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Introduction

MOUNT FUJI commands attention. Part of the “Ring of Fire” that circles the Pacific, the volcano rises an impressive 3,776 meters (12,389 ft) above sea level. Visible to millions in Tokyo, its iconic silhouette is recognizable around the world. At the same time, industries and military bases located on and around Fuji connect it to economic and political networks with global reach. The mountain also has a rich and sometimes turbulent history as a major pilgrimage site, aesthetic inspiration, and national symbol. Other mountains may be as famous, but none has the combination of material and cultural attributes that makes Fuji such a dominating presence.

This book is a “biography” of the mountain—with a particular focus on its relationship to humans—that stretches from its geological origins to today. To use the term “biography” gives Fuji pride of place in its own story, not only as a mountain but as an active volcano.¹ Volcanoes are often depicted as having human qualities. Stories associate them with deities like the Hawaiian goddess Pele or the Roman god Vulcanus, the origin of the English word “volcano.” Volcanoes take on human features in scientific literature too. The introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Volcanoes* states that “each volcano seems to have its distinct ‘personality,’” and “just as the medical doctor analyzes the various fluids of the human body, the geochemist samples and analyzes the magmatic liquids that issue from Earth’s volcanoes.”² It is also common to refer to life cycles in which volcanoes are born, grow old, and die. In the words of a character in Endō Shūsaku’s novel *Volcano* (*Kazan*), “A volcano resembles human life. In youth it gives rein to passions, and burns with fire. It spurts out lava. But when it grows old, it assumes the burden of those past evil deeds, and it turns quiet as a grave.”³

Fuji’s life has been relatively brief. What volcanologists call “Old Fuji” (Ko Fuji) dates to about one hundred thousand years ago, while “New Fuji”

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(Shin Fuji), the volcano that now covers Old Fuji and two older volcanic cones (called “edifices” by geologists), started to take shape only around seventeen thousand years ago. It became especially active about six thousand years later, at the end of the last ice age.⁴ Thus the Fuji we see today did not precede the presence of humans but grew up among them. At times Fuji oozed slowly moving lava; at others it erupted with explosive force. There were long periods when it continuously emitted steam and other periods—the last few hundred years, for example—when it seemed to go completely quiet. These episodes of volcanic activity set the conditions for human interactions with Fuji, in the short and long term, in physical and imagined ways, in close proximity and from afar.

Volcanoes produce substantial differences in soil, elevation, and access to water in a relatively small area, so they clearly reveal the ability of humans to occupy and ultimately transform a wide range of habitats. At certain sites around Fuji, springs and rivers provide reliable supplies of fresh water to rice paddies, shrines, and paper factories; on a young lava flow, where water quickly escapes into the permeable rock and makes it unsuitable for agriculture or heavy industry, people once took advantage of the cool and constant temperatures in lava caves to store silkworm eggs.⁵ In another example of human resourcefulness, people living at the northern foot of Fuji in the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) diverted debris from occasional slush flows (*yukishiro*) and deposited it on a nearby lava flow to create arable land.⁶

Because eruptions can abruptly alter the nearby landscape—and in dramatic cases, even the global climate—volcanoes also reveal the vulnerability of the technologies and institutions humans use to manipulate different environments. The massive eruption of Fuji in 1707 not only buried nearby villages but, because of prevailing winds, deposited up to sixteen centimeters of ash fifty kilometers to the east and up to eight centimeters of ash over a hundred kilometers away.⁷ The ash clogged rivers and canals, wreaking havoc on elaborate irrigation systems that had dramatically increased the output of rice over the previous few centuries and, in turn, increased the number of people living in harm’s way. The result was a famine that took more lives than the eruption itself had.

Volcanic eruptions also highlight the uneven distribution of this vulnerability. Some disasters strike the haves and have-nots in equal measure—the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE buried both patricians and plebeians of Herculaneum and Pompeii—but more often than not, suffering and relief correlate with political influence and material wealth. The villages most devastated by debris in the eruption of Fuji in 1707 were located at higher elevations, where the value of

agricultural output was far lower than in lowland villages. Yet the lowland communities were the ones that received the lion's share of government relief since they produced far more agricultural tribute than those in the poorer uplands.

By the time it erupted in 1707, Fuji had acquired a privileged place in the collective Japanese imagination. Its popularity would only increase over time, first in Japan and then abroad, to the point that Fuji is now one of the most famous sites in the world. Representations of Fuji grew to enjoy lives of their own, and, like the icons of saints, became objects of desire in and of themselves. Today these objects include everything from protective talismans and woodblock prints to Fuji-shaped sponges and erasers.

