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A deep genealogy of Japanese green nationalism from the long 19th century to the present

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Employing the term “green nationalism” in the broad sense of nationalist ideologies that concern themselves with the natural environment, we trace a genealogy of green nationalist thought in Japan back to the start of the long 19th century. The changing contours of this discourse are mapped through five representative writers: Moto’ori Norinaga (1730–1801), Shigetaka Shiga (1863–1927), Testurō Watsuji (1889–1960), Takeshi Umehara (1925–2019) and Yoshinori Yasuda (b. 1946). Despite significant transformations in how Nature has been understood over the previous two and a half centuries, we identify five common trends in the discourse: (1) Japan as a “natural community;” (2) Japan as a harmonious nation where conflict comes from the outside; (3) a nativist concern with Japanese cultural and racial exceptionalism in opposition to China and the West; (4) a concern with protecting the natural resources of the nation for the exclusive benefit of the Japanese people; and (5) the view that an “authentic” *Ur*-identity can be found in archaic or traditional Japan. These ideas have been influential in Japanese society; however, their impact in fostering pro-environmentalist behaviour requires further analysis. Some of the complexities involved are illustrated by a brief examination of the role of green nationalism on school textbooks. We conclude that the radical, utopian elements of Japanese green nationalism have often been at odds with national educational policy. While the discursive constructs of Japanese green nationalism have been mobilised in some state policies, their capacity to encourage environmental action remains questionable.

KEYWORDS

nationalism, geopolitics, nativism, education, Japan

1 Introduction

Though strongly opposed to nationalism, historian Eric Hobsbawm reluctantly admitted that “Some things can be achieved by mobilising nationalist feelings” (Evans, 2019, p. 551). In recent years there has been growing interest amongst political scientists over whether nationalism—defined in various ways—can be mobilised to foster pro-environmental behaviour (Baioocchi, 2009; Conversi, 2020; Forchtner, 2020; Conversi and Posocco, 2022; Moore and Roberts, 2022; Bryant and Farrell, 2024; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024; Feshami, 2025). While this recent research has focused primarily on

Europe and North America, Japan also has a long history of such “green nationalism.” A large literature has explored how Nature has been linked to nationalist thought in modern Japan, with most attention given to the post-war period (e.g., Buruma, 1987; Reader, 1990; McCormack, 1996; Morris-Suzuki, 1998; Prohl, 2000; Reitan, 2017; Rots, 2017; Lindström, 2019; Hudson, 2021; Hudson et al., 2022).¹ However, that research has mainly been conducted by specialists in history, archaeology and religious studies and Japanese green nationalism is rarely considered by political scientists (cf. Takao, 2016; Kameyama, 2017; Fahey et al., 2022; Reimann, 2022). Despite its global and even “salvationist” pretensions (e.g., Yasuda, 1999, 2009b), the approach is little known outside Japan.

The problem of nationalism and the nation in modern Japan is the focus of an extensive literature. The long time-span considered in the present article makes it difficult to enforce concise definitions that fit every period. Our narrative begins with late 18th-century claims that the Japanese people formed a natural community united through language, religion and rejection of outside ideological influences (notably from Confucianism and Buddhism). Such claims can be understood as a type of nationalism before the nation-state (Burns, 2003; Ichijo, 2020), perhaps with some similarities to Smith’s (1991) idea of an *ethnie*. After the 1868 Meiji Restoration, Japan began to adopt the European framework of the nation-state and a range of educational and other administrative policies were instituted to cement the nation on Western lines (Gluck, 1985). In the space of a few decades, the Meiji nation-state followed the European and American trajectory towards imperialism, a shift that had complex impacts on ideas of national identity (Oguma, 2002). After defeat in the Second World War, Japan’s remarkable post-war economic revitalisation became increasingly explained through theories of cultural nationalism termed *Nihonjinron* (Dale, 1986; Sugimoto, 1999). The writings by Umehara and Yasuda discussed below are typical examples of this genre.

Especially in the post-war era, the broad thrust of Japanese academia has been to oppose nationalism and that critique has frequently been extended to writings that employ “green nationalism.” Japanese scholars have noted how Nature was linked with archaism and thus with reactionary politics at the very moment when the nation was becoming modern. The political scientist Masao Maruyama (1914–1996) was an especially influential critic in this respect. Maruyama (1974) argued that invoking Nature limited the space of autonomous, individual action. As discussed in detail by Thomas (2001), however, such critiques need to be balanced against the understanding that concepts of Nature have changed over time. Faced with the current climate crisis, it makes little sense to see Nature as “anti-modern.”

We are interested in three broad research questions regarding Japanese green nationalism: (1) How has nationalist thought been connected to ideas about Nature and the environment, and how has that relationship changed over time? (2) To what extent have ideas about green nationalism influenced the broader society, for example through education or government policy?

(3) “Nobody does it greener” is a key assumption of green nationalist writings; if true, there should be important lessons for building future sustainability. But can the claims made by Japanese green nationalists actually help solve or ameliorate environmental problems? In other words, to what extent does green nationalism present a “realistic” history of past human-environment relations? In previous work we began to examine aspects of these three questions with respect to post-war green nationalism (Hudson, 2018, 2021; Hudson et al., 2022). Here, we consider the first question from a long historical perspective. Nativist and proto-nationalist sentiments in Japan are frequently traced back to the *Kokugaku* (“National Learning”) movement of the late 18th century. Is it therefore possible to trace a genealogy of green nationalism back to that time? The present paper also briefly considers the second of our research questions with respect to education.

Recent literature on nationalism and the environment has developed a quite complex terminology. While some scholars use terms such as “green nationalism,” “eco-nationalism,” and “environmental nationalism” interchangeably (e.g., Nakai, 2025), others attempt to separate the different approaches. The term “eco-nationalism” is frequently used in the literature on Japan. Morris-Suzuki (1991) may have been the first to use this label for Japan. It was also employed by Dawson (1996, 2000) to denote the synthesis of environmentalism, national identity and the struggle for justice that she described in the former Soviet Union. The Japanese writings discussed here are difficult to classify because they are often inconsistent in their aims and discourse. For instance, while the writings are predominantly reactionary in their support for the capitalist *status quo* (Reitan, 2017), they sometimes include utopian calls for new market mechanisms (Supplementary material 1). Here, therefore, we use *green nationalism* as an overall label that can encompass a range of perspectives.

Our analysis demonstrates that Japanese green nationalism cannot be considered as a single, unchanging approach. Although we argue that there are certain recurring themes, it is important to note differences in the way that nationalism, Nature and environmentalism have been understood. Concepts of sustainability at a national or even global scale are largely a modern development (Harkin and Lewis, 2007), even if they have roots in earlier debates over how best to make use of the land to support human life (cf. Warde, 2018). In Japan, as in many other countries, the long 19th century saw an initial conflation of Nature and the nation through a pastoral or ruralist imagery based on “traditional” landscapes developed in reaction to industrialisation and modernity. The same period also saw grassroots reactions to pollution and other industrial impacts (George, 2001; Ishimure, 2003; Walker, 2010). Although locally-focused environmental activism remains important in Japan, not least after the Fukushima disaster (Aoyama and Hudson, 2013; Morris-Suzuki and Soh, 2017; Yoneyama, 2019; Aki and Bausch, 2024), from the 1970s Japanese environmentalism also began to engage with global trends (Avenell, 2013, 2017), presenting an alternative to green nationalist discourse.

