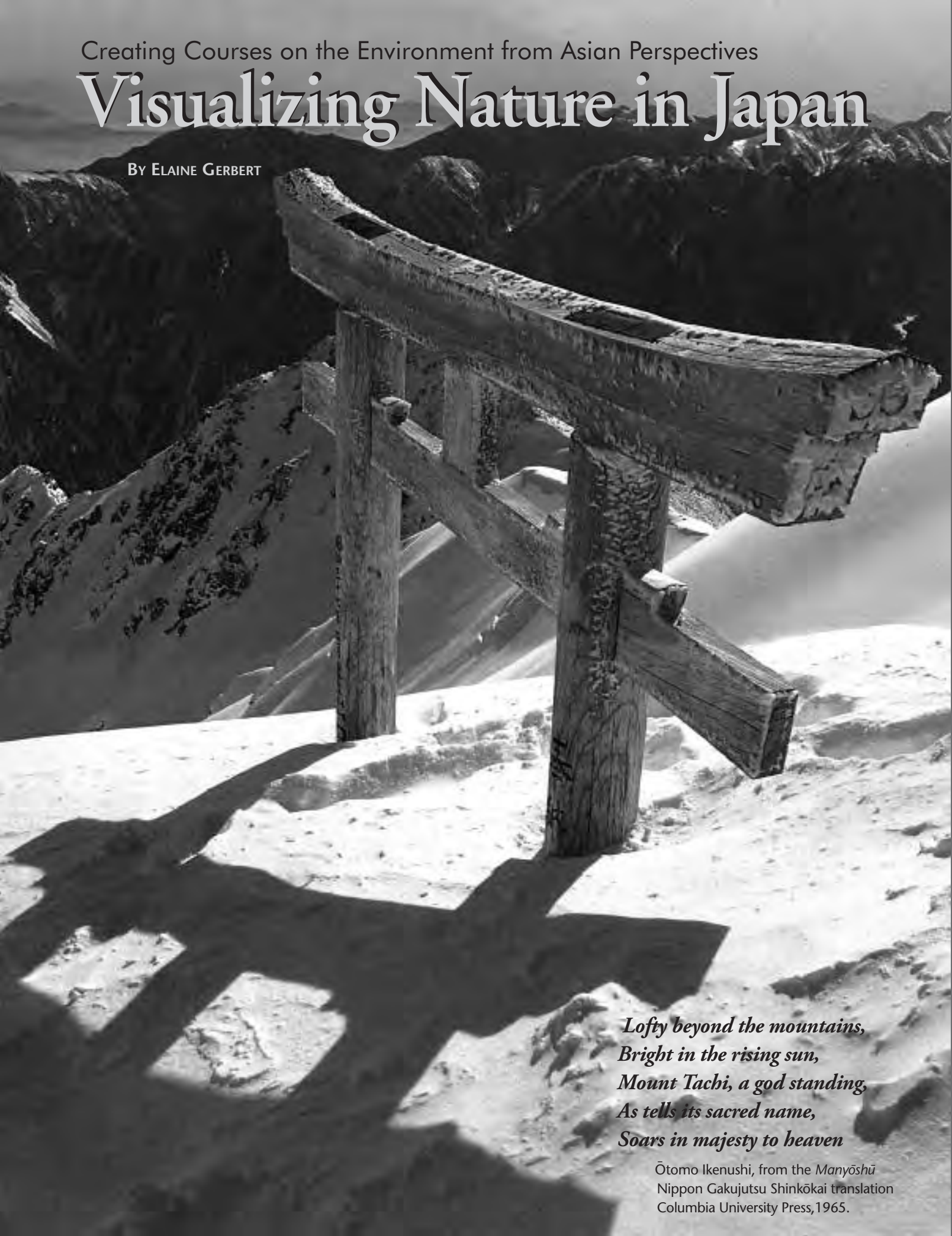


Creating Courses on the Environment from Asian Perspectives

Visualizing Nature in Japan

BY ELAINE GERBERT



*Lofty beyond the mountains,
Bright in the rising sun,
Mount Tachi, a god standing,
As tells its sacred name,
Soars in majesty to heaven*

Ōtomo Ikenushi, from the *Manyōshū*
Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai translation
Columbia University Press, 1965.

H

istories and courses (including my own) devoted to the study of literature oftentimes introduce personages, institutions, and works divorced from any sense of the spaces in which the lives and the events took place. Inviting students to combine their readings of history, religion, and literature with a phenomenological examination of features of the landscape may lead them to consider the ways in which the environment not only influences the shape of human events but becomes a source of the images through which the world is conceptualized and interpreted. Increased awareness of the environment invites us to depart from our accustomed niches of specialization, cross interdisciplinary lines, and view our subjects from new vantage points. The following article inquires into ways in which landscape might be studied from the perspective of the humanities.

We view nature from without, but we also carry it within ourselves, as our views of nature and landscape are invariably shaped by the language and cultural habits of thought that structure the ways in which we look upon the world. To encourage our students to begin thinking about culture through the lens of landscape, we might have them look at the ways in which consciousness of nature has been inscribed in language. An examination of Japanese names reveals that many bear traces of the features of landscape: the four directions, the spatial dimensions of up and down, high and low, broad and narrow, the four seasons, the topographical features of plain, field, paddy, wood, forest, river, cape, shore, mountain, hill, rock, and varieties of plant life are all entities from which a majority of Japanese surnames are derived.