However one views Fuji, whether directly or through representations, certain features are bound to dominate while others remain obscure. The writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who enthusiastically introduced Japanese culture to Western audiences, reflected on this phenomenon in his late nineteenth-century account of climbing the mountain. When describing Fuji at a distance he praises the beauty of its symmetrical shape, which brings to mind “some exquisite sloping of shoulders toward the neck.”⁸ But in recounting his ascent he portrays the mountain as “a frightful extinct heap of visible ashes and cinders and slaggy lava,” where “most of the green has disappeared. Likewise all of the illusion. . . . Above—miles above—the snow patches glare and gleam against that blackness,—hideously. I think of a gleam of white teeth I once saw in a skull,—a woman's skull,—otherwise burnt to a sooty crisp.” He concludes, “So one of the fairest, if not the fairest of earthly visions, resolves itself into a spectacle of horror and death. . . . But have not all human ideals of beauty, like the beauty of Fuji seen from afar, been created by forces of death and pain?—are not all, in their kind, but composites of death, beheld in retrospective through the magical haze of inherited memory?”⁹

Any history privileges some views over others, but by treating Fuji as an actor in, and product of, both the physical world and the human imagination, I hope to dispel some of the “magical haze” that surrounds the volcano. This means breaching the wall erected between humans and nature and drawing widely on different disciplines, from geology to art history. With that in mind, I conducted my research not only in libraries and archives but also on (and under) the ground, including two summers of Lewis and Clark College's Mount Fuji Study Abroad Program that I led with a geologist, Elizabeth Safaran, in 2014 and 2017. We took soil cores, counted tree species, participated in religious rituals, visited a toilet paper factory, and, of course, climbed to the summit.¹⁰

This book proceeds chronologically, but the story of Fuji here does not unfold in a straight line from the deeper to the recent past. Nor does it confuse trajectory with inevitability. There are moments when history might have taken a different course. Given the focus on Fuji's changing relations with humans, this book touches only briefly on developments predating the Upper Paleolithic (the Late Stone Age), when groups of *Homo sapiens* established themselves in the vicinity of Old Fuji.¹¹ Most of the book deals with the past few centuries, when human relations with Fuji multiplied and intensified at a rapid pace and Fuji became a mountain of global importance.

Our history starts with Fuji's geological origins and the earliest humans who lived near the volcano. It then delves into the beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities of Japan's ancient imperial court, for which the volcano was both a poetic inspiration and a deity to be feared. Fuji proved to be an especially violent god, erupting at least seven times between the late eighth and late eleventh centuries CE. The most dramatic eruption took place in 864–866, producing massive amounts of lava that engulfed thirty-five square kilometers of Fuji's northwestern skirt. Yet the court and its representatives feared Fuji mainly as a god of epidemics, situating the volcano in a network of disease that linked microbes, humans, highways, and rituals performed to appease the angry deity. At the same time, Fuji appeared in literature and art as a realm of Daoist immortals, which towered above the mere flesh-and-blood humans below.

After quieting in the twelfth century, Fuji became a deity more beneficent than destructive. First a home to mountain ascetics, it gradually evolved into a destination for pilgrims seeking divine favor. In the process, Fuji's imagined role in the spread of disease was radically transformed, thanks in large part to the ascetic Kakugyō Tōbutsu (1541?–1646). He and his followers worshipped Fuji as the “Original Father and Mother” (Moto no Chichihaha) of the cosmos and viewed the parental god as a source of healing rather than illness. Other divinities clustered around the mountain, including buddhas and bodhisattvas, the dragon goddess Benzaiten, and the “shining princess” Kaguya-hime. Pilgrims who came to Fuji could appeal for help from as few or as many of them as they liked.

Although worshippers now turned to Fuji the sacred mountain for assistance, Fuji the fierce volcano was not done wreaking havoc. The eruption of 1707 buried homes and fields and clogged waterways with ash, causing floods for decades to come. Over the previous century, Japan had experienced enormous growth in both population and agricultural output, the latter driven by new farming techniques and extensive irrigation systems. The eruption and its

aftermath starkly revealed the vulnerability of a complex infrastructure designed to produce crops for subsistence, taxation, and sale to distant markets. Efforts by the Tokugawa regime to provide relief laid bare the challenges and contradictions of a political order in which the shogun shared power—and responsibilities—with the daimyo (lords) of several hundred domains operating within an increasingly national context.

Fuji worship and pilgrimage expanded steadily in the decades after the eruption, especially in the city of Edo, the seat of the shogunal government. Joining worship groups known as *Fujikō*, devotees were inspired by figures like the highly influential leader Jikigyō Miroku (1671–1733). Following in the footsteps of Kakugyō, he identified Fuji with the Original Father and Mother and articulated a cosmic—and dynamic—“bodyscape,” as I think of it, in which the body of Fuji sustained the bodies of humans and other living things through its production of water and rice. Inspired in large part by Jikigyō, who dramatically fasted to death on Fuji in an ultimate act of devotion, *Fujikō* proliferated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These groups came together to worship on a regular basis, and some members also made the trek to Fuji during the summer months, supporting a pilgrimage economy that generated not only profits but also competition and often discord among locals who participated in it.

