

# Dogs and Demons

*Acclaimed author Alex Kerr's new book is deliberately provocative, but he tells Journal contributor Catherine Pawasarat that he does not want to proscribe and writes out of a sense of duty to his adopted homeland.*

By Catherine Pawasarat

As a child, Alex Kerr spent two formative, bucolic years surrounded by the natural beauty and rich cultural heritage accessible to Americans in 1960s Japan. He returned in the 1970s, armed with degrees from Yale and Oxford in Japanese and Chinese studies. Twenty years later, in 1994, he became the first non-Japanese to win the Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize, awarded for his first book, *Lost Japan*—an account of the author's years in Japan, against the backdrop of the country's natural and cultural decline.

In his new book, *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Japan*, Kerr gets down to the disturbing yet fascinating nuts and bolts of Japan's outdated and entrenched bureaucracy. He traces an astonishing and disconcerting trail of its effects: from collapsing financial institutions to cemented wilderness, to millions of Japanese traveling abroad to escape the confines of their home country. Though an author of highly critical work, Kerr insists he writes from a sense of duty to his adopted homeland, and to those Japanese who have no voice on the international stage. Kyoto-based Pawasarat's interview follows:

**JOURNAL:** *Dogs and Demons* has elicited some strong responses from various quarters. What's so different about this book?

**KERR:** Though we've known for a decade that Japan is in economic trouble, my argument is that Japan is culturally in trouble, profound trouble. This country is very unhappy with itself. It's made some drastic mistakes in its education policy, in what it's done to its environment, in what it's done to its cities. And this has had drastic effects on the culture, the actual lives that people lead, the art they create, the designs they do, the cities and houses they live in—you name it.

In *Dogs and Demons*, I begin with the concept of "Japan as a developed modern state" as a given. Surely we're beyond being amazed once again at how far Japan has come from pre-war poverty. It's time to take Japan on its own terms as an advanced country, and then to see how it compares with other modern states. It's in desperate trouble. That's my subject.

**JOURNAL:** What's this trouble; where's it coming from?

**KERR:** Since the Meiji period, certainly post-war, the thrust of everything in this country has been more and more stuff rolling off the manufacturing assembly lines, the production of objects to serve a voracious manufacturing base. That's what the financial industry was set up to do, that's what the education system is set up to do—to train people to be diligent workers in those factories and offices. Everything was sacrificed to that one goal only—nature, society, culture, education, everything.

The tragedy of Japan in the early 21st century is that manufacturing, as traditionally defined since the 19th century, is suffering a massive paradigm change. All these things (nature, society, etc.) have been sacrificed for 150 years. And not only has the sacrifice itself reached an almost unbearable level—they are turning the country into a horrible and ugly place—but also, at the same time, all those goods rolling off the manufacturing line are no longer where the money is. So Japan's in a real pinch.

The whole system is very ill-adapted to the new world. The educational system has trained people to be obedient, unquestioning and uncreative—exactly the wrong education system if you need creative minds for establishing Internet and software companies and the like. It doesn't mean they can't change; it just means that it's going to be hard. It's going to involve pain.

Of course, if the world has changed and you have not, then it really begs the question if you can be called "modern." I think, in fact, that Japan did not modernize. I think it did everything it could to handle the surface issues and not modernize. Japan has all the "look" of a modern state, but lacks the technological infrastructure of a modern state: technologies pertaining to how to run a hospital, design a new city, preserve old cities, handle

## Dogs and Demons

toxic waste, conserve the environment; how to design roads, how to design retaining walls—you name it. The lack of these technologies is creating increasing strain and dysfunction.

Japan, after all these years and all this discussion of internationalization and modernization, has also failed to become an international country. And it is the lack of foreigners being active in the society that is connected to the failure to pick up these sophisticated new technologies.

**JOURNAL:** How so?

**KERR:** I'd say that most of the other advanced industrialized countries of the world have found room—and very creative and important room—for foreigners in their society as resident architects, journalists, writers, designers, businessmen, people establishing their own businesses, whatever. And Japan has fought that, not allowed it. In all my years I've been here, I know a tiny handful of foreigners who have had their own business. And not a single resident architect or designer or musician of note—of international note. Not a single one. Japan gets visitors, but that's the old *yatoi gaikokujin* that they used to have in the Meiji period: the “hired foreigners” they brought over to build the railways, establish museums and basically lay the new infrastructure. And as soon as they'd done that, they were sent packing.

So there are lots of *yatoi gaikokujin* even now. But that isn't how real technologies, and sophisticated new understandings of how the world works, actually get passed down. Japan ends up with the empty shells of the new technologies, but not the content. And it's because they haven't allowed foreigners in; they've fought it.

There's a tide of change in the big, wide world and Japan is very, very frightened by it. I think it's because the systems have gone on for so long that it is a kind of addiction, and withdrawal is just too painful. If the systems in Japan were to unravel, what would happen? There's a real fear of the whole thing falling apart, a fear of total chaos—especially because the financial system, and all these other systems are indeed houses of cards.

**JOURNAL:** There is a lot of talk afoot of change in Japan now.

**KERR:** While there is much talk of reform, it's quite lukewarm. The drastic changes that will be necessary are still in the future. At the same time, the public is clearly aware that something is very wrong with their country. That's why maverick politicians are being elected and the media rings with calls for reform. There's an increasing mood of urgency.

