



PROJECT MUSE®

---

A Japanese View of Nature: The World of Living Things  
(review)

David S. Sprague

The Journal of Japanese Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, Winter 2004, pp.  
211-215 (Review)

Published by Society for Japanese Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2004.0033>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55122>

developed” (pp. 158–59). Social Darwinist conceptions, Thomas suggests, seemed less compelling as theorists realized that they would “imply that Japan lagged behind ‘the West.’” The search for a reconfigured modernity led ideologues to a “nationalized conception of nature,” one ridding nature of its “universalistic and progressive implications” (p. 159), and subsuming it, via “acculturation,” to nothing broader than Japanese culture. Consequently, Thomas claims that “Japan’s twentieth-century sense of nature [including its supposed ‘love of nature’], far from being a traditional or premodern hold-over, was a new creation, configured in reaction against Social Darwinism and in conformity with the requirements of national pride” (p. 178).

*Reconfiguring Modernity* is less helpful in examining the development of new conceptualizations of nature and the polity in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, coverage of nature and the polity between the end of the Meiji period and the 1940s, a time of intense and varied ideological production, is unfortunately given the short shrift. While the focus on works such as *Kokutai no hongī*, the role of Shintō in nationalizing nature, and the writings of Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) is thoroughly appropriate, readers might wonder why as much analytic energy as was given to Katō, Baba, and Ueki was not devoted to this crucial period of tragic ideological reconfiguration. In certain respects, the weakness of the final chapters is highlighted by the more obvious strength of the monograph in discussing Meiji understandings of nature and the polity. At the same time, the evident, and surely major contribution of the study is in opening up a broad field of discourse, the relationship of conceptions of nature to the problem of modernity, from Tokugawa times through the mid-twentieth century. It should come as no surprise that any volume attempting such an enormous task will at points seem less than fully satisfactory. That notwithstanding, Thomas’s *Reconfiguring Modernity* is undoubtedly a profound must-read for anyone interested in the unfolding of Japanese political thought, especially as it relates to the problem of shifting conceptions of nature and modernity.

*A Japanese View of Nature: The World of Living Things.* By Kinji Imanishi; edited and introduced by Pamela J. Asquith; translated by Pamela J. Asquith, Heita Kawakatsu, Shusuke Yagi, and Hiroyuki Takasaki. RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2002. xiv, 97 pages. \$22.95, paper.

Reviewed by

DAVID S. SPRAGUE

National Institute for Agro-Environmental Sciences

Ecologist, anthropologist, and alpinist, Imanishi Kinji wrote prolifically on exploration and biology during his long career from the 1930s through the

1980s, based for much of this time at Kyoto University. He is perhaps best known as the founder of Japanese primatology. Although Imanishi died in 1992, his influence still pervades primatology and some parts of ecology in Japan. Up to about the late 1980s, Japanese graduate students in primatology were expected to read, and some still do read, *Seibutsu no sekai* (The world of living things), the seminal work by Imanishi. Now translated by Pamela J. Asquith and her team, the English-language audience finally has the opportunity to confront Imanishi's philosophy of evolution and ecology.

Asquith, professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta, has fulfilled her quest in completing the translation of this volume. She is one of two types of non-Japanese field researchers who have taken an interest in Japanese primatology. One joined Japanese colleagues in carrying out research with them, while the other joined as participant observers to study Japanese science as a culture intermingling Western and non-Western values. Asquith is of the latter. (I am of the former.) Our colleagues based outside Japan can now join the discussion on the culture of natural science in Japan.

Many primatologists and ecologists remember Imanishi fondly, as do I. His books have a large public following, and the set of his collected works amounts to 14 volumes. He was honored repeatedly, including with the Order of Culture (Bunka Kunshō) from the Japanese government. Nevertheless, even his own students are the first to admit that his writings are difficult, and none of his books had yet been translated, although several of his papers had. Personally, I both welcomed and dreaded the prospect of an English version of *Seibutsu no sekai*. Imanishi wrote in a rambling, expository essay style that made one wonder when he would ever get to the point. Many of his ideas and terminology are highly idiosyncratic. Most problematic for biologists, Imanishi is anti-Darwinian. And because it was written in 1940, I feared that a twenty-first-century audience would find *Seibutsu no sekai* to be an anachronism.

