

Оригинални научни рад  
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## RUINING AND RESTORING RIVERS: THE STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN JAPAN

### Rivers in Japan and Currents in Civil Society

The postwar history of Japan can be seen in terms of the inexorable march of development through construction (generally in concrete).<sup>1</sup> Much of the resulting conflict has focussed on struggles over water, in its various forms and attributes. It has also played itself out against the backdrop of an immense transformation in the human and physical landscape of postwar Japan. Large-scale migration to cities has been accompanied by almost total urbanization and industrialization of coastal areas. At the same time, rivers and their banks, as well as over half the country's coast, has been cast in concrete, with consequences that are only now being acknowledged. Dams were built across nearly all of Japan's rivers to provide power for industry, as well as water for the cities and irrigation for farmers. The combination of steep and thickly wooded mountain slopes and packed but productive plains, consisting largely of paddy fields, combined to form a potent protection force against flooding, but with urbanization in the flood plains and widespread reforestation to conifers in the mountains, the land lost its absorptive capacity. Japan's rivers flood easily; they are generally quite short, rushing down narrow valleys before wandering sluggishly through alluvial flood plains, where in the summer months, swollen by seasonal rains, they are liable to burst their banks. All told, the presence of water is as remarkable a feature of the Japanese landscape as is the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> This view of Japan's postwar history lies at the heart of two important critical examinations, that of Gavan McCormack in his *The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996); and that of Jeffrey Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan: Networks of Power and Protest* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

mountains. Equally remarkable, however, is the aesthetic impoverishment of the landscape resulting from the encasement of rivers.

The dramatically manipulated landscape of rivers, their beds, banks and flood plains serves as a setting to the issues that are examined in this paper. These concern civil society, especially in the context of a rise in volunteer activity in recent years, a growth that both coincided with and was spurred by the Kobe earthquake of 1995, and which (in one way or another) encouraged the passage of new legislation, the NPO Law, in 1998. Reflecting on a much more robust discussion concerning China and East Asia, this paper seeks to modulate the view of civil society that judges its effectiveness according to its distance from the state and state organs; it argues instead that environmental groups in Japan reinforce and extend differences of opinion within the state bureaucracy, differences that would otherwise remain concealed. In this sense, civil society stretches the state, even as state representatives (government officials) move their planning agenda forward by working closely with a select group of like-minded academics, planners and environmentalists. The issue of public works, which has fed into representations of Japan as a "construction state," has divided members of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT), as it did its precursor, the Ministry of Construction. The divisions extend into individual bureaus such as the River Bureau, and have caused rifts between the ministry's central office in Tokyo and its regional offices.<sup>2</sup>

This means questioning our understanding of civil society in the Japanese context. The present paper attempts to explore areas that fall between different positions and points of emphasis on the nature of the state and civil society in Japan. It argues that there is an interlocking and overlapping relationship between the state and civil society, treating this as a busy territory, inhabited by a "soft elite" of academics, environmentalists and government officials (often acting in a "civilian" capacity). They stand against (and to some extent between) a "hard elite" (or ruling triad) of business leaders, politicians and bureaucrats and a small band of "hard" campaigners against dams and similar construction projects.<sup>3</sup>

Why the specific focus on rivers? In the last ten years or so, there has been an extraordinary mushrooming of citizen and environmental groups around water and rivers and the issues that they encapsulate. Rivers have become a central preoccupation, a rallying point, and a locational device for organizing activities. Rivers link upstream and downriver regions, but they are crossed by various administrative boundaries. The soft elite of river-based campaigners see action around rivers as a force for combating the divisiveness stemming from administrative division. Set against that, however, rivers are also a location of

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Woodall, *Japan Under Construction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> McCormack writes of "an 'Iron Triangle' of politicians and bureaucrats, financial institutions and construction industry" (*The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence*, 11). Much has been written about Japan's Ruling Triad, and I will not elaborate on the nature of this "hard" elite here. See also Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan*, and Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

conflict. The continued construction of dams has prompted an increasingly active opposition. Anti-dam campaigners are angered by what they see as the continued grip exercised by the hard elite, but they are aware too of the impact of media coverage and the extent of generally tacit support from large sections of the public as well as from some in the bureaucracy. The focus on rivers in Japan has been driven by a smallish nucleus of people—this soft elite of government officials, academics, planners and environmentalists—seeking partial and, as they would see it, pragmatic remedies to the damage caused by widespread reliance on concrete to exploit water and then channel it out to sea. They have tried to combat this in two ways: through the creation of a new programme of comprehensive river-basin management, and through river restoration and re-landscaping projects. In both cases, their strategy has been to spark the interest and involve the energies of local people by bringing together local environment-focussed groups into river-basin-wide networks or by involving them in river restoration projects. The view of Japan as a society under transformation crystallized around the unparalleled flowering of volunteer activity in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake of 15 January 1995.<sup>4</sup> The period of export-driven economic growth was over, replaced by a consumer-led information society; the growing number of volunteer groups was seen as a reflection of this trend. This came against a historical background of a tight control of civil society bodies, relaxed somewhat after the war, when the narrow entrance into official recognition as a public-interest legal person (PILP) established by the Meiji civil code was opened a little wider to allow authorization of organizations operating in areas including education, social welfare and religion. But in all cases, recognition was only granted at the discretion of the controlling ministry.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, large and important areas of activity that operate outside the PILP framework, among them consumer groups, and most especially the cooperative movement, with Seikyō at its heart.<sup>6</sup> The same applies to environment-related groups and international exchange groups, which are particularly active in exchanges with neighbouring Asian countries, and to a vast array of forums, in which Japanese people meet in an organized way outside of the categories of state and business. As a response both to the surge of volunteer activity after the 1995 Kobe earthquake and to broader processes of change in Japan, a new law (known for short as the NPO law) was enacted in 1998.<sup>7</sup> This law sanctioned the status of non-profit organizations in Japan and in so doing altered the relationship between the state

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<sup>4</sup> Imada Makoto, "The Voluntary Response to the Hanshin Awaji Earthquake: A Trigger for the Development of the Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan," in Stephen Osborne, ed., *The Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan: The Challenge of Change* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 40-50.

