

Clean, Clear Mind and Love for Nature

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1. To the Basis of Japanese Aesthetic Sensibility

When we talk about the Japanese traditional aesthetics, it is common to enumerate *mono-no-aware*, *yojō*, *yūgen*, *wabi*, *sabi*, *iki*, and other aesthetic categories of these kinds.¹ I agree that these aesthetic categories represent the aesthetic sensibility of the times in which they came into existence, and they are certainly indispensable for Japanese aesthetics. But it is also true that these aesthetic categories belong to the Japanese high culture, or to some special societies, not to the popular culture, not to most Japanese people. We could say that they have spread from capital cities to the provinces, from aristocratic class to the common people. In our modern age they are taught in the secondary education, but for most of students they are only words, a kind of foreign language. They might have heard these words, but they would say that they feel themselves remote from such an aesthetic world. So we can hardly say that most Japanese are familiar with these aesthetic values.

These aesthetic values demand that we should have a lot of cultural experiences and we should be highly cultivated. Most Japanese do not acquire those aesthetic sensibilities, I believe. They might be known as words, but they still belong to Japanese high culture, and do not represent Japanese common aesthetic sensibility. This is my opinion.

But these high cultural sensibilities are not all of Japanese aesthetic sensibility. There exists a common sensibility which is widespread among Japanese people, which is simpler and more deeply embedded in the Japanese aesthetic background. Today I am going to talk about this kind of aesthetic sensibility.

To consider Japanese common aesthetic sensibility, it might be helpful to refer to the students in my university. Every year in my class in

aesthetics, I pass out a questionnaire. I ask them what they think is beautiful, and what they think is ugly. My class in aesthetics is that of liberal arts, and not for students majoring in aesthetics or literature. In this sense, my students are common, average Japanese students. Their answers to the questionnaire are quite interesting. We could see a distinct characteristic in their answers.

First of all, most of the students nominate as beautiful things, things in nature, especially natural scenery. They have the tendency to refer to the things in nature rather than artificial things or things in human society. What is more interesting is that they tend to think that the ugly thing is the human mind. Not a few students think that ugly things come from the human mind. I do not think their opinions express their pure aesthetic sensibility. These opinions might belong to a kind of cliché, that is, they express what they have unconsciously learned during their twenty-year lives in Japan. But if this is so, they indicate the modern Japanese common aesthetics all the more. I am not sure if their sensibility is characteristic of Japanese culture or they have universality. But I am going to consider it in the context of Japanese culture.

2. Words Concerning Beauty

Next, we should mention the word problem about the concept “beauty”. We could say that there are almost no Japanese who do not know the English word “beautiful”. This English word is so well known among Japanese people that, when they are asked to translate the word, they would do it almost automatically and instantly. They translate the word “beautiful” into the Japanese word “utsukushii”. They understand that the word “beautiful” means the most general aesthetic value, and assign it “utsukushii” as the equivalent word. But here is a strange thing. The word “utsukushii” is the word whose meaning is known to every Japanese, but we seldom use it in the suitable situation. In reality, we use another word to express that something is beautiful. We use the word “kirei”.² Why does this kind of thing happen? You could say that “kirei” is more colloquial than “utsukushii”. It is half true. But it would not explain the whole of the problem. It is true that they are in the relation of synonym and that both words mean the aesthetically high value. But the centers of the meaning are different.

We could agree that the aesthetic sensibilities are different according to the nations and cultures. Each culture has aesthetic characteristic and tendency. According to Tatarkiewicz, “for the ancient Greeks, beauty was basically visual”, but “for the Hebrews ... it was synonymous with sensuous attraction which is as strong, if not stronger, in the other senses”. For the Greeks, “beauty consisted in harmony, that is, in the harmonious arrangement of elements, while for the Hebrews it belonged to the element themselves”.³ We could say the same kind of things about Japanese aesthetic sensibility. And we could find not a few examples.⁴

Let me explain the meaning of both words. As is mentioned above, we tend to translate “beautiful” as “utsukushii”, so the word “utsukushii” is the most general adjective for the things which are aesthetically evaluated. This is the word for beauty in general. On the other hand, “kirei” is also the word for the beauty in general that might be said a little colloquial. But there is an essential difference between their usages. It is that “kirei” is also used in a different context in a daily life. It means clean, clear, free from dirt and stain, and free from cloud and what obscures. You could use this word “kirei” with regard to our body or any goods for daily use.

