

David and Goliath

The chances of long-time resident W. David Kubiak being elected Mayor of Kyoto come the August 8th election are, well, nil. As a U.S. citizen, the 47 year old lecturer in media studies at Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University is neither eligible to register as a candidate nor serve in office. Rather, he is taking the opportunity to mount his own "virtual campaign" for mayor, to highlight the lack of true democratic empowerment for the average citizen.

John Ashburne talks to him about taking on the giants of the Japanese corporate and political Establishment.

When you first came to Kyoto you set up a coffee-shop-cum-activist meeting-place with the splendid name 'Fun' (the Japanese reading means 'escurement'). Even then you came into conflict with one of Japan's vested interest groups.

That was my first encounter with the Yakuza. A guy we knew had got into debt with some gangsters and put up his house as collateral on the loan. We ran it as a coffee-shop and gave the profits to him to repay the loan. Two years later, the minute he'd paid what he owed, the Yakuza moved in with the bulldozers. No negotiating with bulldozers.

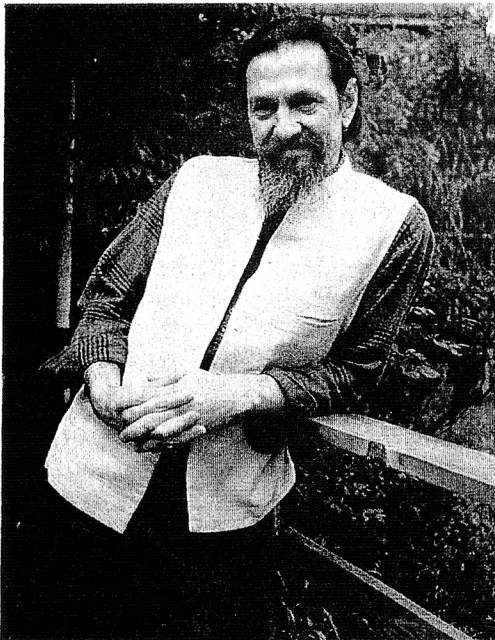
Then you started a live-house, named after a legendary priest-robber-poet?

After 'Fun' we started the blues venue 'Jittoku'. Back in 1972 we realised that Kyoto had a flourishing musical underground, but there were no places to perform. We needed a stage. There were a number of rock bands around, and some excellent blues bands. So 'Jittoku' was born. Do you know the legend? Jittoku was a cook at a monastery out in the middle of nowhere. He and his buddy Kanzan, used to steal food from the kitchens and feed the assorted itinerants up in the mountains. One day the Emperor, consumed by problems of metaphysical magnitude, sent his Prime Minister out to find the Wisest of the Wise. The PM was directed to Jittoku and Kanzan's place. The Prime Minister did the full-length bow and begged enlightenment. Jittoku and Kanzan promptly fell into hysterical giggles, fled into the mountains and disappeared into a cave forever. End of story. This presented a problem for the PM who'd got to deliver the goods to the Emperor, so he took off up the mountain looking for marks of Jittoku and his mate's wisdom. He collected poetry he found inscribed on stones and trees throughout the Kingdom. Most were in fact com-

posed by Jittoku. Gary Snyder's translations of them are excellent, his Cold Mountain poems. Anyway Jittoku was something of a rogue, a poet and a vagabond who stole from those who had and gave to the had-nots. I could identify with that.

Next came KOSAC a grassroots networking and media organisation designed to put activists in touch with each other, via computer, worldwide. You've set up a community radio station and now a project in India?

Kyoto Shimin Gaiko Association. The Kyoto City Government in all its wisdom could only manage to select one Asian city for sister city



status - Xian, the city in China that served as the original model for Kyoto. We wanted to redress the balance. So we set up a project that would work as a seed for citizen-level links between Kyoto and another Asian city. We chose Udaipur, in Rajasthan, partly because it was a place I knew personally having lived there for some years, but more importantly perhaps because it is so culturally removed from Japan. We've sent 18 people, mostly housewives and students, to study a reforestation project there. The Japanese government has promised ¥100,000, 000 for the project and we wanted to put some people on the ground there to study and monitor how the it develops and keep an eye on where the funds are really going.

And now you're running for mayor?

The city elections are coming up in August and I'm 'standing for office', though not in the conventionally accepted manner. As an American citizen I'm prevented from even registering as a candidate let alone becoming mayor. The whole point of running the 'virtual' campaign is to highlight our group's attempt to introduce a proposal to the assembly at City Hall. Technically speaking, we are making use of what is called the

Initiative Referendum System. We want to introduce a *Chokusetsu Jorei Setei Seikyo*. In layman's terms it's a direct application from the people for the enactment of a law.

How do you go about that?

To get a law enacted we need to collect a petition signed by at least two percent of eligible voters. That means we need 24,000 signatures in Kyoto. Once the signatures are validated the Mayor is compelled to put the proposed law before the assembly, where it is then put to the vote.

What happens thereafter?

Once the law has been presented to the assembly, they have every right to vote it down, which they almost always do. The most notorious example of this happened at the prefectural level in Hokkaido. A group of concerned citizens wanting to find information about the opening of a nuclear facility there were told they had to gain the signatures of 5% of the populace within 2 months. They actually got 35% in six weeks. The governor put their resolution to the assembly who promptly voted it down. And that was that.

What law are you trying to put through?