<sup>5</sup> On the history of state regulation of public interest groups, see Robert Pekkanen and Karla Simon, "The Legal Framework for Voluntary and Non-profit Activity," in Osborne, ed., *The Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan*, pp. 76-101.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Leblanc, *Bicycle Citizens: The Political World of the Japanese Housewife* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Lam Peng-er, *Green Politics in Japan* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> The full name of the legislation is Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities [Tokutei Hicini Katsudō Sokushin Hō].

and civil society. According to some, this loosened the state's grip; others have argued that in giving the state new freedom to subcontract, it allowed the state greater purchase on civil society groups<sup>8</sup>. Uptake initially was slow, with civil society groups concerned about the accounting and reporting obligations attached to recognition, and it was not until the year 2000 that large numbers of groups started to apply.

### States and Civil Society in China and East Asia

Civil society's theoretical equidistance between state and market is both a source of its conceptual strength and a subject of dispute. Groups within civil society, it can be argued, have been clear beneficiaries of the rolling back and reformulation of the role of the state in the current neo-liberal regime. But in the context of China at least, the tendency has been to play on the role of the state, and to describe a civil society that supports and is supported, and regulated, by the state—a civil society, in other words, that cannot be treated as an autonomous sphere. The state is understood as the traditional centre of gravity, a view that can be traced back at least to Weber, although against this commentators have argued in respect to China that there is a “long history of autonomous group formation.”<sup>9</sup> Many academics and campaigners with an interest in Asia became transfixed by the events of spring and early summer 1989 in Tiananmen, and these have coloured scholarly writing on civil society in the context of East Asia, as did the collapse of the Iron Curtain at around the same time in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Behind much of the ensuing discussion lay a normative view of how civil society should operate: as a check on an otherwise less than benign and generally rather domineering state, but alongside this came a realization that the state exercises a considerable measure of control. Michael Frolic, for example, argues that civil society in China is either state-led, where organizations are sponsored or coopted by the corporatist state and are involved in helping the state manage society, or Western-oriented, inhabited by groups either allied to NGOs in the West or operating along similar channels and at least potentially anti-state. He emphasizes state-led civil society, which he sees as “a form of corporatism. The state determines which organizations are legitimate and forms an unequal partnership with them. The state does not dominate directly. It leaves some degree of autonomy to these organizations.”<sup>11</sup> Tony Saich, on the other hand, warns against over-emphasis of the role of the

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<sup>8</sup> For a cautious statement of the former position, see Robert Pekkanen, “The Politics of Regulating the Non-profit Sector,” in Osborne, ed., *The Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan*, pp. 53–75. The latter argument was put to me in an interview by Adachi Toshiyuki, then a senior official of the Ministry of Construction's River Bureau, 13 July 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Brook, “Auto-Organization in Chinese Society,” in Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds., *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), p. 22. See also the various contributions to the special edition of *Modern China* on “Public Sphere”/ “Civil Society” in China, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), on which the following text is loosely based.

<sup>10</sup> John Keane, *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives* (London: Verso, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> B. Michael Frolic, “State-Led Civil Society,” in Brook and Frolic, eds., *Civil Society in China*, p. 58.

state, whose capacity to “exert extensive formal control ... is increasingly limited,” although he too makes it clear that the Chinese Communist Party still possesses powerful mechanisms of control.<sup>12</sup> Recently added to these mechanisms are the Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations, passed in 1998, under which all such organizations need a sponsoring unit. This can be seen as a Chinese equivalent of the contemporaneously enacted NPO law in Japan. Saich writes of the regulations that they are designed to “mimic the compartmentalization of government departments and limit horizontal linkage.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, overall he concludes by underlining the “capacity of social organizations to evade such tight strictures and to negotiate more beneficial relations.” According to this view, the relationship between state and civil society in China is being transformed. In East Asia as a whole, the relationship between the state and civil society has been diverse. It ranges, in the analysis of Muthiah Alagappa, from a group of countries, amongst them China, in which there is “a high degree of state control over the legally sanctioned social organizations,” to Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea and Taiwan, where, “despite misgivings, lapses, and periodic setbacks, states and civil society groups acknowledge one another’s legitimacy, interact on the basis of accepted norms and rules, and minimize resorting to violence.” Japan is seen as an outlier, with a civil society that is “at the national level ... small—even miniscule compared to other developed countries and even some newly industrializing and developing countries in Asia.”<sup>14</sup> Any such categorization puts pay to attempts to create a neat conceptualization of a “Confucian” brand of state-civil society interaction for China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, in which the state is seen to be dominant. Equally, we are steered away from an easy correlation between the extent of democratic government and the strength of civil society. According to this reading, civil society in the “mature” democracy of Japan is less influential than in the “upstart” democratic environment of Taiwan. And yet, having acknowledged the overwhelming good sense of an argument that prefers to reflect on the complexity of situations rather than create facile generalizations, similarities in a number of spheres make it tempting to treat these countries under the same rubric. The positions are familiar but no less valid for that: in the political sphere, politicians have been prone to clientelism and factionalism; in the economic sphere, growth has been directed by a compact, qualified, motivated bureaucracy (less so for China). In all four countries, “new” or “nontraditional” religious organizations have had a considerable impact, often out of proportion to their numerical size. In these countries too there is a tendency for a bifurcation to manifest itself between an institutionalized and a

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<sup>12</sup> Tony Saich, “Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China,” *China Quarterly* no. 161 (2000), p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Saich, “Negotiating the State,” pp. 132 and 133.

<sup>14</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, “Civil Society and Democratic Change: Indeterminate Connection, Transforming Relations,” in Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 500 and 501.



noninstitutionalized civil society.<sup>15</sup> Broadly speaking, it would appear that not only can we see commonalities here but, further, that state-civil society interaction is a starting point for discussion and interpretation. Indeed, as Alagappa himself concludes, “there is much overlap between civil and political societies; the boundary separating them is porous.”<sup>16</sup> This porosity, as we shall soon see, is as evident in Japan as it elsewhere in Asia—if not more so.

