

## THE VIEW OF NATURE IN JAPANESE LITERATURE

**Hajime Abe**

*Faculty of Humanities, Toyo Gakuen University, Nagareyama, Chiba, Japan*

**Keywords:** View of nature, worldview, nature, human-nature relations, human-environment relations, culture, Japan, Japanese culture, Japanese literature, Japanese poetry, haiku, Japanese novels, Japanese religion, animism, Shinto, Taoism, Buddhism, cosmology, landscape, aesthetics, environmental perception, naturalism, modernization, Pacific War, economic growth, environmental pollution, urbanization

### Contents

1. Introduction
  2. Four Types of the View of Nature
  3. The State of the View of Nature in Pre-modern Japanese Literature
    - 3.1. The Ancient Age (to 794)
    - 3.2. The Classical Age (794-1185)
    - 3.3. The Medieval Age (1185-1600)
    - 3.4. The Early Modern Age (1600-1867)
  4. The Response to Modernization
    - 4.1. The Meiji Period (1868-1912)
    - 4.2. The Taisho and Early Showa Period (1912-1940s)
    - 4.3. The Postwar and Economic Growth Period (since 1950s)
  5. Conclusion
- Glossary  
Bibliography  
Biographical Sketch

### Summary

Literature is the main source for examining the view of nature, which is the foundation of human-nature relations. Views of nature may be divided into four types: the animistic, the cosmological, the monotheistic, and the modernistic view of nature. The history of Japanese literature shows that the indigenous Japanese view of nature was animistic, where nature lacks the vertical order ruled by the transcendental entity and human beings are part of nature.

The animistic view was influenced by the cosmological view of Taoism in the eighth century and of Buddhism in the thirteenth century. Since the nineteenth century, the modernistic view of Western scientific thought has profoundly influenced it. However, the animistic view is retained firmly under the modernistic view and has fostered the conventionalized imagery of nature.

Modern Japanese writers have taken different attitudes to this dual structure. Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) are inclined towards the traditional beauty of nature. For Murakami Haruki (1949- ), nature has been lost in urbanized society and remains only inside of human beings. Oe Kenzaburo (1935- )

tries to graft the Western humanistic view of man onto the traditional Japanese sense of beauty and sensitivity to nature.

As Oe's novels suggest, Japanese literature can play important roles in producing a new view of nature, one founded on a sense of closeness to nature and which can support sustainable development. First, people of different cultures as well as the Japanese can learn the animistic view of nature through Japanese literary works. Second, Japanese literature can make people recognize the traditional animistic thought in their own cultures. Third, Japanese literature can produce models of harmonization of animism and humanism in the poetic or narrative world.

## 1. Introduction

The view of, or attitude towards, nature is the foundation of human-nature relations. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the regional characteristics of the view of nature in order to prepare effective policies for sustainable development of the region. In examining the view of nature literary works play an important role, because it is only literature that has recorded human-nature relations through the whole range of history.

The relation between nature and literature is reciprocal one. Literature describes the image of nature and the figure of nature influences literary works. The view of nature implicitly supports such a relation. To put it in detail, nature and literature mediate between an author's view of nature and a reader's. An author appreciates the figure of nature on the basis of his or her view of nature, and produces his or her literary work, which refers the figure of nature. A reader reads a literary work and is influenced by the author's view of nature. On the basis of it, the reader gives the figure of nature a meaning, i.e. a place of literary significance. As a result, the place seems to validate the description in the literary work.

Through this process, the author and the reader come to share the same view of nature, even if there was a difference between the author's view and the reader's view. Therefore we can clarify the regional characteristics of the view of nature by surveying literary works of the region.

In Japan, the classic work dealing with the subject of human-nature relations is *Fudo* (Climate and Culture, 1935) written by the philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1889-1960). Watsuji attempted to treat the structure of human existence in terms of space, under the influence of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), based on his experience of a journey to Europe where he stayed as a government student in 1927-28. He defined climate as a means of man's self-understanding and classified climatic characters into three types: monsoon, desert, and meadow. He suggested that the distinctive character of human nature in the monsoon zone, including Japan, could be understood as submissive and resignatory from the nature of humidity itself.