The law that we're trying to introduce would allow citizens to propose and vote on ordinances related to nuclear power, conservation and environmental issues, and above all gain access to information. Establishing freedom of information is one of our major goals. Without it we can never achieve anything other than a veneer of real democracy. Who the hell is representing anyone as the system stands? In the West, elected representatives feel the groundswell of public opinion and act on upon it accordingly. They have no choice. If they don't listen to the demands of their constituents they're out. In the East, there's nothing to make the elected representatives answer to anyone.

But the politicians are by no means your only adversaries.

When we established KOSAC, to initiate the networking process, we invited various disparate groups to come together to talk about their activities. There were people concerned for Chinese students, East Timor, Buraku People, anti-nuclear groups, human-rights groups, anti-apartheid groups, people worried about toxic waste and the *gomi-mondai*. When we all sat down in a room together it was a total disaster. Everyone was preoccupied with their own issues. It was only after three hours that we finally managed to address ourselves to the important question, of what we have in common. The answer was revealing. We found that almost every organisation was, in some way, ranged against the same bunch of multi-national corporations. We discovered we were up against a common and very powerful enemy. Of the Fortune 500 top companies we

found that we were fighting against perhaps a hundred of them. The companies that were getting their oil from Indonesia and tacitly supporting what was happening in East Timor were the same ones that were deforesting the Burmese rainforests, investing ever more heavily in South Africa, and destroying the Thai mangrove swamps. They are also the companies that are knocking down Kyoto.

Have you heard of Fuyo Group? They are almost unheard of here in Japan, but they're possibly one of the most powerful organizations on the planet. Born out of the remains of the Yasuda *Zaibatsu*, they're the least respectable of all the '*keiretsu*' groups. Marubeni Corporation and the Fuji Bank are at the heart of the group. Hitachi and Asahi Beer are heavily involved too. Fuyo are behind the Kyoto Hotel Project.

So you want to introduce a law that will empower small grassroots organisations to fight against these mega-corporations?

Sitting around at KOSAC, the groups agreed that once they'd identified their enemy, there was not much they could do about it. Mass meetings only served to preach to the converted, and they were rarely all that 'mass' either; petition drives didn't mean beans when it came down to it. We were running around with bamboo spears against invincible adversaries.

Hence your fight in August?

We're running this 'virtual candidacy' to draw people's attention to the fact that representative democracy here isn't really representing anyone, and at the same time campaigning for a procedure that should allow us to take on the multi-national corporations that are hell-bent on destroying the planet. It isn't easy. No-one has really done this before. We've just heard that there's a technicality which prevents us from demanding a *Chokusetsu Jorei Setei Seikyo* prior to an election. It's a minor, but annoying setback. Still, we'll be back once the new electoral term gets underway in September.

It must feel at times as though you're banging your head against a brick wall?

The Japanese are simply not used to this level of democratic empowerment. We will finally get to put our demands to the city assembly, whereupon they'll vote them out of existence. But the educational value of what we're doing remains. We're setting up the public conversation. Some cities will have reformist elements in the assembly. Things will change.

This country isn't exactly renowned for its capacity for change is it?

Introducing innovations to communities anywhere is complex. Research has indicated that if 10% of any group support an idea, and 40% are aware of it, then there is a strong chance it will be

adopted. That's our target. As long as we're increasing awareness were serving a very positive role. Introducing real democracy to Japan? Something akin to introducing the condom to the Philippines.

The Western concept of democracy is a relatively new arrival to these parts.

Does democracy lurk in the heart of the Japanese? The Japanese establishment likes to say not. It would of course. On a one-to-one basis I've found the Japanese have the same legitimate concerns as their Western counterparts - about their children, about education, and health, about the livability of their environments. Like Westerners, they want to get a say in the decisions that effect their lives. *That's* the definition of democracy.

Yet the people, individuals, remain essentially powerless?

Japan is one of the most envied countries in the world, not least by the corporate giants. IBM would love to be Japanese. Why? People here don't have the power to reign in the huge corporations, to force them to examine their environmental and human-rights records. There are no product liability laws, no necessity for public environment assessments. All the companies move together to cartelise the market. When you go down to the beer machine and find out the price has gone up ¥20, it has *across the board*. And no-one says a damn word. In other parts of the world these same enormous companies can afford to sell at a loss for 3-5 years, the dumping being subsidized by huge profits they accrue on the home market. Then hostility rises up against the Japanese citizens who are unwittingly financing the whole operation.

So in a real sense the Japanese people are losing out both at home and abroad?

Kyoto's getting torn down. Is that the worst of it? We can always go somewhere else. Marubeni strip-mines the Philippines and those people have nowhere to go. Japan has created these corporate monsters and lost control of them. If we can help them to reign in these huge corporations we'll be performing an international service, even though we're acting at a local level. It's not so much foreign pressure '*gaiatsu*' any more as foreign influence '*gai eikyo*'. Japan Inc ceased to feel foreign pressure once its economy reached No 1. The States is the only foreign power that Japan listens to now. If the E.C. ever gets its act together, they might have some say. What we can do here on the ground is bring in the cameras. Unfortunately in a way, but it's one of the levers we've got.

Kyoto Ecomedia Nancho Ijin Butai may be reached through the KOSAC office, Tel 075 771 4109.

Kyoto Shimin Gaiko are organising an August tour to Rajasthan. Those interested in hands-on experience of their reforestation project, call 075 451 5747.