### Civil Society and Environmental Action in Japan

Traditional political-economy interpretations have placed Japan somewhere on a spectrum between a “strong state country” and one in which business interests predominate over compliant government organs, generally closer to the former than the latter. More recently, commentators have tended to see Japan as run by a much looser, indeed fragmented, coalition of interest groups clustering around specific issues.<sup>17</sup> Broadbent, for example, sees economic growth as driven by alliances of forces built around specific development-oriented projects.<sup>18</sup> Here the emphasis is on coalitions and networks, and it is within this line of thought that the concept of a soft elite, as put forth in this paper, best fits.<sup>19</sup> Standing in approximate contrast to this but relating to the notion of a hard elite is McCormack’s reading of Japan’s political structure in terms of the “construction state” (*doken kokka* or *doboku kokka*), a term used also by Japanese writers such as Honma Yoshihito and Igarashi Takayoshi.<sup>20</sup> In this reading, a dominant vortex of forces coalesces around construction projects to ensure itself constant business while despoiling the country’s environment and impoverishing its people (McCormack’s Iron Triangle includes, as we have seen, the construction industry). One of the most remarkable features of the construction state is its durability and the continuing ability of its leading members to plan and undertake mammoth projects. Indeed, McCormack goes so far as to argue that “while the manufacturing sector had adapted—albeit at great social cost—to the neo-liberal order, the core construction sector has, if anything, tightened its grip on the state.”<sup>21</sup> By comparison with China, the English-language literature on civil society and environmental action in Japan

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<sup>15</sup> Pekkanen refers to this in the Japanese context as a dual-structure civil society. See Robert Pekkanen, “Japan: Social Capital without Advocacy,” in Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 223–55.

<sup>16</sup> Alagappa, “Civil Society and Democratic Change,” in Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*, p. 479.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Schwartz, *Advice and Consent: The Politics of Consultation in Japan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan*.

<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Daniel Okimoto wrote of “ties of structural interdependence [that] bind the private and public sectors together” in his *Between MITI and the Market: Japanese Industrial Policy for High Technology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> For a historical analysis, see for example Honma Yoshihito, *Doboku kokka no shisō: toshiron no keifu* [The Idea of the Construction State: A Genealogy of the Urban Debate] (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Hyōronsha, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Gavan McCormack, “Breaking the Iron Triangle,” *New Left Review* 13 (2002), p. 20.

has been rather sparse. Margaret McKean, in her seminal work on citizens' movements, is insistent on the transformative power of activists working at the local level on pollution and environmental issues.<sup>22</sup> Generally, however, the literature is characterized by an emphasis on what Robert Mason refers to as an "underdeveloped civic culture." Mason divides "domestically oriented environmental groups, the vast majority of them spontaneous and ad hoc, [into] three types ... those that demand compensation, those that oppose development, and those that suggest alternative ways of living."<sup>23</sup> "A sceptical, but perhaps accurate, view," he writes, "... is that government agencies are becoming more adept at co-opting NGOs." This interpretation is echoed in comments by Tessa Morris-Suzuki: "The fact that participation in NGO activities is spontaneous and well-motivated does not necessarily safeguard participants from becoming enmeshed in schemes to shore up the existing edifices of power."<sup>24</sup> Other writers, such as Bouissou and Leblanc, have tended to see civil society in Japan in a more positive light, as a response to a decline in mainstream politics but one that draws its strength from older forms of community action. Bouissou argues that the "consolidation of new democratic practices and new civic movements ... prove the vitality—one Western observers have not always acknowledged—of the Japanese citizenry as a political actor." He goes on to argue that "Japanese civic movements also draw on the symbolic cultural foundations of the centuries-old village community (*mura*), which remains the paradigm of social organization in the collective unconscious."<sup>25</sup> This response draws sustenance from postwar Japanese writers, such as Uchida Yoshihiko, who made reference to premodern traditions of community organization in terms of community-as-civil-society.<sup>26</sup> Environmental campaigning in response to specific events has been (and remains, as we will see) a more active domain within Japanese society than within more generalized movements.<sup>27</sup> Iijima Nobuko, the founder of environmental sociology in Japan, has classified environmental movements into the categories of pollution victims, anti-development, pollution export protest and environmental protection/ natural environment creation.<sup>28</sup> Ui Jun, seeing "the problem of pollution [as] an essential part of the capitalist economy of

<sup>22</sup> Margaret McKean, *Environmental Protest and Citizen Politics* (Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 1980)

<sup>23</sup> Robert Mason, "Whither Japan's Environmental Movement? An Assessment of Problems and Prospects at the National Level," *Pacific Affairs* vol. 72, no. 2 (1999), pp. 187 and 202.

<sup>24</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "For and against NGOs : the politics of the lived world" *New Left review* 2 (2000), p.81.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Marie Bouissou, "Ambiguous Revival: A Study of Some 'New Civic Movements' in Japan," *Pacific Review* vol. 13, no. 3 (2000), p. 336; Leblanc, *Bicycle Citizens*.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Barshay, "Capitalism and Civil Society in Postwar Japan: Perspectives from Intellectual History," in Frank Schwartz and Susan Pharr, eds., *The State and Civil Society in Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), p. 74.

<sup>27</sup> The history of environmental movements in Japan and the way they have been handled within the academic literature is examined exhaustively by Hasegawa Kōichi in his recently translated *Constructing Civil Society in Japan: Voices of Environmental Movements* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm Vosse, "The Domestic Environmental Movement in Contemporary Japan: Structure, Activities, Problems, and its Significance for the Broadening of Political Participation," Ph.D. thesis, University of Hanover, 2000, p. 25.

