

NARA CODE

Unearthing the Cultural Fragments of Nara



奈良市
Old History,
New Discovery.

Unearthing the Cultural Fragments of Nara

Through the remarkable advances of science and technology, our lives today have become increasingly convenient. We now live in an age of abundance where nearly anything we need is readily available. Rapid population growth and the globalization of industries after World War II ushered in a period of dramatic economic expansion known as the Great Acceleration.

However, this intense surge in human activity also generated a host of problems alongside prosperity: climate change driven by global warming, destruction of the natural environment, dependence on fossil fuels, hunger, poverty, and geopolitical conflicts erupting across the globe.

We stand at a turning point, shifting from an era that prioritized economic growth and technological progress to one that values harmony among diverse cultures and coexistence with nature. Even the World Expo, long a champion of scientific and technological achievement, adopted the theme, Designing Future Society for Our Lives—with life (*inochi*) as its central focus—for the Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan.

Is it possible for humanity to coexist with the planet without exhausting its resources for the sake of economic development or disregarding human well-being in the name of environmental protection? What wisdom do we need now so that people of different cultures and perspectives can live together in mutual respect?

Wisdom for the Future from Ancient Japan

The relationship between nature and humanity on Earth has shifted and evolved depending on place and era. Since the days of ancient Greece, Western thought has viewed nature as something distinct and separate from human beings, and sought to understand it through reason—a perspective that has underpinned the development of natural science.

In contrast, Eastern traditions regarded humans as an integral part of nature. Particularly in Japan, a land prone to natural disasters, people believed that deities—the so-called Yaoyorozu no Kami (Eight Million Gods)—resided in all things, from mountains and trees to rocks, rivers, wind, and thunder. They were

revered and feared as presences beyond human comprehension.

The Japanese archipelago, located at the eastern edge of the Eurasian continent, received diverse cultures—so much so that in the Nara period (710-784) it was sometimes described as the eastern terminus of the Silk Road. Rather than accepting these foreign cultures unchanged, the people of Japan creatively adapted them—for example, developing hiragana from Chinese characters—thereby cultivating a culture and identity of their own. Japan has long nurtured a fertile soil for a culture that embraces diversity.

Today, as the world seeks new values for coexistence between humanity and the planet, the keys to the future may well lie within the ancient cultural layers of Japan.

Old History, New Discovery.

Nara may be regarded as the wellspring of Japanese culture. As the nation's capital during the period of Heijō-kyō (710-784), Nara received a flood of diverse cultures from the Asian continent. At the same time, a sensibility for appreciating nature, symbolized by the *Man'yōshū*—Japan's oldest anthology of poetry—blossomed as Nara became the cradle of *wa*, the Japanese ideal of harmony. It was also during this era that the name Nihon came into official use as the country's designation. Inscribed within Nara's 1300-year history are the distinctive values, spirituality, culture, and wisdom of Japan.

Since 2023, Nara City has adopted the slogan *Old History, New Discovery*. It expresses in English the spirit of the phrase *onko chishin* (learning from the old to discover the new), found in *The Analects* of Confucius. True discoveries for the future emerge only through deep engagement with the past. The slogan itself was born through dialogue among people of diverse backgrounds, from local junior high school students to foreign residents of the city.

This booklet, NARA CODE, serves as a modest guide for envisioning the future through Nara's accumulated history, culture, and way of life. In this time of changing values, we present six pieces of wisdom embedded in Nara that may offer hints for the society of tomorrow. It is our hope that each reader will be inspired to decode these fragments—codes of wisdom—and obtain their own keys to unlocking the future.

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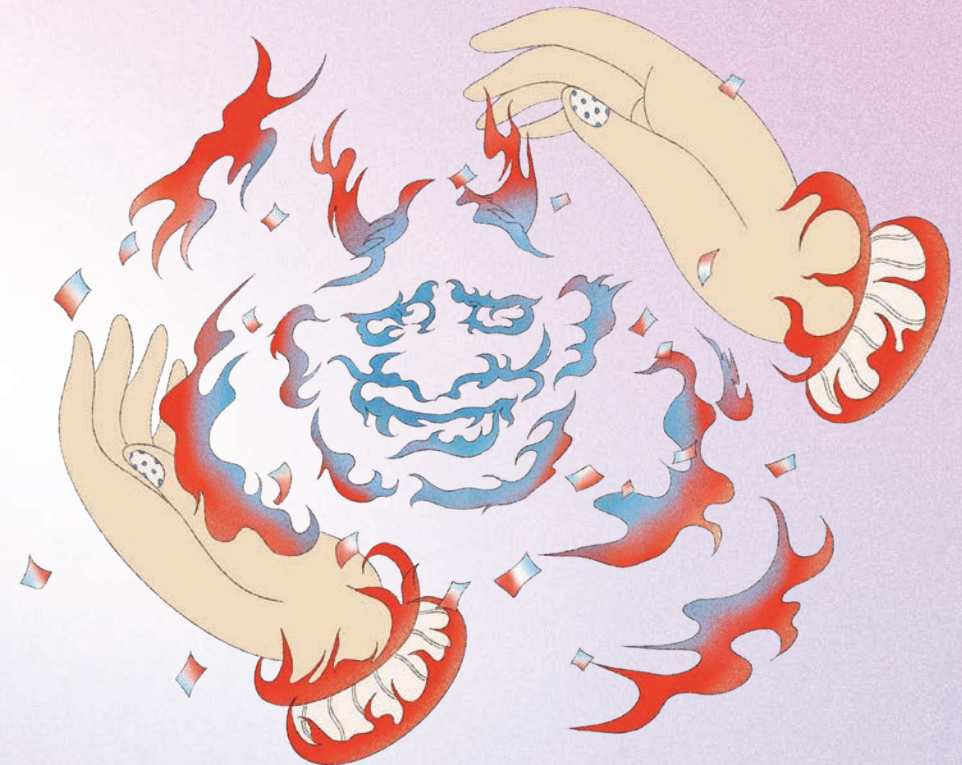
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Thriving in a Complex World

Q.1

How Do We Live With Risk?