Place names mirror the physical landscape to no less an extent. The cities and towns of New York State, for example, may boast of names of famous places of Western antiquity: Rome, Romulus, Massena, Utica, Syracuse, Cicero, Ithaca, Troy, Ulysses, and Homer, whereas the names of communities in Japan are mostly marked by the features of the topography.

Introducing students to the sensual reality of the landscapes themselves, and from there to the cultural practices that grew out of engagement with the landscapes might lead them to a deeper, more intuitive comprehension of the ways in which culture is developed. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted,

Ideas acquire materiality through the history of bodily practices. They work not simply because they persuade through their logic; they are also capable, through a long and heterogeneous history of the cultural training of the senses, of making connections with our glands and muscles and neuronal networks. . . . The past is embodied through a long process of training the senses, . . .¹

In Japan, mountains, water, and trees have been of particular significance in the formation of traditional culture.



← Mount Tachi or Tateyama, as it is now called, stands in the southeastern part of present-day Toyama Prefecture. The 3,003-m summit of Ōyama, one of the three major peaks of the Tateyama mountain system, is home to a Shintō shrine. Mt. Fuji, Japan's highest mountain, is visible in the background.

Photograph by Yanagi Akinobu
Source: *Pacific Friend*, Vol. 25,
No. 9, 1998.

Mountains

Mountains, covering approximately 80 percent of the land in Japan, offer a natural place to begin this investigation. The Japanese Archipelago is essentially a chain of volcanic mountains rising out of the sea whose tops appear as an arc of mountain ranges extending over Kyūshū, Shikoku, Honshū, and Hokkaidō.

Japan's mountains have placed special limitations on the course of the country's economic and political development. Of the five major highways of the premodern era, one, the Tōkaidō (Eastern Sea Road), followed along the coast to link Edo to Kyōto. The four others traced their way through mountainous terrain into the "back country" of Honshu, but did not penetrate far. Much of the country was largely inaccessible before the modern era. Mountain barriers provided not only obstacles to national unification, but protection for political capitals (Kyōto and later Edo) and strongholds for famous warrior chieftains such as Takeda Shingen, master of Kai, and Uesugi Kenshin, lord of Echigo. Isolated mountain settlement patterns contributed to dialectical differences, a keen sense of regionalism, and the strong tendency toward group identity and insularity that characterizes Japanese culture.

Mountain metaphors, legends and folklore set in mountains, religious beliefs and practices centered upon mountains, poems about mountains (160 of these appear in Japan's earliest anthology of poetry, the *Manyōshū*) and narratives of historical events shaped by mountains give some sense of the role of mountains in the formation of Japan's cultural imaginary.

MOUNTAINS IN MYTHS AND RELIGION

Mountains figured centrally in the early myths. It was Mount Takachiho in Kyūshū upon which the Heavenly Grandson of the Sun Goddess is said to have stepped as he descended to earth from the Plain of High Heaven (Takamagahara). Mountains in Japan have been regarded not only as sacred places upon which *kami* descend, but as the body of *kami*. Mountain shrines attest to belief in mountain deities, and to the folk belief, at one time common throughout Japan, that ancestors, buried on mountainsides, merged to become one with the local mountain *kami* who descended from the mountain at rice planting time to take the form of the rice paddy deity (*ta no kami*).²

Shinto vocabulary is rich in terms for mountains and distinguishes several types. One kind of sacred mountain is the *kannabi yama*: a small mountain, enveloped in greenery, adjacent to the flatlands, that stands out conspicuously from the surroundings and gives the impression of a place that *kami* might inhabit.³ The most famous *kannabi yama* is Mount Miwa in Nara Prefecture. Mountains also take on life-like attributes through the personal names they have acquired. Mount Fuji, for example, is affectionately known as the "Sacred Lotus."

Bridging the distance between earth and heaven, mountains have traditionally been regarded as sites of spiritual inspiration and authority, and appropriate places for retreat, meditation, and ascetic discipline. It was on mountaintops that the Tendai and Shingon sects built their main temples. Zen monasteries were typically situated on the slopes of forested hills and included the names of mountains in their formal titles.⁴

The craggy forbidding heights made mountains ideal proving grounds of religious faith. Contemplating the daunting disciplines undertaken by the Shugendō ascetics who stood at midwinter under waterfalls, twisted themselves into embryonic positions upon rock precipices, and lived off ferns and tree bark creates a concrete impression of the role mountains may play in the enlightened comprehension of one's Being in the phenomenal world. The grueling physical demands of the Tateyama Mountain pilgrimage, in which devotees seek to experience "rebirth in the Ten Realms of the Buddhist cosmos on a symbolic level" by making a rigorous ritual ascent of a holy mountain, conveys the practical Japanese "emphasis upon cultivation (*shugyō*) of one's Being" and gives insight into Japanese religion in a way more compelling than