Japan,” has been involved in several campaigns himself.<sup>29</sup> In her history of contemporary environmental protest in Japan, Margaret McKean has drawn attention to the role of environmental campaigns in creating a new political dynamic, especially at the local political level. But in recent years the central event preoccupying most commentators has been the passage in 1998 of a law that significantly facilitates the creation of NGOs (referred to in Japan, not coincidentally, as NPOs, nonprofit organizations). Robert Pekkanen places the passage of this law under sustained scrutiny. He describes the reluctance of political actors to relinquish some of their social controls through the passage of legislation that would formalize the legal status of organizations within the nonprofit sector.<sup>30</sup> The state-society relationship is neatly analyzed by Steinhoff, who shows how, depending on circumstances, different configurations of the relationship between government/official (*kan*) and people (*min*) prevail.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, she demonstrates the variety of ways in which civil society interacts with the state in Japan. Reflecting on the case studies introduced in the book (her contribution forms the concluding chapter), she delineates four types of interactions between the official world and the people: *kan* over *min*, *kan* parallels *min*, *min* checks *kan* as equals, and *kan* represents *min*. Can we say, then, as Michael Frolic does for China, that there are two types of civil society in Japan—one state-led and the other against the state?<sup>32</sup> A number of explicatory frameworks for contemporary Japan restate this basic duality. Tsujinaka Yutaka argues that civil society in Japan has tended to be considered in either an “institutionalist-statist” or a “social-pluralist perspective.”<sup>33</sup> These perspectives translate very crudely into a binary view of state-led and anti-state civil society. Within them, a number of different positions have been adopted. Among writers whose work falls into the first category are those, like Robert Pekkanen, who are especially concerned with the regulatory framework of public interest groups and who emphasize the state’s reluctance to open the door and recognize civil society activity, although recently Pekkanen has qualified this view with an assessment of civil society as newly influential if still small-scale.<sup>34</sup> Others have focussed on the state’s ability to co-opt civil society groups, sometimes exploiting them in a subcontractual relationship.<sup>35</sup> A further group of writers, whose work can be seen as belonging within a social-pluralist

<sup>29</sup> Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Pekkanen, “Japan’s New Politics: The Case of the NPO Law,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* vol. 26, no. 1 (2000), pp. 111-43.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Steinhoff, “*Kan-Min* Relations in Local Government,” in Sheila Smith, ed., *Local Voices, National Issues: The Impact of Local Initiative in Japanese Policy-making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 116.

<sup>32</sup> Frolic, “State-Led Civil Society,” p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Tsujinaka Yutaka, “From Developmentalism to Maturity: Japan’s Civil Society Organizations in Comparative Perspective,” in Schwartz and Pharr, eds., *The State and Civil Society in Japan*, p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Pekkanen, “After the Developmental State: Civil Society in Japan,” *Journal of East Asia Studies* vol. 4, no. 3 (2004), pp. 363-88.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the comments, already noted, of Mason, see Yoshida Shin’ichi’s telling account of Ministry of Construction involvement in the creation of a water park, “Rethinking the Public Interest in Japan: Civil Society in the Making,” in Yamamoto Tadashi, ed., *Deciding the Public Good: Governance and Civil Society in Japan* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999).



perspective, have concentrated their attention on those civil society groups involved in protest against the state.<sup>36</sup> Binary divisions within civil society are identified by Deguchi Masayuki, who juxtaposes institutionalized with noninstitutionalized NPOs; the former include neighbourhood associations and other civil society groups that act as agents or subcontractors for government and the state.<sup>37</sup> For Pekkanen, the Japanese state “seeks to nurture social capital-type civil society groups and to discourage pluralistic, lobbying-type civil society groups.” “State regulation,” he argues, “shapes the development of civil society more than any other single factor.”<sup>38</sup> The state sets the parameters within which civil society operates. Others have deployed more overtly culturalist arguments to depict the nature of civil society in Japan as being inspired by a Buddhist ethos set against the Confucianism of the state.<sup>39</sup> But the general drift of comments supports the notion of a strong state that sets the rules and a more or less subordinate civil society sphere.

### Environmental Campaigners in Japan

Recent contributions to the debate about civil society in Japan have focussed principally on the rise in volunteerism and the state’s response in the form of the NPO Law. Relatively little attention has been paid to civil society groups as they interact with the environment, and yet this represents one of the main areas of civil society activity, and within this area rivers have become a focus for a varied raft of campaigns and activities. It might at first sight seem simplest to categorize these campaigns and activities as either state-led or anti-state, and to leave it at that, but this would obscure the overlapping and interlocking relationship between those operating inside and outside the state and the debates and disagreements that take place on both sides, and more particularly amongst government officials. More beneficial perhaps, while recognizing the claims of a state-led and anti-state dialectical structure, is to refine our understanding of the borders between state and non-state, to destabilize our conception of the state as monolithic, and to acknowledge the role in environment-oriented civil society groups of elite-level coalitions and charismatic leaders.<sup>40</sup>

The following discussion retains the basic state-led versus anti-state juxtaposition, but treats it to an examination by interjecting reflections on the

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<sup>36</sup> Among them, Margaret McKean, Hasegawa Kōichi and Ui Jun.

<sup>37</sup> Deguchi Masayuki, “The Distinction between Institutionalized and Noninstitutionalized NPOs: New Policy Initiatives and Non-Profit Organizations in Japan,” in Helmut K. Anheier and Jeremy Kendall, eds., *Third Sector Policy at the Crossroads: An International Non-profit Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 153-67.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Pekkanen, “Molding Japanese Civil Society: State-Structured Incentives and the Patterning of Civil Society,” in Schwartz and Pharr, eds., *The State and Civil Society in Japan*, pp. 118 and 133.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen P. Osborne, “The Voluntary and Non-profit sector in Contemporary Japan: Emerging Roles and Organizational Challenges in a Changing Society,” in Osborne, ed, *The Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan*, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> The classic case of a charismatic leader is that of the late Hiromatsu Den, an official of the Yanagawa City Government in Kyushu, who single-handedly and against all odds masterminded a plan to “save” the city’s canals and who has been regarded as a sort of father figure by Japan’s river campaigners.