Modern society strives for security and safety, attempting to eliminate risk wherever possible. Wanting to avoid unforeseen events is only natural. Yet the belief that risks can be fully controlled stems from a distinctly modern worldview—one that assumes the world can be grasped through clear cause-and-effect relationships.

In reality, the world is inherently and profoundly complex; unexpected events can occur at any time. How, then, are we to

navigate and thrive in such a complex world with resilience and flexibility?

The answer may lie in the wisdom of *wasuru* (Harmonizing)—a concept nurtured in Japan from the 7th to 8th century. It suggests a way of living that does not fight against the unknown or the dangerous, nor does it exclude them. Instead, it accepts diverse existences and finds balance, compromise, and mutual understanding. This ancient perspective may offer a vital hint for our own time.

Embracing the Wild to Create Harmony

(Wasuru: to harmonize, soften, or bring into balance / Araburu: to be wild, unruly, or destructive)

Japan is a culture of *wa* (Harmony). As symbolized by the famous precept “Value harmony above all else,” great importance has traditionally been placed on avoiding conflict and maintaining balance. This perspective was shaped, at least in part, by the international climate of the 7th century. With the rise of the Tang Dynasty and Silla’s unification of the Korean Peninsula, Japan was exposed to significant threats from the mainland. In response, the nation chose a path of sustaining relations by avoiding direct clashes rather than opting for armed confrontation. The wisdom of *wa* emerged as a way to coexist, while mitigating the risk of clashing with wild or violent forces.

This stance is deeply embedded in Nara, often referred to as the land of “Yamato”. During the Setsubun festival at Kinpusenji Temple in Yoshino, southern Nara, people chant, “Fortune in, Demons in,” welcoming even the demons (*oni*) that have been driven away from the rest of the country. This tradition, based on the legend of En no Gyōja, the founder of Shugendō—a form of Japanese mountain asceticism incorporating Shinto and Buddhist elements—has lasted over a thousand years. According to the legend, he preached Buddhist teachings to the *oni* and made them his disciples.

And, demons are not the only “wild” forces to contend with. Nara is home to the largest concentration of National Treasure wooden structures in Japan. The greatest threat to such structures is, of course, fire. Even so, the city of Nara hosts numerous rituals that employ fire. During the Shuni-e ceremony at Tōdai-ji Temple, massive torches (called O-taimatsu) are brandished wildly at the Nigatsu-do hall, a World Heritage wooden structure. At Kasugataisha Shrine, during the Mantōrō (Lantern Festival) held twice a year, approximately



Oni no Chobuku-shiki (Demon Exorcism Ritual) at Kinpusenji Temple



Oni-hashiri (Demon Run) at Dada-do hall of Nenbutsu-ji Temple (Gojo City)



WASURU ARABURU

O-taimatsu of the Shuni-e ceremony (Sacred Torches)
at Tōdai-ji Temple

3,000 lanterns are lit across the grounds. In the summer, the “Daimonji Okuribi” (Great Bonfire) burns on Mount Takamado, a location famously celebrated in the *Man’yōshū* poetic anthology. Recent research suggests that the continued practice of such fire-based rituals may actually foster a community’s collective capability for disaster prevention. The annual Wakakusa-yama Burning is a good example. Every January, the hills are set afire for a controlled burning event. The local fire brigade takes the lead, with citizens in various roles forming teams, coordinating meticulously to prevent flames from spreading uncontrollably.¹

Ōgai Mori, a great writer of the late 19th to 20th century, who was appointed Director of the Nara Imperial Household Museum in 1917, praised Nara—home to the world’s oldest wooden architecture—with a poem: “A land of dreams / where what should burn does not burn / a land where wooden storehouses / stand eternal” (KeyBook1-4).

To embrace and continually engage with the untamed and wild forces of the world—this wisdom, rooted in Nara, may offer valuable insight for navigating our modern society



Wakakusa Yamayaki (Burning of Mount Wakakusa)

Demons as Protectors Against Evil

Oni are commonly imagined as evil beings who are to be cast away or defeated, like those in the tale of Momotarō. However, the fearsome oni have historically played a dual role: using their immense power to repel evil and protect people. The 18th century scholar Motoori Norinaga believed that the people of ancient Japan used the term kami (deity, spirit, or god) to describe any being that was extraordinary and awe-inspiring, whether they were good or bad. They included oni among the kami. Some of Japan's oldest roof tiles bearing demon faces were excavated from the Heijō Palace site in Nara and are one of the highlights of Tōdai-ji Temple. Glaring out from the rooftops to ward off misfortune, the onigawara is a symbol of the combined powers of harmony and destruction.



Onigawara (demon-faced tile) at Akaiya of Nigatsu-dō, Tōdai-ji Temple

Wasuru, Araburu KeyBook



1-1
Understanding the emergence of "Japan" through the international climate of the 7th century.

Nihonshi no Tanjo
The Birth of Japanese History
Hidehiro Okada
Chikuma Bunko, 2008



1-2
Conflicts and wars continue across the world. How can nations build relations without fighting?

The Clash of Civilizations
Samuel P. Huntington
Translated by Chikara Suzuki
Shueisha Bunko, 2017



1-3
Oni still inhabit the Japanese imagination. Who—or what—are they?

Oni to Nihonjin
Kazuhiko Komatsu
Kadokawa Sophia Bunko, 2018



1-4
Each year, Ōgai Mori attended the opening of the Shōsō-in treasures. Through poetry, he captured his impressions of Nara.

Ōgai "Nara Gojishshu" wo Yomu
Jōji Hirayama
Chuko Bunko, 2015

Thriving in a Complex World

Q.2

How Can We Step Outside Our Filter Bubble?



Today, we are surrounded by an unprecedented volume of information. By some accounts, the world now generates data at a pace of 100 zettabytes (10²³ bytes) annually.² And yet, even as information expands, people are increasingly retreating into their own "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" shaped by algorithms. How, then, might we open ourselves once more to the world—and encounter others anew?

