

WHISPER OF THE LAND

VISIONS OF JAPAN

EDWARD LEVINSON

INTRODUCTION BY KITARO

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“Whisper of the Land: Visions of Japan”

By Vicki L. Beyer

Compared with 40 years ago, many more foreigners are choosing to make Japan their long-term home. Even among members of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan (ACCJ), nearly 20 percent have lived in the country for more than 10 years. The lives of such people are almost always fascinating and special.

They experience the world around them in ways they never could have done had they stayed in their home countries. At the same time, they experience the world around them in ways those born into that world—Japan—do not. This island nation can be challenging but, needless to say, it has its rewards.

For expats in the world of business, the rewards may be largely derived from our business. And yet there are times when the so-called rat race threatens to consume us. We may even lose sight of the unique perspective of our cross-cultural existence, so busy are we with getting on with things. Edward Levinson's autobiographical collection of poems and essays are a window on what, for many readers, will be a “philosophical” perspective on the experience of long-term residents in Japan.

Levinson's book cannot be called an autobiography, but neither is it philosophy per se. For me, reading

it provided an interesting, entertaining, and thought provoking respite. The essay format, each beginning with one of the author's poems and samples of his insightful photographs, made it possible to seamlessly shift from one theme to another without any grinding of the gears.

These collected essays trace Levinson's interactions with people in Japan (and elsewhere): old, young, local, foreign, unknown, and famous. Levinson first came

to Japan to meet “a Zen-style Japanese farmer who practiced what he called ‘natural farming.’” Before long he had amassed an eclectic collection of contacts across various walks of life, both in Tokyo and in far-flung corners of Japan.

Levinson shares vignettes of his encounters with a number of these people, including his neighbors—who are farmers. The cross-cultural encounters he describes are both familiar and distinctive. For example, does the woman who's offered him a room for the night mean to be offering something more? How can he politely refuse to accept money from the local granny to whom he has given a lift?

For city dwellers, Levinson's interactions with nature may be more significant and entertaining. Under his pen, plants, animals, and the very earth itself take on personality and add dimension to his life—he has a tree for a brother, while dogs, birds, and even a local badger befriend him.

The book is aptly titled. The land truly seems to whisper to him. He can delineate and describe soil types in a way that even an urbanite can feel and smell them. His tale of tilling potatoes could be a meditation—and meditation is an important aspect of Levinson's lifestyle.

Ultimately, we must remember that Levinson is, at heart, a gardener. Little wonder then, that his life in Japan has been one where you “bloom where you're planted.” In this book, Levinson truly has bloomed. ■

Vicki L. Beyer is a vice chair of the Women in Business Committee of the ACCJ.

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