role of individuals and the coalitions that cut across state vs. non-state distinctions. Elites, in this context, are generally drawn from the ranks of urban professionals. They may be working inside the state, most likely as local government officials. But they may also be academics or landscape designers. They are often bound together, whether working in or out of state-related organizations, by a number of institutions—for example, Tokyo Agricultural University, where many environmental leaders studied, and Yokohama City Government, reflecting the centrality of Yokohama and certain offices within its government to a number of activities. In their makeup and interests, they reflect recent changes in Japanese society, with the growth of a significant stratum of design and planning consultants, some of them self-employed, others staffers in small companies, often working as subcontractors for the state. In addition, there is a small but significant segment of writers, photographers and artists involved and a further grouping of environmentalists and specialists in outdoor pursuits. Some of those working as officials of local government participate in environmental activities as lay people; more often, they occupy a less easily defined position, “commuting” between state and non-state spheres. Among this soft elite are a very small number of campaign leaders, charismatic individuals who shape and frame the activities of this elite and exercise a measure of soft control.<sup>41</sup>

### **Rivers, Basins and Umbrellas**

There is a fairly distinct if overlapping chronology to Japan’s river-focussed environmental movement.<sup>42</sup> It begins, so to speak, with a prologue, with initial recommendations in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s on new thinking about floods and flood control. During the next period, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, fresh ground was broken mainly through consciousness-raising efforts. Books were written, seminars held and visits undertaken to sites in Europe and North America. This led in the 1990s to a period of pilot projects, several of them in locations surrounding Tokyo. Largely overlapping with this, from the mid-1990s on, comes a period of diffusion of good practice throughout the country under the guidance of umbrella groups. And finally the last few years have seen two trends: river-focussed groups adopting NPO status and the increasing involvement of schools and students.

This development through time reflects at least three factors. The first, from the 1970s into the 1980s, was the product of a period of rapid economic growth and the resulting despoliation of the environment, leading to dramatic instances of flash flooding. The second, from the 1980s into the 1990s, was characterized by the gradual rise to positions of influence of a generation of officials who had

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<sup>41</sup> The concept of soft control is discussed by Susan Pharr, *Losing Face: Status Politics in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> The case-study work that is outlined below is based on fieldwork conducted on a number of visits to Japan, principally in August and September 1995, October to December 1996, July 2000 and December 2003.

been educated during the period of university ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. And the third, in the 1990s, grew out of the blossoming of lay activism that stemmed from disenchantment with the perceived corruption of politicians and bureaucrats.

The diffusion of this activity represents a movement outwards from the centre, but the centre should not be seen as coterminous with the state. In fact, the centre here consists of a small but growing cohort of academics, government officials and other experts intent on guiding policy and practice away from a technocratic fix to environmental problems. As new ideas have been spread around the country, they have merged with and given direction to any number of local groups. The consequence of all this activity to the country's physical environment is as yet unclear, but it does appear to have created a new social space for political action. During the 1970s (the period I have referred to here as a prologue), the incidence and severity of flooding showed no signs of abating despite the blanket use of concrete to encase waterways. The Ministry of Construction's advisory panel on rivers, the River Council (Kasen Shingikai), came up with recommendations to roll back the use of concrete, re-introduce flood meadows, and institute a more general regime of comprehensive basin-wide planning.<sup>43</sup> The River Council is made up of invited experts from universities, utility companies, etc., and can itself be seen as a point of intersection between state and civil society. As a result of these concerns, a number of measures have been taken over the last few decades, including amendments to the River Law (Kasen Hō) in 1997 that identify the need to protect the environment and that incorporate procedures for consultation with local residents in the framing of river-basin management plans. As a result of the report, councils for "comprehensive river planning" (*sōgō kasen keikaku*) were established in a number of the largest and most densely populated river basins, and plans drafted under the aegis of the ministry's regional offices. The effectiveness of these measures has been questioned by experts and, in private, by certain government officials. Nevertheless, this represents a first *prise de position* by strategically placed and prominent persons operating on the conjoined borders of the political and expert worlds. The first phase proper of river-focussed activity revolved around a series of projects and a number of individuals, most of them active in Yokohama, just south of Tokyo, a city that has long been considered a centre of innovation. The activities took two predominant forms. In the first place, they involved the workings of a couple of river-oriented groups. The Yokohama Association to Consider Rivers (Yokohama Kawa o Kangaeru Kai) was founded in 1982. The group has had up to about 250 members, one-third of whom work for the Yokohama City Government, and it distributes about one thousand copies of its newsletter annually. It has no officials, no constitution and no decision-making procedures.

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<sup>43</sup> Ōkuma Takashi, *Kōzui to chisui no kawa shi: suigai no seitsū kara juyō e* [A River History of Flooding and Water Control: From Suppression to Absorption of Flood Damage] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1988), p. 246.

One of the overall aims of the group's activities is to bring residents and local government officials together through joint participation in activities (which have been both educational and recreational). The group is still in existence, although its activities have decreased in recent years. A second Yokohama-based group, the City Rivers Research Association (Toshi Kasen Kenkyūkai), much smaller than the first, has significant overlap of personnel. It was founded in 1986 by a group of influential academics, local government officials, consultants and others involved in town planning, landscaping and rivers. The issues discussed and researched have tended to be at the forefront of thinking and practice— among them, river ecosystems and nature restoration, techniques of ecological landscaping of rivers, postmodernist river planning, and the preservation and rehabilitation of former engineering installations and techniques.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, there was a growing amount of practical environmental and ecological work built around symbolic elements of the landscape and of the ecumene. In a number of cities such as Tokyo and Yokohama, rivers were relandscaped according to a reimagined traditional aesthetic that sought to repudiate many of the harsher aspects of the dominant technocratic approach.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, and in contrast to the “artificial” aesthetic of these projects, an attempt was made to reintegrate local people with the ecological order of their localities using fireflies and other animals with symbolic cultural significance. While these projects were generally planned and undertaken by local government officials, in the case of the latter set of projects, there was a much greater degree of crossover with people outside government. In the case of one of Japan's leading environmental campaigners, the late Mori Seiwa, there is no meaningful way to draw a line between official and nonofficial activities. Mori, author of the influential campaigning tome *Toshi to kawa* (Cities and Rivers, published in 1984), worked as an environmental scientist for the Yokohama City Government. Instrumental in most of the state-supported activities and campaigns mentioned in this paper, Mori launched a series of initiatives in the 1980s to create biotopes where fireflies could live and breed.