In the following, we first provide a historical overview of green nationalism in Japan from ca. 1790 to the present, illustrating the changes through the work of five writers: Moto’ori Norinaga (1730–1801), Shiga Shigetaka (1863–1927),

¹ We capitalise Nature to emphasise its unnaturalness.

Testurō Watsuji (1889–1960), Takeshi Umehara (1925–2019), and Yoshinori Yasuda (b. 1946).² All five were influential figures who contributed important aspects to the discourse considered here. Norinaga developed the idea of a Japanese nation based on the archaic and in opposition to non-Japanese cultures (especially China). Shiga introduced a discourse of national identity centred on landscape and the natural environment. Watsuji went further in connecting culture and landscape through claims that national identities are determined by climate. Umehara generated a skilful synthesis of previous ideas while bringing in new information from environmental archaeology, physical anthropology and other fields. While Umehara always emphasised the originality of his synthesis, we argue here that he was strongly influenced by Yasuda who thus deserves a separate treatment.

In terms of chronological scope, the year 1790 marked the first publication of Norinaga's influential work on the *Kojiki*, providing a convenient starting point for our analysis. The death of Takeshi Umehara in 2019 signifies an effective cut-off date. Although Yasuda had previously been a prolific writer who published at least one book every year since 1987, his last publication is also dated to 2019. The second part of the essay then examines the social impacts of green nationalism through an analysis of education, in particular school textbooks.

2 Japanese green nationalism: a long genealogy

2.1 Moto'ori Norinaga

In the late 18th century, Norinaga, a physician in Ise province, devoted 30 years to the study of the *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters"), a largely mythological work produced by the imperial court in AD 712. Published after 1790, Norinaga's careful investigations of Japan's oldest written text led him to the conclusion that Japan "had once been a harmonious community in which subject and ruler had lived in perfect communion with each other and with the deities, with no need for laws, institutions, principles, doctrines, or norms. This natural community gradually disappeared, however, after the beginning of cultural contact with China led to the introduction of flawed forms of knowledge in the form of Confucianism and Buddhism" (Burns, 2003, p. 1; see also Blacker, 1988). Norinaga's approach became known as *Kokugaku*, a term with the literal meaning of "National Learning" but which is glossed as *nativism* by Harootunian (1988).³

In arguing for an original, natural community Norinaga did not place any particular emphasis on the natural environment *per se*. A later nativist scholar, Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843), used metaphors from the natural world to illustrate his arguments (Harootunian, 1988, p. 157–158). Yet the underlying assumption was that the "natural" nature of society derived directly from the gods; humans, Nature and social production were re-imagined as an integrated whole. Hirata nevertheless extolled agricultural production; above all, it was rice agriculture that linked the Japanese people to the gods in a way not found in China because "Japanese rice was superior to the rice of all countries, and those who consumed it took in a divine food that guaranteed their uniqueness and superiority over all others" (Harootunian, 1988, p. 212). These ideas form one basis of *satoyama* biodiversity discourse in recent decades (see below).

Several aspects of *Kokugaku* nativism anticipate later trends in Japanese green nationalism. One is "its consistent rejection of history for a pre-class, folk chronotope and a privileging of place" in order "to establish an unmediated relationship between humans and nature" (Harootunian, 1988, p. 407, 220). This distancing from history has continued as a feature of Japanese green nationalism into the 21st century. If, for Norinaga, an idyllic, utopian past was to be found in the world of the *Kojiki*, late 20th century scholars used archaeology to propose an "ecotopia" in the prehistoric Jōmon period. In both cases the archaic provided a utopian model for the future. Second is the rejection of outside cultural influences as alien to the real Japan. Third is the conceit that, until corrupted by outside impacts, Japan was a place without discord and conflict. Fourth is the importance given to labour and the rural experience. Hirata Atsutane's "appeal to naturalness necessitated the argument that human practice—working—should not separate people from nature but restore them to it" (Harootunian, 1988, p. 214). Early nativist writings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries approached rural labour from a position of perceived crisis. For later green nationalists, labour became essentialised as part of the "natural" condition of the Japanese people. Yasuda (2006, p. 109) explains that the Japanese and other "rice-cultivating fishing people find joy in transfusing the energy of their bodies into the steep barren wasteland, and transforming it into fertile terraced rice paddies."

The *Kojiki* is today "regarded as a legitimating device produced by the early imperial court" (Burns (2003, p. 1); it was a public transcript of power *sensu* Scott (1990). Norinaga encouraged support for what he called the "public realm" (*oyake*) while simultaneously valorising the "private realm" of emotion and desire (Burns, 2003, p. 95–96). This "private realm" was, however, quite different from the resistance of Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts." In fact, for Norinaga, the "natural community" of archaic Japan involved a rejection of human agency; by contrast Confucianism introduced artificial frames of social relations in opposition to a "natural" Japan.

Norinaga and the nativist school saw Japan as the homeland of an ethnic community, similar to what Smith (1991) terms an *ethnie*. A homeland forms a "repository of historic memories and associations, the place where "our" sages, saints and heroes lived, worked, prayed and fought. All this makes the homeland unique.

² We follow the standard academic convention of using the traditional Japanese order of family followed by given names for the pre-Meiji (1868) period. Thus, Moto'ori is the family and Norinaga the given name. Because pre-modern Japanese sometimes used different names at different times of their lives, another convention followed here is to refer to such individuals by their best-known name, which is often the given name. Thus, Moto'ori Norinaga is referred to here as Norinaga.

³ McNally (2016) prefers 'exceptionalism' over 'nativism' but his argument is based on the modern history of the USA. He claims that the roots of 'nativism' are 'thoroughly grounded in American history, where it is a nineteenth-century term signifying resistance to Catholic immigration' (McNally, 2016,

p. 17). Here, we use 'nativism', the more standard term in the historical literature on Japan.

Its rivers, coasts, lakes, mountains and cities become “sacred”—places of veneration and exaltation whose inner meanings can be fathomed only by the initiated... The land’s resources also become exclusive to the people; they are not for “alien” use and exploitation” (Smith, 1991, p. 9). The *Kokugaku* movement was not yet explicitly concerned with geopolitics and resource conservation but that would come with Shigetaka Shiga.

