

FILM REVIEWS

The *Japan 2000* series provides an overview to the lives and goals of Japan's people, and is interesting in that it does not focus on the Tokyo region (the Kanto Plain), as many such instructional series do. Instead, emphasis is placed on Western Japan, the region known as Kansai. In this shift of focus, the views which many ascribe to the Kanto region are seen to have broader application. This series presents a variety of topics, and offers the Western viewer an explanation of Japanese actions and beliefs. More subtly, the interviews and explanations reveal the role that the government of Japan has played in the post-war development of the nation, and how that influence will continue to change Japanese lifestyles.

Against All the Odds highlights Japan's success in the face of such obstacles as its mountainous and volcanic geography, earthquakes, typhoons, and war. The nation's ability to cope (and recover) from devastation has been accomplished through massive government-directed programs, which are often funded privately. In short, Japan's success in dealing with extreme adversity has been based not solely on national character or on style of administration, but also on its wealth.

However, Japan's need for imported oil is a critical issue; to continue its success Japan will have to become more self-reliant for its energy needs. *Against All the Odds* describes plans for a total of fifty-two nuclear power plants. The

Japan 2000

Against All the Odds

The High-Tech Road

Changing Lifestyles

The Future in the Countryside

FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES

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ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY THE BRITISH BROADCASTING COMPANY.

Japanese government was involved in selling the idea to the public, recognizing that traditional lifestyles will be disrupted by the introduction of massive facilities. This segment raises the question of how far Japan can go in its pursuit of self-sufficiency before it disturbs its citizens.

The High-Tech Road examines the dual aspects of reliance on foreign imports and exploitation of modern electronics. This section highlights Osaka's Electric City (the Kansai counterpart to Tokyo's Akihabara District), and takes the viewer out of the sales region to the hardware sections of cities, where the components of high-tech items get their start. In these areas production is based on small workshops, and the process of using many steps to complete the production of finished goods is illustrated. It is noted that 60 percent of Japanese goods come from small businesses.

In these business relationships the importance of friendships and family ties is noted; traditional *zaibatsu* relationships continue to be a major aspect of Japanese business.

Small companies are still the backbone of Japanese industry. However, the close relationships on which business ties have existed are breaking down, and this is expected to lead to new, unfamiliar means of doing business in Japan.

The segment entitled *Changing Lifestyles* describes the shift in family styles in Japan, particularly the high cost of living space in cities. While recreation space is cramped when compared to the West, the Japanese government is involved in massive landfill projects for public facilities like the Kansai International Airport and the Kobe seaport. This "reclaimed land" offers advantages to crowded mainland residents. Nevertheless, the move to cities has led to a loss of touch with traditional culture. The roles of husband and wife are changing, as two-income families are needed to support city life.

Another aspect of change is the increasing numbers of Japanese middle and high school students who study abroad, particularly in the West, where competition in these grades is not as rigorous as in Japan. These foreign

schools provide the students with excellent language skills, but their different philosophy is perceived as contributing to a diminishing work ethic.

The Future in the Countryside contrasts with that of the city, but changes are coming to Japanese farms as well. The aerial views in this segment show empty hills and busy coastal flatlands which are typical of all Japan, but the layout of these flatlands appears unfamiliar to Westerners. The cultivated areas appear too small; the average Japanese farm is only 1.5 hectares (less than four acres). These small farms in the Kansai region, which grow cabbages, tomatoes, and Japanese daikon radishes, are highly productive and labor-intensive. This segment notes that Japanese farmers have a strong tradition of self-reliance.

However, the traditional farm, with its farmers' markets, cannot provide for life in modern society. Many farm owners must now work a second job, and in Kansai there is a demand for workers away from the coast. Japanese industry prizes location, and the best locations are away from the traditional farming regions.

In the case of the most traditional farm product, rice grown on small farms, major changes are being introduced. Government price supports are being removed; in the past these have increased foreign prices on foreign products while encouraging domestic production at the expense of the Japanese consumer. Even as government support is being withdrawn, creative

means for increasing farm output are described, including “indoor farming” (hydroponic gardening). This method of “computerized farming” can be used to provide produce suited to the Japanese diet.

