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Off with Their Heads! Resolving the "Garbage Problem" of Autumn Leaves in Kawagoe, Japan

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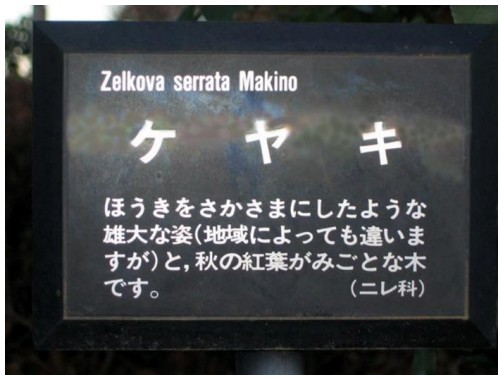
In the scorching summer of 2007, record temperatures were set across Japan and electrical demand for air conditioning threatened power outages throughout the Tokyo metropolitan area. Despite the oppressive heat, the leafy green canopy along Zelkova Avenue (ケヤキ通り *Keyaki Dōri*) extending southwest from the Tsurugashima Station on the Tobu Tojo train line provided a shady passage on my bicycle rides to the station and nearby supermarket. The tips of the highest branches of the trees on one side of the street touched those on the other. This was somewhat unusual in Japan, where trees that line city streets are often closely cropped. The trees along Zelkova Avenue had been allowed to grow to relative maturity, so they indeed appeared like giant upside down brooms with splendid foliage, as described in a plaque next to a zelkova in a Kawagoe Park.



"Keyaki (Zelkova serrata Makino). This tree appears like a giant upside down broom and has splendid fall foliage." (tree identification plaque, Kawagoe Sports Park (Undō Kōen))

Riding my bicycle on Zelkova Avenue one morning in late September, I noticed several trucks parked along one side of the street as I approached Tsurugashima station. Two trucks with hydraulic lifts raised workers high up into the trees where they were sawing off branches. First, it was on just one short stretch near the station. In the following days, however, the crew moved up the street. They were not just pruning. They were cutting vertical trunks of the trees, six inches or so in diameter. Entire tops of the trees were being sawed off. The larger sections were attached with a rope to another crane, which gently lowered them onto a flatbed truck. The crane and

trucks blocked off one lane of the road, and two men wielding fluorescent red batons directed traffic around them. I approached a work crew and asked why they were pruning the trees so drastically. The man who appeared to be in charge replied that the leaves were a problem for people who lived along the street. The leaves would fall on rooftops, get stuck in roof tiles and in storm shutters, and then start to rot. According to him and several others, the leaves posed a "garbage problem" (ごみ問題, *gomi mondai*). Each day, the crew moved farther along the road, leaving a desolate landscape of bare trunks. In a matter of weeks, the summer landscape was transformed into that of winter. These trees were decapitated, pruned back so radically, that all that remained were rows of leafless trunks.

Those who supported pruning zelkova drew on a certain understanding of nature and urban spaces to justify their positions. Others, however, were upset by what was done. They contested the notion of a single Japanese perspective on nature. They could find support in Japan's energetic environmental movements that have supported pollution control, recycling efforts, energy efficiency, reforestation, and the greening of urban areas (Sorenson and Funck 2009; Broadbent 2003; Sasaki-Uemura 2001; Peng-Er 1999). Despite these multiple competing discourses on nature and the environment, the zelkovas were cut to minimal public protest. Why did no movement arise to stop the pruning? Before we get to this question, let us take a look at the kind of ideologies that were used to justify the pruning, and explore the range of local reactions to the pruning.

City trees and visions of nature

The Shinto notion that *kami* (divinity) is immanent in mountains, rocks, trees, the sun and moon, animals, etc. suggests that Japanese may have a special reverence for nature. Arne Kalland and Pamela Asquith have argued that Japanese have not drawn a distinct boundary between the categories of nature and culture, unlike the obsessive dichotomy between these two categories set by Western anthropological tradition (Kalland and Asquith 1997: 1-18). However, the blurred boundary of Japanese thought does not imply oneness with a pristine nature. Kalland and Asquith argue persuasively that Japanese have often assumed that it is active human cultivation that allows nature to achieve its full potential (ibid.: 15-18). They write that

> the nature cherished by most Japanese is not nature in its original state but in its idealized state. The careful training and grooming of a pine tree in a garden is a case in point. '[The] pruning … allows a more *natural*, and at the same time more ideal beauty to emerge … The gardener merely makes this beautiful garden more visible' (ibid.: 16, quoting Ito 1972: 140).