People of antiquity were keenly attentive to the sounds of the world and possessed a finely honed sensitivity to them. Sound was perceived as a sign—an unexpected visitation—a revealed link between human beings and their surroundings. To open one's ears to sounds that arrive unbidden, to entrust oneself to the voices of the world—perhaps we are now in need of such moments in our lives.

Opening to the World through Sound

The Japanese word, *otozure*—regularly used to mean “visit” or “arrive”—is composed of two linguistic components: *oto* (sound) and *tsure* (to accompany). The literal meaning is “to come with sound.” For the people of ancient Japan, hearing sound was not merely a physical phenomenon; it was understood as a sign that something had arrived. When leaves rustled in the trees, when a bell rang in the wind, they sensed the visitation of an invisible and sacred presence. *Otozure* suggests a focused sensitivity to the subtle signs of change accompanied by sound.

The ancient world was far quieter than our own. Faint sounds now drowned out by machinery and the noise of daily life would surely have reached the attentive ears of our ancestors. They likely distinguished subtle changes in sound that marked the hours of the day and the changing of the seasons

A poem in the *Man'yōshū* by Prince Shiki reads: “Above the running stream / of water on stone / bracken buds begin to sprout— / spring has come at

OTOZURE



Uguisu no Taki Waterfall in the Kasugayama Primeval Forest

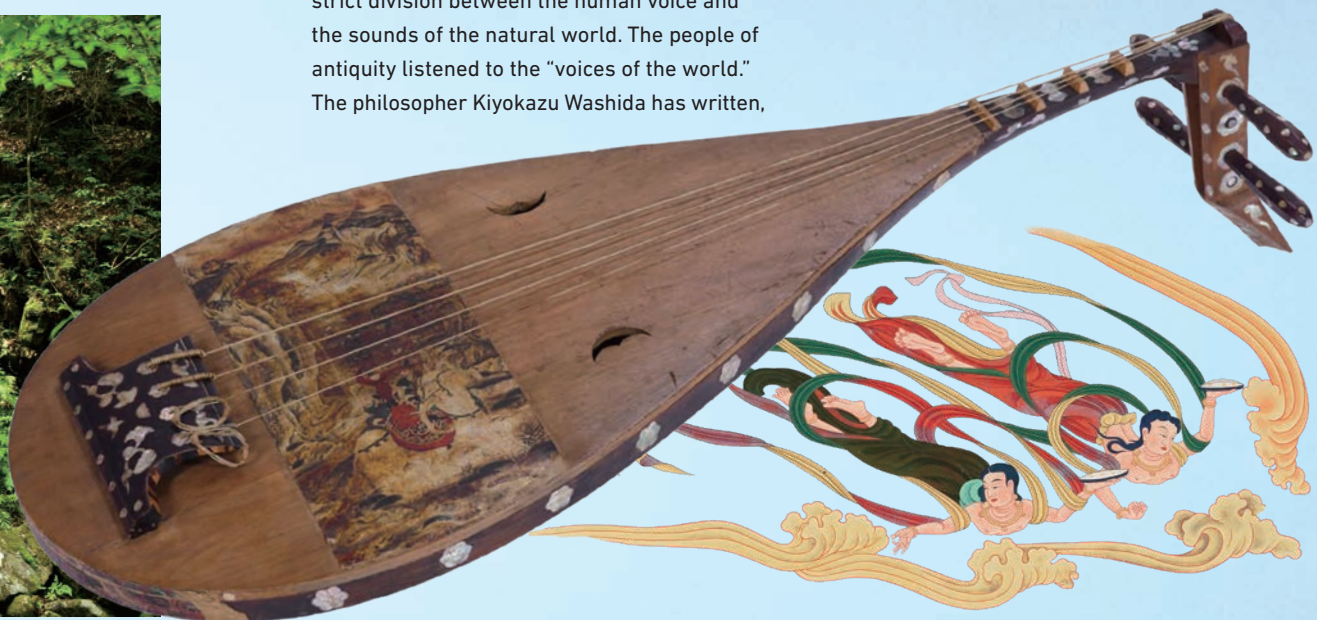
last.” The poet and psychiatrist Mokichi Saitō suggests that the poem’s author realized spring’s arrival first through the sound of the small, rushing waterfall (KeyBook2–2). The coming of seasons was announced as subtle presences accompanied by sound. In Nara, soundscapes that stretch back to antiquity still remain: the calls of deer, the tolling of temple bells, the chanting of sutras at dawn and dusk. Sacred rites and Buddhist ceremonies resound with the music of gagaku (classical court music). On summer evenings at the Heijō Palace Site, the air fills with the collective wings and calls of swallows gathering at one of Japan’s largest roosting sites.

In the age of the *Man'yōshū*, the word “sound”—as in the phrase “the sound of the spring wind”—was at times written using the character for “voice”, suggesting there was no strict division between the human voice and the sounds of the natural world. The people of antiquity listened to the “voices of the world.” The philosopher Kiyokazu Washida has written,



Deer-calling event of Nara

“It is only outside what we have planned in advance that we can truly encounter the other” (KeyBook2–3). Nara is a land where the voices of the world still call out to us. Rather than sealing our ears with earphones, we can listen for the sounds that come by chance. *Otozure*—those arrivals—come in unguarded moments. Nara is a place that reminds us what it means to be open to the world.