2.2 Shigetaka Shiga

Shiga was a geographer, educator and world traveller whose 1894 book *Nihon fūkeiron* (“A Theory of Japanese Landscape”) became a best-seller. Shiga argued that Japanese people had previously seen landscape in a limited fashion as an elite, aesthetic experience. This “passive” experience of nature could not arouse national pride. In order to generate national sentiment through landscape Shiga “asserted four scientific reasons for the beauty of Japan,” namely diversity of climate, luxuriant soil and vegetation, an unusual mountain topography, and unusual rock formations due to erosion (Gavin, 2001, p. 29–30). Shiga’s *Nihon fūkeiron* has often been discussed in terms of its influence on Japanese imperialism. Gavin (2001, p. 27) argues for a more limited role centred on the nation rather than empire: “Shiga’s immediate goal in praising Japan’s geography was to arouse national awareness and pride and to alert his countrymen to Japan’s potentially important position in the fast-changing world order.” At the time Shiga was writing, however, Japanese nationalism was already becoming inextricably linked with imperialism and the popularity of *Nihon fūkeiron* was in part due to nationalist sentiment associated with the Sino-Japanese War (Gavin, 2001, p. 33).

Shiga’s choice of landscape as a means to encourage national identity was influenced by Anglican priest and social reformer Samuel Barnett (1844–1913). Visiting India, Japan and the United States in the early 1890s, Barnett and his wife Henrietta engaged in a comparative investigation of the nature of poverty in those countries as an extension of their work at the Toynbee Hall settlement in the East End of London (Hartley, 2019). It was the Japanese love of Nature, argued the Barnetts, that enabled them to escape the extremes of poverty found in the other places they visited on their world tour:

Only in Japan, do the poor hold a hope. ... Working hard in their land ... [the] nation as one loves [the] beauty of mountains and fields. No other nations love the beauties of nature as much as the Japanese. ... Being one with nature, they would come to even forget their poverty. (Gavin, 2001, p. 36)⁴

Shiga saw Nature as a national resource, an approach that would later be taken up by Yoshinori Yasuda (see section 2.5). A new nationalism was needed to save Japan from the West and Western culture. One secret to that national sentiment was, Shiga argued, the protection and appreciation of Japan’s natural environment. Energy was a particular concern as he noted the global shift from coal to petroleum in his final book

Shirarezaru kuniguni (“Unknown Countries”) (1926). Most importantly, in Shiga’s writings we see the establishment of landscape as a key element of Japanese national identity. This role for landscape would be developed further by Tetsurō Watsuji.

2.3 Tetsurō Watsuji

Watsuji was a philosopher and cultural historian who had a wide-ranging impact on the study of landscape. Watsuji’s influential work *Fūdo*, published in 1935 but drafted in the late 1920s, developed a view of landscape linked to culture and race which mirrored—but subtly inverted—the forest imaginaries of the German Romantic tradition (Watsuji, 1961; cf. Imort, 2005; Kuran, 2023; Wilson, 2012). Watsuji proposed three types of climate—monsoon, desert and meadow—which influenced the characteristics of the people who lived in those zones. Following the German tradition Watsuji saw the desert as the home of nomadic, rootless peoples such as the Jews (cf. Meier-Böke, 1924, p. 8, cited in Zechner, 2011, p. 22). According to Watsuji, the desert character of the Jews continued in the Diaspora even “in the middle of Europe’s green pastures, and even though it [the Diaspora] has passed through Europe’s historical phases of feudalism, bourgeoisie and the like” (Watsuji, 1961, p. 52). Watsuji had surprisingly little to say about forests and saw the European climate as based on the meadow. By the time he was writing, the Japanese government was already promoting the idea of the Japanese as a forest-loving people. A 1910 Bureau of Forestry report claimed that “The burning patriotism and the refined aesthetic ideals of the Japanese are in a large measure the outcome of the influence exerted on the minds of the people by [Japan’s] forests” (Morris-Suzuki, 2013, p. 230). The patchy stands of woodland found in Korea provided a moral rationale for Japan to colonise the Korean Peninsula and rebuild its forests (Morris-Suzuki, 2013, p. 230). Given this background, it is striking that Yasuda (1980) introduces his concept of Japan as a “forest country” using exactly such a colonial viewpoint (Supplementary material 2). Watsuji introduced ideas of geographic determinism linked to race that have remained highly influential in Japanese green nationalism (Hudson, 2021). Watsuji’s role in nationalist education is discussed in Section 4 below.

2.4 Takeshi Umehara

Philosopher Takeshi Umehara was founding director of the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies, established in Kyoto in 1989 by nationalist prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone. From the 1980s Umehara began a broad re-evaluation of Japanese culture that included green nationalist elements. Although he published little in English, Umehara was a prolific writer in Japanese. Umehara’s work was strongly influenced by two European historians. Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) had argued that civilisations undergo a process of rise and decay. In Umehara’s view, the civilisation of the West had now reached clear limits: “Western modernity, so fertile in its scientific discoveries and technological explosion from the 16th to the 19th century, seems to have exhausted itself in nihilism, the obsessive pursuit

⁴ Gavin mistakenly names Barnett as ‘Bernett’.

of pleasure through economic growth and the destruction of nature” (Umehara, 1999, p. 41). The second influence was from Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), a British historian who had an inordinate influence in post-war Japan. Japanese green nationalism adopted Toynbee’s focus on “civilisations” as units of historical analysis, as well as his insistence on religion as a basis of those civilisations. Umehara (1999, p. 44) followed Toynbee in claiming that civilisations are based upon “certain central ideas.” At times when those ideas are “valid and effective,” the “civilisation and the nation founded upon its principles are strong and prosperous. When, at another stage, the principles of that civilisation go against the movement of history, then that civilisation faces a decline. The principles of a single civilisation can never be equally valid in all historical situations.” Europe, in other words, had reached the end of its ascendancy and Japan—a civilisation based upon principles of harmony with Nature—could now take its place as more “valid” in the current historical moment.

While Watsuji had also stressed the hybridity of Japanese culture (Nara, 2012, p. xviii–xx), Umehara developed a new critique of theories of Japanese ethnic homogeneity. Using results from physical anthropology, Umehara (1987, 1990) argued that the Japanese were made up of two biological groups, the “Palaeo-Mongoloid” Jōmon and the “Neo-Mongoloid” Yayoi.⁵ After over a century of debate, this was a time of growing consensus that there had indeed been considerable immigration into Japan during the Bronze Age Yayoi period (ca. 1000 BC – AD 250) (Hanihara, 1991; Hudson, 1999; Hudson et al., 2020). However, Umehara took quite different approaches to this material. On some occasions he argued that it was the “Neo-Mongoloids” who built the ancient state in Japan, ruling over the Palaeo-Mongoloids through “a type of caste-system state” (Umehara, 1987, p. 104). Elsewhere, he claimed that the “essence” of Japanese culture lies in the “synthesis of the opposition between the Jōmon and Yayoi cultures,” a process which led to the “integration and homogenization of the Japanese people” through the principle of “*wa* (harmony)” (Umehara, 1990).