Topographic map of Japan.
Mountain High Maps ©
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Pilgrims climbing Mount Fuji.
Photo courtesy of ISEI.

abstract summations of the importance of nature in Buddhism.⁵ Similarly, Lafcadio Hearn's descriptions of stumbling on cinders and gasping for air in the rarefied atmosphere of a tortuous ascent of Mount Fuji elevates the rapture of "the colossal vision" seen from the mountain's summit at dawn.⁶

Japan's mountainous landscapes have influenced the visualization of metaphysical concepts in art. Pure Land Buddhism in Japan developed a form of painting called "Amida Crossing the Mountains" in which Amida Buddha, accompanied by Kannon and Seishi, is portrayed coming over a range of mountains to greet the dying believer. This religious iconography is believed to have been influenced by "Kumano's 3,600 peaks" which, in medieval times, came to be thought of as the paradise to which Amida took believers.⁷

MOUNTAINS AND FOLKLORE

Local folk practices can provide yet another perspective on the interrelationship between mountains and culture. More than just scenery gracing the landscape, mountains functioned as "almanacs" for farmers. In the Japan Alps farmers read the shifting configurations of snow patches on Nōtori (Field Bird Mountain), Nōushi (Field Cow Mountain) and Nōuma (Field Horse Mountain) for signs which told them when to prepare the fields for planting.⁸ Foods made from mountain plants and sold under the name of *sansai* (mountain vegetables)—consisting of assorted stems and mushrooms—and dishes such as wild boar offer a view of Japanese cuisine that departs from the usual emphasis upon seafood. Ethnographic accounts from Yanagida Kunio's *Yama no Jinsei* (Life in the Mountains, 1925) offer glimpses into an oftentimes brutal but vanishing way of life in the mountains. While Yanagida's work may not be easily accessible (it has yet to be translated into English), Imamura Shōhei's film, *The Ballad of Narayama* (*Narayama Bushi-kō*, 1982) affords a visually arresting view of no less harsh conditions in a mountain village in the late nineteenth century. Folklore about supernatural beings living in the mountains includes legends and stories about *yamanba* (the old hag who is also the subject of the noh play, *Yamanba*), *yukionna* (the snow witch, who has been treated in numerous films, most recently in Kurosawa's *Dreams*), and Kintoki, the wild boy raised in the mountains. Familiarity with this lore may afford a contemporary viewer a double vision, revealing the capricious temper of an aroused mountain kami at work behind the fitful alternations of blizzard, rain, sunshine, fog, and sleet that wreaked havoc with the downhill skiing events on Hakuba (White Horse Mountain) during the Nagano Olympics!

MOUNTAINS IN LITERATURE

Spending more time discussing and showing visual representations of the mountain ranges that constitute the backbone of the Japanese Archipelago would enliven the legend of Yoshitsune, who eluded the assassins sent by his brother, the shōgun Yoritomo, by fleeing into the forbidding wooded mountainsides of central and northeastern Honshū. The fall of the Heike gains in poignancy when we see the steep mountainsides of the Japan Alps where remnants of the clan took refuge from their enemies and carried out precarious subsistence farming, retaining old forms of speech and customs as the centuries passed by.

Excerpts from *The Tale of Heike*; *Yoshitsune, A Fifteenth Century Japanese Chronicle*; Ogyū Sorai's *Journey to Kai in 1706*; and Bashō's *A Narrow Road to the Back Country* convey a sense of the history and romance associated with mountains in Japan. That romance was reignited in the Meiji period when university mountaineering clubs, modeled upon German student clubs, became centers for reading German romantic poetry. Resisting the physical transformation that modernization visited upon the coastal lowlands, mountains become associated with an enduring past in twentieth-century literature. The romantic aura of the backcountry mountain terrain accounts in no small part for the perennial popularity of Shimazaki Tōson's works set in Shinshū. The fact that the events of his monumental masterpiece, *Before the Dawn*, take place at the end of the Edo period and in the formative days of the Meiji regime enhances the nostalgia of their settings all the more. Other modern works in which mountains and their settings evoke a connection with a lost past or an alternate way of being in the world are Kawabata Yasunari's *The Sound of the Mountain*, Izumi Kyōka's "The Priest of Mount Kōya,"⁹ and Nakagami Kenji's "The Immortal."¹⁰



Amida Crossing the Mountains.

Hanging scroll, color on silk. Zenrinji, Kyoto.

Source: *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes*, published by the MIT Press, 1983

Water

Surrounded by oceans and located in the path of monsoon rains, Japan receives 1,600 millimeters of rain per year, considerably more than the yearly world average of 750 millimeters.¹¹ Its average annual rate of humidity is 64 percent, double that of France at 32 percent.¹² As might be

expected, the native vocabulary signifying degrees and types of wetness and humidity is extensive and highly expressive. Japanese describe theirs as a “wet” (*uetto*) culture that privileges intuitive emotional understanding and empathy, as opposed to a “dry” culture that prioritizes abstract logical reasoning and intellectual relationships.

