

The Japanese Aesthetics of Snow

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In the Western aesthetics, relatively scant attention was paid to weather conditions as aesthetic objects until recently. Only in the eighteenth century discussions on the picturesque and the sublime were meteorological conditions considered aesthetically relevant insofar as they affect the appearance of landscape. Otherwise, the attention to weather has predominantly been of practical nature.

There are several reasons for this relative neglect of weather for aesthetic considerations. First, though a recent tendency, aesthetics in the West is frequently equated with the study of fine arts, thereby neglecting rich sources of our aesthetic life such as natural objects and phenomena as well as artifacts outside the domain of fine arts. Second, even when objects other than fine arts are aesthetically appreciated, the Western aesthetic theories in general presuppose that the object of appreciation has to be "an object" in the sense of having a spatial or temporal frame as well as some permanency. As a result, a flower or an animal becomes a typical object of appreciation. A weather condition is not an identifiable and everlasting "object" in this sense; instead, it envelopes us as an aspect of our environment before it dissipates or changes. Third, Western aesthetics tends to distinguish the so-called higher and lower senses and the emphasis is put on our aesthetic experience gained through the higher senses of vision and sound. The appreciation of various weather conditions, however, does not consist merely of the visual and auditory sensations as if one were a spectator of a painting or a film. Rather, it is typically derived from the experience involving our whole body which *feels* the relentless sun, wind-driven rain, piercingly cold wind, heavy, oppressive weight of the air before a storm, fresh scent of the earth delivered by a passing shower, and the fluffy lightness of powdery snow. These experiences have been largely neglected in Western aesthetics perhaps because they are considered too bodily to allow any logical analysis or rational characterization.

In contrast, the Japanese aesthetic tradition has always demonstrated a keen sensitivity toward and celebration of weather as an integral and prevalent aspect of everyday life. Nowhere is this integration of weather into daily life more eloquently expressed than in Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*. Starting with its well-known beginning passage where the author identifies the best of each season with a particular weather condition as well as a specific time of the day, numerous passages in this work discuss the fittingness between various occasions and weather conditions. For example, in describing an incident of receiving a note

from a man, Sei Shonagon remarks that it occurred “when there was a strong wind, a dark sky, and a little snow”, and she further comments on the content of his note by saying, “the words were most appropriate for the weather.”¹

This pervasive interest in weather for its contribution to people’s aesthetic life is indicative of several important characteristics of Japanese aesthetics in general: aestheticism, the aestheticization of imperfection and inconvenience, and the celebration of transience. I shall illustrate these points by focusing on the Japanese appreciation of snow because, among different weather conditions, snow seems to provide the most diverse aesthetic appeals.

I am making two assumptions in this paper. First, the primary sources for my discussion is classical literature. I am fully aware of the fact that the experiences of snow depicted in literary works such as *Kokinshu* and *Shinkokinshu* are often fictional, not always rooted in the poets’ real life experience. However, their celebration of snow is important for our purpose because of the power these literary expressions exerted, through their popularity, on the subsequent development of the Japanese aesthetics of snow.

Second, in the interest of emphasizing the commonality of Japanese aesthetic sensibility regarding snow, I shall discount the important differences between, for example, *Manyoshu*, *Kokinshu*, and *Shinkokinshu*, or between *waka* and *haiku*. Despite some dramatic differences between and among these works, I believe that we can gather from them some shared sensitivity toward snow generally unmatched by Western aesthetics.

The first characteristic of Japanese aesthetic illustrated by this keen sensitivity toward snow is what may be called aestheticism, a predominantly *aesthetic* interest in objects and phenomena which otherwise can easily be regarded only with practical interests. For example, we deplore heavy snow for creating a traffic nightmare while farmers may welcome it for replenishing next summer’s water supply. Furthermore, any meteorological conditions can pique scientific interests. However, we find that the Japanese interest in snow has predominantly been aesthetic. Indeed Sei Shonagon includes “a large garden all covered with snow” in a list of “splendid things” along with Chinese brocade, wood grain in a Buddhist statue and grape-colored material.² The Japanese *aesthetic* preoccupation with snow is also reflected in the now seldom practiced custom of *yukimi*, the snow-viewing ritual, the creation of *yukimi doro*, a garden lantern with a wide top to exhibit the accumulated snow, and the well-documented excitement of the tea master, Sen no Rikyu, who delighted in holding a special tea ceremony whenever snow fell.