The idea that Japanese culture was composed of two contrasting components had been proposed in the 1950s by artist Tarō Okamoto (Hudson, 2022). Umehara followed Okamoto in regarding the Jōmon as the element of Japanese culture that was close to Nature and thus more “authentic” than the “artificial” continental civilisation of the Yayoi. Although the division was now framed around archaeological cultures, here we see the same sort of contrast between native and foreign that had concerned Norinaga. In a book with novelist Kenji Nakagami, Umehara even suggested that Jōmon and Yayoi roots were still present as *psychological* traits in the modern Japanese (Umehara and Nakagami, 1984). As noted by Conversi (2024), fascism introduces *standardising* and *conformist* narratives of the nation. The question posed by the title of Umehara and Nakagami’s (1984) book—“Are you a Jōmon or a Yayoi person?”—is nonsensical. The Jōmon people were hunter-gatherers living between around 16,000 and 3000 years ago and likely spoke languages completely unrelated to Japanese.

Moreover, we cannot assume there was one uniform “Jōmon people” since there were frequent population movements to and from the mainland. Despite his acceptance of immigration into Japan in the Yayoi period, Umehara attempted to construct a new framing in which the Japanese race was imagined as a homogenous entity *despite* diverse historical roots.

If the ancient strata of Japanese culture—including the emperor and Nature (broadly conceived)—were initially seen by Japanese critics as barriers to full participation in the modern world, that was especially true for the Tokugawa period (Maruyama, 1974). By the 1980s, however, the Tokugawa had become re-imagined as a repository of traditional knowledge and lifeways essential to Japan’s rapid adoption of modernity and also providing lessons for global sustainability. Umehara was not the first to make this argument but it became an important element in his writings. Isolation was regarded as key to Tokugawa success. The “closed country” policies instituted in the 1630s strictly limited relations with overseas nations and prevented all Japanese from travelling abroad. As a result, Japan could be considered as a “small-scale model for the spaceship Earth” whereby the country “inadvertently experimented to sustain itself virtually without input of energy and material from the outside; i.e., depending solely on solar energy” (Ochiai, 2007, p. 2). This experiment was successful, it was argued, due to a series of factors that resonate with contemporary debates on sustainability: peace and human security; minimal consumption of meat and dairy; re-use and re-cycling of goods and materials, including human night-soil; active measures for environmental conservation; and high levels of literacy and education. The Tokugawa system relied on hard work (glossed as “industriousness” by Hayami, 2015) producing a “just enough” affluence (Brown, 2009), yet managed to create vibrant cultural expressions such as *kabuki* theatre and *ukiyo*e art (Haga, 2021).

The idea that early modern Japan could be an ecological model for the world was proposed by at least 1992 (Gluck, 1998, p. 276). However, the literature supporting such claims is uneven. Popular writings by novelist Eisuke Ishikawa (b. 1933) have attracted a large audience. From the late 1980s Ishikawa published a series of more than 20 books on the Tokugawa, including *Ō-Edo risaikuru jijō* [“Recycling in Greater Edo”] (Ishikawa, 1997). Some professional historians have also penned influential works, including Kitō’s (2012) *Kankyō senshinkoku Edo* (“The environmentally developed country Edo”). Kitō’s striking title juxtaposes “developed country” with “environment” to suggest Japan’s historical legacy lies in its unique combination of being economically *and* environmentally advanced, but that the latter preceded the former. Sustainability, in other words, was not simply a result of Japan being a backward society with low levels of consumption.

2.5 Yoshinori Yasuda

Yasuda is a geographer and environmental archaeologist who was initially trained in pollen analysis. Yasuda linked Watsuji’s concept of *fūdo* (cultural landscape) to the subsistence economy, contrasting meat-eating with rice- and fish-eating “civilisations” (Yasuda, 2006, 2007, 2009a). Japan as a “forest civilisation” is a key tenet of recent Japanese green nationalism. Umehara’s writings

⁵ In the 1980s, the terms Palaeo/Neo-Mongoloid were still being used by many Japanese anthropologists. As well as the lingering influence of 19th century racial science, this reflected a certain chauvinism that it was not only the ‘Caucasoids’ who were the movers of world history.

on this topic seem to have been directly inspired by Yasuda who had already discussed Japan as a “forest country” (*mori no kuni*) (Yasuda, 1980). According to his memoirs, Yasuda wrote a second book, titled *Sekaishi no naka no Jōmon bunka* (“Jōmon culture in world history”) (Yasuda, 1987), while under investigation for the murder of a dean at his university. Eventually cleared of any wrong-doing, he sent a copy of the new publication to Umehara who was apparently impressed enough to offer him a job at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies (see Yasuda, 2013b, p. 183–188). The chronology suggests Umehara may have borrowed the concept of Japan as a “forest civilisation” from Yasuda. The relationship between these writers is important, not least because it involves contrasting approaches to the question of base vs. superstructure. While Umehara had initially followed Toynbee in seeing religion as the basis of civilisations, Yasuda proposed that mode of subsistence (rice and fishing) provided the deep structure of Japanese history. All writers in the modern green nationalist tradition in Japan were opposed to Marxism yet this contradiction in approach was never explicitly acknowledged or resolved.

3 Japanese green nationalism: themes and perspective

Not all nationalisms are concerned with the natural environment or environmentalism. However, nations are built around territories that have to be imagined as “homelands.” Smith (1999, p. 149–159) has discussed this process through the concept of *ethnoscape* (i.e., an ethnic landscape). In Europe, the Romantic movement encouraged a new interest in the history and customs of the land, which were often “discovered” through new disciplines such as archaeology and ethnography (Smith, 1986, p. 174–208). Hutchinson (2013, p. 80) notes how “Intellectuals from the cities undertook cultural journeys as part of the ‘recovery’ of their collective self to record the distinctive qualities of their habitat and its peoples.” Interest in the *ethnoscape* can be considered as one aspect of green nationalism but there are also important differences with respect to the writings considered here. If for Norinaga the *ethnoscape* was *sui generis*, Shiga recognised the need to promote a particular way of looking at the landscape of Japan in order to build the nation-state. Watsuji then attempted to explain Eurasian *ethnoscapes* through the concept of climate. While Watsuji’s approach influenced Umehara and Yasuda, the latter two writers moved beyond the *ethnoscape* to environmentalism in linking nationalism with ideas about ecological sustainability.

Despite these differences at least five common themes can be identified in the writings considered above: (1) Japan as a “natural community;” (2) Japan as a harmonious nation where conflict comes from the outside; (3) a nativist concern with Japan’s cultural and racial exceptionalism in opposition to China and the West; (4) a concern with protecting and controlling the natural resources of the nation; and (5) the view that an “authentic” *Ur*-identity can be found in archaic or traditional Japan. The details and precise expression of these themes changed over time. For instance, as archaeological knowledge became widely available in the late 20th century, archaeology—or at least a selective use of archaeology—came to play a key role in the arguments. The themes also evolved in tandem with broader ideas about environmentalism and

sustainability, and understandings of Nature have thus undergone major changes (Thomas, 2001).