Intricate configurations of mountain ranges provide channels for narrow, fast-running streams and waterfalls that lend great beauty to the landscape, and force for the production of hydroelectricity, an important source of energy in a country lacking oil deposits. Water was central to economic productivity in a rice-dependent economy, and the control of waterways and management of water supplies have been crucial factors in patterns of settlement and socialization. Political and economic power configurations were shaped by the maritime conditions of the Sea of Japan, the South China Sea, and the Inland Sea. And the need for fresh water supplies (among other things) brought Matthew Perry’s black

ships to Uraga Bay in 1853. Destruction of the waterwheels that filled its moats and provided its water supply brought about the fall of Yodo Castle, which led to Tokugawa Yoshinobu’s defeat at the battle of Toba-Fushimi, and marked the beginning of the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate.¹³

Water assumes many different forms in the cultural imagery of Japan. There is the violence of tsunami, typhoons, and floods. A magnificent wave arcs around the image of Mount Fuji in a Hokusai woodblock print, while the sea undulates sensuously in Miyagi Michio’s musical composition, “Spring Sea.” There is water that surges and water that is deep and still; rain water, river water, spring water; water that flows and carries, water that submerges; water that connects or separates, and water that induces dreams and reveries. Following are some categories for investigating the material imagination of water.¹⁴



Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849).

The Great Wave. c. 1831.

Source: *How to Look at Japanese Art* by Stephen Addiss with Audrey Yoshiko Seo.

Copyright © Honolulu Academy of Arts, Gift of James A. Michener, 1955

Hachiman’s *tomoe* or double comma pattern crest, based on the image of a whirlpool.

WATER DEITIES



Water deities are found in rivers, ponds, swamps, lakes, streams, springs, wells, waterfalls, and the sea. These kami are often invested with protective powers. The deity Hachiman of the Usa Hachiman shrine is said to originally have been a water kami, a protector of harbors and rivers, who became identified as a war kami when it accompanied Regent Jingū (201–69 C.E.) on her Korean expedition. Later, when the capital was established in the Kyōto basin, it was brought to

the side of the Yodo River, which leads into the basin, and the Iwashimizu Hachiman shrine was established to protect access to the area.¹⁵ The crest of Hachiman is based on the image of a whirlpool. It appears on roof tiles to symbolize water and serves as a talisman against fire (as do images of dolphins which also appear on the roofs of great buildings).

Water has been essential to worship in Japan. From Kōya-san to Hōryūji to Nikkō, all major temples and shrines were built near springs, wells, and lakes, whose waters were as essential for sustaining communal existence as they were for engendering a sense of connection with vital life forces.¹⁶

WATER AND IMAGES OF BIRTH, SEXUALITY, AND FEMININITY

Water occupies a central place in the cosmological myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, in which the islands of Japan are described as coalescing from primordial soup when stirred with a pole by Izanagi. Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, is born from Izanagi’s left eye when he cleanses himself in a river; the Moon Goddess and Susanoō the Storm God are washed from his Right Eye and Nose, respectively. The idea of the watery origin of life is reflected in the word for aborted fetus, *mizuko* (literally, water child), which is returned to the water to await a more propitious time for rebirth.¹⁷ Images of water are used to describe youthful beauty (*mizumizushii*, young and comely). The association between water and sensual pleasure finds

expression in the notion of the *mizushōbai* (water trade), the world of restaurants, bars, massage parlors, etc. Sexuality and images of water are interwoven in many works of literature, including Izumi Kyōka's "The Saint of Mount Kōya,"¹⁸ Kawabata Yasunari's *The Izu Dancer*, Mishima Yukio's *The Sound of Waves*, and Abe Kōbō's *Woman in the Dunes*.

WATERS OF PURIFICATION, EXORCISM, AND CONNECTION

Water and acts of lustration and purification occupy a central place in the cosmological myths of the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* and in native religious practices ranging from the rinsing of hands and mouth performed by ordinary worshippers in shrine courtyards to cold water ablutions undertaken by those who wish to purify their resolve.

Considering water's role in ritual alone might entail an examination of the *wakamizu kumi* (drawing young water) rite in January in which water is drawn from a well to mark a new beginning, followed by the *omizutori* rite at the Nigatsudō Temple in Nara in March to pray for national prosperity and offer well water to the Buddha when the water is at its lowest level, and, it is believed, purest. March's Doll Festival (*hina matsuri*) began as an exorcism in which doll effigies were set afloat on streams. Today at Kiyomizu Temple in Kyōto one can purchase a paper doll to be submerged and dissolved in a basin of water, along with one's misfortunes.

Water establishes a connection between people and kami in Shintō rites in which hot water scattered over a crowd constitutes a form of purification. Prayer to the kami of the river above the Otowa waterfall at Kiyomizu Temple takes the form of communal sipping from dippers of water caught from the falls. Sprinkling the flagstones of a tea garden or the entryway to a home or a shop with water not only lays the dust, but more importantly, signifies a welcome greeting to guests.

Some of the most prominent rituals of Japanese socialization revolve around the handling of water, as in the washing of rice, the etiquette of the *ofuro* bath, or a visit to a hot spring. From the ceremony of the first bath at the beginning of life to the wetting of lips at life's end, water has figured centrally in practices that contribute to a sense of cultural identity.