Watsuji's discussion has limitations because he could not use geographical and ethnological data sufficiently. However, as an essay on Japanese culture, *Fudo* successfully shows that the character of Japanese human-nature relations and the Japanese view of nature can be understood through the concept of the fusion of self and

other. Such insight can be verified by the history of Japanese literature.

This paper deals with Japanese literature in order to trace the development of the Japanese view of nature. First, the views of nature are classified to establish a conceptual framework for description. Based on the classification, the brief history of pre-modern literature is grasped to see how the Japanese view of nature has changed or remained unchanged. Then the response of the traditional view to modernization is illustrated. The conclusion is a consideration about the significance of the Japanese view of nature for the formation of such a view that supports sustainable development.

## 2. Four Types of the View of Nature

A history of the view of nature is that of the collision between an indigenous view and foreign views, leading to the replacement of an indigenous one by a foreign one, the preservation of an indigenous one, or the fusion of both. Therefore it is very convenient to classify the type of the view of nature.

The view of nature is the way of seeing nature. Seeing has two aspects: a point of view and a direction of view. As for a point of view, there are two types of relation between a viewpoint and the natural surroundings. One is continuous and the other is discontinuous. The former means that a seer is a part of nature; the latter means that a seer stands outside nature. Each view can be called “inclusive” and “disjunctive” respectively. As for a direction of view, there are also two types. One type makes much of the vertical direction and the other does not. Each view can be called “vertical” and “horizontal” respectively. Therefore by combining the axis of inclusive-disjunctive and that of vertical-horizontal, the view of nature can be divided into four types as shown in Figure 1.

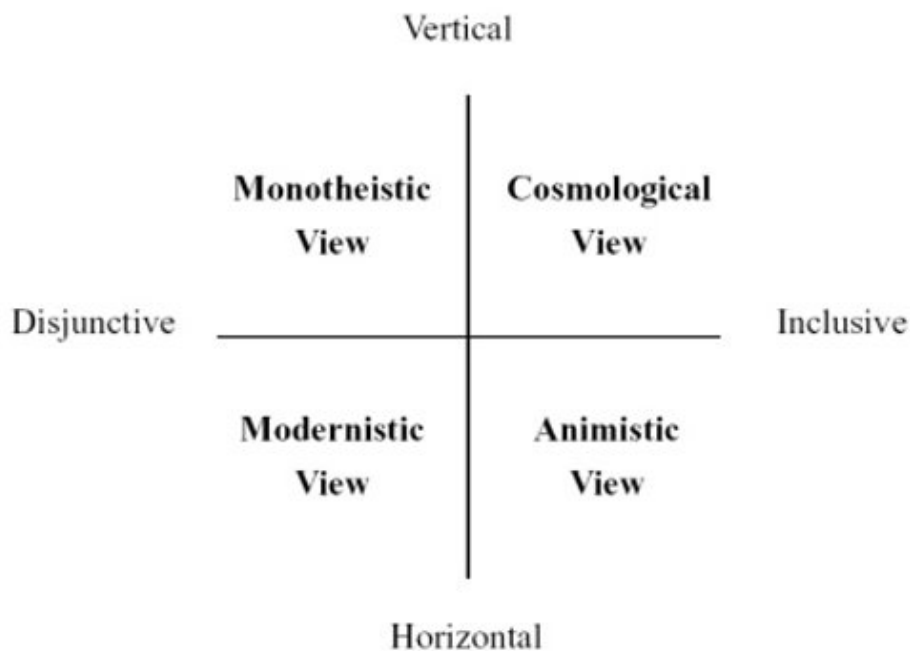


Figure 1. Four Types of the View of Nature

The combination of the inclusive and the horizontal view is the animistic view of nature. This is the view that human beings are enclosed by nature, lacking definite vertical order. Natural surroundings are nature-gods themselves repeating the “death and rebirth” cycle and humans are part of it; thus there is no clear boundary between nature and human beings.

The combination of the inclusive and the vertical view is the cosmological view of nature. This is the view that human beings are enclosed by nature with vertical order. Nature is recognized as cosmos that has the strata of the sky, earth and underground. Each stratum is connected with each other through the perpendicular axis. The celestial order is often reflected in city plans.