The next phase was the period of pilot projects, consciousness-raising exercises, countless seminars and good-practice manuals, most of them financed through funds administered by bodies affiliated to the Ministry of Construction (MoC). The pilot projects were set in train from about the year 1990, with the aim of changing the ideas that underpinned river landscaping.<sup>46</sup> Drawing on river restoration projects in countries like Switzerland and Germany, a small number of highly motivated officials and experts initiated pilot projects on Japanese rivers and then coordinated a programme of seminars and symposia to spread good practice.<sup>47</sup> They set up new government-affiliated bodies, umbrella

<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to Inuyama Kiyoshi for this information.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of this theme, see my chapter “What's a River Without Fish? Symbol, Space and Ecosystem in the Waterways of Japan,” in Chris Philo and Chris Wisbert, eds., *Animal Places, Beastly Spaces: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 161-82.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Waley, “Following the Flow of Japan's River Culture,” *Japan Forum* vol. 12, no. 2 (2000), p. 211.

<sup>47</sup> Seki Masakazu, *Daichi no kawa: yomigaere, Nihon no furusato no kawa* (Rivers of the Earth: Revive,

organizations, national conferences and study groups to facilitate this process. This was a very extensive campaign, and one that drew the attention of the media, resulting among other things in a television series on “home country rivers” (*furusato no kawa*). The campaign was specifically—and controversially—aimed at setting to right the damage seen to have been caused by decades of government-funded public works. It was highly controversial within the Ministry of Construction, where it faced determined and entrenched opposition. It was led by Seki Masakazu, an MoC official who died an untimely death in 1994, in close conjunction with a small group of like-minded environmental and landscape planners, academics and government officials (mainly in local government). This was, in other words, a movement that was driven by a coalition of people both in and out of the state. It was in ethos both state-led and anti-state at the same time, driven by a soft elite drawn from both the state and civil society. Two important pilot projects were both undertaken in the folds of the Tokyo conurbation.<sup>48</sup> Both projects were initiated by government officials, but there the similarity ends. In Hino, in the far west suburbs of Tokyo, Sasaki Nobuyoshi, an official of the local government planned and oversaw the “restoration” of a short stretch of waterway. Using carefully researched techniques, he was able to incorporate a high degree of ecological “authenticity.” Working in the face of some criticism from his superior within the local government and relying in large part on his own enthusiasm, he was later promoted and had to relinquish his river restoration activities. Here a state official, in the face of opposition from within, pushed an agenda based as much on personal enthusiasm and commitment as local policy. TR Net was a far larger pilot project, bringing together various citizens’ groups along the Tsurumi River and its tributaries. The river, which has its source in the still largely rural hills of the western part of the Tokyo Metropolis, flows through the cities of Kawasaki and Yokohama. It is only 42.5 kilometres long, but the catchment area covers some 235 square kilometres and counts a population of 1.7 million inhabitants. The river has a history of severe flooding, and this, combined with the intensity of the pressures of urbanization, was one of the main reasons it was chosen by the government as a pilot project. TR Net brings together over 30 different citizens’ groups with an interest in the river and the locality. The Tsurumi scheme was started in 1994 with a contribution of two million yen from Yokohama City Government. In 1997 it sprouted a limited liability company (*yūgen kaisha*), advising on the holding of events and river-related activities, and it now enjoys the use of one floor of the regional office of the Ministry of Construction. It is clear, then, that the state in various manifestations has been an important actor in the Tsurumi scheme. The project was a pilot for the MoC and received large amounts of moral support from

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Rivers of Japan’s Countryside) (Tokyo: Sōshisha, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> For more details on both projects, see Paul Waley and Martin Purvis, “Sustaining the Flow: Japanese Waterways and New Paradigms of Development,” in Martin Purvis and Alan Grainger, eds., *Exploring Sustainable Development: Geographical Perspectives* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2004), pp. 207–29.



government officials through a sort of partnership of intent that materialized in the form of symposia, workshops and a host of events sponsored or staged by local government offices (principally Yokohama City Government) or central government (generally the MoC's regional office). Several of its leading figures continue to play a part in the direction of national environmental policy. At the same time, it relies heavily on the enthusiasm and energy of a small number of community leaders, landscape planners, university professors and "off-duty" local government officials. TR Net was instrumental in showing the way forward for a number of other umbrella groups, whose diffusion throughout Japan in the 1990s marks the next phase in river-focussed environmental campaigning. Many of the country's main river basins now have umbrella groups, or network organizations, supported by regional offices of MLIT and coordinated by academics, experts and environmentalists. As these umbrella groups have sought and obtained NPO status over the last few years, so their relationship with the sponsoring ministry has had to change, and finance is now more likely to come through applications for funding than direct payments from government. These issues caused tensions to surface amongst people associated with an umbrella association, the Kitakami River Exchange Association (Kitakamigawa Renkei Kōryūkai), that brings together groups working along Japan's second-longest river. This association now has NPO status, but its close involvement with the state has been a problem, with one group active at the mouth of the river actually leaving the umbrella association. The Asahi River Basin Network (AR Net), which is composed of groups based along the Asahi and tributaries in Okayama Prefecture between Kobe and Hiroshima, operates according to a rather different dynamic. AR Net was founded and driven forward by an MLIT official, Takehara Kazuo. Takehara's own account of the organization is cast in terms that belie his own role.<sup>49</sup> While this is not the place to discuss the nuances and implications of Takehara's story, it is important to note the role of charismatic leadership as an alternative to that of soft elites in driving forward environmental agendas in Japan. Through a journey that he made from the river's source, pulling a wooden marker in a cart, Takehara was able to galvanize interest and enthusiasm in river-based environmental campaigns among a number of people and groups. This "pilgrimage" was undertaken when Takehara moved to this post in 1996 with the aim of casting his ministry's role in a new and more positive light. With the support of his then superior officers, Takehara used the ministry's local office as a meeting point for local environmental groups. In his activities he has focussed on environmental education with schools. He created an extensive on-line resource for the exchange of messages and information related to the needs of teachers and students. He also instituted a network of "Asahi river professors" (*Asahikawa hakase*), experts willing to share their knowledge through his network, as well as an annual symposium. The continued success of the network

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<sup>49</sup> This text is based on an interview with Takehara and three members of citizens' environmental groups held in Okayama on 26 July 2000, as well as subsequent communications. The interpretation here is mine.

is largely dependent on Takehara's abundant enthusiasm. The support of the ministry is contingent on the political stance adopted by his regional head of office, and on Takehara's continued involvement.

