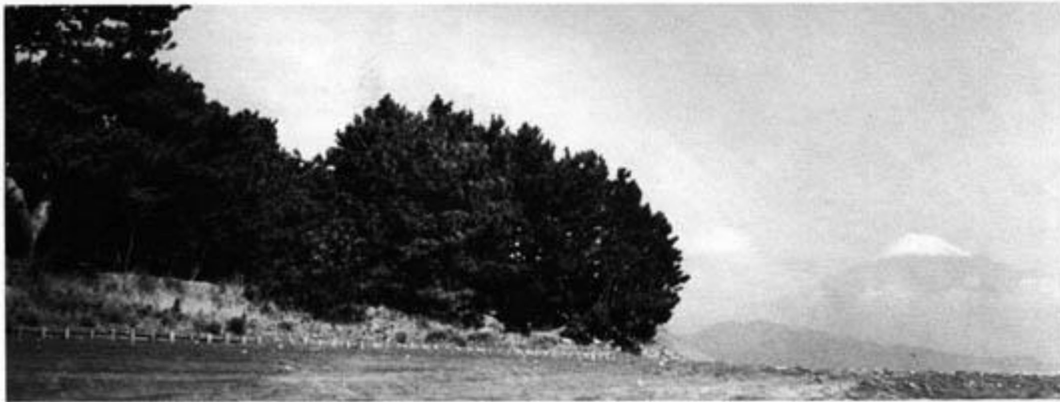
A Nostalgic Landscape of Japan



white sand & blue pines

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WHAT LANDSCAPE image does Japan most often evoke? For some, Mt. Fuji, considered sacred by many Japanese, will come to mind. Others will think of Kyoto, where ancient temples, shrines, and gardens embody more than one thousand years of Japanese culture and tradition. The younger generation may envision Tokyo, where crowded structures and jammed streets represent modernity in Japan.

There is, however, an often overlooked landscape that is nostalgic to most Japanese people. It is *hakusha-seishō*, or a white sand beach with blue (prosaically, dark green) pine trees. The term evokes memories of pine trees stretching along a sandy beach, the steady roll of gentle waves, and the smell of the ocean drifting along the shore. But to the surprise of many Japanese, this landscape is not entirely natural. Rather, borrowing Denis E. Cosgrove's term from *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, it is "a *social* product, the consequence of a collective human transformation of nature." How did hakusha-seishō come to be? And why does the image stir such poignant memories in the Japanese mind? To understand the origin and meaning of this landscape, we must first examine the pines themselves.

Mt. Fuji from the Miho pine grove. For many Japanese this grove and others like it have special significance.

"The beach of the Dancing Girl in Harima Province." Color woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige, 1853. 15 x 10 inches. From a series depicting places famous for scenic beauty, this view shows tourists near a teahouse under large pines on a sandy beach. Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

PINES AND WHITE SAND

Matsu, or pine, is in the genus *Pinus*. Most of the one hundred species belonging to this genus originated in the Northern Hemisphere; more than half of these occur in North America. Despite its popularity in Japan, only seven or eight species are native to that country and only two of these are widespread there: *kuro-matsu* (black pine, *Pinus thumbergii*) and *aka-matsu* (red pine, *Pinus densiflora*). Black pine prefers a warm coastal habitat and is most common along the southern coast of Japan; while red pine, a common inland species, occasionally replaces it along the northern coast.

Pine trees have been a conspicuous and popular natural feature of Japan for centuries. During the Heian period (794-1192), Japanese culture assimilated the traditional Chinese regard for plum, bamboo, and pine as auspicious plants, and pine trees have since been depicted in many Japanese poems and paintings. In *Manyoshu* (collection of ten thousand leaves), a poetry anthology compiled in the eighth century, pine trees are mentioned more often than any other type of tree. The backdrop in the traditional Noh theater, which was developed in the fourteenth century, has long been a stylized pine tree, and many woodblock prints from the Edo period (1603-1867) depict pine trees in landscapes. Pine trees are also prominent in Japan's three most famous sites of scenic beauty, Amanohashidate, Matsushima, and Itsukushima, and they remain an indispensable component of both traditional and modern Japanese gardens.