The aesthetic effects of snow are wide-ranging. First, there are purely visual effects. For example, snow blankets a house or an entire landscape and transforms the view into pristin white, as described in the following *waka*:

In the early dawn
It looks like the brightness of the moon
Remaining in the sky,
The blanket of snow that through the night
Has covered the village of Yoshino.

(Sakanoue Korenari, *Kokinshu*)³

Later on, a haiku depicts a similar phenomenon: "Snow has obliterated all from sight:/ Mountain and moor are now a world of white." (Joso)⁴

The pristine whiteness of the newly fallen snow is sometime considered so attractive that any disturbance is unwelcome, as expressed in the following:

What am I to do
if the man I have waited for
should come to me now —
not wanting footsteps to disturb
the snow of my garden court? (Izumi Shikibu)⁵

On the other hand, breaking upon the pristine white surface can sometimes create amusing effects, as in the following *haiku*: "Morning snowscape: every wooden shoe has left imprinted there the figure two." (Sute, aged 6)⁶ In haiku, even the hole made on the snow by urination excites poetic inspiration: "Pissing through my doorway/I make a clean hole/in the snow." (Issa)⁷

Snow is aesthetically appreciable not only for blanketing the entire landscape and for providing a pristine canvas for marking; its weight also transforms the shape of plants and tree by bending them downward, a phenomenon variously described as oshinabe, shinogi, or tawami. Furthermore, snow often amuses us with its resemblance to something else, in the practice of *mitate*. For example, snow on the ground in the process of melting creates an interesting pattern which was frequently compared to the dotted pattern on deerskin, the phenomenon of *kanokomadara*. Or snow also resembles flowers, either plum blossoms on the branches or falling cherry blossoms:

It now is winter but behold!
White flowers come showering from the sky!
Perchance the spring reigns there
Beyond the clouds on high. (Kiyowara no Fukayabu, *Kokinshu*)⁸

The aesthetic appreciation of snow is by no means limited to visual experience. Snow, both as a phenomenon and an object, can appeal to other senses and Japanese appreciation includes those appeals. The acoustic aspect of snow, celebrated in Japanese literature, includes its muffling effect on other sounds such as warbler's singing, egrets' crying, and neighbors' activities and the crunching sound of wind-driven snow against one's dwelling. The gustatory appeal of snow is described in the seventeenth century record of a ritual of eating the first snow of the new year as well as in a thirteenth century account of an aristocrat being treated to a snack of snow with syrup made from Amazura plant.⁹ The amusement of making and holding a snowball is expressed by Basho: "You kindle up a blaze; and then I'll show you something wonderful: a ball of snow!"¹⁰ while the wetness of snow is wholly embraced in:

How sad it would be
were it to melt tomorrow!
Let us drench ourselves

in the snow that has fallen
on this seed-black evening.

(Oharida Azumamaro, *Manyōshū*)¹¹

Thus, the sensitivity to the diverse aesthetic appeals of snow both as a phenomenon and as an object is fully developed in the Japanese tradition. However, it should be noted that this predominantly aesthetic mode of experiencing snow is a legacy primarily of the Heian court culture. Snow for them is experienced from the safety and comfort of their residence such as a veranda or a garden rather than in the middle of wilderness. Furthermore, divorced from the day-to-day outdoor work, aristocrats' lives and livelihood in general were not affected by snow. These factors made it possible for them to experience snow primarily as an aesthetic object rather than as something threatening which needs to be overcome.

In addition to these diverse modes of purely sensuous appreciation of snow, the Japanese aesthetics of snow also reveals another characteristic of Japanese aesthetics in general turning the otherwise negative values into something positive through aestheticization. Snow does create many practical problems in our daily life. On the sheer practical level, it delays the arrival of spring which people in general eagerly await; moreover, spring snow may destroy the delicate young buds and shoots of spring plants. It is also a nuisance when we are outdoors because we have to protect ourselves from its coldness and wetness. Finally, it can make certain places inaccessible.