The combination of the disjunctive and the vertical view is the monotheistic view of nature. This is the view that the transcendental god has the highest position of cosmological order. There is a gap between human beings and the god transcending this world. On the other the human beings are closer to the god than animals and plants are. Therefore there is also a gap between human beings and nature.

The combination of the disjunctive and the horizontal view is the modernistic view of nature. This is the view that there is a clear line between human beings and nature without vertical structure. Human beings face nature freed from the order of the god. This view was established in modern Europe as a result of secularization of Christian worldview.

The indigenous Japanese view of nature is animistic. In Japan, nature is recognized as both the process of “death and rebirth” and the whole that is repeating the cycle. Human beings are infiltrated by the power of nature and their sentiment is strongly connected with the appearance of nature, that is, the yearly round of the seasons.

### **3. The State of the View of Nature in Pre-modern Japanese Literature**

The history of pre-modern Japanese literature was divided into four periods: the ancient age, the classical age, the medieval age, and the early modern age. As for foreign relations, which are primarily relations with China, the ancient and the medieval age were open and the classical and the early modern age were closed. Therefore, in the ancient and the medieval age, Japanese animistic view of nature was influenced by Chinese cosmological views. On the contrary, in the classical and the early modern age, the indigenous Japanese view of nature was predominant.

In the ancient age, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism were introduced into Japan. It was Taoism that was most influential on literature. The Taoistic view of nature introduced an attitude to see nature as scenery. In the medieval age, new sects of Buddhism flourished under the influence of China. The Buddhist view of nature produced a transcendental viewpoint to see nature objectively. But, even in these open periods, the views of nature were eventually merged into the indigenous animistic view. In the late sixteenth century, Christianity was introduced into Japan. However, because of the suppression of Christianity under the policy of isolationism, the monotheistic view of nature had little influence. The Japanese view of nature tended to cling

obstinately to the indigenous one.

### 3.1. The Ancient Age (to 794)

In this period, the imperial family of Japan gradually extended its power and created a unified country. A permanent capital was established in 710 at Nara. The culture of the court was strongly influenced by those of China. The indigenous animistic view of nature encountered the highly organized cosmology of Taoism, on which the planning of the early capital cities of Japan was based, and poets at court discovered the scenery of suburbs.

The indigenous view of nature emerging before the eighth century can be reconstructed from legends and ballads recorded in the first Japanese histories: *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720). They begin with an account of the creation of Heaven and Earth, which relies on Chinese concepts. But most of the legends and ballads reflect the indigenous worldview. According to it, Earth was enclosed by Water both horizontally and vertically, and the ancestor-gods descended to the place jutting out into Water such as a hill, mountain or promontory. The gods wandered around to find a fertile land, praised it and founded the village on it.

The same type of poems can be seen in *Man'yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves) that is Japan's first poetry collection compiled in the mid-eighth century. In these poems an Emperor surveys the land from a high peak to praise the richness of the domain. A typical example is the second poem of Book I, which is attributed to the Emperor Jomei (593-641), with the title "Climbing Kagu-Yama and Looking Upon the Land".

Countless are the mountains  
 In Yamato,  
 But perfect is  
 The heavenly hill of Kagu:  
 When I climb it  
 And survey my realm,  
 Over the wide plain  
 The smoke wreaths rise and rise,  
 Over the wide lake  
 The gulls are on the wing;  
 A beautiful land it is,  
 Akizushima,  
 The land of Yamato.

This type of poem means that the ancestor-gods of villages were replaced by and integrated into an Emperor as the central government established the capital city on the Yamato plain in the Nara basin. The formation of the Emperor system and the capital city of Japan were under the profound influence of Taoism. In this city emerged a class of courtiers who practiced poetry as a kind of profession. Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (fl. 689-700) is the outstanding example of this kind of poet. He followed the Emperor's visit to the valley of Yoshino (a mountainous region southeast of Nara) and wrote

*choka*—long poems—praising it as the immortal land of Taoism.

The form of poem completed by Hitomaro was soon lost after his death. But the attitude to see suburbs from the urban viewpoint produced the court poets who are famous for the scenic description. One of the most famous poets was Yamabe no Akahito (fl. 724-737). He traveled widely, observed nature with his own eyes and described nature apart from human affairs.

