

Japanese Culture, a Product of a Sense of Oneness with Nature

By Wang Min

NATURAL beauty holds special significance for the Japanese. Pondering the relationship between the Japanese and natural beauty by way of the “Japanese garden,” which creates a natural landscape, may offer a shortcut to an understanding of Japanese culture.

In local areas in Japan, the ruins of castles from earlier times generally serve as public gardens for rest and recreation for Japanese people. The same is true of the grounds of many temples in Kyoto. In Tokyo, there are also many famous, well-groomed Japanese gardens that inherit the wealth of the *bakufu* (shogunate) era of samurai rule, which lasted through about 150 years ago in Japan. Japan marched towards Westernization starting from the Meiji Restoration, so the look of its towns and cities in bygone days has completely vanished, but the appearance of its gardens alone evokes a traditional Japanese sensibility even today.

One such garden is the Shinjuku Gyoen located near the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office. Trees grow verdantly like a forest in the vast garden to form a green space isolated from the city’s hustle and bustle. The visitor who strolls along the circuit course while listening to the chirping of birds feels cleansed. Man-made features are limited to artificial hills filled with earth and a pond where carp swim. Otherwise there are no sumptuous buildings. The appearance differs completely from that of Western-style gardens.

A concrete arboriform bridge whose length is 2m at most spans the babbling brook along which a nature trail runs. To one side there is a plaque indicating that this is the first Japanese arboriform bridge made using Western techniques in the Meiji Era. However, it blends right in with the surrounding grove of trees, and if you are not careful, you will

not even notice it. One can clearly sense the attention devoted to making the miniature bridge coexist harmoniously with nature.

The day that I visited Shinjuku Gyoen, there happened to be a Chinese couple, residents of Japan, standing at the edge of the pond and admiring the carp in it. One of them said, “Whenever I come here, I always feel ‘This is the real Japan!’ When our friends visited from China, we brought them here. Somehow, it seems my heart is washed clean by the immediacy of this up-close view.”

Indeed. Is not the beauty of the famous gardens in China – whether the Yi He Yuan Imperial Garden (the Summer Palace) in Beijing, or the shore of the West Lake in Hangzhou – that of a distant landscape? An example of a famous site symbolizing beauty for the Chinese is the Great Wall of China. Like similar sites in the West, it imparts an impression of having been constructed by man, and is majestic and superb. Its composition, which equates symmetry with beauty, is evident throughout.

JAPAN has few flatlands. Even though it is called an island nation or a maritime nation, mountainous terrain accounts for more than 80% of its territory. The fact that Japanese antiquity began in the Nara basin in Nara Prefecture, which is surrounded by verdant mountains, probably merits our attention. It is well known that the world’s ancient civilizations, including Chinese civilization, were born along great rivers. To put it differently, there was little relationship with green areas amidst ancient mountains. But the view that Japanese civilization, which boasts a history of almost two millennia, was born among the mountains, is defensible, and the only other such instance that comes to mind is the case of the

Andean civilization of South America. This is therefore something that is quite rare in world history.

In the historical chronicles known as the *Kojiki* or Records of Ancient Matters and the *Nihonshoki* or Chronicles of Japan, which were written approximately 1,300 years ago, there are many myths related to the mountains.

Japan features mountains taken to be sacred peaks throughout the land. Such is the case of the renowned Mount Fuji. It even reached the point where the mountain itself was deemed a god and prayers were made to it. Omiwa Shrine is located in Nara, the cradle of ancient Japanese civilization, and there is no shrine in which a god is enshrined. Worshippers stand facing the front hall of the shrine and place their hands together in prayer to Mt. Miwa, which is the *shintai* or object of worship housed therein. Mt. Miwa is certainly not a towering peak, given its elevation of a mere 467m, but it is densely wooded enough to keep people at bay, and there is no gainsaying the impression of solemnity that the mountain conveys. There are mountains taken to be sacred ground in Christianity as well, but the reason is that God appeared at that particular place or that a saint is somehow connected to it. There are also a number of sacred peaks in China, although the Chinese do not consider them gods.

IN Japan, mountains are not the only natural formations regarded as gods. The waterfall at the southern tip of the Kii Peninsula is also a *shintai*. It is called Nachi-no-taki, or Nachi Falls, and with its drop of 100m it is one of Japan’s greatest waterfalls, and can be venerated from the sea. In the vicinity there is also a Shinto shrine dedicated to the Gotobiki-iwa, an enormous rock more than 10m in diameter. It is not known how many shrines there are

whose deities are large trees like Japanese cedars, camphor and yew trees. There are reputedly 120,000 Shinto shrines in Japan, and half of these are small shrines called the tutelary deity of the village, but even these are enveloped by trees, and a calm environment is basically maintained. If you go to a local area in Japan, the small shrines are located in places backed by mountains. One can see from this as well how different this is from Christianity, since Christian churches are ordinarily found in the center of a town.

Even though China's landmass is close to 26 times that of Japan's, it does not have a single volcano. The so-called Huoyanshan, or Flaming Mountains, appear in the traditional Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*. This suggests mountains of fire, but the actual Flaming Mountains that served as the model lie in the Turfan Basin of the Uighur Autonomous Region in Xinjiang Province, where no rain falls for years on end. The mountainsides are baked reddish brown, forming a thoroughly inhospitable mountain range with no sense of life whatsoever. Countless fissures in the earth run from the ridge to the foot of the mountains, keeping humans at a distance. People in the area patiently wait for rain, and if it rains, they consider them fruitful showers. As symbolized by the yellow sand, in the northern region generally the things feared most are damage due to wind or drought.

ONE can see that the climate of Japan simultaneously bestows both disasters and blessings. A climate that brings about severe natural disasters and one that bestows precious blessings coexist. Without typhoons and the rainy season, there would be no fruitful autumn.



Illustration: Iwasawa Akio

Without volcanoes and earthquakes, there would not be such a wealth of healing hot springs. As long as the Japanese dwell in this land, they must endure this natural severity. The Japanese have accepted this, and touched, revered and stood in awe of nature. It is no surprise that this has fostered a sense of unity with nature greater than that of any other culture.

Japan is blessed by the regenerative force of greenery found in the temperate monsoon climate region, and the Japanese have been steeped in a sense of oneness with nature owing to the gratitude they feel for a climate that produces such agricultural bounty. A delicate sensibility has doubtless been nurtured even as they remain sensitive to the changing of the seasons. Who is God? In response to this query, the monotheistic image of a single deity that is the Creator of the universe is completely alien to the Japanese. It is estimated that less than 20% of Japanese people believe in "the existence of God." There are not many Japanese who answer in the affirmative to the question of whether they believe

what is written in religious texts like the Bible. However, if we were to say God is that which incites awe of nature and makes us imagine it with a sacred consciousness that treats it sensitively, then a majority of Japanese would respond that they believe in God. The reason why a majority of Japanese beat a path to shrines and temples for the first yearly visit at the start of the New Year is probably that each one of them has a divine sensibility.

The Japanese have a delicate view of nature. This is because of their sensibility due to a life lived in union with a fortunate climate. The Japanese share subtle emotions that cannot be expressed in words. I think that the sense of oneness with nature may in fact be at the core of the Japanese people. What I have said here is no doubt too brief, but I hope that it will provide food for thought for all readers who enjoy pondering the uniqueness of Japanese culture. **JS**

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