All five themes represent ways in which Japanese society attempted to come to terms with the dramatic transformations of modernity, a trajectory consistent with Hobsbawm’s (1983) observations over “how nostalgic tendencies for an unredeemable lost past tend to emerge during times of rapid social and cultural change” (Conversi, 2024, p. 2). That change was itself not always negative. It is striking, for example, how the green nationalism of Umehara and Yasuda emerged at a time of material wealth and success for Japan: it did not derive directly from disenchantment with the socio-economic status. Of course, the late 1980s was a period of significant political and social transition. The end of the Cold War—during which Japan became a “client state” of the USA (McCormack, 2007)—led to new debates over the essence of Japanese identity (Denoon et al., 1996). Umehara (1999) described his own intellectual journey away from disenchantment and towards the “cultural recovery” of Japan. During wartime and the years immediately after 1945, he explained, the nihilism of European philosophy held a natural attraction for young Japanese intellectuals. But as he “married and became established, and as Japan itself began to get back on its feet,” Umehara “started to feel that I could not continue living by staring into the void.”

Nevertheless, green nationalist ideas gained substantial momentum with the 1990s burst of the “bubble” economy when Japan’s post-growth hangover combined with disappointment in the promises of modernity and with growing environmental awareness. A particularly influential concept at the time was *satoyama*, a “traditional” production landscape combining rice cultivation, forestry and aquaculture in a small-scale mosaic landscape. First emerging as an isolated term in the projects of photographer Mitsuhiro Imamori and some authors in forest ecology in the mid-1990s, it soon became a dominant lens for discussing Japanese nature-culture ecosystems, skillfully aestheticising and mobilising all of the dominant discourses identified in the present article (Lindström, 2017; Fujita, 2020). While the direct impact of the authors covered here is difficult to determine, their ideas stood at the centre of the *satoyama* information campaigns run by the national broadcaster NHK and the Ministry of Environment, making their way into important policy documents such as the Basic Environmental Plans, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans as well as messianic international campaigns such as the Satoyama Initiative. The policy impact peaks around COP 10 held in Aichi in 2010, the compilation of *Japan’s Strategy for Becoming a Leading Environmental Nation* (Government of Japan, 2007) and the Fourth National Biodiversity Strategy (NBSJ, 2012)—events and publications which proposed Japanese traditional wisdom as a global model for sustainable societies “living in harmony with nature.” Detailed analysis of these policies in the post-Fukushima and post-COVID eras remains for the future but—even though the basic premises of the green nationalist utopia are retained—the framing of the 2024 VIth Basic Environmental Plan (Government of Japan, 2024) and its related policies seems to shift to safety, security, and planetary health issues. Despite the very ambitious educational goals outlined in these documents, polls indicate low environmental awareness compared to Western countries and a declining number of people engaging in environmental volunteer work (NBSJ, 2023).

Japanese green nationalism has approached Nature in two contrasting ways: as a Romantic source of *Ur*-identity and as a series of essential resources for the nation. In the writings of Shiga and Yasuda, these approaches are combined. According to Gavin (2001, p. 135), a life-time concern of Shiga's was "Japan's survival;" he studied geography as a type of geopolitics. Geopolitics has been an explicit theme in Yasuda's writings. Some of Yasuda's book titles foreground this approach, for example *Nihon yo, mori no kankyō kokka tare* ("Japan, Become an Environmental Nation of the Forest!") (Yasuda, 2002). The following passage captures Yasuda's underlying way of thinking: "Humans have continuously strived to lead a plentiful life on this beautiful planet by maximising the harvest of crops suited to their climate. Yet this endeavour has produced sharply contrasting outcomes among different civilizations, with certain civilizations causing irreversible destruction to forests, while others have successfully preserved the forests and the water cycle for continued prosperity" (Yasuda, 2006, p. 107). The idea that climate determines subsistence is taken from Watsuji and both Watsuji and Umehara provide the socio-historical framing of "civilisations." A more forceful statement of these ideas is found in Yasuda (2013a, p. 462):

The 4,000-year-long history of East Asia is mainly that of the domination and oppression of the peripheral ethnic minority tribes by the wheat/barley/millet-cultivating pastoral people.... The rice-cultivating piscatory people in the peripheral regions including Japan have repeatedly been oppressed and have suffered at the hands of the Han [Chinese] people during their runaway appetite stages. ... It is a history of ... the oppression and destruction of the rice-cultivating piscatory people's "civilisation of beauty and compassion" by the wheat/barley/millet-cultivating pastoral people's "civilisation of force and conflict."

Space prevents a detailed discussion of how Japanese green nationalism compares with that phenomenon elsewhere and with existing models of eco- or green nationalism. Such a comparative analysis might be conducted using different historical stages of environmentalism (cf. Bryant and Farrell, 2024) or could be approached through thematic or discourse analysis such as that presented by Ungureanu and Popartan (2024) on the "real ecology" (*ecología real*) of the far-right Vox party in Spain. Clear similarities between the latter study and the writings of Yasuda in particular show that this could be a fruitful area for future research. In both cases hyperbolic metaphors of crisis and salvation lead to an "emergency diagnosis" which, it is proposed, can only be solved through the ideas espoused by the nationalist thinkers. As with Vox, Japanese green nationalist writings make skilful use of floating signifiers that draw on broader historiographic traditions of the nation. In the case of Japan, such signifiers include "forests," "mountains" and "Jōmon." Yasuda's (2009a) book *Mountains fight against market fundamentalism* is clearly an emotional manipulation: mountains themselves cannot "fight" against anything. The Jōmon period has long been seen as a static time when historical change was slow; the period lacked the rapid "political" dynamics of later stages in Japanese history. The Jōmon could thus be associated with themes such as peace, harmony with Nature, and the female, which in turn could be contrasted with the Yayoi, Kofun (AD 250–700) and later eras (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Nationalist tropes of ecology and history in Japan.

Jōmon	Yayoi/Kofun	Tokugawa
Nature	Culture	Nature + Culture
Static (timeless)	Dynamic (historical)	Static but dynamic
Other	Same	Same
Idyllic	Evil	Idyllic
Nostalgia	Despair	Nostalgia
Female	Male	Male (e.g., samurai) + female (e.g., courtesan)
Domestic/shamanistic	Political	Domestic + political
Embodied knowledge	Strategic knowledge	Embodied + strategic
Harmony with nature	Control over/destruction of nature	Appropriate (top-down) control leads to harmony with Nature
Remedy to modernity	Ills of modernity	Japan's "traditional modernity"

Source: Jōmon and Yayoi/Kofun columns based on Mizoguchi (2002, p. 31–38) and Hudson (2018, p. 163), Tokugawa column this study.