Water in Japan is also associated with intuitive ways of sensing realities beyond the present, concrete world. In "At Kinoshiki," a widely read prose poem by Shiga Naoya notable for its fresh evocation of natural surroundings, water in the episodes of a bee washed away by the rain, a drowning river rat, and the death of a water lizard triggers and marks the turnings of the narrator's psyche as he inches from insight to insight, to experience a final epiphany while walking along a lonely mountain stream at dusk.¹⁹

In Buddhist writings pure, clear water or a serene body of water may serve as a symbol of enlightened consciousness.

In folklore, water joins the world of the living with the spirit world. In August during the Festival of the Dead (Obon), paper boats with lit candles are traditionally set afloat on water to return the visiting spirits to the land across the sea. In ghost stories, a receptacle of water may function as a medium for the appearance of a non-corporeal being.

Water can also symbolize ties with the past. In Meiji and Taishō period literature, the Sumida River sometimes appears as a trope of nostalgia for lost traditions. A copper print image of Nakazu Island in the Sumida River evokes dreams of the Edo period in Satō Haruo's "Beautiful Town."²⁰ Separating the old plebian quarters from the centers of finance and government of the new capital, the river symbolizes a precious connection with a disappearing way of life in Nagai Kafū's "The River Sumida."²¹ The streams and canals of a *shitamachi* neighborhood in Tokyo demarcate a site of escapist fantasy in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's story, "The Secret."²²

The literary associations of water may be negative as well as positive. In the later books of *The Tale of Genji*, the incessant roar of the Uji River establishes an ominous background for the sad events that transpire. In Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*, the sea suggests separation, loneliness, and death. Water is a medium for disease as well as for healing in "The Monk of Mount Kōya." Tanizaki turns the ritual purity of the bath on its head in "The Incident at Willow Bath House," whose muddy waters harbor a corpse.²³



Shintō priests performing an exorcism in which paper effigy dolls are dropped into a river. The rite takes place at the Upper Kamo Shrine in Kyōto on the 30th of June.

Source: *Inishie no miyabi no sekai. Ōchō no asobi*
Shikōsha Art Books, 1992





THE AESTHETICS OF WATER

Water is an essential part of landscape architecture and gardens. The directions from which water enters and leaves the garden, its relationship to trees and rocks, the shape of the water bed, the height of the water, the angle of its flow, the sounds it produces in relation to its points of contact with other elements, and the life it sustains in its compass are all carefully planned according to well-defined aesthetic principles. Like mountains, waterfalls are categorized by type, according to texture and form, e.g. running falls, cloth falls, and double stepping falls, to name but a few.²⁴

Other aesthetic activities in which the handling of water is of utmost importance include *chanoyu*, *ikebana*, calligraphy, ink painting, and, in premodern times, in winding stream verse-capping games.

The constant humidity of the Japanese climate has influenced a style of architecture that facilitates the flow of cool air and produces a feeling of openness and lightness. Some have even suggested that the pervasive humidity disinclines people to touch one another and thus adopt as a form of greeting a bow from a distance as opposed to a handshake, a kiss, or an embrace.²⁵



Japanese cuisine is water based. The water content of the foods that make up the Japanese diet is high, and a majority of dishes are prepared with water, either through boiling, steaming, or pickling. The aesthetic appeal of Japanese food is heightened through the visual effect of moistness (e.g. *sushi*, *sashimi*, rice, and *mizu yōkan* water bean jelly), and the lacquerware that sets Japanese food off to greatest advantage requires atmospheric moisture to retain its luster.²⁶

A summertime treat is *sōmen nagashi* (flowing vermicelli). Fresh mountain water keeps the noodles chilled.

Credit: ASOBI: *The Sensibilities at Play* (Mazda Motor Corporation).

Painting of a winding-stream, verse-capping game by Ikeda Koson (1802–1867). Participants were required to compose a verse before the floating cup of sake reached them.
Source: *Inishie no miyabi no sekai. Ōchō no asobi*. Shikōsha Art Books, 1992.



Trees

If the ancient appellation for Japan, Yamato, contains the syllables for mountain, Yamato province (present-day Nara Prefecture) abuts the province of Kinokuni, “Land of Trees.”²⁷ The association between mountains and trees is close, so close that the word *yama* is also used to designate the woods found on mountains. About 65 percent of the land in Japan is still covered with forest, much of it dense growth, thanks to extensive policies of forest management and reforestation in the Edo period.²⁸

The temperate zone climate with four seasons and plentiful rainfall has resulted in many varieties of beautifully grained wood. Japanese frequently refer to their culture as a “culture of wood” (*ki no bunka*), and from early times, paper and other wood products have constituted important artifacts of Japan’s material culture. Often noted is that the oldest wooden buildings in the world are the Hōryūji, Tōshōdaiji, Yakushiki, and Shinyakushiji temples in Nara; that the largest wooden building before written records was the Izumo Taisha Shrine on the Japan Sea Coast; and that the largest wooden structure in the world today is the Tōdaiji temple in Nara.²⁹

The reconstruction of the nation’s most sacred Shintō shrine every twenty years from fresh timber taken from trees grown in special woods is well known. Less well known is the fact that a pillar, symbolizing the pillar linking the heaven of the Sun Goddess with the earth, lies buried in the courtyard of the Ise Shrine, or that the Izumo Shrine, dedicated to Ōkuninushi, likewise contains such symbolic pillars within its structure. Here again language reminds us of the centrality of nature in Japanese religious belief, for the counter (*hashira*) for kami is also the word for pillar.