While Jikigyō and his followers transformed Fuji into an entity of popular worship, others incorporated the mountain into daily life through fiction, poetry, art, and consumer objects ranging from dishes to combs. As a result, sacred Fuji became a familiar friend. The people of Edo, who could see the mountain from the city on a clear day, laid special claim to it, but as time passed, Fuji entered the everyday lives of people throughout Japan, becoming a national possession—and obsession.

The link between Fuji and a sense of nationhood grew more pronounced in the face of the threat posed by the Western powers in the mid-nineteenth century. Some Japanese sought to nationalize Fuji by turning it into an object of purely Shinto—that is, native—worship. Their efforts intensified after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when a new imperial regime replaced the Tokugawa shogunate and initially looked to unify Japan by Shintoizing it. The promotion of Shinto met with mixed success, however, and ideologues in and out of government soon found other ways to foster national sentiment within the “national body” (*kokutai*) headed by the emperor. Fuji played a symbolic role in this ideological project, appearing in schoolbooks designed to teach schoolchildren to be productive and loyal subjects. At the same time, Japanese were

encouraged to climb Fuji and other mountains not for religious purposes but to foster personal health and, by extension, national vigor.

Not that Fuji was viewed by everyone in the same way. Its power as a national icon lay in its capacity to mean different things to different people, much like the nation itself. After World War II, these differences played out in a political and legal battle over who owned Fuji's summit: a Shinto shrine at the base of the mountain or the state. This conflict had its roots in local competition that dated back centuries, but it took on national significance because participants saw control of the summit of Fuji, symbol of Japan, as an indication of the sort of country Japan was and would become.

From the late 1800s, Fuji also became a prominent site of scientific inquiry. The husband-and-wife team Nonaka Itaru and Chiyoko achieved fame, for example, by attempting (and failing) to spend the winter of 1895–1896 on the summit to take meteorological readings. They aimed to make Fuji's summit into a place for empirical measurement, but the thin air and severe cold took their toll, and their mission was cut short when a rescue party took them down the mountain in December. The advance of modern science may have deepened the conceptual divide between humans and nature, but the Nonakas' grueling experience—and the publicity surrounding it—attest to the ways in which the creation of this divide has involved living, breathing people entangled with both the objects of their study and the expectations of their fellow humans.

As Fuji developed into a national symbol and scientific object, it became increasingly enmeshed in commodified networks, first nationally, then globally. The production of tea, textiles, and paper depended, and continues to depend, on the steady supply of water at the base of the mountain. Industrial growth created environmental problems along with economic prosperity, however. The most notorious was the pollution of nearby Suruga Bay, which had grown so dire by the 1960s that it was featured in a Godzilla film. Despite efforts to clean up the bay, the bodies of sharks and other marine life are still contaminated with industrial chemicals.

Environmental impacts have been anything but straightforward, as the militarization of common lands at the base of Fuji from the 1890s demonstrates. Initially used by the army of imperial Japan, since World War II these common lands have hosted both the Japanese and American armed forces. Military leaders found the region attractive not only because it was close to Tokyo but also because of its vast grasslands, which were maintained *as* grasslands by locals who regularly mowed and burned them. Previously used to feed horses, grow edible plants, and thatch roofs, today they are burned to preserve a

terrain suitable for artillery practice and other military exercises, which in turn generates rental fees from the government for common land associations. Were it not for those fees, the associations would likely stop burning the grasslands, since there is little demand today for horses or thatch. Elsewhere in Japan former grasslands once maintained by burning or mowing have turned into forest—or golf courses. It might seem unproblematic to allow nature to take its course and let the grasslands around Fuji disappear into forest as well. But should this occur, endangered butterfly species and other organisms that depend on grassland plants would disappear, too. The curious fact is that these organisms have the militarization of Fuji to thank for the maintenance of their habitat and thus their survival. In an epoch so dominated by *Homo sapiens* that it is frequently called the “Anthropocene,” ecological entanglements of this sort are multiplying at a rapid pace.

Fuji may be famous throughout the world, but its contradictions, like its summit, are often obscured by mist. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013, it is depicted as stable, peaceful, and even timeless. Yet it has erupted many times in the past and will almost surely erupt again. It is an awe-inspiring example of natural beauty, but its water supports polluting industries and its lower slopes are home to artillery ranges. It is one of Japan’s most prominent symbols of national unity, yet its history is full of economic, political, and ideological conflict. What follows is therefore a biography of multiple lives, multiple Fujis. It is also a parable—one that shows how fantasies about nature can be destructive as well as creative, for humans and nonhumans alike.

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