Another open signifier in Japanese green nationalism relates to the identity of the enemy (or enemies) supposedly ranged against the nation. While right-wing ideologies around the world typically protest a nebulous series of enemies both outside and inside society (e.g., Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024), the threats put forward by some Japanese writers are vague to a degree that is sometimes farcical. Yasuda (2015) writes about the dangers posed by "milk civilisation," meaning people who eat meat and dairy rather than rice and fish. Kawakatsu and Yasuda (2003) protest about "civilisations that make enemies," as if dividing up the world in such a way does not already encourage a narrative of persecution. Absurd as these proposals seem, they tap into a long history of writings about the "unique" character of Japanese culture. While the details differ, however, the clear similarities with the discourse promoted by Vox shows that the strategies adopted by Japanese green nationalism are by no means unique (Table 2).

Many of the elements listed in the third column of Table 2 can be traced back to Norinaga's ideas about the peaceful embrace of Japanese Nature. Since Japan is a perfect natural community, it is argued, Japanese society originally had no conflict and violence and war were therefore introduced from the outside. A link with isolation is often made, leading to the argument that the supposedly isolated Jōmon and Tokugawa periods were especially peaceful (Umehara, 1990; Haga, 2021). As usual, Yasuda provides one of the most zealous interpretations of this idea when he claims that "the Japanese are a nation with greater variation in DNA than any other people in the world" (Yasuda, 2009a, p. 10). This situation, he informs us, is due to the peaceful nature of the Japanese: rather than "killing each other," diverse groups from surrounding regions were attracted to "these beautiful Japanese Islands" where they came together "with loving kindness" (Yasuda, 2009a, p. 10). Yasuda thus proposes a *cultural* definition of Japaneseness: "If you live in these beautiful Japanese Islands, speak Japanese and eat Japanese food, then after 10 years anyone can become Japanese. ... Without connexion to skin colour or blood colour [sic], the Japanese are an international, multi-ethnic group with

TABLE 2 Nationalist eco-narratives in Japan and Spain.

Narrative element	Examples/proxies from the Vox party (Spain)	Examples/proxies from Japanese green nationalism
The people	<i>Proxies for the people:</i> Spaniards, farmers, workers, middle classes, youth, the elderly. <i>Attributes:</i> honourable, pacific, those who wake up early in the morning, hard-working, patriots, humble.	<i>Proxies for the people:</i> ethnic Japanese (Indigenous Ainu accepted as “proto-Japanese”), rice farmers. <i>Attributes:</i> hard-working, industrious, peaceful, benevolence, compassion.
Enemies of the people	<i>Proxies for enemies:</i> anti-Spain, caste, global elites, establishment (consensus/agenda), progressives, the Left, UN, China, Brussels lobbies, environmentalists, <i>comelechugas</i> (vegans), climate religion/dogma/lobby, degrowthers, animalists. <i>Attributes:</i> privileged, powerful, treacherous, divorced/disconnected from reality, from the city, sectarian, fanatic, globalist, worn-out, degenerate, stateless, hypocritical, coward, hungry for power, alarmist.	<i>Proxies for enemies:</i> the West, north China, bread, meat-eating, milk consumption, desert, pastoralism, sheep/goats, Monotheism, Christianity, Judaism, market mechanisms. <i>Attributes:</i> privileged, powerful, nihilism, individualism, urban, globalist, worn-out, degenerate, stateless, hypocritical, hungry for land and water, dirty.
Nature-nation	<i>Proxies for nature-nation:</i> <i>patria</i> , green Spain (natural), heritage/landscape, legacy of our children, inherited from our parents, expression of the genuine beauty of the nation, resources.	<i>Proxies for nature-nation:</i> <i>fūdo</i> (cultural landscape), Japan as a “civilisation,” forests, mountains, resources (rice, wood, water), <i>satoyama</i> , cleanliness.
Vision of decline	<i>Metaphorical imagination:</i> culture of death; biological desert, demographic winter, Anti-Spain, empty/emptied Spain, abandoned Spain; unpopulated Spain; utter ruin, horror movie, biological desert, factory of misery, Stone Age. <i>Emotions:</i> fear, bitterness, anger, spite, contempt.	<i>Metaphorical imagination:</i> culture of violence and death, deforestation, desertification. <i>Emotions:</i> fear, anger, contempt.
Vision of salvation	<i>Metaphorical imagination:</i> <i>España viva</i> , Spain stands up, culture of life, green Spain, <i>reconquista</i> ; Cid Campeador. <i>Emotions:</i> patriotism, love, pride, sense of security and self-confidence, hope.	<i>Metaphorical imagination:</i> <i>seimei bunmei</i> (“life civilisation”), <i>wa</i> (“harmony”), animism, Shinto, beauty, isolation. <i>Emotions:</i> patriotism; trust in nature = trust in people; pride in Japanese tradition; sense of security and self-confidence, hope, responsibility to save the world

Source: First two columns from Ungureanu and Popartan (2024) with amendments, third column this study. The examples in the third column are taken from this study, Supplementary material 1 and Hudson (2021).

an extremely wide-open door” (Yasuda, 2009a, p. 11). As noted in Supplementary material 1, Yasuda’s approach reflects a biopolitical concern with the ethnic nation.

4 Education and the social impacts of Japanese green nationalism

The writings discussed here under the label green nationalism have had a significant impact on Japanese society since the late 18th century. As noted, a utopian thread is woven through many of the writings. The political implications nevertheless stand out. Harootunian (1988, p. 176) discusses how, from the 1830s, *Kokugaku* nativism moved from the city to the country as its ideas became employed by rural elites “to resolve the question of [social] order and to arrest the diminishing productivity plaguing the countryside.” On one level green nationalism in Japan can be seen as a bourgeois or even elitist movement which often had little direct contact with local environmentalist movements. At the same time, green nationalist ideas increasingly generated a mass appeal. A full analysis of the impact of green nationalism on Japanese society would require study of several aspects of the phenomenon, including education, publishing, museums and public archaeology, and government policy. Because education forms an important element in all nationalist movements (Hobsbawm, 1975), it provides one analytical focus. However, the utopian ideas of Japanese green nationalism have not always matched the state’s

educational policies, leading to a certain tension between the two approaches.

Of the writers discussed above, it was Shiga who first attempted to engage with the problem of how to foster an appreciation of Japanese Nature by all members of the nation and not just the elites who had traditionally enjoyed the natural world for its aesthetic sensibilities. Shiga critiqued traditional Confucian-based moral education as unsuited to the modern age. Shiga proposed three aspects of educational reform: the need to think in a global fashion, the need to de-emphasise (but not abandon) moral teaching, and the need to align education with country of residence (meaning that Japanese resident overseas should receive different tuition from the homeland) (Gavin, 2001, p. 129–130). Watsuji also had a major impact on educational policy in Japan as a member of the Ministry of Education committee tasked with compiling the *Kokutai no hongi* (“Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan”), a wide-ranging 1937 propaganda document used in schools (Thomas, 2001, p. 187). Thomas (2001, p. 179–181) has discussed how the *Kokutai no hongi* emphasised the Japanese love of Nature and the “exquisite harmony” between the Japanese people and their natural environment.