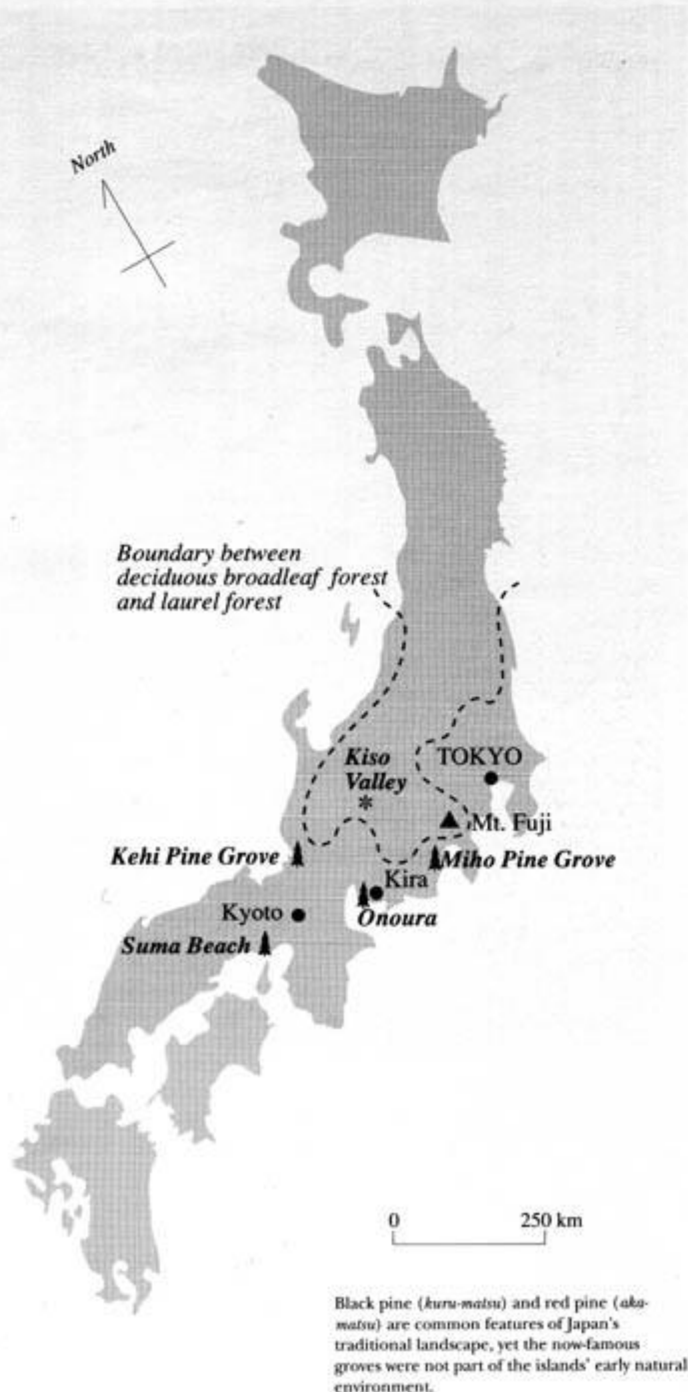
There is, however, evidence that pine trees were uncommon in Japan's early landscape. A third-century Chinese manuscript *Wei Chih* that describes contemporary life in southwestern Japan does not mention pine trees, although it notes the presence of nine other tree species, including camphor, oak, and maple. Pine trees were probably not common, or at least not conspicuous, in the region

observed by the Chinese visitors, who must have already been familiar with the plant in their own country. How then, have pine trees become so common in Japan?

Before answering this question, we must first look at the origin of white sand beaches in Japan. The primary source of sand is alluvial deposits of eroded mountain soil. In general, the more extreme the mountain deforestation, the greater the amount of sediment carried downstream. Thus, a large deposition of sand along a coast usually indicates that the mountain upstream is severely deforested. If the geologic material of the mountain is granite, which is often the case (especially in western Japan), a beautiful white sand beach will result.

Ecological Setting

The natural environment of Japan does not encourage an abundance of pine trees. The climate of Japan is very diverse because of its location, elongated shape, surrounding ocean, and high mountain backbone running north to south. Climatic variety is closely reflected in vegetation. In southwestern Japan the climax vegetation is the evergreen laurel forest; in northeastern Japan it is the deciduous broadleaf forest. Occasionally, however, soils are not sufficiently rich to support the climatic climax. In these cases soil conditions become the determining factor, and an edaphic climax community appears. This often occurs in mountainous areas where soils are poor. On slopes, the dominant edaphic climax vegetation is *hinoki* (Japanese cypress, *Chamaecyparis obtusa*), while in valleys *sugi* (cedar, *Cryptmeria japonica*) often dominates. On ridges, where the poorest soils exist, pine trees may be preponderant, not because pines prefer poor soil, but because they have little competition there. Although poor soils do not provide optimum growing conditions, ecologically they may offer the only habitat where pines can survive. For the same reason, pine trees are also common pioneer plants on new shoreline beaches.