Japanese perspectives of nature, and the aesthetics of a cultivated nature, partially explain what otherwise appears to be a case of excessive pruning of zelkovas in Kawagoe. Such views hardly explain it completely, for among Kawagoe residents, more people than not felt that the pruning was excessive. Few saw beauty in the trees once they were severely cut back, contrary to what might be expected from Asquith and Kalland. Only one of the approximately 20 people I spoke to about the zelkova drew on the discourse of a cultivated nature to justify the pruning. But if few Kawagoe residents' expressed any aesthetic appreciation for the extreme pruning of their zelkova, why didn't more people object to it? Why were they largely indifferent?

Morris-Suzuki's history of Tokugawa era thought about nature emphasizes *kaibutsu*, "a term which means literally 'the opening up of things,' but might be interpreted either as 'revealing the nature of things' or as 'developing' or 'making use of' the natural world" (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 41, citing Saigusa 1973: 371-374). Many viewed nature as abundant with resources, and capable of responding resiliently and positively to human action. City officials in Kawagoe and many other Japanese municipalities may have inherited such a perspective. Throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this line of thinking cleared space for a "dominionistic" stance towards nature to develop, and for national projects of industrialization and subsequent environmental degradation little different from experiences of industrialization in other cultural contexts.

Ideas about nature have been an important dimension of modern Japanese political ideology, but they have served to support a whole range of national projects, few of which had anything to do with environmental sustainability. Julia Thomas notes, in fact, that Japanese political ideology equated nature with Japanese culture (Thomas 2001). In so doing, the pruning of trees would not be understood as violating nature, but rather in tandem with culture (Thomas, personal communication). In an earlier research project in a different city, I described locals who, without the least irony, took advantage of the national holiday Green Day (緑の日, *midori no hi*) to cut back many trees in their neighborhood (Roth 2002).

But aesthetics and visions of nature alone cannot resolve all of our questions. More so than Japanese gardens, which are meant for contemplation and respite (see Hendry 1997; Ito 1972; Johnson 1991), city trees are located in a more varied social, political, and economic context. City trees raise questions about how people understand public space, governance, and democratic action.

In the European context, tree-lined boulevards were introduced into urban settings gradually over a period of several centuries. Trees were largely absent along cramped streets of medieval walled towns. As historical geographer Henry Lawrence has written, "from the perspective of a medieval city dweller it would have seemed absurd that someone would want to plant a tree in front of a house along the street instead of in a garden behind the house" (Lawrence 2006, 3). This mode of thinking changed as the urban centers expanded beyond the confining city walls, and visions of nature as a beneficent force, a source of cleanliness and moral order, grew during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods (ibid., 270). State power too began to express itself through the deliberate planting and management of trees in public spaces as opposed to the haphazard planting by individual homeowners (ibid., 57-59, 87-89). This development was most fully expressed in the Baron Haussman's mid 19th century redesign of Paris where tree lined boulevards were "forced through crowded neighborhoods in almost every part of" the city (ibid. 237).

Tree-lined avenues have become more widespread in Japan somewhat more recently since the 1960s. However, there is a history of roadside trees in Japan. According to the Japanese language Wikipedia entry on roadside trees (街路樹, *gairoju*), mulberry trees were

planted alongside a street in 6th century Naniwa (current day Osaka). Tachibana and willows were planted along streets in 8th Heian-kyo (current day Kyoto). Later, peach, pear, cherry, plum, pine, and zelkova trees were introduced over the centuries in different locations (link). More often than not, trees appear on the outskirts of expanding urban areas. Stately pines graced the Tokaido, the coastal route linking Edo with Kyoto. In earlier times, trees were much more prevalent in urban settings, but gradually green spaces retreated to parks, gardens, temple grounds, and river banks. In many neighborhoods today, the only green is just that which peeks over concrete walls separating narrow private gardens from the street. The jumble of narrow winding streets that make up many urban neighborhoods allow no room for raised sidewalks let alone for trees. Many of the city views on Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa postcards are devoid of trees (link). One notable exception is the Ginza, which was famous from the 1880s to 1921 for its willows, until the street was widened for vehicular traffic and the trees were removed. Chiyako Sato's 1929 hit song "Tokyo March" lamented the loss of the willows, which were reintroduced in 1931, but again mostly removed in 1968 (link).

