

# The First International Symposium of the Society of Informational Exchange for Environmental Education between Japan and China, at Peking University, August 1999

"Modern Environmental Problems and Educational Information Exchange: The Possibility of Environmental Education at the Eve of the 21st Century"

A summary of the symposium, fieldtrips and journey to Inner Mongolia

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We, that is the Japanese contingent, 31 Japanese and myself, arrived at Beijing airport in the early evening of Sunday, 15th August. A bus took us through the northern fringe of the city to our hotel, pleasantly situated near Peking University. Beijing is the hub of an urban region of 12 million people. The city is set out on an immense grid of wide, busy, tree-lined boulevards, with ranks of high-rise developments crowding the skyline in all directions. A yellow haze of pollution blanketed the entire urban region.

Monday was the first day of the symposium at Peking University. The first day comprised the keynote speeches given by Professors Taniguchi and Cao Qing Yang on the actual conditions of environmental education in Japan and China respectively, and the panelists' presentations. An important guest was Professor Yu Fuzeng, head officer at the secretariat of UNESCO. On the second day most of the presentations were students' presentations. The focus of the symposium was on the current state of environmental education in Japan and China and the prospects for environmental education in the 21st Century. Over the two days a number of common points emerged from the various presentations that pointed towards the direction of the future development of the association, and also provided the leitmotif for the rest of our stay in China and our excursion to Inner Mongolia.

Several of the presentations stressed the importance of direct experience, of project work or fieldwork in environmental education as opposed to only textbook-learning or classroom-based lessons. Many papers highlighted the importance of practical experience in developing the affective elements of learning, in developing an ecological consciousness in students that provides the foundation for the more cognitive aspects of environmental education and the understanding of living organisms and systems. The idea of developing psychological maturity, inner growth and developing aspects of care, respect and responsibility towards the non-human world and fostering citizenship among students turned out to be the cornerstones of many of the presentations.

It was a mutually rewarding experience for the Japanese side to forge links and make friends with Professors Kin, Bi Jieguang and their colleagues and students. Indeed, the parties and dinners we shared with our hosts brought us closer together. On the first night of the symposium we enjoyed Beijing Duck at the dinner party. The food throughout the trip was of a high standard and varied, with Inner Mongolian lamb and mutton dishes often sharing the table with more traditional Chinese dishes. Conversation flowed, and so did the

Chinese beer.

On Tuesday afternoon, following the closure of the symposium, we visited the Sino-Japanese Friendship Centre for Environmental Protection, which is run by the State Environmental Protection Administration of China (SEPA). The centre, in the north of Beijing City, serves as the Information Centre of SEPA, and as such is China's main centre for the collation of environmental data from all around the vast nation. The centre's other important roles include policy research, the development of pollution prevention control technology and environmental monitoring technology and the development of public environmental education materials. The centre includes laboratories, a computer centre, TV and video production studios and an extensive library and collection of reference materials. Much of the funding and many of the advisors come from Japan. The centre provided a working example of international cooperation in environmental policy, planning and education.

On Tuesday evening we boarded the overnight train bound for Inner Mongolia and its renowned grasslands. We arrived in Hohhot, the capital of the province of Inner Mongolia, early on Wednesday morning. Inner Mongolia conjures up images of endless grasslands, desert and nomadic herdsman, yet Hohhot is a modern industrial city of 800,000 people. From Hohhot we traveled by bus 180-km north into the grasslands. Despite being only 400-km northwest of Beijing we were in a different world. The first hour of the journey took us over mountains that reminded me of the Pennines of northern England, or the Scottish Southern Uplands. Once beyond the mountains however, all reminiscence of Britain or Europe was left far behind. After passing through the small agricultural town of Siziwang Banner we traveled through irrigated croplands and conifer plantations and on to the grasslands themselves.