Black pine (*kuru-matsu*) and red pine (*aka-matsu*) are common features of Japan's traditional landscape, yet the now-famous groves were not part of the islands' early natural environment.

Kindergarten children on an outing at the Miho pine grove. The area is famous for its magnificent views of Mt. Fuji and for an exceptional pine tree associated with the legend of a celestial maiden who danced for a fisherman.

Pines in Japan

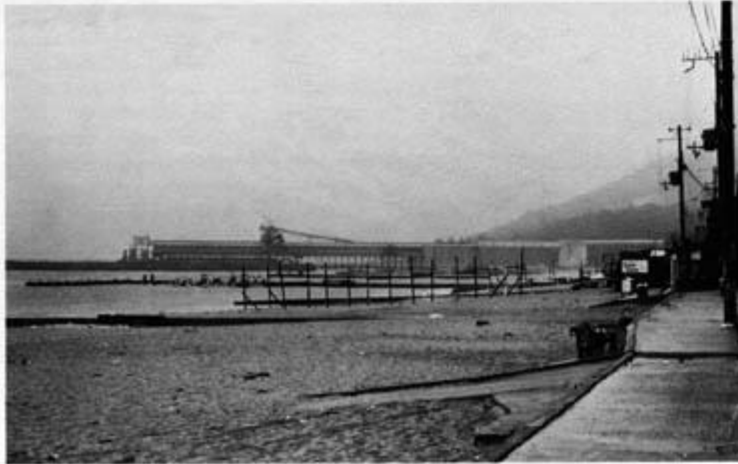
Historical and physical evidence suggest that the greater the distance from cultural and political centers, the later the appearance of pine trees. Pollen analyses show that near Kyoto, the cultural and political center of early Japan, the number of pine trees suddenly and rapidly increased at the end of the sixth century until, by the end of the seventh century, pines outnumbered other species. During this period the Asuka culture, the first Buddhist culture of Japan, emerged in the region. In the remote Kiso Valley forty miles northeast of Kyoto, buckwheat pollen first appeared at the beginning of the twelfth century. This marks the beginning of human settlement and cultivation in the valley. At the same time the amount of red pine pollen in the valley also suddenly increased. The place and time of these increases coincide with the rise of the warrior clan of Kiso Yoshinaka, whose army raided Kyoto and defeated the ruling Heike clan in 1183. This historical evidence, together with the changes in pollen samples, indicates that rapid increases in human activity coincided with increases in the number of pine trees.

As populations grew, people opened more of the forest for housing and agriculture and exploited it repeatedly for construction materials, firewood, fodder, fertilizer, and other products. As a result, the soils became poorer and poorer, and pine trees gained dominance over other species. Apparently, pine forests proliferated largely as a result of human disturbance of the natural landscape.

The next step in the sequence was the formation of a sandy beach and the establishment of a pine forest on it. As people continued to open and exploit forests in mountainous areas, the slopes became more vulnerable to erosion. The degraded mountain slopes increased river sediment loads, which led to new beach formation

along Japan's coastline. Pine trees entered this new landscape as pioneer species and eventually generated forests.

Of course, not all sandy beaches with pine trees in Japan are of anthropogenic origin. Many of them must have occurred naturally. However, what *is* unnatural in all cases is that the sequence stopped at this stage. Human exploitation of the established secondary pine forest halted normal plant succession at the pioneer stage and allowed the forest to persist for many years. Thus, the familiar "white sand beaches with blue pine trees" resulted from deforestation and erosion in nearby mountains followed by exploitation of pine forests in the vicinity of human occupation. Despite its romantic image, it represents a degraded natural landscape of Japan.

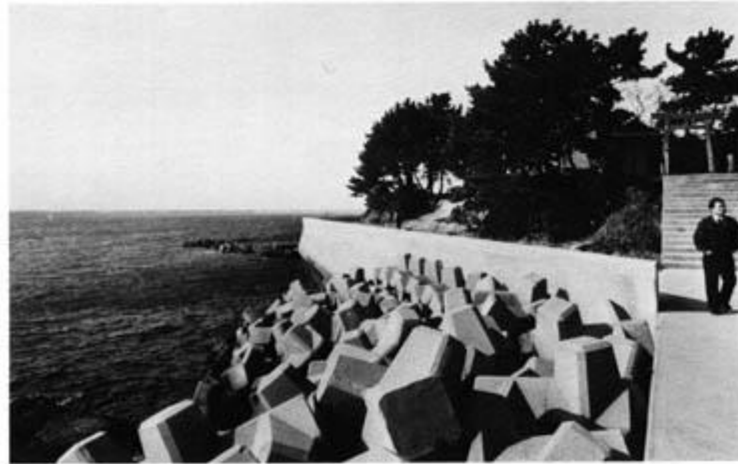


Sands collected inland are deposited offshore by a conveyor belt in an effort to restore the famous Suma Beach.