4.1 Japanese green nationalism and school textbooks

The use of ideas from green nationalism in school textbooks in post-war Japan shows both the success and limits of the approach.

The limits are found in the decision by the Japanese government to remove the Palaeolithic and Jōmon periods from the main text of elementary school history textbooks in 2002 (Kenmotsu, 2024, p. 22–24). Given the great significance accorded to the Jōmon in green nationalist discourse since the 1980s, this decision was met with consternation by proponents of that approach. Yasuda (2009b, p. 50) laments the danger of Japan “losing its national and ethnic identity” from being sandwiched between two superpowers (the USA and China) with civilisations rooted in environmentally destructive “crop and livestock farming.” That process might have already started, he warns, “with the fact that discussions on the Jōmon period, which is the source of Japanese identity, have been eliminated from history textbooks for young students—the leaders of tomorrow” (Yasuda, 2009b, p. 50, emphasis added).

The content of school textbooks in Japan changes in accordance with curriculum guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (abbreviated as MEXT). Omission of the Palaeolithic and Jōmon periods from elementary school history textbooks stemmed from deletion of the phrase “hunting and fishing” in the 1989 guidelines. While “hunting and fishing” had been present in the 1977 version, only “agriculture” remained in the 1989, 1998, and 2003 guidelines (MEXT, 1977, 1989, 1998, 2003). In 2008, however, the phrase “hunting and gathering” was re-inserted and the Jōmon period reappeared in textbooks in 2011 (MEXT, 2008; Kenmotsu, 2024, p. 22–24). After the 1989 revision, the Palaeolithic period was removed from the main parts of textbooks or delegated to short entries in the preface section. With the 1998 revision, more content was removed from the main texts, including sections on the Jōmon period, which remained in a limited capacity in the “developmental learning” sections or in illustrations (Kenmotsu, 2024, p. 22–24; Teshigawara, 2005, p. 156–157, 161–162). These omissions are usually attributed to the policy of *yutori* (“pressure-free”) education, the reduction of classroom hours and content, and particularly to the instruction in the 1998 revision not to discuss matters not included in the curriculum guidelines (Nishikawa, 2014, p. 209; Subcommittee for the Study of Social Studies Textbook Issues of the Archaeological Society of Japan, 2007, p. 174). According to Nishikawa (2014, p. 210), however, the deeper reason lies in the “tradition,” detected already in the 1958 guidelines, of the “tone of the curriculum guidelines [that] has consistently been “indifferent” towards archaeological results and discourse, [but] on the other hand is cordial to “myth and legends.” This could be interpreted as a type of clash between two nationalistic discourses—the eco-nationalistic in which the Jōmon period is featured and the emperor-centred nationalistic discourse—although green nationalists such as Yasuda have also been supportive of the emperor system and a further factor may be the low interest of the academic community in textbook authorship and engagement with school education.

In contrast to these debates over the Jōmon, the Tokugawa period commonly receives positive treatment in recent middle school history textbooks with respect to its supposed environmental sustainability. These textbooks include page-length features titled *Edo no risaikaru shakai* (“The recycling society of Edo”) or *Edo no eko shakai* (“The ecological society of Edo”). The relevance of the material for contemporary societies is clearly explained. The 2006 edition of the Tōkyō Shoseki textbook states: “Recently, the recycling of electronic goods, PET bottles and other

things is common. This trend stems from remorse (*hansei*) over the throwaway behaviour that was standard in mass consumption society. At the moment, the lifestyle of the Edo period is being re-evaluated as a resource for a re-cycle society” (Gomi et al., 2006, p. 121). A decade later, a new edition of the same book noted that “In the Edo period, commoners worked towards saving (*setsuyaku*) [resources] and made thorough use of the recycling of daily goods. For this reason, the lifestyle of the Edo period is being re-evaluated as an example of an ecological society” (Sakaue et al., 2016, p. 138). These texts use the common Japanese word *eko*. Derived from English “ecology,” *eko* has the nuance of something that is good for the environment; it does not necessarily mean “ecological” in the scientific sense since there is another word (*seitaigaku*) for that discipline. The word *setsuyaku* is a cultural keyword that is difficult to translate; in this context, it essentially means the 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) but has moralistic overtones.

The main examples discussed in these textbook sections on Tokugawa environmentalism are the recycling of straw and cotton clothing, and the use of human nightsoil for fertiliser as a way to reduce bad smells in cities. Such themes reflect those promoted by the Japanese government. For instance, a 2008 white paper published by the Ministry of the Environment included an eight-page section on “The Tokugawa period and the social system of sustainable society.” The document puts forward the Tokugawa as an example of a “primitive circular economy” where “a society in harmony with nature was formed when people had a so-called ‘*mottainai*’ [regretting waste] spirit about the use of things and a feeling of wanting to be ‘clean’ [*seiketsu*]” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 67). If, as the school textbooks claim, the city of Edo was cleaner than European cities of the time, it is argued that was because of its use of nightsoil. Premodern Europeans also knew that human wastes could be used to fertilise fields and it was understood that the concentration of large numbers of people in cities made nightsoil a more economical resource. *The English Husbandman* (1635) explained that cities gave “great store of Manure ... and so consequently [it] is very cheape” (Warde, 2018, p. 45). The expansion in consumerism that occurred in Tokugawa Japan mirrored a contemporaneous trend in Europe (Franks, 2012). What Morton (2007, p. 111) terms *Romantic consumerism*—the idea of consumption (or *non-consumption*) as an *identity*—finds clear echoes in Japanese green nationalism with its insistence that the Japanese are a people defined by their consumption of rice and fish but not meat. Japanese green nationalism rarely, if ever, questions the fundamental logic of consumption; at best it makes the utopian proposal that markets should be reorganised in a more ethical way (Supplementary material 1).

5 Conclusions

Japanese green nationalism has deep roots in nativist reactions to Chinese influences on pre-modern Japan as well as in the country’s modern project of nation-building. As the first Asian society to embrace industrial modernity, Japan was faced by the problem of how it was to be interpolated into the cultural and racial hierarchies of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Tanaka, 1993; Oguma, 2002). From Japan’s perspective, those hierarchies were undergoing a shift from a Sinitic to a Euro-American framing and,

as a result, “the Japanese [became] accustomed to seeing themselves through the *Western gaze*” (Mizoguchi, 2002, p. 1). Consequently, Japanese responses to modernity frequently employed Western Orientalist terms of reference while attempting to re-frame them to their own benefit (Tanaka, 1993; Hudson, 2021).