Biwa lute with back made of kaede stained with sappan juice and decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, No.1. (Shōsō-in Treasure)

Reconstructed drawing of the celestial beings on the Small Wall of the Kondō, Horyūji Temple

Shiki Masaoka and *Otozure*

"Biting into a persimmon, the bell tolls —Horyuji Temple."
This famous haiku was composed by Shiki Masaoka during his stay in Nara. Shiki was famously fond of persimmons. While lodging near Tōdai-ji, he requested and delighted in Goshō persimmons, a Nara specialty. In his essay "*Kudamono*" ("Fruit"), he wrote: "The persimmons were delicious, the setting superb. As I sat there, enraptured, I heard a single boom of a temple bell." What Shiki heard was likely the great bell of Tōdai-ji, known as "Nara Tarō," which still tolls every night at 8:00 p.m. (except during the Shuni-e period). It was the sudden *otozure*—the unanticipated tolling—that moved Shiki to compose the verse on persimmons. By overlaying that experience with the image of Horyuji Temple, which he visited the following day, he crafted one of the most celebrated haiku in the history of Japanese literature.



"Autumn Persimmons at Nishizato, Ikaruga": Photograph by Taikichi Irie

Otozure KeyBook



2-1
From ancient times to the present,
what sounds have resonated across
Japan?

Nihon no Oto
The Sounds of Japan
Fumio Koizumi
Heibonsha Library, 1994



2-2
Four hundred poems capturing
the spirit of the Man'yōshū,
selected by Mokichi Saitō.

Man'yō Shūka (Vol. 1-2)
Mokichi Saitō
Iwanami Shinsho, 1968



2-3
Modern society has forgotten
how to wait.
A reflection on welcoming the
unexpected.

"Matsu" to iu Koto
Kiyokazu Washida
Kadokawa Sensho, 2006

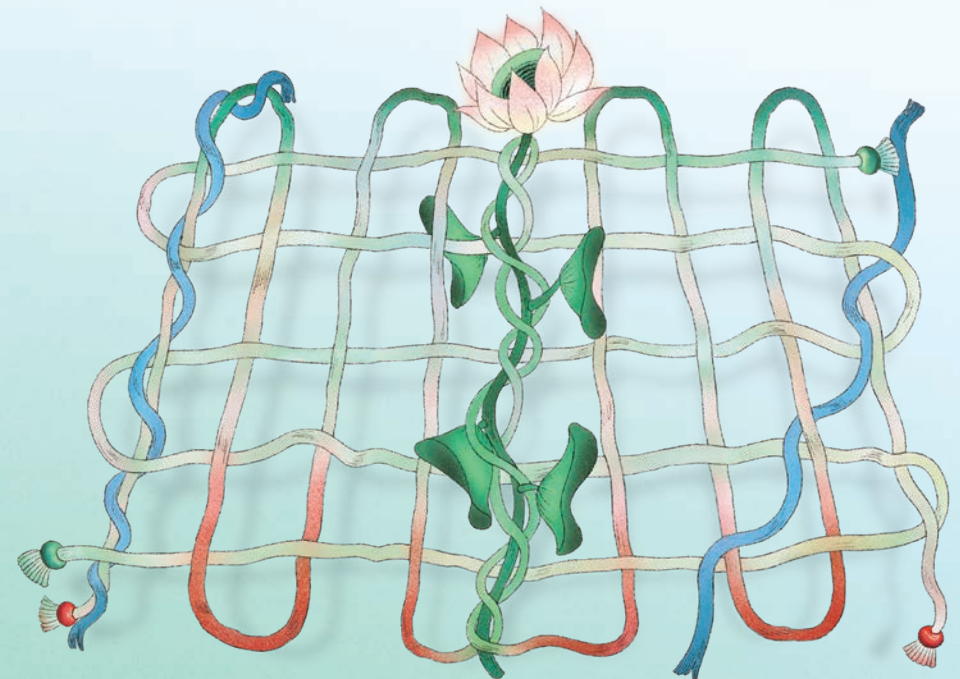


2-4
Awaken to the beauty of Bud-
dhist sculptures
through actual visitations.

Koji Junrei
Pilgrimages to Ancient Temples
Tetsurō Watsuji
Iwanami Bunko, 1979

Q.3

What Form of Coexistence Lies Beyond Exclusion or Assimilation?



Across the world today, social divisions are becoming increasingly visible. Even within the same country or region, differences in values and beliefs surface more sharply, and social media often becomes a site of confrontation. We attend more to what separates us than to what we share, and the awareness that we live together seems to be fading. On the other hand, the internet and logistics networks that span the globe may have fostered a sense that the world is one—and

therefore that we should share the same values. However, it is only natural that people differ. From ancient times, Nara flourished as an international city where diverse cultures and values intersected. It flourished not by choosing one element and discarding others, but by layering and weaving differing elements together. It may be time to look again at what wisdom Nara can offer for coexistence in our world today.

A Wisdom of Coexistence from Ancient Japan



One method, key to the development of Japanese culture, is *naimaze*. The word originally refers to twisting threads of different colors together to form a single, beautiful rope.

As the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, Nara received inflows of religion, culture, and material goods from the distant continent. At the Great Buddha Eye-Opening Ceremony of 752 at Tōdai-ji, Empress Kōken attended in state, with Retired Emperor Shōmu and other dignitaries. The officiating priest was the Indian monk Bodhisena, and some ten thousand monks are said to have participated. Alongside traditional Japanese music, performances included gigaku and other continental forms from Tang China and the Korean kingdoms, making the ceremony strikingly international in character.

As Nara developed into a major international center, systems of belief gradually intermingled. Shinto deities were identified as manifestations of Buddhas, or enshrined as protective guardians of temples, allowing Buddhism and Shinto to continue side by side. Kasugataisha Shrine, where deities dwell in an ancient forest, stands beside Kohfukuji Temple, long one of the central temples of Nara Buddhism, called Nanto Bukkyo. Even today, on January 2nd each year, the chief priest of Kohfukuji leads the temple's monks in a formal visit to Kasugataisha Shrine. The writer Masako Shirasu described this vision as "weaving Japan's native gods as the warp and

Buddhism as the weft" (KeyBook3-3).

The people of Nara have continually generated new forms of harmony by placing differing elements side by side and weaving their distinctions into relationship. One theory holds that the name "Nara" derives from *narasu*—"to level" or "to make even"—perhaps suggesting the smoothing of differences into unity.