I personally think the beginning of the revolution lies in a change of consciousness—in understanding, seeing, comparing with other nations, and thinking about the facts. When the change of consciousness comes, everything else will happen automatically. When the moment of real change in world outlook arrives, Japan will transform itself with surprising speed.

**JOURNAL:** With all this talk of structural reform, do you see any special opportunities for non-Japanese businesses and businesspeople, or for foreign investment? How about pitfalls?

**KERR:** I think this is one of the best times for foreign investment and business activity in the last 50 years. The old exclusive Japanese ways of doing things are under severe strain. This applies not only to banks, but also to department stores, hotels, automobile companies, medicine and hospitals, and much more. There's vast room for change and improvement, and the mood of the public is to embrace the new.

It's also true that all the old exclusive systems are still intact. So far, foreign companies have only been allowed to play a major role in cases of complete collapse, such as with banks and insurance companies. And even then, they are restricted to being lesser players.

Japan is still a country where size counts and big capital matters. Thus, large multinationals with big chests of cash and political clout will be able to enter the market and play a role they could not have played before. For single individuals or small companies, however, Japan will go on being more or less as difficult as it was before. The opportunities to own or run your own business, or to enter the market with small capital and restricted staff, are dramatically superior in other Asian nations such as Thailand or Vietnam.

**JOURNAL:** Japan is sometimes referred to as an information “black hole” because lots of information gets sucked in, but does not come out again.

**KERR:** The correct handling of information is part of what makes hospitals run properly; it's crucial for management, for nuclear plants and all the other things that have gone wrong recently. It's what makes those things work right. When you build up massive slag heaps of hidden information, you end up with ghastly problems in industry

after industry, ministry after ministry—because nobody knows where the truth is anymore. Then you have a big problem from a modern-technology point of view.

Companies have a certain sense of responsiveness and move a little faster than the bureaucracy; but even so, look at the Mitsubishi auto-defect scandal last year. That was a company that hid its own auto defects and eventually actually computerized it—they developed a special computer system to hide all the defects. What that means is that the people who ran Mitsubishi didn't know anymore what constituted "deceptive" and "not deceptive." They lost track—because in Japan, there are no penalties for not knowing. In America, you get sued.

**JOURNAL:** Though you've lived in Bangkok for the last several years, you still make time to work on revitalizing the village in Iya Valley, on Shikoku Island, where you own a thatch-roofed farmhouse. What is it that you see in Iya?

**KERR:** What Japan failed to do with its countryside was to recycle it in a way that's appropriate for a post-industrial state. If you keep up villages of thatched houses, then there's a need for all the crafts that go along with that. That strengthens the village economy, even though the demand is coming from a completely new mechanism.

In Japan, this never happened because the government tried to freeze the *inaka* (country house) into its old patterns. This is a problem that happens across the board—whether it's banking or any other thing in Japan—it all froze in about 1965.

The thing you have to remember about the romantic view of Japan is that it's not something that only foreigners have. This is what Basho was talking about in his *Manyoshu* poems; this is what screen paintings are about: The Japanese looked at their countryside and felt the romance, for thousands of years. So that is an important tangible thing; it's not just something that you can dismiss as being legitimate for industry to destroy—especially when you realize there's money in there!

I'm not just talking about some fuzzy-headed (notion of) "Isn't it nice to sit out and watch the moon over the bamboo; let's go back to the Edo period." No. Let's be a capitalist and say, "Where's the money?" Intellectual property is an accepted concept these days. Likewise, the Thais are talking about "cultural capital." The rich cultural capital in Thailand supports an incredibly profitable tourist industry, which makes Thailand the richest country in this area. It's what can attract a great resort, it's what can create a tourist industry, it's what can create booming land values in a little quaint village of thatch-roofed houses outside London.

One of the problems is that when the Japanese go abroad, by the tens of millions, they travel the beautiful countryside all over southeast Asia or Australia, and they go back to Japan and go right on doing what they've always done. Because there's a block in the mind that says, "What has been done in the rest of the world cannot be done in Japan." If it could be seen visually, if you could go there and see that it could be done, I think the impact would be tremendous. *Chiiori*—the thatch-roofed farmhouse that I wrote about in *Lost Japan*—gets many visitors and volunteers. We're suggesting that we take a *chiiori* and repair it properly, provide it with all the comforts that people take for granted as part of modern life. There's quite a demand among my friends, among artists and young volunteers to have a house in Iya, but there is no such house available to them now. We'll try to acquire some land and build some new houses in an environmentally sustainable way, using some of the fascinating new technologies for this. We'll try to make it a showplace of these things. This is the dream. And it's actually looking possible for the first time.

**JOURNAL:** For Japan, given that there is no going back, what is the way forward?

**KERR:** So far, I've resisted telling the Japanese what they should or must do, something foreign writers on Japan usually can't resist. The purpose of *Dogs and Demons* has been to describe the present reality—not to proscribe.

The Japanese are as entitled as anyone to the efficiencies of technology. The key is how to combine those with respect for the environment, and an attractive and comfortable urban existence—as well as a financial system that is based on real value and returns benefits to the people. As I see it, recombining those things is true modernism.

*Catherine Pawasarat is a Kyoto-based freelance writer who has covered Japanese and global issues for international publications since 1989.*