THE SPIRITUAL WORLD:
ASPECTS OF NEW AGE IN JAPAN

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The Japanese New Age scene is booming: strolling through a big bookstore in Japan, one will come across the translated works of Shirley MacLaine, Fritjof Capra, Ram Dass, Rudolf Steiner and various other authors popular in New Age in the West, but also books by native Japanese authors on questions of spiritual energy, spiritual awakening or life after death. Since the emergence of New Age in Japan, the various Japanese terms for ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ have become more and more popular, although it is difficult to discern what they actually mean—whether in English or Japanese. Throughout the course of this chapter I will therefore expand on the problematic aspects of these two terms.

Since the second half of the 1980s more and more Japanese companies have offered seminars and workshops about the spiritual self and the proper way to attain it. A growing number of shops sell omajinai-goods (items or objects with a so-called ‘spiritual touch’) such as crystals, stones and pyramids that supposedly contain spiritual energy from which their purchasers or owners benefit in various ways. During the 1990s the subject of destiny (unmei) and the different methods for improving it became extremely popular. Since then, Japan has been witnessing a boom in all kinds of healing (iyashi), with New Age notions becoming more and more integrated into mainstream life-styles.

The first part of this chapter introduces the development, the audience and some popular themes of the seishin sekai, the ‘spiritual world’, the Japanese counterpart of New Age in the West.\(^1\) In sharp contrast to the latter scene, Japan’s New Age is distinctive in its discourse on the nature of spirituality typical for Japanese religions, in which many intellectuals, authors and artists participate. In the second part of the chapter, the emergence of the spiritual world and this ‘spiritual discourse’ will be

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\(^1\) The Japanese term seishin can be translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘spiritual’ into English, while sekai is rendered by the English word ‘world’. Japanese writers refer to the Japanese word seishin sekai as ‘spiritual world’ when writing in English; see Shimazono (1996a).
discussed in the contexts of both Japanese religions and contemporary Japanese society. The chapter then describes some tendencies of New Age in Japan in the early twenty-first century. The conclusion again takes up the problematic aspects of the term spirituality.

The Emergence of the Spiritual World

As is the case with the so-called New Age in other countries, it is notoriously difficult to grasp this phenomenon in terms of its form of social organisation, its basic notions and practices and its adherents. Therefore, this chapter will just give some very general descriptions. Since the 1980s many New Age ideas and practices have been introduced to Japan. The term seishin sekai (‘spiritual world’) was first used in 1978 when a large bookstore in Tokyo held a book exhibition called Indo Nepal seishin sekai no hon (“Books on the spiritual world in India and Nepal”). Because the contents of these books could not be fitted into the framework of established religions (kisei shûkyô) and also because of their often critical view of established religions, they required a separate category. Thus the term seishin sekai came to serve as an umbrella term for these ideas and practices. During the 1990s, instead of the catchword ‘New Age’, the term spirituality came to refer to the Japanese counterpart of New Age in the West, having been taken up both by its adherents as well as by many of the academic observers of the religious scene in Japan.

By the early 1980s, many bookstores in major cities all over Japan had established sections on the spiritual world. Today, almost all of the large bookstores have a department with shelves of translations of works by Edgar Cayce, Osho, Krishnamurti, Rudolf Steiner, George I. Gurdjieff, Shirley MacLaine or Carlos Castaneda, among others, along with books on channelling, transpersonal psychology, Qi Gong, Feng Shui, holistic healing, aromatherapy and other major themes of New Age in the West. Best-selling authors include, e.g. James Redfield and Darryl Anka. While the majority of these offerings are translations of authors popular in western New Age, we also find a growing number

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3 The religious traditions of Buddhism, Shintô and Christianity.
4 The term spirituality corresponds to the English word ‘spirituality’; see below.