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The Wild Years: Roger Walch remembers the riotous history of Kyoto

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Seibu Kodo is a haven for leftist underground culture. The first thing one notices about the building is the three yellow stars on the tiled roof. Painted in 1972, the marks serve as a tribute to the violent student uprisings that took place in Kyoto in the late 60s.

The huge wooden hall on the Kyoto University campus was originally built in 1937 as a training facility for the kendo and basketball club. After World War II, a professor donated a film projector and the facility has been an important venue for independent movie screenings and avant-garde theatre ever since. Film director Oshima Nagisa showed his first works here; it was also the site of many notorious rock concerts such as "Fuck '70." Like the nearby student dormitory Yoshida-ryo (built in 1913 and still in use), Seibu Kodo is managed entirely by Kyoto University students.

The radical student movement came to many people's attention with a 1970 hijacking incident, in which armed members of the Red Army Faction diverted a Japan Airlines flight to North Korea. Campus radicalism had already been thriving for at least a decade with the growing resistance among younger people to the automatic renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (or Anpo joyaku) in 1960.

Even earlier, just after the war, students had begun criticizing the systematic inadequacies of campuses throughout Japan. This led in 1948 to the unification of the nation's student bodies as the Zengakuren (All-Japan Federation of Students' Self-Governing Bodies). With the start of the Korean War and problems with the U.S. Occupation, the scope of activity broadened. By 1951, the Zengakuren had fallen under the controlling authority of the Japan Communist Party (JCP).

By the time students and workers surrounded the National Diet and voiced their opposition to the 1960 treaty, demonstrations were being organized by the Zengakuren throughout the country. The relative calm that followed in the mid-60s ended with the eruption of nationwide campus unrest in 1968-69. This marked the most combative and stormy academic year in the history of modern Japan with over 100 universities becoming engulfed in unrest. One of the main objections was that medical students were forced to serve a one-year unpaid internship upon graduation, a practice that was viewed as exploitative. Rising tuition, the ongoing Vietnam War, and another renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty fueled the anger.

In January 1969, Tokyo University students barricaded themselves into a section of the main clock tower, provoking the authorities into a showdown in which riot police with water cannons and helicopters were summoned. No one was allowed to graduate at the end of that academic year and entrance examinations for newly enrolling students had to be cancelled.

The mass demonstrations by Zengakuren during this period had the feel of ancient peasant uprisings or medieval battles with both sides decked out in riot gear - helmets, shields, and fighting poles. They were highly disciplined affairs where thousands of participants would advance in a perfectly choreographed manner while singing or chanting revolutionary slogans and bearing colorful banners. Although vociferous opposition in the Diet prohibited the use of teargas except in extreme cases, the riot police were soon outfitted with mobile riot buses, water cannons and huge nets to deflect thrown rocks and bricks.

At Kyoto University, a faction of the Young Doctors' Union called on the students to boycott entrance examinations. Students who opposed the boycott were attacked by militant members of the union. Riot police were called in, and in the fights that ensued, 270 people were injured. This triggered a widespread strike among the faculty, and then a complete faculty lockout. A mixture of students and teachers erected barricades, school buildings were taken over, and gates and entrances to the universities were blocked off.

Ultimately, the students weren't able to prevent the entrance examinations, but they did succeed in cancelling the graduation ceremony. Similar turmoils spread to other Kyoto universities, such as Doshisha, Ritsumeikan or Ryukoku. Lockouts, demonstrations and street battles continued for several months, and the fighting was not limited to the campuses.

The final battle of the Kyoto student uprisings took place on September 20, 1969 around the university clock tower. Riot police stormed the university and arrested the students who were occupying the buildings. Other protest sites included the Hyakumanben intersection near Seibu Kodo and the southwest side of Doshisha University. From behind barricades, the students threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, and some police cars were torched. Students from other universities and regular citizens sympathetic to the cause fought alongside them. A Kansai University student died from injuries he sustained during the fight, which lasted until deep in the night.