Asquith has allayed many of my fears with a masterful translation and a series of introductory essays by herself and her translation team. Part of the charm of this translation is that it preserves the personal experience of reading Imanishi. The personalization of reading this book is unavoidable, because Imanishi made it so. At the beginning of the book, Imanishi declares the book to be a self-portrait, a personal view of the world he was compelled to draw quickly because he could have been called up to serve in the war. He wished to leave a record of one biologist in Japan. Following the war, Imanishi's powerful personality shaped the experiences of the students he led in reviving ecological research. Reading *Seibutsu no sekai* was part of that experience for several generations of Kyoto-based ecologists. This personal view of Imanishi is expressed in the first introductory essay of this volume by Takasaki Hiroyuki, a biologist now at the Okayama University of

Science. He had read *Seibutsu no sekai* for the first time at the age of 17 years. Here, he recommends reading the book many times, as if climbing a favorite mountain.

I also recalled Imanishi's essay style, which carries the reader happily along, anticipating what would turn up next, as he expounded on the wondrous ecology and evolution of the living things of our world. Soon, though, the student will have to confront the problem of trying to figure out the meaning of the great man's words. I found the experience edifying, because Imanishi had the knack for identifying fundamental assumptions in the philosophy of biology and challenged the reader to think about evolution under different assumptions. This translation allowed me to feel challenged once more.

However, Imanishi's little book now faces new challenges itself. Can *Seibutsu no sekai* find new audiences outside the circle of nostalgic Imanishian ecologists? New questions came to my mind as I reread the book in English. Will Imanishi find relevance today for Japanese studies? There is no doubt that *Seibutsu no sekai* is indeed *A Japanese View of Nature*, as Asquith has titled this version. Imanishi was very self-consciously Japanese. Nevertheless, I could not help wondering if the book will teach the English-language audience something different about Japan? Or is this book so personal that it is exactly what the author declared it to be, a self-portrait?

Yagi Shusuke and Asquith place the book in both past and present contexts in their introductory essays. Yagi, an anthropologist at Furman University, presents Imanishi as an example of the indigenization of science as a step toward recognizing the legitimacy of non-Western discourses. He considers Imanishi to be an example of a scientist "creating a new concept or model molded from indigenous experiences situated in a non-Western episteme, and applying it with a new meaning in Western scientific discourse" (p. xv). Imanishi himself was acutely aware of this issue, although not explicitly in this volume, and not with Yagi's particular terminology. He expanded on his own terminology in his later writings as he attempted to formulate his personal theory of evolution, extending a non-Darwinian slant that starts in this volume.

In her more extended introductory essay, Asquith provides the biographical background to Imanishi's life, his education in Kyoto, early research in entomology, founding of the Academic Alpine Club of Kyoto University, and exploratory expeditions to the South Pacific, northeast China, and Inner Mongolia. She also places Imanishi and his philosophy in the context of the Kyoto intelligentsia of his time. In particular, she points out his association with the Kyoto School of philosophy, including his relationship to Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). Imanishi knew Nishida socially, but the extent to which Nishida's philosophy influenced Imanishi is difficult to assess. Asquith does refer to Japanese commentators who claim to find whole pas-

sages from Nishida's books in Imanishi's *Seibutsu no sekai*. She attempts to identify some key concepts from Nishida that may have found their way into this book, such as Nishida's antipathy to mechanistic explanations of nature, or his argument that an individual cannot exist outside the context of society.