The grasslands of Gegental are beyond description. It is a sublime landscape. The grasslands are vast, the air sharp, clear and dry, and the sky, deep blue and arching from horizon to horizon, appeared bigger and yet somehow closer than it does elsewhere. The first day on the grasslands was a full day. We visited a Mongolian sheep farm out on the prairie. We saw herds of sheep and goats and several prairie dogs. Back at the grassland centre we rode small but rather spirited horses out onto the grasslands and watched displays of horsemanship and Mongolian sumo wrestling. The sunset was spectacular, all hues of violet sweeping over the undulating prairie. The night sky, after the moon went down, was breathtakingly clear; there is very little light pollution out on the prairie. We slept in yurts, the traditional dome-shaped tents used by the Mongolians in the summer. They remain cool during the heat of the day yet retain their warmth through the cool nights and mornings. At 5:30 on Thursday morning several of us arose from our yurts and walked to the top of a swell in the prairie to watch the sun rise over the horizon. Again a magical moment, all were moved by the grandeur of nature's display.

We again boarded the buses and returned to Hohhot. This time the mountains were very dry and no longer reminded me of the Pennines. In Hohhot we visited a sewage treatment plant. At the moment the plant recycles water for industry, but with changes in economic policy, liberalization, it is intended to modernize the establishment to recycle water fit for domestic use. Several of us doubted, however, that the rather small plant was capable of

recycling the water of 60% of Hohhot, as was claimed.

In the afternoon we traveled 180-km west to Baotou, Inner Mongolia's largest city with 1.5 million inhabitants. The road paralleled the mountain ranges to the north. By the time we reached the factories, chimneys, high-rise developments and smog of boomtown Baotou, "land of deer," the mountains were typical dry, craggy desert mountains as might be found in Nevada or Arizona. The Baotou region comprises the eastern fringe of the great Gobi Desert. It is a very arid region but there is a lot of cropland bordering the Yellow River.

In the late afternoon we crossed the Yellow River, followed a slow highway up a long incline, slowed down more by convoys of coal trucks endlessly feeding Baotou's huge power plants, and found ourselves in the Gobi. We took a dirt road into a valley of sand dunes known as Miraculous Resonant Sand Gorge. We arrived at the dunes near sundown and several of us scrambled up to the top of one of the dunes. We were rewarded with a spectacular view, the setting sun casting vermilion shadows over the deep orange dunes. Once again, all were moved by the sublime landscape. The vastness, silence and power of deserts is at once frightening and exhilarating. We all felt exhilarated running, sliding and shouting our way down the dunes like children.

Thursday night we stayed in a very modern hotel in West Baotou. On Friday morning we drove through the depressing squalor of East Baotou and into the desert mountains to the north. For two hours the buses wound through arid valleys to Wadong Monastery of the Gelukpa (Yellow Hat) sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery is set at the head of an arid valley. The site has a powerful setting, the surrounding desert hills having great beauty and holding great mystery. The monastery was built in 1749 in typical Tibetan style. At one time it had 1,200 monks but nowadays only a handful take part in the religious practices. It is now one of the regions major tourist attractions.

Back in Baotou in the late afternoon we were conducted on a tour of the massive steel mill of Baotou Iron and Steel Company. Huge quantities of coal and ore are consumed by the plant that contributes much to the local economy as well as to the purple clouds of smog engulfing the city. It provides a graphic example of the tensions that exist between economic growth and environmental protection.

I was sad to leave Baotou and the arid landscapes and grasslands of Inner Mongolia. We spent only three days there, yet our experiences had a timeless quality. The human spirit and identity are expanded in such a setting, an experience continuous with ecological consciousness, or the development of the affective that was a central theme of the symposium. It is an expanded feeling that I hope I can keep kindled on return to Japan and modern urban life. I think we all shared this feeling.

We boarded the overnight train in Baotou to return to Beijing. Early Saturday morning we awoke to find ourselves in forested mountains much like those of Japan. We were at Badaling, and were lucky enough to glimpse sections of the Great Wall through the train windows. Some hours later we were back in Beijing. The senior members of the party had a meeting with the Chinese contingent, the rest of us continued as tourists. On this last day in China the sun burned down from a deep blue sky as walked through Tiananmen Square

and the magnificent Imperial Palace; the Forbidden City. Tiananmen Square on a sunny August afternoon was difficult to equate with the site of the massacre of 1989.

The last night we enjoyed a farewell party with our hosts. It was a happy occasion of talk, laughter and karaoke. Many friendships had been made and we hope fruitful working relationships and friendships will continue to grow. It is up to us to work to build on the ideas, links and the partnerships that were successfully established at the First International Symposium.

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