The Japanese language itself, with its distinctive writing system, offers another example of *naimaze*. Chinese characters introduced from the continent were incorporated into the native linguistic system: their meanings were borrowed, while Japanese readings were assigned to them. In the *Man'yōshū*, the oldest anthology of classical Japanese poetry (*waka*), poems were written entirely in Chinese characters but read as Japanese, adapting an imported script to express a native language.

Meanwhile, in Nara today, one can encounter the unusual sight of people and deer sharing the same crosswalk. Differences are neither excluded nor erased. *Naimaze* is coexistence that preserves distinction—an approach that today might be described as diversity and inclusion. In an age of deepening division, Nara's capacity to interweave differences into relationship may offer a path toward a more sustainable future of coexistence.



Reliquary Shrine with Sacred Deer of Kasuga
(detail)



Mandala of Kasuga Shrine and Kohfukuji Temple

NAIMAZE

Naoya Shiga and *Naimaze*

Drawn to the cultural treasures and natural landscape of the ancient capital, the novelist Naoya Shiga resided in Nara from 1929 to 1938. In his essay “Nara” (1938), he wrote: “Nara is a beautiful place. Its nature is beautiful, and the surviving architecture is beautiful. Nowhere else do the two so completely dissolve into one another.” His former residence in Takabatake, designed to his own specifications, still stands today. While based on the sukiya style, it also incorporates elements of western Art Deco, creating an architectural *naimaze* that was strikingly modern for its time. Writers of the Shirakaba group, including Jun’ichirō Tanizaki and Saneatsu Mushanokōji, gathered to discuss art in what became known as the Takabatake Salon, itself an expression of cultural *naimaze*.



Former residence of Naoya Shiga

Naimaze KeyBook



3-1
Ancient Asia was shaped encounters across borders.
A history of cultural crossings and mixtures.

Ekkyō no Kodai-shi
Fumio Tanaka
Kadokawa Sophia Bunko, 2017



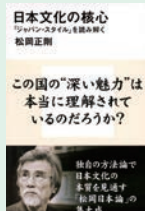
3-2
1,200 years of East Asian culture,
uniquely preserved in the Shōsō-in.

Shōsō-in: Rekishi to Hōmotsu
The Shōsō-in: History and Treasures
Kazuki Sugimoto
Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2025



3-3
How did Shirasu portray the beauty of Nara?
A journey into hidden landscapes and cultural memory.

Kakurezo
Masako Shirasu
Shinchosha, 2010



3-4
Hiragana, tea culture, shinbutsu shūgō—
concepts rooted in the deep layers of Japanese culture.

Nihon Bunka no Kakushin: Decoding "Japan Style"
Seigow Matsuoka
Kodansha Gendai Shinsho, 2020

Q.4

What Is a “Good Relationship” Between Earth and Humanity?



We live in an age now described as the Anthropocene, in which human activity exerts influence across the entire planet. Through deforestation, resource extraction, and the large-scale consumption of fossil fuels, the global environment is approaching a major turning point. In this context, rather than viewing the environment merely as a means for human benefit, growing attention is being given to the philosophy of deep ecology, which seeks to recognize the inherent value

of all forms of life. Nara is a land that has long been sustained by the richness and beauty of its soil. That sensibility has been passed down to the present in the language of waka poetry, in the shaping of pottery, and in a deep sense of gratitude for the harvest. Now, as humanity once again seeks to renew its relationship with the earth, might we draw upon the sensibilities of those who came before us?

A Bond Between Earth and Humanity

In Japan, there has long been a poetic epithet: *Aoniyoshi*.

Traditionally used to adorn the name of Nara, it was originally written with characters meaning "blue earth," referring to the mineral-rich clay once used as pigment in paints and dyes.

The word is said to celebrate the fertility of Nara's soil, from which this blue-green pigment was drawn.

Yet as the ancient capital flourished, the term gradually came to praise not only the land itself but the beauty of the city that rose upon it.

Heijō-kyō, the capital of Japan during the Nara period from 710 to 784, located in present-day Nara City, was constructed in the eighth century, modeled on Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty in China, then the greatest metropolis in East Asia. Vermilion pillars, golden Buddhist images, and the luminous colors of glass transmitted along the Silk Road filled the capital with brilliance. Words once used to honor the earth came to celebrate the splendor of human-made beauty. In the *Man'yōshū*, we find the following verse: "*Aoniyoshi— / the capital of Nara now flourishes / like blossoms in full bloom / radiant in their fragrance.*"

The poets of the Man'yō age understood something essential: the man-made beauty that adorned the capital was drawn from the earth itself.

The vivid colors that once decorated the Daigokuden Hall, the original Great Buddha Hall of Tōdai-ji Temple, and even the Great Vairocana Buddha, were derived from pigments



Yamato Province (Map of the Kinai Region)

AONIOSHI



Tenpyō Procession, Heijō-kyō

fashioned from cinnabar mined in Nara and from minerals gathered both within Japan and across distant lands.

Aoniyoshi may thus have expressed a sensibility that cherished beauty born from the fusion of the earth's bounty and human ingenuity.

When commissioning the Great Buddha, Emperor Shōmu declared his wish that "all beings, both sentient and insentient, may flourish" (*Edict for the Construction of the Great Buddha*, 743). His aspiration extended beyond human prosperity to the thriving of all life. The philosopher Tetsurō Watsuji, in his work *Fūdo*, argued that human beings are not entities separate from their natural environment (KeyBook4-1). Yamato vegetables and Yamato tea, cultivated within the basin encircled by mountains, derive their distinctive character from marked seasonal temperature

shifts and the richness of local water and soil. The crops of a region are nothing less than expressions of that land's vitality. Agriculture itself is the fruit of interaction between earth and humanity.

So too with traditional crafts. Akahada-ware exists because of clay suited to firing; without the soil, there would be no vessel.