Regarding this issue, Ôno Susumu (1919-), a Japanese linguist, says that “there are two streams of the words which mean beauty”. The one expresses “the mind which finds beauty in small and fine things”; the other generalizes “the mind which finds beauty in cleanness and purity”. According to Ôno, “in Japanese language, the two tendencies come, in turn, into the center of the word which means beauty. One is the love for little things and the other is the preference for cleanness”.⁵

The word “utsukushii” already existed about a thousand years ago in the Heian period. Its old form was “utsukushi”, though. It was an adjective which expressed the love for little things. On the other hand, the word “kirei” is, today, the word with the meaning of cleanness. So we could say that these two words, “utsukushii” and “kirei”, are the descendants of the two streams which Ôno mentioned. But “utsukushii” of today has become a word for beauty in general and has completely lost the meaning of love for little things.⁶ On the other hand, “kirei”, being the word for beauty in general, includes the modern Japanese aesthetic sensibility which still finds beauty in cleanness and cleanness.

Ôno considers the Heian period as the time in which the sensibility to cleanness was dominant. He points out the word “kiyora” as the word which meant the noble and graceful beauty. This word was derived from the adjective “kiyoshi” which meant clean, pure, and free from cloud. Ôno says that “kiyora”, a derivative of “kiyoshi”, was used as the word meaning the supreme beauty in the “*Tales of Genji*”. So the highest aesthetic value in the Heian period implied cleanness and clearness.

Regarding the beauty of cleanness, Ôno sees the Heian period as its climax. But in this context, we could go back hundreds of years for its origin. In “*Manyôshû*”, the oldest anthology of Japanese poems of the seventh and the eighth century, we can find many examples of adjective meaning clean in relation to water, river, beach, moonlight, and air. We could say that the ancient people paid much attention to the cleanness of those things and estimated it aesthetically. I will refer to it again later.

3. *Ethical Aspect: Clean, Clear Mind*

As for the ancient times, I would rather pay attention to the fact that the aesthetic values like clean and clear were understood not only aesthetically but also ethically.

In the textbook of the history of Japanese ethical thought, we could find clean and clear as the concepts of ethics in the ancient times. It is known as “seimeishin (清明心)”, which literally means “clean, clear mind”. This is the central concept of ancient ethics, which is indicated by Watsuji Tetsurô (1889-1930) in his monumental book, “*History of Japanese Ethical Thought*”. After Watsuji, “clean, clear mind” is widely known as representing the ancient Japanese mentality.⁷

The most famous story concerning “clean, clear mind” is found in “*Kojiki*” (*Records of Ancient Matters*, 712), the first Japanese history book including a lot of myths. It is the argument between Amaterasu and Susanoo.⁸

Amaterasu is the goddess who reigns over the heaven. Her younger brother Susanoo is the ruler of the sea. One day Susanoo came up to heaven to see Amaterasu. But Amaterasu suspected Susanoo of his treason. When he was accused of treason, Susanoo tried to prove that he was not a traitor. He said that his mind was “clean and clear”,

because being clean and clear was the proof of the goodness. This is one of the most well known episodes among Japanese myths.

Apart from such myths, we can find many examples of the expression “clean, clear mind” in the ancient official history books.⁹ In the statement of inauguration, the ancient successive emperors demanded to their subjects to have “clean, clear mind”. We could find a strong ethical meaning in these phrases which were originally aesthetic.

What does the “clean, clear mind” mean in the context of ethical thought?

It is obvious that clean and clear mind is the mind free from cloud and muddiness. The question is: what makes the clean and clear mind muddy and cloudy? According to Watsuji, it is “self”. Watsuji assumes that the ancient Japanese society was “a community of emotional fusion”.

In this kind of community, the person who tries to deprive the well-being of others is a traitor to the order of the whole. Therefore he is the traitor to the authority of the whole. Such a person, because of his self-mind (私心), resists others, does not mingle with others, and lives in a state of mind which others cannot look through. Such a “self” that nobody is allowed to look into is neither clean nor clear because of its invisibility. Therefore it is regarded as a dirty mind, a dark mind.¹⁰

Watsuji says, the persons who have “self” in their minds do not allow others to see their minds. That kind of person is a threat to the community of emotional fusion.

Such ethical consciousness which regards “self-mind” as a bad thing is not limited to ancient Japan. It continues to occupy the center of Japanese ethical thought in the following ages.

4. Selflessness

In the middle ages, “the respect for the clean and clear mind will change into the respect for the mind of seichoku”.¹¹ The word “seichoku (正直)” is composed of two ideograms. One means right, true, and straight, the other means straight, immediate, and direct. So in these ideograms we could still sense some aesthetic impression. But

when we hear the word as one word, that aesthetic impression becomes much weaker. Therefore this word is more abstract than the ancient clean and clear mind. But it still has the same characteristic, which is, being free from self-mind.

