

Waves of Fear: A New Religion Stirs Controversy in Japan¹

By Benjamin Dorman

From late April to mid-May 2003, official police statements and intensive media coverage once again stirred up fears of millennialist religion in Japan. A week after prosecutors argued for imposing the death penalty on the founder of Aum Shinrikyo—the millennial group whose murderous gas attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995 remains a painfully close memory for many—the story of Pana Wave Laboratory hit the presses and the airwaves.

Pana Wave members, who dressed in white clothes, drove white vehicles complete with bandaged steering wheels, and wrapped their immediate surroundings in white sheets, provoked both “amusement and an underlying sense of fear,” as the prominent daily *Mainichi Shimbun* put it May 6. Pana Wave was, the same newspaper declared a few days later, “a weird cult.”

On May 15 *Asahi Shimbun*, another major daily, reminded readers that Aum, which changed its name to Aleph sometime after the subway attack, had similarly been ridiculed for its bizarre behavior before the extent of the crimes it actually committed in the 1990s came to light. The article aired the concerns of Susumu Yamada, an official of Oizumi village in the central Japan prefecture where Pana Wave owned a facility, that the strange activities of Pana Wave members were making the residents feel uneasy.

Years before Aum launched its attack, it had run-ins with local communities whose residents complained about the group’s activities. But in the case of Pana Wave, a lot more people were listening than before. Amidst the flurry of talk show chatter and letters to the editor, Prime Minister Koizumi himself felt impelled to ask why anyone would join such a strange group.

Pana Wave claims to be the “scientific arm” of Chino Shoho, a small and hitherto little noticed religious sect founded in 1977 by a former English teacher named Yuko Chino. The English-language *Japan Times* reported May 6 that Chino’s mother was associated with a group called God Light Association (GLA). After the death of GLA’s founder, Chino gathered followers around her, having published a book describing her beliefs, which included elements of Buddhism, Christianity, and New Age spirituality. According to the *Japan Times*, these ideas

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developed over the years into a combination of spiritualism, science fiction, and political conservatism. The paper ran an interview with a follower who stated that members regard Chino as the “last Messiah to succeed Buddha, Moses, and Jesus.”

When Chino became ill in the early 1990s, the group established Pana Wave Laboratory in order to conduct research into electromagnetic radiation, which the members felt was the cause of her illness. The group began to wander around western Japan in search of a location that was free from electromagnetic radiation.

According to Pana Wave’s Japanese language website (www.panawave.gr.jp), KGB agents using research conducted by scientists in the former Soviet Union have tampered with power lines in Japan. The group claims that these activities are not only dangerous to people but also are causing untold environmental destruction. Pana Wave believes that the color white neutralizes the harmful effects of electronic radiation and, as a follower told the *Japan Times*, protects them from “persistent attacks by an unidentified enemy.”

Chino had long made millennial predictions that—unlike Aum’s pre-subway attack announcements (and songs), which actually mentioned sarin gas—were rather short on details. But with her illness purportedly worsening the messages became more specific. *Mainichi Shimbun* reported May 6 that she had recently predicted that she would die on May 15, and that on that day a 10th planet would move close to the earth, reversing the magnetic pole and triggering massive tidal waves and earthquakes.

Beginning in October 2002, Pana Wave’s cavalcade of vehicles was parked on a stretch of road in Fukui prefecture that had been closed for the winter. When the road was opened in the spring, local authorities asked the group to move on, threatening to charge them with violations of the Road Traffic Law. On April 25 Pana Wave relocated to neighboring Gifu Prefecture, but the mayors and citizens of nearby towns demanded that they leave.

Media attention was triggered by a series of articles in the weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun*. On April 25 the magazine called some facilities owned by Pana Wave “satyams”—a Sanskrit word for truth that Aum had used to identify both its places of worship and the laboratories where members produced the gas that was used in the subway attack. It was not just this hint of Aum that made *Shukan Bunshun*’s sensation-alized report catnip to other media organizations. The magazine correctly claimed that Pana Wave had a connection with the latest star in Japan’s media firmament.

In August 2002 a bearded seal somehow strayed into the polluted Tama River and was given the name Tama-chan (“Dear Little Tama”). Tama-chan quickly acquired a legion of fans besotted with its *kawaii* (cute) nature and also became something of a *cause célèbre* amongst environmentalists. (After receiving a residency certificate from the city of Yokohama, a privilege that non-Japanese humans cannot gain, a group of foreigners wearing seal costumes with whiskers painted on their faces organized a demonstration to demand the same privilege.)

In early May Pana Wave members announced that global destruction could be averted by rescuing Tama-chan. Later it was revealed that a Pana Wave member had funded a botched attempt in March to capture the seal by the “Group That Thinks About Tama-chan,” whose activities were heavily criticized by the opposing “Group That Watches Over Tama-chan” and other Tama-chan fan clubs.

Meanwhile a Fuji TV reporter was granted an unprecedented interview with the 69-year-old Chino—who was supposed to be at death’s door but looked fine to him—during which she elaborated on the nature of the forthcoming calamities and Tama-chan’s potential to save humanity. Belief in Tama-chan’s miraculous powers aside, other observers viewed this “connection” as no more than a cheap publicity stunt by Pana Wave.

Pressure on Pana Wave intensified after May 1, when the chief of the National Police Agency (NPA), Hidehiko Sato, announced that the group not only looked strange but also resembled Aum in its early days (he did not go into specifics). Thereupon the Pana Wave story saturated the news for two weeks.

The police ordered the vehicular cavalcade to move from Gifu Prefecture, and again threatened to charge the group with violating the Road Traffic Law. As the vehicles moved from one area to another they were greeted by protesting local residents, perplexed law enforcement officials, an army of media, and the odd Tama-chan fan hoarsely shouting out support for the group’s efforts to save the seal.

The frenzy prompted a strong response from Shoko Egawa, the independent journalist who was among the first people to alert the public to the criminal activities of Aum. Writing in *Asahi Shimbun* May 10, Egawa lashed out at the media, comparing the reporters covering the story to Italian paparazzi. The NPA chief’s “impressionistic meanderings” connecting Pana Wave to Aum were, she claimed, way off the mark. Both media and police were, she noted, generating unnecessary fear amongst the public.

On May 14, in a move that was widely viewed in the media as an attempt both to quell the growing public fear about the group and to collect information, some 300 police investigators swooped down on 12 Pana Wave facilities located around the country as well as on the 17 white vehicles that made up the cavalcade. After collecting some 400 pieces of evidence, the police charged the group with possessing three falsely registered vehicles.

An *Asahi Shimbun* report the same day quoted a police officer as saying that the police wanted to snuff out any social anxiety at an early stage. On May 15 the paper published an article by Masayuki Tanamura, a professor on the law faculty of Waseda University, warning of the dangers of heavy-handed police action and citing Waco as a lesson that Japanese authorities needed to heed. But after the May 15 deadline passed without either global destruction or Chino's death, interest in the group dwindled rapidly. Most newspapers ignored claims by Pana Wave members that the end of the world would be delayed by one week. By early June, the group appeared to have returned to its prior state of innocuous obscurity. Tama-chan was last sighted swimming freely in a river in Saitama prefecture.

It is clear that the Japanese authorities remain all too eager to show the public that their fingers are on the pulse of any millennial threats. The media continue to convey the message that "millennial group" equals criminal activity and requires swift, decisive, extensive, and very public investigation. The specter of Aum continues to haunt Japan.