At Wakanoura  
The tide, rising to the full,  
Has engulfed the strand;  
Heading for the reedy shore,  
The cranes cross, crying.

But the scenery he chose to depict was intimate places such as hills, fields, bays, and shallows. The poets of the *Man'yōshū* described familiar natural surroundings in the vicinity. They were not concerned with the wilderness such as high mountains, deep forests, or vast oceans.

### 3.2. The Classical Age (794-1185)

At the end of the eighth century, the capital was moved from the Nara basin. In 794, a new capital was established in the Kyoto basin. The aristocratic society of the nation's capital became closed and confined after the discontinuation of the embassies to T'ang China in 894; consequently, poetry too took an inward turn and nature became confined to terms of highly conventionalized imagery.

In the ninth century a transformation of the Japanese writing system occurred; the *kana* system was devised and became increasingly used. The system made possible the unrestrained expression of human emotion, which was deeply attached to the changing seasons and scenery landscapes around the capital city. This led to the efflorescence of *waka* poetry, and in 905 the first imperial anthology of it, *Kokin Waka Shū* (Collection of Waka, Old and New), usually referred to as the *Kokinshū*, was compiled.

The aesthetics of the *Kokinshū* attached much weight to poems of seasonal description, especially poems of spring and autumn, since both seasons had been traditionally recognized as the pivotal periods of the annual cycle of “death and rebirth”. The major theme of the poems was the emotion inspired by the changing seasons. Typical is the “spring” poem of Ki no Tsurayuki (868?-945) who is the leading compiler of *Kokinshū*.

Spring has come  
And soon its breezes will melt  
The water now frozen  
In which in summer we dipped our sleeves.

The poets of the *Kokinshū* mentioned nature, but they did not describe a new scenery landscape. They composed poems about places that had been described in *Man'yōshū*, without observing real nature. Such places became *uta-makura* (places with poetic

associations) that could provoke the stereotyped imagery of nature. The poets who were primarily concerned with the names of the places composed artificial poems with the aid of many technical devices, one of which is *mitate* (taking one thing for another). A typical example is this poem by Ki no Tomonori (d. 905?) who is one of the compilers of *Kokinshu*.

In fair Yoshino,  
 Blossoming in the mountains  
 Were cherry flowers.  
 I thought that they must be snow  
 But how mistaken I was!

The aristocratic poets seldom ventured outside Kyoto. Thus the objects of interest became ever narrower. Even on the journey, they did not pay any attention to the natural surroundings along their route. The most outstanding example is *Tosa Nikki* (The Tosa Diary, ca. 935) written by Ki no Tsurayuki. The *Tosa Nikki* is a travel diary covering his journey from Tosa on the island of Shikoku to Kyoto. In it Tsurayuki was full of longing for nature of Kyoto. His interest in natural surroundings was simply pointed to *uta-makura*.

The imagery of nature associated with *uta-makura* also became the background of narrative material: *monogatari*. In the beginning of *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise), one of the earliest Japanese narratives, a man visits one of the famous *uta-makura* and behaves in courtly manner. The scenes of *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, the early eleventh century) are confined to Kyoto and its suburbs. In the story the scenic beauty is described through the aesthetic criteria of landscape pictures and gardens; the imagery of nature reflected the closed aristocratic aesthetics.

-  
 -  
 -

TO ACCESS ALL THE 26 PAGES OF THIS CHAPTER,  
 Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

### Bibliography

Abe H. (1995). *The Birth of Japanese View of Space: Cosmology, Landscape, and Otherworld View*, 238 pp. Tokyo: Serika Shobo. [This study traces the development of Japanese view of space from the ancient to the medieval age]

Abe H. (2000). *The Comparative Study of the View of Space*, 262 pp. Tokyo: Serika Shobo. [This study classifies the views of space into four types and discusses the transition and correlation of those views]

Hirakawa S. and Tsuruta K. eds. (1994). *Reading Animism: Nature, Life, and Self in Japanese Literature*, 447 pp. Tokyo: Shinyosha. [This collection of essays dealing with animistic characteristics in Japanese literature is based on the symposium "Nature and Self in Japanese Literature" held at the University of British Columbia in 1992]