In the Tokugawa period, from the 17th century to the 19th century, the main ethical thought changed under the strong influence of Confucianism, especially that of Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi. They newly emphasized the concept “makoto (誠)”. The word “makoto” itself is very old and we could find it in the ancient books. This concept was no more than a virtue among many other virtues in Confucianism. But the Japanese Confucianists in the Tokugawa period selected that word to indicate the most important ethical concept. They read the Japanese traditional ethical spirit into the word. It could be translated as “sincerity” or “true heart”. But this time again, “the concept ‘makoto’ consists in the purity of the mind that would not tell a lie nor pretend”.¹² The essence of “makoto” lies not in the content of mind but in the form of mind. Whatever the contents are, the purity of the mind to others justifies them. This purity of the mind would be considered to be free from self-mind. One thousand years after the ancient period, in the Tokugawa era, we could still find the respect for the clean and clear mind.

We could say that the aesthetic image of the cleanness and clearness was always found in the center of Japanese ethical tradition. For more than a thousand years the clean and clear mind existed in the basis of Japanese ethical thought. And it was always the self-mind that is avoided because it pollutes and dirties the clean and clear mind.

5. The Concept of Nature

We have seen that the aesthetic value of clean and clear has a very important meaning in Japanese ethical thought. This ethical aspect of the clean and clear is also important when we think of the Japanese view of nature. The ethical aspect had a great influence on the Japanese attitude to nature. Now we are going to think about the meaning of nature in Japan.

Regarding the concept of “nature”, not a few interpretations would be possible. But today the word “nature” commonly means that which is implied in the phrase “natural science” It is the case with the modern

Japanese language, too. In this context, “nature” means the external world in general that is not made by human beings. It is the whole of the things which are given to human beings. We could find an example of this way of thinking in the following passage of English philosopher, R. G. Collingwood.

The term nature, in whatever context it is used, bears a negative sense. It always indicates a limit of our own activity. ... The nature of anything is that which we must accept as an absolute datum; but this datum is correlative to an activity of our own. ... Therefore the idea of nature arises as the negative counterpart of the idea of activity, and every kind of activity has its counterpart in a distinct kind of nature.¹³

It is clear that Collingwood conceives nature as the counterpart of active human beings. The dualism of nature and human beings is obvious. Therefore Collingwood talks about natural beauty as following.

Because nature is a negative term, it always presupposes its corresponding positive. To call an object nature is to express the feeling that it is not in any sense the fruit of our own activity. Hence all beauty is natural beauty so far as it belongs to an object of which we feel ourselves not to be the makers.¹⁴

According to the logic of Collingwood, nature is identified in so far as it is contrasted with the human activity and consciousness. Therefore natural beauty is the beauty of the things which are given to human consciousness. The criterion for the nature to be nature is located on the side of human beings. In this context, we could say that there is a strong self even in the experience of natural beauty.

6. Japanese Aestheticians on Natural Beauty

In contrast with such view of nature, it is often pointed out that the Japanese traditional view of nature does not contrast nature with human beings. It is also the case with the Japanese scholars of aesthetics. Let us take a look at some of them.

Ônishi Yoshinori (1888-1959) discussed the relation of nature and human beings with regard to the ancient Japanese. In his famous book, “*The Feeling about Nature in Manyôshû*”, he asserted that, in the ancient Japanese, mind and nature are fundamentally in a fusion. To emphasize this fusion of mind and nature he contrasts it with the 19th century European Romantic literature. According to Ônishi, in the case of Romantic literature, the correspondence between nature and human beings is that between the things which are previously divided. But, in the case of the ancient Japanese poets, the unity of nature and human beings precedes.¹⁵

Yoshioka Kenjirô (1926-) summarizes the relation between nature and human beings as following:

We could say that the Japanese are the people that respect natural beauty, but it is not the Japanese way of thinking that nature is first considered as confronted with human beings, and then it is found beautiful. That is, the border between nature and human beings is vague.¹⁶

Since it is difficult to draw the outline of nature, Yoshioka thinks that it is difficult to talk about natural beauty. In contrast, the object of art is obvious and distinct because it is made by human beings. In this way, Yoshioka handles mainly the issues of art as his aesthetics. But in any case, Yoshioka also thinks that there is no dualism of nature and human beings in the Japanese tradition.