While the town of Kawagoe has a long history as a castle town, I lived in a more recently developed outlying region. Zelkova Avenue was built in 1976, when the city finances were relatively prosperous. As the official tree of Saitama Prefecture, zelkovas were chosen to line the streets of a number of Saitama cities. The narrow, old main street leading from Tsurugashima station ran parallel to Zelkova Avenue. The old main street was lined with stores but lacked sidewalks and trees. The relatively broad two lane Zelkova Avenue diverted much of the traffic, including all of the larger buses, and has ample sidewalk space on both sides of the street. According to Prof. of Agriculture Minomo Toshitaro of Kumamoto Prefectural University, such avenues were built in many cities throughout Japan from the mid 1960s through the 1980s as the most expedient means of reversing the loss of green spaces that accompanied urbanization (link). One storeowner on Zelkova Avenue in Kawagoe said that the splendid foliage was an attraction for all the businesses along the street.

However, Prof. Minomo notes that the maturation of trees along many of these streets led to a number of problems. For one, the volume of leaves falling increased to the point that residents were no longer able to manage them as they had in the past, and city clean up services also lagged behind. In addition, roots began to buckle sidewalks and cause breaks in water mains (ibid.). City planners in Kawagoe expressed a similar feeling that what had seemed a good idea in the 1970s was a cause of considerable expense and headache today. In previous years, the branches of the zelkovas had been thinned. Some pruning was done every year in the city, although not necessarily on the same trees. The trees on different stretches of Zelkova Avenue were of varying heights, some half the height of others, indicating that more severe pruning, as well as thinning of branches, had been done in the past. In the fall of 2007, the city contracted gardening services to extend this extreme action by pruning the entire length of the avenue and several other streets. By so doing, the city could reduce their annual expenditures for tree maintenance, although at considerable start up expense.

Local Responses

I had been living in the area long enough to view the trees with some affection, and to resent that they were being cut for no apparent reason. As the chainsaws started buzzing on the stretch of Zelkova Avenue with the tallest trees, I put aside my other activities to try to get more reactions from people in the neighborhood. I posted myself on a walkway that paralleled the avenue alongside a supermarket parking lot where the pruning cranes and trucks were situated. For the most part, few residents seemed to take notice of the tree cutting operation, which, with the passage of days had become a normal activity. Most passers by followed their daily routines with hardly any display of interest. Several four-year-olds, their attention drawn by the buzzing of the chain saws, pointed over to the cranes and trucks and asked their mothers what was going on. The women appeared too busy talking to each other to bother answering. One older man walking toward the supermarket looked over for a short time, while an elderly couple walking in the same direction made no note of the activity. A supermarket employee in a white smock smoked a cigarette in the parking lot and looked at the work for a while. A young person talking on his cell phone as he biked along the path glanced over at it with slightly raised eyebrows. One mother, responding to her child's question about how much the workers were cutting, said that they were "cutting everything" (*zembu kitteiru*).

A couple of my neighbors commented that the trees were pruned every year, and that this year was no different. Many mentioned the big job of cleaning up all the fallen leaves in the autumn. One 70-year-old Japanese man who I knew from the local community center was surprised by my reaction to the tree cutting. He suggested that Japanese aesthetic sensibilities (*biteki ishiki*) were different from Western ones. He noted the tradition of bonsai, and he commented that the street appeared refreshed (*sukkiri shita*) once the trees were cut, like one feels after getting a haircut. (Umebori-san always kept his hair cropped close to his scalp.)

Another man in his mid fifties, whom I recognized from the local community center, walked by as I was taking notes on a bench. He asked what I was doing. I described my interest in the trees. They were cut every year, he said, adding that the city had wasted a lot of tax money maintaining the trees. He felt that other kinds of trees should have been planted, ones without so many leaves, and that the trees could have been spaced out more. Ginko? I suggested. No—its leaves didn't readily decompose. Pine? No—have you ever seen pines lining streets? The man went on to say that the trees were a real nuisance for people who lived here, despite the fact that there were few

private homes along the avenue, and almost all of the work of clearing the leaves was done by contingents of retirees ("silvers"), who worked for very low wages, much less than it costs to contract a pruning company. The man also said that outsiders (関係ない人, *kankeinai hito*) had no business meddling in this matter, suggesting that I had no place getting involved. In his view, an exclusive concern with the aesthetics of the trees failed to properly assess the work that the leaves caused, or grasp the issue of how tax money was spent. For him, only those who lived on the street had a balanced sense of the relative importance of aesthetics and costs resulting from the trees.