SACRED TREES

The special status of a sacred tree (*reiboku*) is indicated by a *shimenawa* (a thick straw rope with white paper pennants) hung around the trunk. The tree may also be enclosed by a low wooden fence. Trees designated as sacred are found in great numbers throughout Japan, and there are also hoary trees venerated as national treasures. The special regard for the living spirit of trees can also be seen in the traditional treatment of lumber in Japan, where milled lumber was stored upright with the root ends of the boards pointed toward the ground, and where carpenters, when building a house, customarily installed the lumber in the direction in which it grew, root end down.³⁰

Giant cryptomeria tree with *shimenawa*.

Source: *Taiyō Magazine*. No. 457, Nov. 1998

Photograph by Kitai Kazuo.

Courtesy of Kitai Kazuo, Takahashi Yūko, and *Taiyō Magazine*.



coolness —
*faintly a crescent moon over
Feather Black Mountain.*

Bashō. From *Oku no hosomichi*

Translation by Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*,
Stanford University Press, 1998.



Cryptomeria log descending a slope in the *ki-otoshi* (tree dropping) stage of the Pillar Festival. Shimo Suwa, Nagano Prefecture.

Credit: Cover photo from a Suwa Tourism Association brochure featuring the Pillar Festival.

CRYPTOMERIA (SUGI) — A majority of sacred trees are cryptomerias, a tree which has a long life. According to a study published in 1979 by the ethnographer Higuchi Kiyoyuki, over half the cryptomeria over five hundred years old were designated as sacred trees.³¹ In addition to longevity, the tree's practical usefulness to human health may also lead it to be singled out for sacred status. The fusel oil in the resin of the cryptomeria that counteracts decay and exudes a pleasant odor makes that tree a favorite choice for the making of sake casks. Rosettes made from the buds of the sacred cryptomeria in the courtyard of the Ōmiwa Shrine in Nara are distributed by the shrine to local sake makers, who hang the rosettes from their shop eaves as a kind of talisman. Other conifers that attain a long life and are sometimes regarded as sacred are pine (which may live 700 years) and camphor (which may live to over 2,000 years).³²

The most famous rites honoring the cryptomeria are conducted in Suwa in Nagano prefecture. In the Suwa Pillar festival, held every seven years since the late thirteenth century, sixteen cryptomeria tree trunks, taken from mountain woods belonging to the Suwa Shrine, are pulled down from the mountains, hauled over fields and through the towns of Kami Suwa and Shimo Suwa, and erected in the corners of the courtyards of the four shrines constituting the Suwa Taisha.³³ The pillars are erected in tribute to Takeminakata, a wind deity, said to be Ōkuninushi's younger son who fled to Suwa after being bested in a wrestling match with the lightning deity. Some believe that the pillars become the *shintai* or temporary abodes of the kami. Others hold that the pillars mark a sacred space. Similar pillars found elsewhere in Nagano and Akita prefectures are said to placate the wind.

Broad-leaved trees that are sometimes regarded as sacred are zelkova, hackberry, *sasaki* (*cleyera japonica*) and star anise. The latter two are said to contain an insect repellent.³⁴



Suwa Shrine parishioners hauling a cryptomeria log with rope through the town of Shimo Suwa during the *kami asobi* (entertaining the deity) stage of the Pillar Festival.

Photo courtesy of the author, Elaine Gerbert.



A newly erected pillar in the Mae Miya Shrine courtyard of the Suwa Shrine in Kami Suwa, Nagano Prefecture.

Photo courtesy of the author, Elaine Gerbert.

Erecting a pillar during the *tate-onbashira* (pillar erecting) stage of the Pillar Festival.

Credit: A photo from a Suwa Tourism Association brochure featuring the Pillar Festival.



PINE (MATSU) — Trees that appear with especial frequency in literature, the theatrical arts, and the visual arts include bamboo, willow, maple, cherry, plum, and ginko. Homophonous with the word for wait (*matsu*) and symbolic of the virtue of fidelity and long life, no tree has been punned upon as often in Japanese literature as the pine (*matsu*). As a sign of renewal and hope, pine branches were drawn along the ground at the New Years by members of the Heian court as a kind of exorcism to sweep away bad spirits and insure good health in the coming year.³⁵ Although the original ritualistic use of the pine may be forgotten today, pine branches placed upright by the gate or front door of the home at the New Year continue to convey a propitious greeting,

The pine tree figures prominently in the noh theater, painted on the back wall of the noh stage and serving as a sign for noh itself. The noh play *Takasago* is about the spirits of two pines. A celebratory “god play” performed at the beginning of a noh program, *Takasago* features an old woman, who is the spirit of the Takasago pine, and an old man, who is the spirit of the Sumiyoshi pine. While the pine is an auspicious symbol of peace and longevity in this play, it is associated with unrequited longing in the play *Matsukaze* (Pine Wind), in which the ghost of the lovelorn fishergirl Matsukaze disappears at the end of the play, leaving only the sound of the wind in the pines.