The earth sustains people; people, in turn, bring the earth's gifts to life. This mutual relationship between soil and human life lies at the heart of the spirit of *Aoniyoshi*. It may also be the very way of being that the world now seeks.



Akahada-ware



Kōji Kinutani, *Nara, the City of Radiant Light*: An evocation of his native city, suffused with the circulating energies of mountains, nature, and the sacred.

Nara's Soil: Nurturing Medicinal Herbs, Healing People

Nara has been one of the most important regions in shaping Japan's culture of medicine. The *Nihon Shoki* records that Empress Suiko conducted a *kusurigari* (medicinal hunt) in the Uda region of present-day Nara Prefecture. Such hunts were court rituals in which deer antlers—believed to possess medicinal properties—were collected and medicinal herbs gathered. With its marked seasonal temperature differences and abundant water, Nara provided an environment in which medicinal plants readily flourished. From the time of Heijō-kyō onward, many temples in Nara offered the charitable distribution of medicine as a form of relief for the people. In time, an industry known as Yamato baiyaku (medicine sellers) developed, encompassing the cultivation and gathering of herbs, the compounding and manufacture of medicines, and their distribution through traveling merchants. As Nara became a major center of medicinal plant production, the Morino Old Medicinal Garden, established in the early 18th century in Uda City, was founded. Even today, it cultivates approximately 250 varieties of medicinal herbs, preserving and transmitting this long history of medicinal culture.



(Top) Morino Old Medicinal Garden, Tōgaku-an
(Bottom) Pages 23–24 from Matsuyama Honzō, illustrated by Morino Tōsuke I (Saikaku), founder of the Morino Old Medicinal Garden

Aoni-yoshi KeyBook



4-1
Climate and landscape are not merely external. They shape the inner structures of human life.
Fūdo: Ningengakuteki Kōsatsu
Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study
Tetsurō Watsuji
Iwanami Bunko, 1979



4-2
How a Western writer translated *aoni-yoshi*. A bilingual journey into the poetic world of the *Man'yōshū*
Man'yō Luster
Ian Hideo Levy (English translation)
Modern Japanese translation by Susumu Nakanishi
PIE International, 2014



4-3
The hidden power of soil—the secret force behind the rise and fall of civilizations.
Tsuchi to Seimei no 46-Okunen-shi
Kazunari Fujii
Kodansha Blue Backs, 2024



4-4
What was eaten in the ancient capital Heijō-kyō? Archaeology reveals the everyday meals of temple life.
Kodaijiin no Shoku wo Saigen Suru
Takayuki Mitsufoji & Motoi Baba (eds.)
Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2023

Q.5

Can Tradition and Creativity Coexist?



In contemporary society, “the new” constantly draws attention—new products, new inventions, new technologies. With tools such as generative AI and 3D printing, we now inhabit an environment in which ideas can be given form almost instantly. We place immense value on novelty. But what of “the old”? Long-established family businesses with centuries of history, and artisanal skills handed down through generations, now face a shortage of successors. The preservation of tradition and the creation of new value are often spoken of

as if they were fundamentally opposed. In Japan's past, greater importance was placed not on the “new,” but on the “origin” (*honke*, *honryū*)—the main house or authentic lineage from which new forms arise. It was to this foundational tradition that respect was accorded, and it was believed that without honoring tradition, nothing of lasting worth could be created. There remains an embedded wisdom that speaks precisely to this balance within Japan's long-treasured disciplines.

Innovation as Collaboration with Predecessors

In Japan, there is a distinctive philosophy known as *Shu-Ha-Ri*. Most often associated with disciplines such as the tea ceremony and the martial arts, it describes the process of learning in three stages.

Training begins with faithfully observing and preserving the teacher's instruction and established forms (*shu*, "to protect or to adhere faithfully"). As one masters the forms, one gradually introduces personal ingenuity, breaking open the form (*ha*, "to break"). Ultimately, one transcends dependence on the teacher and attains an independent realm (*ri*, "to depart").

Behind this way of thinking lies the artistic theory of

Zeami, who perfected the art of Noh. Together with his father, Kan'ami, he was active in a Yamato sarugaku troupe based in Nara. In *Fūshi Kaden*, the oldest surviving treatise on Japanese performance theory, Zeami wrote that to create art capable of captivating an audience, one must first imitate the teacher's movements with complete devotion (KeyBook5-2). In Japan, new value has not traditionally been understood as something born from nothing. Rather, it emerges from a deep accumulation of the past.

Nara embodies this spirit of *Shu-Ha-Ri*:

preserving the teachings of predecessors

while continuing to create anew.

Ancient *hishio*—the precursor to soy sauce and miso—was faithfully reconstructed from historical sources



From Noh Kyōgen Emaki (Lower Scroll),
"Momijigari" (Maple Viewing)

守破離 Shu-Ha-Ri



Shaved ice from the popular kakigōri shop Housekibako

to commemorate the 1300th anniversary of the relocation of the capital to Heijō-kyō. Kakigōri (shaved ice)—elaborately crafted and now one of Nara's most inventive contemporary specialties—traces its origins to ice enjoyed by ancient aristocrats and flavored with amazura, a natural sweetener. Tabi, originally worn outdoors in place of shoes, have been reimagined in form and function as modern "tabi sneakers," now shared with the world. Nara sumi—the charcoal traditionally used to produce calligraphy ink since the era of the Taihō Code (701)—has also found new

expression as interior decorative objects. Buddhist monks, who have spoken to the people since the introduction of Buddhism, now refine their sermons across sectarian lines in forums such as the "H1 Dharma Talk Grand Prix."

Learn from the old to generate new value. In Nara, collaboration unfolds not only among the present generation, but across time itself—encompassing the wisdom and faith of grandparents and distant forebears. Through this engagement between people across time and space, Nara's distinctive mode of innovation takes shape.



H1 Dharma Talk Grand Prix



Nara sumi workshop Kinkoen. "Kaori-zumi Asuka," incense-infused sumi shaped like a gigaku mask.