The state here, far from being monolithic, becomes a space that contains disparate views. There is no central organization of river-based environmental groups as such, but there are a number of loose-knit national forums, of which the most prominent is the National Association for Local Water Environment Groups (Zenkoku Mizu Kankyō Kōryūkai), known as Mizukan for short.<sup>50</sup> Mizukan acts as a central point for information exchange and as an organizer of annual seminars and workshops. It shares with the groups it links the aim of bringing together people from business, government and education, as well as from broader, nonexpert circles (*san, kan, gaku, ya*). It has NPO status (since October 2003), using the staff and office facilities of its coordinating officer (*daihyō riji*), Yamamichi Shōzō, who is a landscape designer and environmentalist. A similar sort of role is played by the National Conference of Water Regions and Water Cities (Suigō Suito Zenkoku Kaigi). This latter organization is even more loosely constructed and is more issue-oriented and hence polemical than Mizukan. There is a significant overlap of personnel among these groups, as well as a certain amount of duplication in terms of activities and debates. Since 1997, once a year on the nearest weekend to River Day (*kawa no hi*, 7 July), Mizukan members and MLIT officials have organized a national workshop for people involved in river-related environmental campaigns. This is very much a meeting of the faithful, with the trappings of a religious rally. A panel of experts—university professors, landscape designers and, more generally, leaders of the river restoration movement—award prizes to restoration projects that meet a number of objectives such as citizen participation, environmental education and care for ecosystems. In 2002, 73 groups took part, including five from Korea, and 74 in 2003. In 2003, eight projects were introduced by participating school students; a further eight comprised activities involving children. Eleven projects were led by MLIT regional offices. Most of the others involved citizens' groups of one form or another. The projects presented to successive River Day Workshops, reflecting river-based activity around the country, have concentrated on "soft" pursuits that bring people together, and they avoid controversial campaigning issues.

Broadly speaking, the activities of river-based groups have one (or occasionally two) of three main thrusts: educational, environmental and recreational. Projects with an educational emphasis inevitably have a natural history orientation, especially where they involve children. Pond hoppers (*amenbo*), for example, are a focus of activity for school children that belong to one of the AR Net groups. Other groups are built around local history and culture. Thus, one of the groups associated with the Kitakami River Exchange Association has been undertaking a historical rediscovery of regional trade

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<sup>50</sup> The lack of large central NPOs is an issue dwelt on by a number of commentators, including Pekkanen in his paper, "After the Developmental State."

routes in the premodern period. Environmental activity, accounting for the majority of projects, involves all sorts of schemes to improve, clean, relandscape and restore river banks and beds. Summer festivals, boats and boat racing figure among the more popular recreational river-related events.

This, then, is the final phase in this chronology of river-based movements, a phase stimulated by the diffusion of river-focussed environmental campaigns, by the growing adoption of NPO status and by the increasing involvement of schools. River-focussed environmental campaigns have spread out from their earlier proselytizing approach, with its reliance on a Confucian vocabulary. The campaigns now feature a more recreationally oriented array of activities alongside symposia and other learning-based events. Throughout this process of development, however, we see the difficulties in proffering one formula for civil society's relationship with the state; this relationship cannot be categorized simply as one of state leadership or even of state support, or as being defined by state co-optation.

### Rivers and Dams: Lines of Conflict

Some of the same blurring of lines and ambiguities exists, if not quite so acutely, with the concept of anti-state environment-related civil society, featuring the small band of "hard" campaigners referred to above. Civil society groups over the last 15 years have led campaigns against the construction of dams and other barriers across rivers and mud flats. Many campaigns have been extremely bitter and protracted. Alongside these, there have been campaigns against the construction of airports (for Kobe, for example) and highways and bridges. Several of these campaigns, at various stages, have drawn support from government officials and politicians, although not necessarily with a successful outcome. And they have prompted the new Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport to appreciate that it needs to reflect on and engage with issues of environmental sustainability.

A number of *causes célèbres*—the Nagara River, the Yoshino River, Isahaya Bay, Kawabe Dam—surfaced in the 1990s and grabbed the attention of the media, forming a roll-call of campaigns reminiscent of the fevered struggles of the four great pollution cases of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most drawn-out and bitter struggles was that surrounding the construction of a barrage across the lower reaches of the Nagara River near Nagoya. A defining moment during the protest was the argument in 1990 between the director of the Environment Agency and the minister of construction over whether to carry out a more thorough impact assessment; the EA director lost and was forced to resign.<sup>51</sup> Opposition to the dam was led by a number of high-profile people, including the writer Amano Reiko, who subsequently went on a hunger strike in 1992 and then again in 1995.<sup>52</sup> The dam gates were closed on the day that a rapidly ailing

<sup>51</sup> Vosse, "The Domestic Environmental Movement in Contemporary Japan," p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Amano is the author of a number of books on dam-related issues, including *Damu to Nihon* [Japan and Dams] published by Iwanami Shoten (Tokyo, 2001) in their authoritative Iwanami Shinsho series (no.

Amano was taken to hospital. Public opinion and the media turned very strongly against the ministry but failed to deflect it from its course.