"Locals" (地元, *jimoto*), however, were not of a single opinion on the matter. When the pruning was just starting, I took a shot of an older man in suit and tan tie, carrying a white paper gift bag, perhaps returning home from a wedding or some other special event. He was walking towards me with furrowed brow, the work crew behind him. Perhaps he did not want his photo taken? As I adjusted the camera to take another shot, the man, now at my side, asked what I thought of

what I saw. I replied that they were cutting too much. This prompted him to express his indignation at the excessive pruning. He wondered why the trees were being cut, and who asked that it be done. He declared that if people around here didn't like the trees, they should move somewhere else. If they didn't like zelkova why live on Zelkova Avenue?

Critical perspectives arose in dribs and drabs when I approached people and asked for their thoughts. After the trees in front of several apartment buildings along the street were cut, one resident commented that the apartments were left completely exposed. The trees had partially hidden the laundry that residents hung up to dry on their balconies, but now everything was in full view from the busy street.

One woman in her forties prefaced her remarks with the disclosure that she was married to a British citizen, lived in England, in contrast to her sister, a local who was slightly older, with whom she was walking. The older sister had just given me the familiar explanation about the trouble caused by fallen leaves. The younger one thought the trees were being overly cut, that the work crew was shaving the poor trees bald (*maru bōzu ni shiteiru*). The older sister explained that the branches became tangled with the electrical wires, and that pruning had to be done every year. The younger argued, however, that the trees were not being pruned; they were being cut in half. The older said that once cut, there would be more light. The younger countered by saying that Japanese put people first, nature second, and wondered somewhat sarcastically why they did not just chop the trees down entirely. The kind of cutting that was being done would be unimaginable in Britain, she said. The conversation continued in this fashion until they eventually took leave of me.

Shortly afterwards, I spoke to a man in his fifties who was walking by with a large plastic container filled with purified water. According to him, the problem of the trees was a product of bad city planning. The trees were getting tangled up with the electrical wires he said. Still he did not think the extreme cutting could be good for the trees, and he pitied them (*ki ga kawaisō*). He noted that there were other kinds of trees, smaller and easier to manage, that would have been better choices. He thought that local politicians were giving contracts to various pruning services in exchange for votes. In another country, such politicians might get voted out of office, he said, but in Japan, these deals were necessary to get elected in the first place. He professed that in Japan, powerbrokers defined the mainstream, and those who opposed them were labeled communists.

People responded in a variety of ways, sometimes invoking nature and aesthetics as part of a critique of the pruning of the zelkova (shaving them bald, pity the trees), sometimes as a justification (more light, refreshed feeling). Perhaps it is significant that my older acquaintance from the community center had argued that pruning involved a peculiarly Japanese aesthetic sensibility. While he saw this in a positive light, the Japanese woman who had returned from England saw this in a negative light. Nevertheless, she agreed that it was a Japanese sensibility, one that was completely different from that of the English. Comparisons between Japan and the West in terms of modernization in the past have spurred Japanese to catch up. However, the countervailing nativist valorization of things Japanese seems to be at least as strong. And while the woman's comparison between Japanese and English attitudes towards trees may have been meant to suggest Japanese backwardness, others consider trees only incidental to modern urban landscapes. In a context where modernity and progress are symbolized by shiny glass and concrete cityscapes, trees are tolerated in neutered form, one that is free of a luxurious canopy which produces "garbage" in the form of fallen leaves. In such a context, claims of the "backwardness" of Japanese pruning practices will not get much traction.