Recently, a contemporary aesthetician, Sasaki Ken'ichi (1943-) asserts the unity of nature and human beings in the experience of natural beauty. His theory does not take the form of cultural comparison but a general theory of natural beauty. In his “*Dictionary of Aesthetics*”, which is most read among the aesthetics students, he indicates that, in the experience of natural beauty we feel ourselves as a part of nature.¹⁷

The viewpoints of these above mentioned aestheticians are different. But they are common in asserting the unity of nature and human beings in natural beauty.

7. *Snow-moon-flowers*

Now, we are going to think about the experience of natural beauty in the Japanese tradition. But we have to confirm that before the modern age, Japan did not have the idea of nature as in natural science. It was after the turn of the 20th century when the modern concept of nature became prevailing in Japan. Therefore, before that, there was not the idea of natural beauty. But we could not say that there was not any concept similar to nature. For example, the concept of “*tenchi* (天地)”, which literally means heaven and earth, could be one. It means the entire being in the universe. In this way, we could also find, in the Japanese aesthetic tradition, what is understood today as natural beauty. The objects might be limited, but we could easily find them.

In the Japanese traditional context, it is mainly the beauty of scenery of mountains, rivers, snow, the moon, and the cherry blossoms that correspond to the natural beauty today. These things have been sung in the poems and drawn in the pictures for more than thousand years. Even for the modern Japanese people who have learned the idea of nature, it is the traditional beauty of these things that comes to their mind when they hear the word “natural beauty”. Regarding these things as natural beauty, I would like to indicate the element of “clean and clear” as the common characteristics of these beauties.

As is already mentioned above, in “*Manyōshū*”, the epithets “clean” or “clear” were used as the adjectives of mountains, rivers, moon, or place names.¹⁸ These natural things attracted ancient people because of their cleanness and clearness.

Moreover, I would like to remember the word “*Setsu Getsu Ka* (雪月花)” which expresses the general view of natural beauty in Japan. This word is consisted of three ideograms which mean snow, moon, and flowers. This word is widely known and understood as meaning the natural beauties of the four seasons. The natural beauties in Japan are represented by the winter snow, the autumn moon, and the spring flower, that is cherry blossoms. This aesthetic sensibility is commonly possessed by Japanese people even today. You could see in this word the seasonal change of natural beauties. But at the same time, we should sense the sensibility to the cleanness of natural beauty.¹⁹ Snow is loved for its taintless whiteness, the moonlight in the autumn sky is clean and

clear in the transparent air, and in spring, the cherry blossoms in full bloom shine in the fresh morning sunlight and fall like snow. These images are all free from dirt and stain. They are the summit of the beauty of cleanness. I would say that this is the common and basic image of natural beauty among Japanese people. And what is important here is that in these experiences of natural beauty of cleanness, human mind corresponds with it and the mind is also conceived as clean and transparent like them. In other words, the mind is in unity with the cleanness of nature, and such mind is regarded as being free from self.

The sensibility to see cleanness in natural beauty and the ethics to avoid the existence of self indicate the fundamental sense of values. They are still living in the mind of Japanese people, which could be observed, for example, in my students.

In addition to these fundamental sensibilities, there is one more factor which reinforces such tendency. It is caused by the personal history of the Japanese word for nature.

8. Being So of Itself

Today the word “nature” generally has the same meaning as is implied in the phrase “natural science”. So the nature means the external world in general that is not made by human beings. As is mentioned above, however, it is in the 20th century that the nature in the meaning of natural science prevailed. Until then it had a different meaning.

The Japanese word for nature is “shizen (自然)”. We could see the word in the Chinese classic, “Lao-tzu’s Dao De Ching”, but it was pronounced differently and had a quite different meaning from the present one. This word indicated a state in which things are so of themselves. Therefore it was understood as an adjective, not as a substantive.²⁰

This adjective was applied not only to natural things but also to human beings. It also means the state in which a person is not doing things deliberately or intentionally. In addition, this state is highly evaluated in general. This is a remarkable point, because nature in the meaning of natural science is neutral in value. This high valuation is found not only in the context of Taoism but also in Japanese Buddhism, especially in Shin Buddhism, which is the biggest denomination in Japan. Shin Buddhism emphasizes the state of being so of itself. It

means to give up your self-power and rely on others-power, which is the power of Amitabha. We would find, here again, an avoidance of self.

