

# Thoughts on a Zushi Afternoon

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

It is a bright day here in Zushi, south of Tokyo. The sun is shining on the sea just as it did when I was young and growing up on the coast of the Pacific near Los Angeles. Days like this have a narcotic kind of nostalgia for me.

There is a road along one side of the marina. It ends at the seawall that overlooks the bright sea. A young couple are sitting atop the seawall, lost in the happiness of being together. They sometimes look at each other, sometimes laugh, sometimes look silently away from each other for a moment or two, and sometimes look outward in the same direction together. Their happiness flows down the quiet road like a soft invisible tide.

A few generations ago, it was much more difficult for young Japanese to do what this young couple are doing. Society was tighter, more rigid. A young merchant's assistant or craftsman's apprentice could not conceive of such free time. And a woman in her early 20s would have been married and a mother. These young people have something special: they have alternatives.

The flow of modern history has been from a situation where a select few had all the alternatives in their lives to a situation where real alternatives are at hand for the majority of the people. Various social and political systems have evolved as part of attempts to deal with this flow. None of them (excepting possibly that of the Khmer Rouge) have attempted to avert it. Of course the flow is not smooth or predictable. There are in every society those who resist.

Tokyo is a city with an ever-expanding horizon of alternatives. The variety has grown at an astonishing rate. Its growth has been far from even and has been on occasion very difficult. In times of difficulty, there is a tendency to use labels such as "foreign" or "Western" or "American," when in fact the flow is common to most of humanity. The European cultures were the first to encounter the rapid expansion of the number of alternatives due to their own special combination of historical circumstances. They and their offspring cultures—America, Canada (both French

and English), Australia, Argentina, and so on—have tended to be the most visible and of course have left a strong imprint on the path of this "alternativization" process. But this does not limit the flow to them or their patterns. What is happening in Japan in this last part of the 20th century is not a slavish "Westernization" in which Japan is the object on which forces from outside act as they erase the established patterns. It is a new growth, a new flow, which incorporates, utilizes and parallels the experience of Western nations. And although we may see the pattern of this change, there is no clear historical precedent. We have to be careful not to draw conclusions too hastily.

Of late, the media in Japan and abroad have tended to descend into name-calling and generalization. Those are good ways to sell newspapers and magazines and books. They are marvelous at pushing up television ratings. But they do nothing positive at this time when real understanding is so critically needed. We are all moving down the same stream together; each nation is moving at its own pace and in a different part of the stream. The important thing to remember is that it is the same stream. Now that the nations of Eastern Europe are moving into the active part of the stream, one can only wonder how they will be received after the elation at their throwing off the yoke of Marxism has subsided.

The sun has dropped a little lower as these thoughts subside in my mind. The young couple are still there, silhouetted in the light. I think back on my times as a romantic youth. I smile a little. I'm always busy with work, meeting people, rushing to complete assignments. However, if I really felt like it, I could sit on the seawall and lose myself in the happiness of being with someone special. I have that alternative.

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