Wabi-cha: A New Aesthetic Awakening in Nara

Since envoys to Tang China first brought tea across the sea, Nara has remained in close dialogue with tea culture.

Among those who shaped its development was Murata Jūkō, born in Yamato Province in the 15th century and later regarded as the originator of wabi-cha. In his early years, Jūkō encountered many forms of tea culture—from lively tōcha competitions to shoin-style gatherings where rare Chinese objects were displayed in splendor.

A decisive shift came when he studied Zen under Ikkyū Sōjun. Through this encounter, tea came to be understood not as diversion, but as a discipline for cultivating the mind.

With the insight that “the Buddha’s teaching is present in the art of tea,” Jūkō began to recognize beauty not in opulence, but in restraint—in the quiet strength of the simple and the unadorned. By bringing together tea culture from China and Zen thought that matured in Japan, he helped shape a practice that would come to define a distinctly Japanese sensibility: wabi-cha.



(Top) Tea conducted within a shoin-style interior, as depicted in Boki-e (copy)
(Bottom) The tearoom Doku-ro-an at Shōmyō-ji, associated with Murata Jūkō

Shu-Ha-Ri KeyBook



5-1
How did Yamato sarugaku develop into the art of Noh?
Tracing the theatrical traditions rooted in Nara.

**Walking the Worlds of Stories 11—
Nō: The World of Yamato**
Yamakawa Shuppansha, 2011



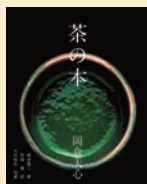
5-2
“If concealed, the flower will bloom.”
The secret teachings of Noh.

Fūshikaden
Zeami
Edited and annotated by Kazuma Kawase
Kodansha Bunko, 1972



5-3
Why do Zen, tea, and martial arts share the idea of *kata*?
A philosophical exploration of the principles of *shu-ha-ri*.

Shu-Ha-Ri no Shisō
—from *Beginner’s Mind to Mastery*
Tadashi Nishihira
Iwanami Shoten, 2025



5-4
The tea ceremony as a ritual
for discovering and honoring beauty.

The Book of Tea
Translated by Hiroshi Muraoka
Photo by Yasuhiro Ookawa
PIE International, 2020

Q.6

What is Imagination in the Japanese Tradition?



In today’s society, we are expected to make things visible: verbalized, evidenced, quantified. Information that can be grasped at a glance through numbers or images is welcomed, while events that cannot easily be visualized—or ideas that take time to understand—are often overlooked. There is a pitfall here. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan warned that “in a visually centered civilization, the other senses gradually decline.” Even as visible

information increases, our ability to sense what cannot be seen may be receding into the background. Long ago, the poet-monk Saigyō wrote: “I do not know what presence dwells here—yet, overcome with reverence, tears fall from my eyes.” To be moved by the presence of something whose form and name remain unknown—to accept the unseen as unseen. Might we be able to recover such a sensibility?

Evoking the Unseen

Japan has a word: *omokage*. It appears in the *Man'yōshū* and in *The Tale of Genji*, and in *Tsurezuregusa* it is expressed in the line: "Upon hearing the name alone, one already feels able to imagine the face." To hear a name, to glimpse only a fragment, and yet to see clearly in the mind a person's presence or a scene from the past—this evocative power may be called *omokage*.

There are times, when we feel the vivid presence of the absent—someone, or something, that is not here in the moment. Like, for example, during the procession of the Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri, when the lights are lowered and people quietly sense the passing of the unseen deity, Wakamiya-sama, through the darkness. What cannot be perceived by the eye is felt with the whole body and formed within the mind.

Nara is a city of *omokage*. Walking near its temples, shrines, and ancient burial mounds, one may notice fragments of roof tiles or shards of earthenware resting on the ground. In that instant, it is as if

OMOKAGE おもかげ

Mount Nijō



Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri

one were wearing virtual-reality goggles: scenes from long ago rise before the eyes. On the walls of shops, contemporary goods stand beside maps and illustrations from centuries past. When one looks at a map from the Edo period, the streets align almost seamlessly with the present cityscape. The sunrise over Mount Wakakusa and Kasugayama Primeval Forest are landscapes shared by those who lived a thousand years ago and those who live today.

To walk through Nara is to encounter fragments of history. The fragments are just that—tiny pieces of what once was. And precisely because they are small, the imagination is free to soar, traveling across a millennium. What may not appear clearly to the eye nonetheless remains deeply inscribed in the heart. Nara, filled with the *omokage* of Japan's past, quietly awakens within us the capacity to sense what is no longer visible. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere, that one truly experiences *Old History, New Discovery*.



Fragment of square tile with figures of triad



Takamatsuzuka Tomb Murals

NARA Fragment

Shinobu Orikuchi and *Omokage*

A poem in the *Man'yōshū* reads: "I, a living being in this transient world— / from tomorrow on / I shall look upon Mount Futakami as my younger brother." It was composed in mourning for Prince Ōtsu, who was executed on suspicion of rebellion.

Located at the western edge of the Yamato Basin, Mount Nijō—known in earlier times as Mount Futakami—has long been associated with imperial mausolea and was regarded as an entrance to the other world. Prince Ōtsu was laid to rest there. At the foot of the mountain stands Taimadera, where legend tells of Princess Chūjō, who wove a mandala in a single night. When the folklorist Shinobu Orikuchi stayed there, he drew inspiration from the memories and traditions said to dwell in Mount Nijō. Interweaving the story of Prince Ōtsu with that of Princess Chūjō, he composed the visionary work *The Book of the Dead*. History, legend, and literature overlap in layers of *omokage* on Mount Nijō.



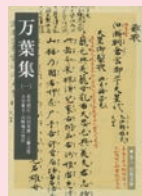
The Jōkyō-era Taima Mandala. Taimadera Temple.
Important Cultural Property.

Omokage KeyBook



6-1
Using the *Man'yōshū* and *Shōsō-in* treasures as clues to recreate life in ancient Heijō-kyō.

