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COUNTERPOINT

Whatever befell Japan's heady '60s hopes?

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Over the past two weeks in this column, I have looked at Japanese society in the 1980s and '90s in order to trace how the nationalistic policies of the current Shinzo Abe administration, particularly in the educational and military spheres, are the outcome of developments in the preceding decades.

Next week I will conclude this series with a discussion of the 1970s. Here, though, I go back to the 1960s, when it was inconceivable that a Japanese prime minister would make a statement such as Abe made in Europe last month, when he said he would "unhesitatingly send the Self-Defence Forces overseas."

In the 1960s, it was well-nigh impossible to foresee Japan becoming the bastion of political reaction that it now is. With the possible exception of the 1920s, modern Japan had never before seen such activism across a wide swath of society, and such hope that this country would become more liberal-minded, open and socially democratic.

The 1960s started with a resounding bang.

The government under Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi was determined to upgrade military ties with the United States by signing the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, known here as Anpo. Demonstrations broke out, primarily in Tokyo, under the banner of the Zengakuren (All-Japan League of Student Unions), garnering a good deal of sympathy among the general populace. It was these demonstrations that made Zengakuren famous, laying the groundwork for student-movement agitation in the 1960s. The anti-Anpo struggle came to a head on June 15, 1960, when University of Tokyo student Michiko Kanba was killed in a clash with riot police in front of the Diet building.

Though the legislation to ratify the treaty was pushed through, a scheduled visit to Japan by U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had to be cancelled, and Kishi resigned.

Would such a thing be thinkable now -- ordinary Japanese citizens preventing President George W. Bush from coming here, leading to Abe resigning? No, for those were heady times indeed.

Reverberating transformations

Tokyo was meanwhile undergoing a huge transformation in the buildup to its hosting of the 1964 Summer Olympics. This was symbolized by the completion of new freeways and the amazing *shinkansen* (bullet train), the first of its kind in the world.

These transformations reverberated through society at large, as Japanese people finally began to believe that the ravages (and guilt) of the war years could be put behind them. Until then, for instance, they were not in the custom of eating out at restaurants as a family. This was to become the norm during the "decade of the Tokyo Olympics," introducing a new emphasis on family life here.

The artistic scene, too, was exploding. A new generation of filmmakers, led by the iconoclastic and radical director Nagisa Oshima, was calling some of Japan's hallowed social institutions into question. In films such as 1960's "Seishun Zankoku Monogatari (Cruel Story of Youth)" and 1969's "Shinjuku Dorobo Nikki (Diary of a Shinjuku Thief)," Oshima took up themes of young love and youth violence, portraying them as rebellions against the staid, suffocating mores of the older generation -- the generation that had failed Japan. Masaki Kobayashi, in his monumental 9-hour trilogy, "Ningen no Joken (The Human Condition)" (1959-60), told the real story of war and its effect on those forced to fight it.

The so-called *angura* (underground theater movement) was well under way by mid-decade. Juro Kara's stunning, passionate plays, performed in a huge red tent, redefined the relationship between actor and audience, and brought a kind of poetic nihilism onto the stage. Minoru Betsuyaku wrote what may still be his best play, "Zo (Elephant)," the story of a Hiroshima survivor who is determined that Japanese people should never forget what happened there. Shuji Terayama was creating metaphorical, surrealistic dramatic works at his Shibuya space, Tenjo Sajiki, that would awe audiences on its tours of Europe.

As for literature, the brightest star was surely Yukio Mishima; and while he was no leftie, he was a radical. His rightwing poses and

eloquent defenses of his romanticized vision of traditional male-worshipping Japan contributed to the lively polemics of the decade.

In every aspect of the arts -- from those above to music and design -- the atmosphere itself was vibrating. Audiences and viewers *expected* innovation. This was a decade when Japan wanted least of all to rest on its laurels. Those laurels were being regrown and nurtured by brilliant young artists who had chiefly been brought up and educated in the democratic 1950s.

It certainly looked as if a new social model was being formed in Japan, one in which polemics flourished and fostered a fairer, more aware community of citizens.

But things began to turn by the end of 1967.

Mass demonstrations

Unrest around the world was shaking Japan. The war in Vietnam was sparking mass demonstrations here, too. In October 1967, a student was killed at Haneda Airport during a Zengakuren protest against a visit by Prime Minister Eisaku Sato to South Vietnam. Less than a year later, 3,000 people, many of them workers, demonstrated at Osaka Airport against the U.S. military's use of the facilities there. By May 1968, more than a million people were marching in Paris as the French government briefly teetered. The Dubcek government in Czechoslovakia was putting a humanitarian face on communism until, in August that year, the Soviet Union invaded and ripped the face to shreds.

Many Japanese people recognized that, by 1968, with a century having passed since the Meiji Restoration, the economy was booming, accompanied by bizarre predictions of Japan becoming No. 1 in the world; and that it was time to reform Japanese society along truly democratic lines, creating a viable two-party system and social welfare structure.

It wasn't to be, for two reasons.

The arch-conservative government of Eisaku Sato, re-elected in February 1967 and then again in January 1970, had a message to the Japanese people: You've never had it so good.

That was true. But the Establishment's reasoning was that this required further sacrifice on the part of the people, and the continued suppression of both individual freedom and liberalized social welfare in the interests of eternal industrial growth. The people, eventually, bought this line -- and they are toeing it to this

day, namely: economic growth at the expense of personal freedom and broad-based social welfare.

The second reason for the collapse of the 1960s' dream of a more open and socially tolerant Japan was the internecine struggles within the student movement itself. Eventually the movement was to succumb to anarchy and devastation . . . but that was not until the next decade, when Japan took another course again, one that has led directly to what we see today: A docile populace and compliant media in the hands of a government determined to turn the clock back to the "good old days," when nationalistic pride dominated the conscience of the nation.

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