Partly through the influence of European Romanticism, Japanese green nationalism adopted ideas about the Noble Savage and the valorisation of traditional or native societies for their supposedly holistic social and religious systems that enhance sustainability. From this standpoint, sustainability transforms into a broader critique of modernity and capitalism, a perspective sometimes extended to patriarchy or Christianity (Merchant, 2003; White, 1967). Industrialised countries have rarely seen themselves as descendants of the Noble Savage, though the concept of “wilderness” has been co-opted into the ideological history of the USA (Nash, 2001; Slotkin, 1985). Japanese green nationalism successfully developed an ideologically strong version of historical sustainability that incorporates numerous elements of “traditional” culture, including religious practises from Buddhism, Shinto and animism, as well as ecological conditions related to the history and organisation of agriculture in the archipelago. Given the environmental destruction and hubris that has characterised modern Japan (McCormack, 1996), this is a remarkable trend, one perhaps best explained by a close connexion with paligenetic nationalist ideologies. However, this celebratory framing can be argued to contribute to complacency rather than environmental action (Lindström, 2019).

Japanese green nationalism is notable for its extensive use of archaeological and historical information regarding two periods in Japan’s past: the Neolithic Jōmon and the early modern Tokugawa. The choice of these periods is striking because they were previously regarded as “backward” (or “feudal” in the case of Tokugawa) roadblocks on the nation’s march towards civilisation. In traditional historiography, neither Jōmon nor Tokugawa could be seen as “triumphal” historical moments for the nation; they certainly lacked a symbolism akin to the mediaeval *Reconquista* invoked in far-right ecology in Spain (cf. Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024). Both Jōmon and Tokugawa were, however, periods when Japan was supposedly isolated from outside cultures and could thus best express the nation’s “authentic” nature. The use of both archaeology and history in Japanese green nationalism is selective and, as noted above, shrouds a fundamental rejection of history for the folk. Similar issues of history, heritage and nationalism have been discussed outside Japan (e.g., Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez, 2021).

The concept of a Jōmon “forest civilisation” developed by Yasuda and Umehara reflects, to a certain extent, broader critiques that hunter-gatherers do not fit the “primitive” image that they had carried for so long (Sahlins, 1972; Koyama and Thomas, 1981). Umehara (1989) attributed the retention of large areas of forest in Japan to the late persistence of the hunter-gatherer Jōmon culture and the very recent adoption of cereal agriculture in the Japanese archipelago. Umehara also argued that wet-rice farming was concentrated in the lowlands, thus leaving upland forests untouched. These arguments have been critiqued by Hudson et al. (2022). Nevertheless, while many Japanese archaeologists dismiss the claims made by Umehara and Yasuda,

it is not difficult to find comparable arguments that the Jōmon people lived “in harmony” with Nature. Leading Jōmon specialist Kobayashi (2018, p. 206) writes about how the Jōmon “co-existed” (*kyōsei*) with Nature while continental cultures “subjugated” (*kokufuku*) Nature. Okamura (2017), another well-known archaeologist, approaches the Jōmon as a type of “ecotopia.” Other archaeologists criticise such ideas (e.g., Imamura, 2002) yet they retain resonance within the broader discourse about the Jōmon as the “timeless past” of Japanese identity (cf. Mizoguchi, 2002).

Japanese green nationalism employs *völkisch* sentiments that mirror ideas and prejudices from German Romanticism, including anti-urbanism and a view of the forest as an authentic ethnic landscape. The nation is seen as a *Volkskörper*, a pure body in danger of corruption from the outside. Japanese society has a long history of the exclusion of groups thought to be polluting (Kirby, 2011). However, conflating racial hygiene and “cleanliness” with ecology involves several problems (Morton, 2007, p. 109–117). One is the idea that environmental problems can be solved by “tidying up” or “purifying” our living space—like the “KonMari” household tidying method on a national scale. In this view, others can be excluded from that living space because they are “dirty.” In Japanese nationalist writings, the idea of Japan as a “garden nation” has been linked to “living space” (Hudson, 2021, p. 32–33). Kawakatsu (2006) made explicit the putative link between national seclusion, closed-cycle resource use and keeping Nature “neat and clean.” This led, he suggested, to a “civilisation of beauty” that was naturally peaceful. The moral aspects of cleanliness find extreme expression in writings by Yasuda (Hudson, 2021, p. 34–35; Supplementary material 1).

The relationship between nation-states and global environmental change is complex (Bsumek et al., 2013; Duara, 2015) and our critique does not mean that Japan has been unable to implement a range of environmental policies at national and other levels. In fact, as argued by Avenell (2012) and others, Japan has been extremely successful in instituting such policies. Nevertheless, Japanese green nationalism has served as a constraint on thinking about how the past might inform future sustainability. The idea that “traditional Japan” enjoyed a “just enough” affluence is a claim that veils numerous problems. Any critique of economic growth involves fundamental issues regarding the organisation of human societies (Felcht, 2015; Hamilton, 2003). With the exception of Yasuda’s vague ideas regarding reform of market mechanisms (Supplementary material 1), Japanese green nationalism presents no such critique of capitalism. It thus remains unclear how green nationalist thought might impact long-term trajectories of environmental sustainability in Japan. The claim that Japan has had no social hierarchy is a way to avoid the need for the social revolution required for real sustainability. The underlying assumption is that everyone is by default part of the Japanese nation. Paradoxically, however, even if the “real” ecology of Japan lies in its prehistoric “forest civilisation,” the agricultural Yayoi and the emperor are somehow seamlessly incorporated into the national fabric.

Across Japan’s modernist trajectory of economic growth, green nationalist ideas offered an alternative vision that resonated with nostalgic conceits about tradition. In the late 20th century—decorated with new ideas about global sustainability—Japanese

tradition had never seemed so relevant to the contemporary moment and, for a while, its “civilizational puffery crested on a surge of nationalist self-satisfaction” (Gluck, 1998, p. 276). The civilisational meta-narratives of Japanese green nationalism have met a more nuanced response in the precarious Japan of the post-bubble decades (cf. Allison, 2013). After the Fukushima disaster, many writers, critics and activists have attempted to revitalise grassroots environmentalism (Yoneyama, 2019). Given the continuing influence of meta-narratives of the Japanese nation this has not been an easy task. Sociologists have argued that the 1990s saw a shift towards a model of “Cool Japan” that contrasted with the “Mysterious Japan” model of the 1950s–60s and the “Groupist Japan” model of the 1970s–80s (Sugimoto, 2014). Cool Japan’s concern with diversity and globalisation and its playful critiques of essentialism stand in contrast to the central ideas of Japanese green nationalism. As we have argued here, the latter draws heavily on Romantic nationalism and thus possesses a longer genealogy than the three models discussed by Sugimoto (2014). Certain aspects of Japanese green nationalism might be said to have a playful side that mirrors the Cool Japan framing: Yasuda’s “Shangri-La living” is one example and the environmentalism of Hayao Miyazaki’s anime films has been widely discussed (Yoneyama, 2019, p. 159–204). Ultimately, however, Japanese green nationalism has been unable to escape a biopolitical and essentialist framing of normative Japaneseness. As a result, while the discursive constructs of green nationalism have been mobilised in some state policies, their capacity to encourage environmental action in Japan remains questionable.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

MH: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JU: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft. KL: Investigation, Writing – original draft. KŠ: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fhumd.2025.1638653/full#supplementary-material>

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