# 【Field Work News】 Exhibiting Sustainability as National Value: “cycle” and the Japan Pavilion, Expo 2025

Marina MURATA
（Master’s Program, the Graduate School of Letters, Arts and Sciences, Waseda University）

日本館にみる日本のナショナルな価値観としての持続可能性

村田まりな

**要　旨**

Osaka hosted the World Expo for the first time in 55 years. In the past, World Expos primarily showcased technological and developmental achievements and the futures they envisioned. In contrast, under today’s growing emphasis on sustainable development, many pavilions frame their national progress through narratives of environmental responsibility and climate change mitigation. The Japan Pavilion follows this trend: under the theme of “cycle,” it presents environmentally friendly forms of development alongside Japanese technologies related to sustainability. However, the pavilion also includes exhibits that, at first glance, may not appear environmentally friendly. While many countries today pursue both environmentally sustainable and environmentally questionable practices, pavilions typically present only one side of this reality in order to maintain a coherent narrative. Despite this common practice, the Japan Pavilion succeeded in constructing a coherent discourse of sustainability while simultaneously incorporating both approaches. This essay examines how such a seemingly contradictory narrative becomes possible, focusing on the nationalization of sustainability.

## Introduction: From Global Sustainability to National Value

Traditionally, anthropology has focused on specific communities while simultaneously addressing questions concerning humankind as a whole, thereby engaging with both small- and large-scale perspectives. From this standpoint, contemporary anthropological research increasingly examines how local issues are embedded within and shaped by global processes. In discussions of global environmental issues, anthropologists have therefore paid close attention to national, international, and transnational relationships. Building on this body of scholarship, this essay focuses on the nationalization of sustainability demonstrated at Expo 2025.

Environmental issues and climate change are now widely recognized as urgent global challenges, and sustainable development has been institutionalized as a worldwide goal by the United Nations [online United Nations 2015]. This perspective is also widely shared across many academic disciplines, including anthropology.

In a revised edition of his anthropology textbook published in 2023, Erikson devotes the final chapter to climate change. He states that thinking about climate change requires both local and global perspectives. He also refers to the fact that ’sustainability’ is often integrated into the taken-for-granted knowledge, especially among Indigenous groups. By focusing on their knowledge gained through anthropology, Erikson hopes that anthropology teaches us that there are more alternatives for living than immediately meet the eye [Eriksen 2023: 475].

The Japan Pavilion, which displays Japanese technology and traditions under the theme of “cycle”（循環）, can be considered a showcase of the taken-for-granted sustainability knowledge of Japanese people. However, the pavilion also exhibits space probes and a Martian rock that appear inconsistent with sustainability. This raises the question of why apparently

unsustainable artifacts were exhibited in the pavilion and how they could be a part of the sustainable narrative.

In this essay I apply the concept of nationalization to highlight the nationalization of sustainability through a close reading of the narrative presented by the Japan Pavilion. Specifically, I examine how space development—often perceived as environmentally harmful and inherently unsustainable—is rendered legitimate within Japan's distinctive conception of sustainability articulated through the notion “cycle”（循環）.

## “cycle” and the Japan Pavilion

The concept of the Japan Pavilion is “cycle”（循環）. The term “cycle” encompasses a wide range of phenomena, from the biosphere to product recycling. It also evokes multiple meanings, including rebirth, sustainability, eternity, the space between lives, and the universe itself.

From a tangible perspective, the Japan Pavilion incorporates an operating biogas plant, featuring a circular pond that is filled with water generated through the processing of waste collected at the Expo, as well as a circular exhibition structure. Architecturally, the pavilion is organized into three areas: Plant, Farm, and Factory. Rather than prescribing a single fixed route, the pavilion allows visitors to begin their visit from any of these areas. The Plant area consists of a biogas power plant, exhibitions on decay, a water purification system, and a space where visitors can touch a fragment of a Martian rock. The Farm area features an aquarium containing microscopic algae, visual displays illustrating the potential of algae, and algae-shaped character statues. The Factory area is made up of a working stool-making workshop, panel exhibitions, and an artwork incorporating a plate made from diatomaceous earth.

From an intangible perspective, the pavilion presents “cycle” as a Japanese value system and aesthetic. The Plant area showcases how a biogas plant transforms waste into usable resources such as water and energy, while also illustrating the productive potential of decay through the example of koji mold, which is essential to Japanese food production. The Farm area presents the potential applications of materials derived from the Plant area and introduces algae cultivation as one such example. In this context, algae are presented as a material long familiar to the Japanese public. The Factory area curates Japanese-made objects—from stools produced within the exhibition to space probes—around the theme of their cyclical qualities, under the overarching concept of “soft.” A distinctive feature of this area is the juxtaposition of cutting-edge technologies with traditional Japanese tools, explained through numerous interpretive panels.