Many of the students who participated in the movement became radicals out of a simple sense of fun and adventure. Only a few had a clear political vision, and hardly anyone considered the consequences. Many of the arrested students were expelled from the universities, blacklisted and had great difficulty finding a job, or even getting a passport. Although the student revolution eventually failed, it did exert a lasting influence on a generation. The events of the late 1960s were transformed into many well-known works of Japanese art, music, literature, and film. In 1971, members of the Peace for Vietnam Citizens' League, who were fighting against the war along with the students, opened the alternative restaurant Honyarado on Imadegawa-dori. Located right between two of the famous battlegrounds, the place is still popular with political activists and has served as a meeting place for Kyoto NGOs and NPOs for 35 years. Here the spirit of Kyoto's wild years live on. kto

For more information (in Japanese) on Honyarado, see: <http://honyarado.cool.ne.jp/> or call 075-222-1574.

red headgear

What started as a common struggle against the Vietnam War and Japanese government support of American military interests soon broke down into factional infighting set off by minor theoretical and tactical differences. As protests grew more violent and police became more well-equipped, students took to wearing helmets and towels across their mouths. This uniform is believed to have been inspired by the 1960 miners' strike at the Mitsui Miike Mine in Kyushu, where both items were a necessity.

Members of each student group came to be identified by the color and insignia on their helmet (or meto). The Chukakuha (Revolutionary Communist League) helmet, for example, was white with the group's name in hand-painted black kanji, the Kakumaruha (Revolutionary Marxist League) was white with a large "Z" (for Zengakuren) and a red stripe around it, and the Beheiren (Citizens' League for Peace in Vietnam) was black with the word "NON" in white letters. There were also regional colors for those who weren't allied with any of the over 20 groups that were active on campuses around the country. In Kansai, red was for Doshisha and Kyoto University, and black for Osaka University.

In general, each group was expected to provide its members with a helmet; money to buy them often came from each university's student body treasury. Some groups cultivated a fierce reputation through strong and more expensive helmets, while others were known for their pacific manner and easily broken headgear. As helmets were often dropped or lost in protests, it was common to steal replacements from other groups and paint over them. Some helmets were covered with several layers of paint and various allegiances.

Perhaps the best known wearers of student helmets were John Lennon and Ono Yoko during their brief foray into radical politics in the early 70s. On the front cover of Lennon's 1971 single "Power to the People," he is shown wearing a helmet decorated with the kanji hon ("rebellion") and raising his fist. On the reverse side, Ono, in a similar helmet, is making a peace sign.

Chronology of Japanese Student Movement

1967

October 8

Haneda Airport: Demonstration against Prime Minister Sato Eisaku's visit to South Vietnam. Zengakuren battles riot police at Bentenbashi. One student is killed.

1968

August 17/September 12

Osaka Airport: 3,000 workers and students demonstrate against the use of airport for military operations.

October 21

Shinjuku Station: Demonstration and subsequent riots against the transporting of U.S. military fuel tanks using Japanese railways. New Anti-Riot Law enforced for the first time.

November 15

Kobe Port: Demonstration by 1,500 people against the use of the port for military operations.

December

Due to the occupation of Tokyo University and violent riots by radical students, all entrance examinations to are cancelled (for the first and only time in the school's history).

1969

January 18

Tokyo University: Riot police attempt to oust students who are occupying Yasuda Kodo Hall, the symbol and center of the school.

1969

January-October

Many public and private universities follow Tokyo University's lead in removing the radical element. Students erect barricades against the police. In Kansai, this starts with Kyoto University followed soon after by Osaka City, Ritsumeikan, Kobe, Doshisha, Kansai and Kansai Gakuin University.

March 1-3

Kyoto University: Demonstrations are staged during entrance exams, and barricades are erected on Higashiyama-dori. Riot police move in and try to take back the campus. Their arrival is met with Molotov cocktails and other objects. Twenty students are arrested.

September 20

Kyoto: Riot police battle radical students at the Kyoto University clock tower. Fighting spreads to Imadegawa-dori and Hyakumanben. One student is killed in front of Doshisha University.

September 22

Barricades at the Kyoto University clock tower are removed by riot police. Red Army Faction members attack police boxes in Osaka and Kyoto.

November

Until June of 1970, demonstrations against the Japan-U.S. Security Alliance (Anpo) and for the return of Okinawa are staged repeatedly throughout the country.

1971

February, July, September

National demonstrations against the confiscation of farmland for the construction of a military airport in Sanrizuka, Chiba. (This later becomes Narita International Airport.)

November

Mass riots are staged throughout the country against the so-called "Okinawa Reversion Agreement," which stipulates that U.S. military bases will be maintained in Okinawa.

1972

February

Student revolutionaries take a hostage and barricade themselves in a mountain cottage called Asama-Sanso near Karuizawa (Nagano Prefecture) in a ten-day standoff with police. During the raid, two police officers are killed and 24 people are injured.

Later, it was found that the radicals had brutally killed twelve of their own members prior to entering the cottage because they acted "weakly." This incident threw the Left into confusion and eventually broke the back of the Japanese student movement.



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