The pine appears in the kabuki theater, both in the form of the Yodo pine of the noh theater that sometimes adorns the backdrop of the kabuki stage, and in the image of the pine as it is used to convey the idea of fealty. Matsuōmaru, whose name is written with the character for “pine,” is a loyal retainer in *Sugawara’s Secrets of Calligraphy* who embodies this virtue, and one of the play’s dramatic highpoints is the moment when he reveals his hidden resolve and removes his outer garment to expose a gorgeous under-kimono imprinted with green pine branches highlighted with gold clouds.

Its sharp needles and angular lines, which lend themselves to minute grooming and training, make the pine a favorite tree for gardens (including the miniature ones of bonsai), and a study of Japanese gardens reveals the interesting effects produced by the contrasts in colors, lines, and textures when pines are combined with rocks, sand, water, and other plants.

PLUM AND CHERRY — Of flowering trees, pride of place goes to the plum and the cherry. These trees, whose bare branches bear blossoms before the leaves come out, were once considered to possess uncanny, magical power. Poems in the *Manyōshū* bespeak an early belief that the pervasive fragrant scent of plum blossoms held the power to drive away demons. Sitting under plum blossoms was regarded as a way of safeguarding one’s health, and plum branches functioned as talismans. The phosphorous and sulfur in the pollen of the cherry blossom, and a substance in the blossoms and bark related to ephedrine that functions as a cough suppressant, gave the cherry tree prophylactic properties that were prized even before their actual chemical constituents were known. By the late Heian period, blossoming cherry trees were regarded as possessing spiritual power, and standing under a cherry tree and inhaling its air was viewed as a way of imbibing the life force of a tree whose vitality was manifested in the clouds of blossoms that it generated as if by magic every spring.³⁶ Even today, hot water flavored with salted cherry petals is served at pre-wedding gatherings and on other special occasions to impart vitality and health.



Above: Matsumoto Kōshirō as Matsuōmaru in a mie pose.



Left: Close-up of the pine boughs covered with snow that decorate Matsuomaru’s kimono.

Photo courtesy of Samuel L. Leiter.
Source: Samuel L. Leiter, *The Art of Kabuki*.
University of California Press, 1997.
Photographer: Yoshida Chiaki.



Picnicking under the cherry blossoms in April.

Credit: ASOBI: *The Sensibilities at Play*
(Mazda Motor Corporation).



Cherry tree in Wazuka, Nara Prefecture.

Photography by Kita Noriaki.



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Cherry and plum blossoms have flourished in *waka* poetry (there are seventy poems about cherry blossoms in the *Kokinshū* alone), *gesaku* novels, kabuki plays, and twentieth-century novels, movies, and advertisements with a frequency too great to cite.

In the Edo period, the cherry blossoms that bloom spectacularly just before dying were likened to the samurai, and the tree that had been a symbol of life became associated with a glorious death. In the Meiji period cherry blossoms were equated with the spirit of Japanese nationalism, and cherry trees were planted by military barracks and in school gardens. Lines of a poem by Motoori Norinaga about the blos-

soms of the mountain cherry trees of Yoshino were incorporated into a popular song whose words—*Shikishima, Yamato, asahi* (morning sun), *sakura*—were adopted as brandnames for cigarettes.³⁷ Whether in the form of cherry blossom insignia on school uniforms or cherry blossom viewing parties, no flower has played such a role in forging group identity in Japan.

Finally, a word might be said about the role of flower and leaf motifs in crests. As is well known, the imperial crest is a sixteen-petaled chrysanthemum, whose sun disk shape and hardy resistance to frost were associated with longevity in the Heian court, while the crest of the Foreign Affairs ministry features three leaves of the paulownia, a tree that was traditionally planted when a girl was born and made into a bridal chest when she was betrothed.

For too long, nature and landscape have been relegated to the background as mere settings for human events, thoughts, and aspirations. Foregrounding elements of the environment and studying the ways in which nature has been conceptualized, visualized, ritualized, and aestheticized in a society other than one's own invites a new look at human culture. While space limitations do not permit a fuller exposition of this approach, another natural phenomena which lends itself to an investigation is rice, whose effect upon Japanese culture has been most profound.³⁸ Moreover, a study of the influence of nature and landscape on culture would not be complete without a serious consideration of the environmental degradation taking place in Japan today that threatens to vitiate the distinctive, traditional culture that has been created over the centuries through and around nature.³⁹ ■

NOTES

1. Dipash Chakrabarty, "Afterword: Revisiting the Tradition/Modernity Binary," *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 295.
2. This idea, advanced by Yanagida Kunio, is set forth by Ichiro Hori in *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change*, Joseph Kitagawa and Alan L. Miller, eds. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
3. For a discussion of the typology of mountains in Japan, see Tadahiko Higuchi, *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes*, trans. by Charles S. Terry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 164–5.
4. Martin Collcutt, *Five Mountains. The Rinzaï Zen Monastic Tradition in Medieval Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 182–3.
5. A classical study of *shugendō* practices is Carmen Blacker's *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1975).
For a detailed account of the Tateyama pilgrimage, see Susanne Formanek, "Pilgrimage in the Edo Period: Forerunner of Modern Domestic Tourism? The Example of the Pilgrimage to Mount Tateyama" in *The Culture of Japan as Seen through Its Leisure*, Sepp Linhart and Sabine Fruhstick, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
6. Lafcadio Hearn, "Fuji-no-yama," in *The Book of the Mountains*, ed. A. C. Spector (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1955).