When readers reach Imanishi's own text, they will be drawn into a philosophy of biological evolution that is at once familiar and unfamiliar. Initially, biologists will find familiar themes, as listed in the chapter titles: "Similarity and Difference," "On Structure," "On Environment," "On Society," and "On History." His discussions on structure and function, or the intricate relationship between organism and environment, continue to be core issues of ecology today. Biologists will find less familiar many of Imanishi's notions on evolution, especially his anti-Darwinism. Whether Imanishi was prescient in his time in comparison to his Western colleagues requires closer study by historians of science familiar with the scientific literature of his time, a task made possible for many more scholars by this translation.

Readers will find little guide to where specifically Japanese ideas may be found in the book itself. I think I find them in his play on words based on the character denoting "to live." Other candidates may be his emphasis on the relationship of individuals with larger, integrated structures constituted by society, species, and environment, or the attribution of autonomy to all living things. His view that the avoidance of conflict, rather than conflict itself, is a driving force in biological evolution may echo values on conflict in society. For example, in one passage he declares, "if we admit that living things tend to preserve the individual and maintain the present state, we can also think that they avoid wasteful friction and abhor conflict, and we see a state of equilibrium without friction or conflict" (p. 41). I leave further judgment to scholars familiar with Japanese intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 2001, in celebration of Imanishi's one-hundredth birthday, the Academic Alpine Club of Kyoto University hosted a commemorative symposium with scholars and alpinists who had climbed many a peak with him, and the Kyoto University Museum mounted an exhibit on his life and research. *Seibutsu no sekai* and other books by Imanishi remain in print, and are now available for purchase via the internet. A new generation of authors writes books and maintains web sites about him. Imanishi's legacy, thus, still endures.

Whether Imanishi's works will continue to be read by Japanese graduate students in ecology, however, remains to be seen. I suspect the students are sharply divided over the value of the Imanishian legacy. Thanks to Asquith and her team, the debate has now popped out of Japan, and an international audience can now join the discussion on the nature of *Seibutsu no sekai*.

For scholars studying contemporary Japan, the continuing public appeal

of Imanishi may be a fruitful avenue of investigation. This suggestion is also my request, because, in fact, Imanishi's public appeal is somewhat mysterious to those of us who have been immersed in his world as ecologists or primatologists. What does the public see in him? I even have had the experience of being chided by a nonscientist for not more fully incorporating Imanishi's ideas into my own research. Imanishi's public appeal has been his personal charisma and, to some extent, the readers' nationalism. The figure of Imanishi standing up to Darwin and the West appeals to many in Japan. However, I don't think these points explain his broad appeal. My own hypothesis is simply that Imanishi could stir the public through his writing, just as he inspired his students to go forth and do field work in the far corners of the earth. Imanishi's works are far more accessible to the public than those of many other members in the pantheon of Japanese scholarship, such as his contemporaries in the Kyoto intelligentsia, Nishida Kitarō and Yukawa Hideki. Just as in his persona of an uncanny leader of exploratory expeditions, Imanishi addresses the readers squarely and pulls them into joining him in the great scientific debates. *Seibutsu no sekai* was the first and still perhaps the most accessible of his books, and still the first book by him picked up by many readers. We shall now see if a new readership finds inspiration in the English version, *The World of Living Things*.

*Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-Garde 1905–1931*. By Gennifer Weisenfeld. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002. xi, 368 pages. \$55.00.

*Reviewed by*  
ALEXANDRA MUNROE  
Japan Society Gallery

In recent years, social, political, and intellectual histories of Japanese modernity have become increasingly common as topics of research and publication. Yet the role of visual artists as agents of modernism is often omitted in these recent studies. Gennifer Weisenfeld's spectacular study of Mavo and the Taisho avant-garde is the first to fully examine how modern art was central to Japan's early twentieth-century debates on individualism, expressionism, and radicalism. At once meticulously researched and conceptually bold, this book encompasses the intellectual and cultural history of the origins, fields of activity, and legacy of the Taisho avant-garde.

Traditionally, Japanese art history has been defined as all art that predated Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival in 1853 and the consequent "corruption" of pure Japanese art by the forces of Westernization. The study of