Aesthetics, economics, and environmental consciousness

When it comes to managing their roadside trees, Kawagoe city officials and residents were inclined to think either in terms of aesthetics, or economics. No one I spoke to in relation to the pruning of the zelkova mentioned climate change, despite the fact that we had just experienced Tokyo's hottest summer on record, and despite the fact that Japan had hosted the international convention on climate change that led to the 1997 Kyoto Climate Treaty. Why were Kawagoe planners so ruthless in cutting the zelkova when planners in cities around the world have been making efforts to plant more trees, and even green rooftops, in order to reduce a build up of heat in urban centers? In fact, many Japanese residents, in Kawagoe as well as other cities, compensate for the lack of trees by placing numerous potted plants alongside their homes and shops. People are diligent about recycling, conservation, and various forms of environmental advocacy. Why then did the city authorize cutting the zelkova, and why did not residents oppose itthe zelkova?

As we have discussed, part of the answer has to do with the way some Japanese conceive of the relationship between nature and culture, especially in urban settings. On Japan's urban streets, nature is managed even more rigidly than in garden settings, as it is subordinated to the practical needs of street signage, telephone wires, and sewer pipes. It is this subordination of nature to culture in the urban context that allows some to imagine autumn leaves as a "garbage problem." For them, the value of the trees no longer justified their costs. Others, of course, for many years had appreciated the zelkova and regretted what was done to them. Mayor Funabashi Kō'ichi, who had been in office for fourteen years at the time, as well as the LDP-dominated city assembly, had themselves spent resources maintaining the zelkova in their more luxurious condition before deciding that the costs associated with the zelkova outweighed the benefits. Their eventual decision to cut the trees cannot but have been facilitated by the kind of diminished understanding of trees' benefits that we find in the Japanese wikipedia site on roadside trees (街路樹, *gairoju*). This site provides only a brief outline of some of their benefits, while going on at considerable length about all their evils. This section starts as follows:

> Roadside trees are artificially (人為的に, *jin'i teki ni*) planted into an environment that is completely different from that of forests or parks, causing a variety of problems for urban life… Although meant to relieve residents suffering from pollution along the roads, trees have ended up hurting them more, and have added to the already numerous dangers of the roads, leading to increased accidents, and the calamity of an increased tax burden.
>
> In Japan, the government does not consider future impacts, and forces the planting of roadside trees that is the source of great suffering for residents… When disaster strikes, these trees may take people's lives. Japan has a distinct climate with many typhoons and earthquakes, so if we plant trees like Paris or New York, there is a much greater danger that numerous problems will arise.
>
> For these reasons, we should not plant trees in a haphazard fashion. As we decide on what trees to plant, or whether to plant at all, we must consider the climate, topography, the appearance of the town (町並み, *machinami*), traffic safety, living conditions, crime, dangers during disasters, and the lives and opinions of those residents who come in direct contact with the evils (弊害, *heigai*) of roadside trees. The government must not neglect to properly manage the trees that have been planted, regularly and comprehensively carrying out inspection, pruning, and cleaning operations, taking swift action in cases where problems arise, treating, transplanting, or cutting down as necessary… (source, accessed Sept. 24, 2009).

We should note that the Japanese Wikipedia entry for roadside trees only recently added on this discussion of their "evils." The entry for roadside trees was initiated on April 8, 2004 with a one-line definition: "trees planted in cities" (町に生えている木の事). This entry gradually expanded, with the addition of new sections were added under the following headings:

- May 10, 2004: "selection of tree type" (樹種の選択 *jushu no sentaku*)
- Sept. 7, 2004: "commonly seen roadside trees in Japan" (日本でよく見られる街路樹 *nihon de yoku mirareru gairoju*).
- May 14, 2006: "history" (歴史 *rekishi*) section.
- Sept. 15, 2008: "evils of roadside trees" (街路樹の弊害 *gairoju no heigai*).
- Oct. 21, 2008: "benefits of roadside trees" (街路樹の効果 *gairoju no koka*).

As we see, it was not until Sept. 2008 that an entry posted by someone using the handle Kokka Ankō (国家安康, a name referring to Tokugawa Ieyasu, taken from an inscription on an Osaka temple bell that incited conflict between Tokugawa Ieyasu and Toyotomi Hideyoshi) initiated a section on the evils of roadside trees. This same Kokka Ankō added on the section on the benefits of roadside trees a month later, but it was clearly an afterthought, and more than a year later it remained a skeletal outline compared to the detailed section on the evils of roadside trees.

In the history of the wiki entry, we see a recapitulation of the fate of Kawagoe's zelkovas. For many years, a more positive appreciation of the trees had prevailed. More recently, a minority with the power to impose its will cut Kawagoe's zelkova in half, and on the wiki emphasized the evils of roadside trees more generally. Following both cases, there was little protest or attempt to find another balance between costs and benefits, even within the context of the wiki where a debate could proceed without restraint.