In the Factory area, Japan‘s lunar probe Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM), which successfully landed on the Moon in 2024, is displayed alongside the Kozuya Bridge on a single panel. Notably, the panel does not emphasize SLIM’s technological achievement or even specify the exact date of its landing. Instead, it focuses on the design of SLIM’s landing legs, which are intentionally engineered to deform in order to absorb impact upon touchdown. This feature is compared to the structure of the Kozuya Bridge, where, during periods of heavy rain, the bridge girders are designed to be washed away during floods while the piers themselves remain protected.

Another panel is dedicated to the system of periodic rebuilding of shrines（式年遷宮）. It introduces Ise Jingu practice of reconstructing the entire shrine every twenty years. Significantly, the exhibition does not promote the shrine’s religious authority or aesthetic value but instead presents its rebuilding system in functional terms, emphasizing its effectiveness as a method for transmitting craftsmanship across generations. This system is further interpreted through the uniquely Japanese sense of “tokowaka”, meaning “eternal youth.” Through this panel, the timeless circulation of craftsmanship “tokowaka” is integrated into the broader concept of “cycle.”

One of the main attractions of the Japan Pavilion is a Martian rock（火星の石）, whose name echoes the lunar rock exhibited at Expo 1970. Unlike that earlier exhibit, however, the object is not a result of space exploration but of meteorite research conducted by the National Institute of Polar Research. Officially designated as the Martian meteorite “Yamato 000593,” it was discovered in Antarctica in 2000. In the pavilion, fragments of this meteorite are embedded in the wall and

can be touched by numerous visitors. Serving as a symbolic centerpiece of the pavilion, souvenir paper visitor certificates are distributed in connection with this exhibit. The Martian rock is displayed at the end of the Plant area, accompanied by three illuminated panels.

The first panel explains that water once existed on Mars and the evidence of this has been identified within the meteorite, suggesting the presence of a Martian water cycle. The second panel discusses scientific efforts to explore the potential of Martian water as an energy source, given the absence of fossil fuels such as oil or coal on the planet. The final panel envisions a future in which human life exists on Mars and suggests that the recycling of scarce resources will be essential for sustaining life in such an environment. In other words, the panel presents the Japanese spirit of sustainability as what would make life on Mars possible.

## Sustainability as National Ideology

The Japan Pavilion highlights sustainability as a form of knowledge that is deeply integrated into taken-for-granted Japanese understandings of everyday life. By exhibiting traditional and popular foods and technologies, the pavilion consistently conveys the idea that sustainability is not a newly imported concept, but rather something long embedded in Japanese culture. This message is particularly emphasized in the Factory area, where Japanese tradition is explicitly linked with sustainability through phrases such as “a sustainable mindset rooted in Japanese tradition” and “The timeless spirit of sustainability inherited by Ise Jingu”. In this way, sustainability is reconstructed in the Japan Pavilion not as a development-oriented concept that emerged after the 1980s, but as a tradition and aesthetic sensibility that helps shape the imagined community of the Japanese nation.

Through this process of foregrounding “sustainability” as something embedded in everyday knowledge, sustainability is reframed as a form of practical wisdom rather than an abstract policy ideal. By shifting attention to details of technique and design, the pavilion creates conceptual room for exhibiting artifacts such as SLIM, which are not typically framed in terms of sustainability. For instance, the mechanism of “not resisting” found in earthquake-resistant structures and traditional Japanese nails, and the idea of “parts designed to break” seen in both SLIM and the Kozuya Bridge, are presented as shared design principles.

Like most space probes, SLIM is ultimately disposable, and even after completing its mission it remains on the surface of the Moon. From a material perspective, SLIM itself cannot be recycled. Nevertheless, its structure is based on the principle of intentional breakability, and it is precisely through this logic that SLIM is discursively reframed as embodying the spirit of Japanese sustainability within the narrative of the Japan Pavilion.

## Conclusion

Sustainability is typically understood as a global concept associated with worldwide environmental problems and development, as reflected in the United Nations’ articulation of sustainable development as a global goal. Although it is often treated as a universally defined term, sustainability acquires locally specific meanings as it circulates between global and local contexts. In the Japan Pavilion, sustainability is not framed as an abstract policy concept or a vague solution to environmental problems but as a form of practical wisdom understood as uniquely Japanese. In this sense, sustainability is interpreted as a nationalized value.

In the Japan Pavilion, sustainability is reconstructed as a set of values that shapes the imagined community of the Japanese nation. Furthermore, a reconstructed notion of sustainability and Japanese wisdom are incorporated into a larger narrative called “cycle,” which is articulated through analogies with the circulation of the biosphere and the processes of decomposition and regeneration evident in biogas plants and fermented foods. The narrative of “cycle” is realized not only

through the oscillation between global and local scales but also through the fusion of micro- and macro-level perspectives, as well as traditional and cutting-edge technologies. Through this multiscalar synthesis, sustainability is nationalized in the Japan Pavilion, and a coherent discourse of sustainability is constructed that is capable of incorporating both environmentally friendly and environmentally unfriendly practices in which Japan is actually engaged.

## References

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