Ibuse M. (1979). *Black Rain* (Translated by J. Bester), 300 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This

novel is centered on the story of a young woman who was caught in the radioactive rain that fell after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima]

Kato S. (1981). *A History of Japanese Literature, Volume 1: The First Thousand Years* (Translated by D. Chibbett), 319 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This work traces the development of Japanese literature from the 7th to the mid-16th century]

Kato S. (1990). *A History of Japanese Literature, Volume 2: The Years of Isolation* (Translated by D. Sanderson), 230 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This work traces the development of Japanese literature from the 17th to the mid-19th century]

Kato S. (1990). *A History of Japanese Literature, Volume 3: The Modern Years* (Translated by D. Sanderson), 307 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This work traces the development of Japanese literature from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the present]

Keene D. (1976). *World Within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600-1867*, 606 pp. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. [This presents a history of Japanese literature during the period when the country was closed to the outside world]

Keene D. (1984). *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, 2vols, 1327 pp., 685 pp. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. [This presents a history of Japanese literature covering a century after the Meiji Restoration of 1868]

Keene D. (1993). *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century*, 1265 pp. New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc. [This presents a history of Japanese literature during the first nine hundred years]

Karatani K. (1993). *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature (Post-Contemporary Interventions)* (Translated by B. De Bary), 219 pp. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press. [This critique reinterprets modern Japanese literature and calls into question the concept of modernity]

Kawabata Y. (1969). *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself* (Translated by E. G. Seidensticker), 74 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha. [This is a Nobel prize speech delivered by the first Japanese winner of a Nobel prize for literature in 1968]

Kawabata Y. (1996). *Snow Country* (Translated by E. G. Seidensticker), 175 pp. New York: Vintage Books. [This novel depicts a love affair between a wealthy sophisticate and a *geisha* in a snowy hot spring region]

Mishima Y. (2000). *The Sound of Waves* (Translated by M. Weatherby), 183 pp. London: Vintage. [This novel depicts first love between a young fisherman and the daughter of a wealthy man in a small island]

Murakami H. (2000). *Norwegian Wood* (Translated by J. Rubin), 296 pp. New York: Vintage Books. [This novel depicts the urban life of a quiet college student who is devoted to an introspective young woman]

Napier S. J. (1995). *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo*, 258 pp. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press. [This critique examines Mishima's and Oe's depictions of sex, emperor worship, and violence]

Oe K. (1995). *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures* (Translated by K. Yanagishita and H. Yamanouchi), 128 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This collection of lectures includes a Nobel prize speech delivered by the second Japanese winner of a Nobel prize for literature in 1994]

Oe K. (1996). *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (Translated by P. S. Mackintosh and M. Sugiyama), 189 pp. New York: Grove Press. [This novel recounts the exploits of juvenile delinquents evacuated to a remote mountain village in wartime]

Ooka S. (2001). *Fires on the Plain* (Translated by I. Morris), 246 pp. Boston: Tuttle Publishing. [This novel explores the degradation and isolation of a Japanese soldier by war on the island of Leyte in the Philippines]

Shiga N. (1979). *A Dark Night's Passing* (Translated by E. McClellan), 408 pp. Tokyo: Kodansha International. [This is an autobiographical novel tracing a young man's passage through a succession of upsetting events to a truce with himself]



Watsuji T. (1988). *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (Translated by G. Bownas), 235 pp. Tokyo: Yushodo. [This study attempts to clarify the function of climate as a factor within the structure of human existence]

### **Biographical Sketch**

**Dr. Hajime Abe** is professor of geography at Toyo Gakuen University in Japan. He received his MSc and DSc in geography at University of Tokyo, Japan. He joined Toyo Women's College in 1994 as a lecturer in geography, becoming an associate professor in 1998. He was transferred to Toyo Gakuen University in 2001, and became professor of geography in 2003. Professor Abe has been interested in humanistic geography and translated four books written by the Chinese American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1930-) into Japanese. He studies the structure of cultures from the viewpoint of human-environment relations and has published two books: *The Birth of Japanese View of Space: Cosmology, Landscape, and Otherworld View* (1995) and *The Comparative Study of the View of Space* (2000). He is also active in writing and translating encyclopedias, dictionaries, and educational books of geography.