This segment brings up an essential issue for the next generation of Japanese citizens, commonly stated in America as “How are you going to keep them down on the farm?” The realization is coming that in Japan, the next generation may not be farmers.

This video series can provide a basis for discussion of Japanese lifestyles and expectations for the future, and most certainly dispels the view that Japanese society is a monolithic entity. At the very least, the differing roles of Japanese society, industry, and government are illustrated. In conjunction with the companion CD-ROM, this series would be an asset to secondary school or college undergraduate courses on modern Japanese culture. ■

Thomas Dolan

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Interweaving mythic and supernatural elements, writer/director Jacky (Je-kyu) Kang’s *The Ginkgo Bed* dramatizes the tale of doomed lovers whose souls have transmigrated to, and remain trapped for over 1,000 years in, the expertly hand-carved wood of a ginkgo bed. The film proper begins in contemporary Seoul as 32-year-old college art instructor Su-hyun takes possession of the antique bed, oblivious to its tragic history even as he reignites its drama. Soon beset with baffling impulses, hallucinatory visions, and terrifying nightmares, Su-hyun struggles to understand his experiences.

As revealed in flashbacks, Su-hyun is, in fact, the reincarnated Jung-mun, a court musician enamored of Mi-Dan a thousand years ago. Jung-mun’s transcendent playing of the *kayagum*, music described as “soft as the water and sharp as the sword . . . the sounds of the wind,” wins Mi-Dan’s affection. But brutal General Hwang, wartime conqueror who has taken Mi-Dan as his prize, longs for and demands passionate devotion, which she repeatedly refuses. A jealous Hwang pursues the secretive pair to a beach rendezvous where he beheads Su-hyun before Mi-Dan’s eyes. The thwarted lovers’ spirits travel to two ginkgo trees, blossoming side by side on a hillside. Ever vengeful, Hwang, taking the form of a hawk, uses lightning to kill Mi-dan’s tree, thereafter sculpted into the exquisite bed where her spirit dwells. Now, 170 years later, Su-hyun unwittingly frees Mi-dan’s spirit, reactivating

The Ginkgo Bed

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1996. 88 MINUTES



Photo courtesy of CineLine Corporation

Hwang’s determination to destroy them both once and for all.

Subplots include Su-hyun’s girlfriend, a doctor named Sun-Young, whose medical career is threatened by her involvement in a scientifically inexplicable incident. Sun-Young pronounces a young man dead, not knowing Mi-Dan has borrowed the patient’s body to warn Su-hyun, who cannot see Mi-Dan (in fact, he walks straight through her) in her ethereal form. By the time Mi-Dan returns her vehicle, the young man’s eyes have been

donated to another. After the “dead” man returns, the hospital administrator assumes gross incompetence on Sun-Young’s part and forces her to quit. Convinced by Su-Hyun of the truth of the extraordinary situation, Sun-Young offers her own body for Mi-Dan’s use in the final confrontation and secures Mi-Dan’s promise to return before the lunar eclipse ends.

Grisly horror, flashy special effects, jagged editing, and an energetically moving camera result in awkward juxtapositions of spiritual beliefs with a visceral cinematic style. Fast-paced and emotionally aggressive, technique often overwhelms substance. And despite its effective and harmonious blend of traditional and contemporary music, *The Ginkgo Bed* frequently fails to achieve a thematically satisfying union of violent and mythic content. That is, the story repeatedly foregrounds loud verbal and fierce physical battles, all but eclipsing the fascinating legend and intriguing cultural content, including a brief funeral scene, a group of individuals testifying to transmigration, a “cultural property” monument to the destroyed ginkgo, glimpses of musical training and performing, and superb music.

Unfortunately, the pervasive intrusion of gore limits classroom use. In one scene, only six minutes into the film, we watch an unknown man viciously beating and raping a woman, tearing her clothes off and ferociously kissing her breasts. General Hwang attacks him, not to protect