7. Tadahiko Higuchi, p. 84.
8. For proverbs and lore related to mountains, see Kondō Nobuyuki, ed., *Yamayama Jiten* (Tokyo: Taishūkan Shoten, 1988), pp. 36–7.
9. An English translation of this story can be found in Charles Inoue's *Japanese Gothic Tales* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).
10. For an English translation, see Van C. Gessel and Tomone Matsumoto, eds., *The Shōwa Anthology: Modern Japanese Short Stories, 1929–84* (New York: Kodansha International, 1985).
11. Toshimi Tazawa, "Japanese Architecture and Designs with Water," *Process Architecture*, vol. 25: 43.
12. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, *Shizen to Nihonjin* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1979), p. 216.
13. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, pp. 99.
14. The term "material imagination" is borrowed from Gaston Bachelard's *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Water*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983). Another richly suggestive essay on water is found in Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religions*, translated by Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), cited in William LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 23.
15. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 78–9.
16. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 84.
17. La Fleur, pp. 24–7. LaFleur's book contains a fascinating description of the role of water in the Japanese religious imaginary.
18. For an analysis of the water imagery in the work of Izumi Kyōka, see Charles Inoue, "Water Imagery in the Work of Izumi Kyōka," *Monumenta Nipponica* 46:1 (1991); also the chapter, "The Archetype, 1900" in Inoue's *The Similitude of Blossoms* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998).
19. For a translation of this piece by Edward Seidensticker, see *Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove Press, 1956). Shiga's grandfather had been a founding member of the Ashio Copper Mine company whose waste liquids poisoned the Watarase River in 1901. The fierce battle joined between young Shiga and his father over the writer's desire to join the protests against the copper mine provided the impetus and subject matter for many of the autobiographical novels that made Shiga famous, novels in which nature often plays a central role. Ironically, Shiga had the leisure to perfect his writing style because of the family investments that had led to disastrous ecological consequences.
20. Translated by Francis Tenny in *Beautiful Town: Stories and Essays by Satō Haruo* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).
21. Available in English translation by Edward Seidensticker in *Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove Press, 1956). Hidenobu Jinnai in *Tokyo, a Spatial Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) and Kawamoto Saburō in *Taishō gen'ei* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1990) express these ideas about the cultural meaning of the waterways of Tokyo, especially the Sumida River.
22. This story has been translated by Anthony Chambers in *New Leaves, Studies and Translations of Japanese Literature in Honor of Edward Seidensticker*, Aileen P. Gatten and Anthony Hood Chambers, eds. (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1993).
23. Translated by Phyllis Lyons in *Studies in Modern Japanese Literature: Essays and Translations in Honor of Edwin McClellan*, Dennis Washburn and Alan Tansman, eds. (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997).
24. Mitchell Bring and Josse Wayembergh, *Japanese Gardens* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1981), p. 169.
25. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 218.
26. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 219.
27. Also known as Kii and now located in Wakayama and Mie prefectures.
28. For a detailed account of premodern forestry in Japan, see Conrad Totman, *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Preindustrial Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
29. Kiyoshi Seike, "A Culture of Wood," in "Japan: Climate, Space, and Concept," *Process Architecture* vol. 25: 17–18.
30. Seike, p. 23.
31. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 132.
32. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, pp. 131–33.
33. For an English language article on the Suwa Taisha shrine and its festival, see Elaine Gerbert, "The Suwa Pillar Festival Revisited," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 56.2, (December 1996): 319–74.
34. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, p. 133.
35. Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1964), p. 169.
36. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, pp. 120–2. For an informative account of the role of the cherry tree in Japanese religion and culture, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's "Cherry Blossoms and Their Viewing: A Window onto Japanese Culture," *The Culture of Japan as Seen through Its Leisure*, Sepp Linhart and Sabine Frühstück, eds. (Albany: State University of New York, 1998).
37. Higuchi Kiyoyuki, pp. 124–5. Ohnuki-Tierney discusses the special significance of the mountain cherry in her article above.
38. See Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time* (Princeton University Press, 1993).
39. An impassioned critique of Japan's environmental degradation is found in Alex Kerr, *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Japan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), reviewed by Ian Buruma in *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 48, No. 11 (July 5, 2001).



Mountain, wave, pine tree, and cherry blossom crests.

Source: *Japanese Design Motifs: 4,260 Illustrations of Japanese Crests*. Compiled by the Matsuya Piece-Goods Store.

Translated by Fumie Adachi

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