Another *cause célèbre* is that of the Isahaya barrage, the lynchpin of a longstanding project to drain flood tides at the mouth of several rivers in Kyushu in the southwest of Japan. The project was first mooted in 1952 by the Ministry of Agriculture in response to farmers campaigning for more farmland, but with later agricultural overproduction this argument was replaced by others considered more persuasive. When the plan was resuscitated in the 1990s, the local mayor put pressure on his own officials and on local residents to sign a petition supporting the reclamation.<sup>53</sup> The gates of the tidal barrier were closed in 1997, in a welter of publicity and despite increasingly hostile public opinion. The following year, cultivators of *nori* seaweed found their harvests drastically reduced. Local fishers were angered by a sharp drop in their catch. Ill effects to various species, including the mudskipper (*mitsugoro*), were reported. One of the main points of criticism was the failure to consider the effects of silting. Opposition to the construction plan was led by a local fisher, Yamashita Hirofumi, who went on to become leader of the Japan Wetland Action Network, a capacity in which he received much attention, particularly abroad, and a wide spectrum of support at home.

Some recent high-profile campaigns have eventually achieved successful outcomes. In Shikoku, the government had planned to construct a barrage near the mouth of the Yoshino River. Such was the hostility to the plan that campaigners successfully engineered the holding of a referendum, in which the voters of Tokushima City expressed opposition to the project. Initially, indications were that the ministry would disregard public opinion and go ahead with the construction of a dam, but it later ruled out such action.<sup>54</sup> More recently, mixed signals have been sent out once again.<sup>55</sup> Similar campaigns have been waged against the reclamation of Japan's fifth-largest lake, Lake Nakaumi in Shimane Prefecture, with over half a million people signing a petition to have the project halted. This campaign was ultimately successful. In Tokyo Bay, the Sanbanze tidal flats were saved when the governor of Chiba Prefecture, Domoto Akiko, ruled against a drainage project there in September 2001. The well-known author Tanaka Yasuo made the transition from opposition figure to a position of authority, winning the post of governor of Nagano Prefecture. He campaigned on a promise to end the construction of dams in the mountainous prefecture, and then surprised his officials by doing just that. Although he subsequently lost a vote of confidence, Tanaka was voted back into office by his supporters in the prefecture, and he has stuck to his opposition to dam construction. In this case, the state has found itself in the unusual position of

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<sup>53</sup> Hasegawa Hiroshi, "Ebb and Flow of Isahaya Project," *Asahi Evening News*, Saturday 12 July 1997, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> McCormack, "Breaking the Iron Triangle," p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Asahi shinbun*, "Yoshinogawa kadō seki, futatabi sōten ni" [The Yoshinogawa Weir: Back to Dispute], 23 June 2004, accessed from the Asahi Web site on 26 June 2004, available at <www.asahi.com>.

being forced to absorb a figure from the opposition without having co-opted his thinking. Tanaka remains something of a maverick within Japan's body politic. In most of these cases, government policy has been characterized by an apparent rigidity, an unwillingness to change a previously decided course, however unreasonable or inexpedient it is shown to be. The government has been inclined to use questionable data to claim that its policy is needed, both to provide drinking water and for flood control. There has been widespread anger directed against the government amongst sections of the public, whose views are represented and articulated in media such as the *Asahi* newspaper. Critics claim that the government vastly exaggerates the increase in demand for water in order to justify the construction of dams. Some of these critics have jobs in government, generally in local authorities but a few of them in central government. On this and other issues, various opposition politicians, and even some within the ruling party, have allied themselves with protesters, again suggesting that a more complicated picture than might be supposed exists between representatives of the state on the one hand and civil society groups protesting against specific state policies on the other.

### **Conclusion: Qualifying the Centrality of the State**

It has been suggested, by Pekkanen for example, that the longstanding political and economic crisis in Japan has already seen civil society attain a new position of prominence, with conventional political parties beginning to look for support and advice to civil society groups.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this can perhaps be seen in spheres such as community planning and more especially social welfare, where the state is very much reliant on the services of NPOs. Equally, it can be argued that in recent years the state has regrouped and retained its position of control through the co-option and redirection of civil society groups, for example by outsourcing social welfare contracts. Japanese NPOs, for their part, tend to portray their own situation in terms of weakness, especially in their funding base, and they can be heard to argue that they need support from the state.<sup>57</sup> Are they led, or co-opted, by the state? Indeed, is this a useful distinction in the Japanese case? Can we, along with Evans in his reference to a broader East Asia, talk of a partially embedded autonomy for civil society in Japan?<sup>58</sup> This paper has attempted to describe and delineate environment-oriented activities in Japan in terms of overlapping and interlocking relationships. It has accepted as an overall organizational conceit the distinction between state-led (and state-co-opted) efforts on the one hand and anti-state efforts on the other. But it has done this primarily to draw attention to the problems that lie therein. It has introduced

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<sup>56</sup> Pekkanen, "After the Developmental State."

<sup>57</sup> Robert O. Bothwell, "The Challenges of Growing the NPO and Voluntary Sector in Japan," in Osborne, ed., *The Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector in Japan*.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted by Gerard Clarke in his *The Politics of NGOs in South-East Asia: Participation and Protest in the Philippines* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 69.



two areas of environmental activity in contemporary Japan: river restoration projects and protests against the construction of barriers across waterways. In the former case, I have argued that projects are led by a soft elite, a coalition of like-minded people both inside the state and out, driving forward an environmental agenda to which they are deeply committed. For many of them, their commitment to this agenda comes first, and they carry it with them out of the government offices in which they work and down to the riverbanks where they are active. In the process, they often find themselves at loggerheads with colleagues whose professional loyalties lie with a different, more technocratic understanding of environmental management and whose personal connections link them with corporate leaders and construction companies. Equally, they stand in opposition to “hard” campaigners, many of whom regard a position within and on the borders of the state with deep ambivalence. The confrontations that occurred over the construction of dams and other barriers punctured popular support for state projects and undermined popular faith in the overall moral probity of the state. The Isahaya, Nagara, Yoshino and other protest campaigns drew considerable support from the public and accentuated disagreements amongst bureaucrats and politicians. The state has been forced into an adjustment, even if it is only partial and (perhaps) temporary. Comprehensive river planning and the river restoration movement has now become more of a mainstream consideration within government planning. The soft elite of officials and opinion leaders have, arguably, pulled their more recalcitrant colleagues a small distance towards the moral high ground on the environment. They have in the process reinforced their position between the state and civil society, in a territory that is much traversed and increasingly well populated.

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