From Intimacy to Oblivion?

How have the Japanese people come to regard the hakusha-seishō, a degraded landscape, with such tender feelings? The depiction of this landscape as a place of scenic beauty can be traced back to classical collections of 31-syllable Japanese poems called *waka*. In *Manyoshu*, the oldest waka collection, hakusha-seishō was characterized by its purity and cleanliness. Many later poems in imperial collections such as *Kokin-wakasu* (Ancient and modern poems, 905) and *Shinkokin-wakashu* (New ancient and modern poems, 1205) also described pine trees on beaches. These collections have been a major source of inspiration for later Japanese literature and may be at the root of the modern sentiment that the hakusha-seishō symbolizes the beauty of Japanese coastlines.

While early literature made ample reference to the landscape, early paintings did not. Instead, they tended to follow the Chinese tradition of *sansuiga* (paintings of mystic mountains and water). It wasn't until the nineteenth century that landscape paintings and woodblock prints began to portray pine trees on white sand beaches as scenes of beauty. Such



The natural shoreline has disappeared under concrete tetrapods at Cape Hiruko, Kira.

images are still visible in advertisements for tourists.

Although the image of hakusha-seishō has been in evidence first in literature, and later in art, for more than ten centuries, it has only emerged as a source of nostalgia and sentimentality during the past century. The most prominent use of hakusha-seishō as a nostalgic image, especially for common people, is in the elementary school songs introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, the new Japanese government attempted rapid westernization of the country. Under the new compulsory education system, the Ministry of Education selected school songs, usually short tunes written in the Western style, for elementary school education. Some of these songs expressed wistful yearnings for pine groves, sandy beaches, and ocean waves. Examples include "Utsukushiki tennen" ("Beautiful nature," 1905), "Ware wa umi no ko" ("I'm a child of the ocean," 1910) and "Umi" ("The Ocean," 1913). "Ware wa umi no ko" begins:

> I'm a child of the ocean.
> The hut from which smoke arises,
> In the pine grove on the beach,
> Amidst the sound of waves,
> Is my home, sweet home.

Although the compulsory education system cultivated nationwide nostalgia for hakusha-seishō, this could not have been accomplished without the long-felt intimacy of the Japanese people with this landscape. Pine forests had been familiar features near human settlements for centuries. Many famous scenic beauty sites in Japan boasted pine trees along sandy beaches, and these celebrated landscapes were often imitated in the gardens of Japanese aristocrats. More recently, people have also grown

Crowded bathing beaches and artificial shorelines like this one at Cape Hiruko, Kira, are becoming the only Japanese beaches known to younger people.

enamored of hakusha-seishō through scenic photographs, popular literature, prevailing traditions, and memories of vacation trips to coastal areas. Thus, the nostalgic image has become intimately blended with the actual landscape.

That landscape is now rapidly disappearing from Japan. Much of the shoreline has been reclaimed for industrial development, and in many places concrete embankments separate the beaches from the pine groves. Reforestation along mountain slopes and the construction of sand-control dams midstream have halted the supply of sand to the coast. At the same time, communities no longer exploit the remaining pine forests, and consequently the soil is becoming richer. As normal plant succession proceeds, pines are being replaced by other tree species. Moreover, air pollution, coupled with a recent infestation of insect pests, has damaged entire pine forests.

There have been attempts to restore the vanishing landscape. Some efforts to add sand to once-sandy beaches are under way. Many groups are trying to save pine groves from the insect epidemic. Several civic movements are working to halt further development near notable hakusha-seishō such as the Miho pine grove. However, not all of these efforts have been successful, and the future of the landscape remains clouded.

Nostalgia for hakusha-seishō also appears to be waning in the younger generation. Perhaps as Japan has gained international economic power with its concomitant industrial pollution, the once-nostalgic image of hakusha-seishō has lost its meaning. This may be especially true among the younger people, many of whom know only polluted oceans, concrete coasts, and crowded bathing beaches. Unless the restoration of hakusha-seishō is successful, the image will fade. For both the image and the landscape itself, the sands are washing away. □

FURTHER READING

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Photographs and map by the author, 1991.

白砂青松

"White sands and blue pines." Calligraphy by Setsuko Hiers, 1993.