Man'yōbito no Nara
Nara of the Man'yō People
Makoto Ueno
Shincho Sensho, 2010



6-2
Poems that reveal the living presence of the *Man'yō* people.

Man'yōshū (5 vols.)
Edited by Akihiro Satake, Hideo Yamada, Rikio Kudō, Masao Ōtani, and Fukuyuki Yamazaki
Iwanami Bunko, 2013–2015



6-3
Omokage—the deeper layer of Japanese cultural imagination.

Senya Sensatsu Edition: Omokage Nippon
Seigow Matsuoka
Kadokawa Sophia Bunko, 2018



6-4
Hearn's portrait of a vanishing spiritual culture.

Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan
Lafcadio Hearn
Translated by Masayuki Ikeda
Kadokawa Sophia Bunko, 2000

Image Credits

P6–8

Oni no Chobuku-shiki (Demon Exorcism Ritual) at Kinpusenji Temple Courtesy of Kinpusenji Temple
Oni-hashiri (Demon Run) at Dada-do hall of Nenbutsu-ji Temple (Gojo City) Courtesy of Gojo City Tourism Association
O-taimatsu of the Shuni-e ceremony (Sacred Torches) at Tōdai-ji Temple Photo by Yasuhiro Imamiya
Wakakusa Yamayaki (Burning of Mount Wakakusa) Courtesy of Nara City
Onigawara (demon-faced tile) at Akaiya of Nigatsu-dō, Tōdai-ji Temple. Photo by Shinzo Ota

P10–12

Uguisu no Taki Waterfall in the Kasugayama Primeval Forest Photo: k-hiro / PIXTA
Deer-calling event of Nara Courtesy of Nara City Tourism Association
Biwa lute with back made of kaede stained with sappan juice and decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, No.1. (Shōsō-in Treasure)
Source: Office of the Shōsō-in/Treasure House, Imperial Household Agency
Reconstructed drawing of the celestial beings on the Small Wall of the Kondō, Horyūji Temple Collection of the Nara National Museum
"Autumn Persimmons at Nishizato, Ikaruga": Photograph by Taikichi Irie Courtesy of Nara City

P14–16

Deer Crossing a Pedestrian Crossing, Nara Photo: narashika / Adobe Stock
Heisei Gigaku Troupe, companions of Sento-kun Courtesy of Satoshi Yabuuchi Studio
Reliquary Shrine with Sacred Deer of Kasuga (detail) Collection of the Nara National Museum
Mandala of Kasuga Shrine and Kōfukuji Temple Collection of the Nara National Museum
Former residence of Naoya Shiga Courtesy of Nara Gakuen Educational Corporation

P18–20

Yamato Province (Map of the Kinai Region) Collection of the Kyoto University Library
Tenpyō Procession, Heijō-kyō Courtesy of the Heijō-kyō Tenpyō Procession Executive Committee
Akahada-ware Courtesy of Akahada-yaki Oshio Masando Kiln
Kōji Kinutani, Radiant Nara Courtesy of the Kōji Kinutani Art Foundation
Morino Old Medicinal Garden, Tōgaku-an Courtesy of Morino Old Medicinal Garden
Pages 23–24 from Matsuyama Honzō Source: Kyoko Takahashi, *Morino Tōsuke Saikaku's Faithful Copy of Matsuyama Honzō*
Collection of Morino Old Medicinal Garden
The two images above courtesy of **Kyoko Takahashi** (Visiting Professor, Osaka University Museum / Advisor, Morino Old Medicinal Garden)

P22–24

From Noh Kyōgen Emaki (Lower Scroll), "Momijigari" (Maple Viewing) Source: ColBase, National Institutes for Cultural Heritage (Japan)
Collection of the Tokyo National Museum
Shaved ice from the popular kagigōri shop Housekibako Courtesy of Kakigori Housekibako
H1 Dharma Talk Grand Prix Courtesy of the H1 Dharma Talk Grand Prix Executive Committee
Nara sumi workshop Kinkoen. "Kaori-zumi Asuka," Courtesy of Nara Sumi Workshop Kinkoen
Boki-e (biographical stories about priest Kakunyo) (copy) Source: ColBase, National Institutes for Cultural Heritage (Japan) Collection of the Tokyo National Museum
The tearoom Doku-ro-an at Shōmyō-ji Courtesy of Shōmyō-ji Templ Photo by Masaya Tamura

P26–28

Mount Nijō Courtesy of Kashiba City
Kasuga Wakamiya On-Matsuri Courtesy of KasugaTaisha Shrine
Fragment of square tile with figures of triad Collection of the Nara National Museum
Takamatsuzuka Tomb Murals Source: Wikimedia Commons
Original material: Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties Public domain
The Jōkyō-era Taima Mandala. Collection of Taimadera Temple Courtesy of the Nara National Museum

*1 Kenta Shimizu
"Possibilities of Community Leadership through Festivals" *Socioscience*, No.29 (2023) Waseda University Institute for Advanced Social Sciences
*2 Takeshi Yamawaki *Media Literacy in the Age of SNS* Chikuma Q Books, 2024

Take a moment to note what you discovered and thought about while exploring the history and culture of Nara.

Old History, New Discovery.

Through social media, we share new discoveries in Nara with the world.



#oldnewnara

NARACODE

Unearthing the Cultural Fragments of Nara

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This booklet, NARA CODE, is a new attempt to interpret the historical, cultural, and everyday wisdom embedded in Nara through questions and challenges widely shared in contemporary society.

By organizing these hints—insights and forms of wisdom rooted in Nara—into a coherent framework, the booklet aims to communicate the enduring appeal of Nara to audiences both in Japan and around the world.

In its preparation, the Editorial Engineering Laboratory was commissioned by Nara City to produce this booklet based on the voices of people connected with Nara, including tourism ambassadors, students, and scholars. Rather than presenting a single ideology or fixed set of values, the booklet uses the history and culture of Nara as a reference point, offering readers clues that encourage them to think and reflect for themselves.