The kind of vigilance in the management of roadside trees promoted by the wiki entry above seems to be standard in many of Japan's urban neighborhoods, where trees are never allowed to extend their branches. The twisted branches of the trees in a Tokyo neighborhood below have a certain gnarled beauty from an aesthetic of a cultivated nature. But even if we admit that there is some

Japanese aesthetic behind this pruning of street trees, the pruning of Kawagoe's zelkova seems uncharacteristic. Clearly, these other trees had been pruned more regularly over the years and never allowed to grow as much as those in Kawagoe. It is the abrupt cutting of trees that had long been allowed to grow more fully which made that landscape in Kawagoe so bleak.

If the pruning of trees in Kawagoe violated some norms of Japanese aesthetics, why then was there so little public reaction to it? A few people apparently did call in complaints to city hall but they had little time to organize. The work was completed in a matter of weeks, in effect presenting them with a *fait accompli*. Even if there were not ample time to organize a protest, I would have expected more discussion about the matter. As I mentioned before, the vast majority of residents did not seem to take much interest, going about their business with barely a glance at the work going on despite the daily buzz of chainsaws.

The limited public response raises questions about how people understand the relationship between state and society. Many people just may not have thought to voice their opinions on the matter, understanding the management of the city trees to be the purview of the city government. In that sense, locals exhibit little sense of collective ownership of public space. While similar cases of drastic pruning occur in the U.S., these often lead to loud public criticism (link).

But Japanese have objected to public projects, as was the case when locals opposed the use of eminent domain to remove homes in the expansion of Narita airport in the 1970s and '80s (Apter and Sawa 1984). And officials in the planning department in Kawagoe City Hall explained that the construction of newer wider roads were seriously constrained precisely because people very strongly defend their private property rights. The city could not really act on any right of eminent domain because of the public outcry that might be provoked, so the city's basic street plan has not changed since the military government's transportation projects in the 1930s.

Japanese have not limited their protests only to those instances when public projects impinge on individual property rights. Although that is how the Narita airport protests began, it expanded far beyond that narrow focus. In 1960, the millions-strong demonstrations against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (AMPO) showed that many Japanese participants in grassroots organizations were prepared to oppose what they felt were undemocratic policies that undermined the larger national interest (Sasaki-Uemura 2001). More recently, Apichai Shipper argues that a kind of "associative activism" has grown even more noticeable in the context of support for foreign workers' rights in Japan (Shipper 2008). On the other hand, Mark Driscoll has pointed to the widespread and virulent public denunciation of the three Japanese human rights and environmental activists who were taken hostage in Iraq in April 2004 as indication that the interests of the nation often take precedence over those of idealistic individuals (Driscoll 2007).

While some Kawagoe residents may miss the more luxurious state of the zelkovas, few bothered to make their feelings known. What are the consequences of a citizenship that lacks a sense of ownership of public spaces and other public amenities? In the case of Kawagoe's trees, it may mean the ascendance of a political economy of pruning that gives priority to a nexus of local politicians and gardening services, and which is justified by references to traditional aesthetic sensibilities and the construction of nature as Japanese culture. As the author of the section of the Japanese Wikipedia site on the "evils" of roadside trees writes, planners need to carefully consider local climate and topography, rather than blindly emulating Paris or New York. These are legitimate points. After a large tree branch fell on my neighbor's driveway in Holyoke, Massachusetts, I realized that city planners could be overly lax as well as overly vigilant. Nevertheless, Kawagoe residents who were unhappy with what was done to their zelkovas should not accept justifications based on "traditional" Japanese aesthetics and visions of nature. Indeed, the aesthetics of bonsai, which are trained by gradual pruning over years, provide a critique of the kind of pruning that was performed on the zelkovas, which were allowed to grow so large only to be cut all at once. Residents could draw on the legacy of environmental activism in Japan to oppose unilateral actions by the city administration. They could counter arguments, based on the notion of some Japanese idealization of a cultivated nature, by showing how such arguments could be used in opportunistic ways to justify almost any attack on the environment. Surely residents could push for a more thoughtful management of city trees, one that does not too easily discount the beauty of their expansive form and the shade that they provide, and which does not exaggerate their "evils."

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