

## When "Foreign Pressure" Backfires

By Richard Evanoff

In the last ecoLogic column we were talking about *gaiatsu* — "foreign pressure" — and how the presence of foreigners in the Japanese environmental movement can help to give it a measure of credibility. Japanese environmental groups working alone can often be marginalized as simply nails that stick up. But when foreigners are involved, it may be more difficult for the powers-that-be to portray the movement as simply a group of Japanese misfits who are "challenging" authority and disrupting "social harmony." Japanese are increasingly learning the art of openly criticizing authority (albeit in a thoroughly Japanese way), but the lack of a tradition in this area means that foreigners are frequently called on to express their opinions. Moreover, the tendency of foreigners to fully exercise their democratic rights to free speech neatly fits the interest of the Japanese press in reporting on "what foreigners think of us."

There are several ways in which *gaiatsu* can backfire, however, and that's what I'd like to talk about in this month's column. The first problem is that *gaiatsu* puts foreigners on the "front line" as it were. Since it's impolite for Japanese to raise embarrassing questions about controversial issues, let the foreigners do it. In most cases Japanese don't intentionally use foreigners in this way, but some foreigners may *feel* as if they're being used in this way. Personally I don't think this is much of a problem since expressing opinions openly is more or less the kind of behavior Japanese expect from "brash," individualistic foreigners. In my own criticizing I try to keep focused on the issues rather than on individual personalities or "cultural factors."

A more serious (and perhaps more frequent) problem are those foreigners who never *stop* giving their opinions. They think that the best way to help the environmental movement in Japan is to give detailed advice to everyone on how everything should be done. There is more than a little ethnocentric condescension involved here, since it assumes that the Western way is the best way and that the Japanese don't really know how to stand up and speak for themselves. Developing effective internal forms of criticism may indeed be a problem for Japan, but one that will ultimately have to be resolved by the Japanese themselves, not by domineering foreigners. Nor should Westerners mistake the subtleties of the Japanese way of expressing a divergent opinion for the lack of any opinion whatsoever — a common mis-

take made even by long-term foreign residents in Japan.

A third problem with *gaiatsu* is that any foreign criticism, even legitimate criticism, can be easily dismissed as "Japan bashing." It's relatively easy for people in positions of power who are being criticized to rally public opinion by falling back on nationalistic arguments when other, more rational arguments fail. The cry of "cultural imperialism" has been particularly strong on the whaling problem, for example, with the issue frequently being cast in terms of "those foreigners" trying to push "us Japanese" around. Foreign environmentalists whose concerns are *purely for the environment* suddenly find themselves demonized as the worst sort of racist imperialists, seeking to deprive the Japanese of their traditional cultural values and trying to impose Western cultural values on Japan. (For some of the many ways in which this argument can be deconstructed see the ecoLogic column in the July/August 1992 issue of JEM, "How Environmental Issues Degenerate into Nationalistic Issues").

Moreover, Japanese activists who are too closely associated with foreign environmentalists can easily be marginalized by the powers-that-be as having become too "Westernized." To continue with the whaling example, there are, of course, a number of Japanese environmentalists who are also opposed to whaling. But by voicing their opposition to commercial whalers, politicians, and insensitive consumers, suddenly their own "Japaneseness" may be called into question. They can be easily cast as cultural traitors who have sold out to "those foreigners." From the statements of some pro-whaling advocates you would think that a Japanese who opposed whaling — if such a situation can even be *conceived* — is not only unpatriotic but guilty of high treason.

Maintaining the "purity" of Japanese culture can thus be used as an argument in favor of supporting the status quo, which basically means giving unquestioning obedience to the powers-that-be. The presence of foreigners in a Japanese environmental group is thus always problematic and we should therefore be aware of the dilemma we face in using "foreign pressure" as a tactic. On the one hand, foreigners may be asked by some Japanese to support their causes by voicing their opinions openly, which is fine. But on the other hand, they may also be accused by other Japanese of trying to imperialistically impose "Western values" on Japan. By drawing attention away from the real issues (i.e., by saying that the "real" problem isn't environmental degradation but foreign criticism), "foreign pressure" can make scapegoats of foreigners just as easily as "Japan-bashing" makes scapegoats of Japanese in the West.

In the last column we also pointed out how "foreign pressure" can be easily manipulated by the government, corporations, and media to suit their own purposes. The double standard used here should appear a bit clearer

now. On the one hand, if the government *supports* a certain course of action it can easily use "foreign pressure" as an excuse for doing something, as in, "We ourselves do not necessarily support sending Japanese soldiers overseas as part of UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations, but 'foreign pressure' is forcing us to do so." In this case "foreign pressure" is just the excuse the government needs to give Japan's military a boost. On the other hand, if the government is *opposed* to a certain course of action, it can just as easily use "foreign pressure" as an excuse for *not* doing something, as in, "We refuse to bow to 'foreign pressure' to stop whaling, since whaling is a part of Japan's cultural tradition." Basically the powers-that-be are going to do whatever they want to do anyway, regardless of foreign opinion.

What all of this shows, I hope, is that "foreign pressure" has absolutely nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of a particular cause. It has value only as a propaganda tool, and ultimately depends on who is using it and for what purpose. While foreigners can certainly lend their support to the environmental movement in Japan, ultimately what is needed is a stronger grass roots movement with an indigenous Japanese leadership that is able to draw on traditional Japanese cultural values for an environmental ethic. Buddhism and the cooperative tradition of early agricultural communities are good places to start looking for these values. The task is to develop an internal critique of values (i.e., traditional eco-sensitive Japanese values vs. modern eco-damaging Japanese values) rather than an oversimplistic external, "us vs. them" critique of values (i.e., the presumed Japanese emphasis on "harmony" with nature vs. the presumed Western emphasis on "domination" of nature). This internal critique would give Japanese activists a powerful tool that would enable them to effectively challenge the powers-that-be and to transform the system so that it is genuinely responsive to human needs rather than simply to the profit-mongering interests of the corporations. More on how to get the discussion off the nationalistic plane and back onto the ethical plane will be the theme of the next and final installment on this theme. □

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