In the contemporary Japanese, when the word “shizen” is used as noun, it is understood as nature in the meaning of natural science. When it is used as adjective or adverb, we understand it in the traditional meaning, that is, things are in the state of being so of itself. But the fact is not so simple. In the everyday consciousness, the traditional meaning is infiltrated in the modern concept of nature. Therefore we have a tendency to regard nature as something which is so of itself, and we implicitly assign the traditional value to the substantive nature. Because of this linguistic condition, the nature itself is not neutral in valuation.

9. Conclusion

In the traditional mentality of Japanese people, there is an aesthetic sensibility which loves cleanness. This sensibility is applied not only to the outer world. It is also applied to human mind. The clean mind is represented as selfless mind. There is a correspondence between the cleanness of outer world and that of mind. In other words, the unity of nature and human beings is mediated by aesthetic value of cleanness.

In addition, in the modern age, after we accepted the concept of nature and translated it into the word “shizen”, nature is understood as something which is being so of itself; the concept of natural beauty has increased its value. The Japanese love for nature is backed up with ethical element of selflessness. Nature is all the more clean and beautiful because it does not have self.

NOTES

- 1 Saito, Yuriko, “Japanese Aesthetics: Historical Overview”, ÔHASHI, Ryôsuke, “Japanese Aesthetics: Kire and Iki” in *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, pp. 545-553, pp. 553-555.
- 2 Sasaki, Ken-ichi, *Bigaku he no Shôtai* (An Invitation to Aesthetics), (Tokyo: Chûôkôron-shinsha, 2004), p. 201.
- 3 Tatarkiewicz, Władysław, *Historia estetyki Estetyka średniowieczna*, (Warszawa, 1962), (tr. Eng. by R. M. Montgomery, ed. by C. Barrett, *History of Aesthetics II* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 8-9.

- 4 Tanizaki, Jun'ichiro, "In'ei Raisan", *Keizai Ourai* (December 1933), (January 1934), now in Tanizaki, Jun'ichiro, *In'ei Raisan*, (Tokyo: Chûôkôron-sha, 1995).
Keene, Donald, "Nihonjin no Biishiki" (Japanese Aesthetics) in *Nihonjin no Biishiki* (Tokyo: Chuôkôron-sha, 1999), pp. 7-37.
- 5 Ôno, Susumu, Biishiki no Hattatsu to Nihongo (The Development of Aesthetic Consciousness and Japanese), *Risô* 483 (1973 August), (Tokyo: Risô-sha, 1973), p. 39.
- 6 The expression of love for little things has shifted to the adjective "kawaii". You would notice that this word is too often used by young Japanese girls. This could be also a very interesting issue.
- 7 Watsuji, Tetsurô, *Nihon Rinri Sisôshi* (History of Japanese Ethical Thought), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1952), vol. 1 p. 85.
- 8 *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1963), pp. 32-36. "Amaterasu" literally means "sky shine". "Susanoo" literally means "wild male".
- 9 *Shoku Nihongi* Vol. 1, in Shin Nippon Koten Bungaku Taikei, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989), p. 247.
- 10 Watsuji, p. 95.
- 11 Sagara, Tôru, *Nihonjin no Kokoro* (The Japanese Mind), (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1984), p. 77.
- 12 Sagara, p. 85.
- 13 Collingwood, Robin G., *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*, 1 ed., 1925, (rep. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 50.
- 14 Collingwood, p. 50.
- 15 Ônishi, Yoshinori, *Manyôshû no Shizen Kanjô*, (The Feeling about Nature in Manyôshû), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1943), p. 164.
- 16 Yoshioka, Kenjirô, *Kindai Geijutsugaku no Seiritsu to Kadai* (The Formation and the Problems of Modern Study of Art), (Tokyo: Sôgen-sha, 1975), p. 158.
- 17 Sasaki, Ken-ichi, *Bigaku Jiten* (Dictionary of Aesthetics), (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1995), p.27. Sasaki does not intend to point out the indigenoussness of Japanese aesthetics. But, as he mentioned himself, his theory of natural beauty is related to Takeuchi's (p. 30). Takeuchi refers to the Occidental human centrism. As for Takeuchi, see Takeuchi, Toshio, *Bigaku Sôron* (General Remarks on Aesthetics), (Tokyo: Kôbun-dô, 1979), p. 133.
- 18 Sagara, p. 75.
- 19 Araki, Hiroyuki, *Nihonjin no Shinjô Ronri* (The Emotional Logic of The Japanese), (Tokyo: Kôdan-sha, 1976), p. 100.
- 20 Yanabu, Akira, *Hon'yakugo Seiritsu Jijô* (The Formation of Translated Words), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1982), pp. 125-148.