventh largest military force in the world. Of course, the U.S. has in fact been putting "foreign pressure" on Japan to increase its military spending, but this should be seen more correctly as an act of *collaboration* than of *confrontation*.

Given the collusion that goes on at the top between those promoting economic growth, war, and environmental destruction, I think there's plenty of room for a bit of cross-cultural solidarity among environmentalists and other "ordinary people" working for social change. If the cause is one that I myself happen to believe in, certainly I won't hesitate to speak my mind on it, lend my support to Japanese groups that are working to address it — and maybe write a few folksongs. How this tactic can *backfire* in Japan, however, will be the subject of the next ecoLogic column. □

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