However, the Japanese sensibility not only accepts these experiences of frustration, disappointment, and inconvenience, but also elevates them through various means of aestheticization. One typical mode of aestheticizing the practical problems caused by snow is to celebrate the very nature of its coldness and wetness as giving expression to the quintessential features of itself or of winter. For example, Sei Shōnagon captures the mood of winter created by snow in the following passage:

It is delightful when there has been a thin fall of snow; or again when it has piled up very high and in the evening we sit round a brazier at the edge of the veranda with a few congenial friends, chatting till darkness falls. There is no need for the lamp, since the snow itself reflects a clear light. Raking the ashes in the brazier with a pair of fire tongs, we discuss all sorts of moving and amusing things.¹²

Indeed in a similar description in the beginning passage of *The Pillow Book*, she claims that the best of winter is experienced in the early morning with snow and ends the description with the exclamation, "how well this fits the season's mood!". Snow in these passages gives rise to the wintery mood of coziness created by people gathered around the brazier. The wintery mood associated with snow, however, can also be solitariness and isolation, which is poetically captured by the following *waka*:

Each person I meet
I ask the way to an inn —
but no one replies.
Hats against driven snow
go down the path at a slant.

(Sinkei, 15th century)¹³

Another means of celebrating snow for its various practical problems is to aestheticize the way in which snow intensifies the feeling of desolation and loneliness. The following are typical examples.

Even when snowfall began
this morning
I longed for a visitor from the capital.
Desolate mountain village at dusk
buried in snow.

(Priest Jakuren, twelfth century, in *Shin Kokin Shu*, #663, my translation)

Thinking that
Perhaps today you might come and visit,
I gaze at the garden —
Trackless snow.

The appeal of snow here is partly due to its power to heighten the already felt loneliness experienced by one living in an isolated village or one awaiting the lover's visit. The sense of melancholy or resignation becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation through the contribution of snow.

Inaccessibility caused by snow is not limited to physical space; it also can be a perceptual obstacle. Unlike under a clear sky, where everything will be seen clearly and in its entirety, falling snow renders landscape obscure, the moon indistinct, and flowers indistinguishable from snow itself. Accumulated snow also covers the ground, grass, and flowers. In these cases, too, the Japanese sensibility cherishes, rather than laments, an obscured view, indistinct moon or an object hidden beneath a blanket of snow. According to this taste for obscurity and concealment, an object is rendered more appealing and enticing when its view is obstructed by things such as a screen mist or snow.

In a well-known passage, Yoshida Kenkō expresses this penchant for obscurity and implication by the example of the moon. According to him, the moon obscured or hidden by the mist or cloud is more pleasing than the exposed moon, because the former stimulates the imagination and increases excitement through anticipation, longing, or reminiscence.¹⁴ This judgment is shared by his contemporary thinkers and critics who uniformly contend that “the moon is not pleasing unless partly obscured by a cloud.”¹⁵

This taste for obscurity and concealment becomes incorporated into the aesthetic category of *wabi* by Sen no Rikyū who illustrates its ideal by citing the following poem by Fujiwara no Ietaka:

To those who wait
Only for flowers,
Show them a spring
of grass amid the snow
In a mountain village.

(*Sinkokinshū*)¹⁶

According to this verse, the essence of spring, such as freshness and vitality, can be felt much more intensely in a patch of grass peeking through snow rather than in cherry blossoms in profusion. While posing an obstacle for the full blossoming of spring snow here increases one's longing for and appreciation of the coming spring, heightening one's imaginative and poetic sensibility.

A similar appreciation of snow is expressed in the following verse:

We cannot detect
the flowering plum tree's blossoms
for white flakes of snow
flutter to earth everywhere,
obscuring the lofty skies.

(Anonymous, *Kokinshu*)¹⁷

Such appreciation of snow for producing obscurity and confusion results from a kind of dialectic between two opposing elements: longing for something (such as the arrival of spring clear view of plum blossoms, unobscured landscape) and its obstruction by snow. At first this unfulfilled wish may give rise to the feeling of resentment and lament. However, the Japanese sensibility resolves this conflict by aestheticizing rise to the feeling of resentment and lament. However, the Japanese sensibility resolves this conflict by aestheticizing both the obscured, such as plum blossoms, and that which obscures, such as snow. This aesthetic resolution adds pathos and poignancy to the experience which would be absent if one were to simply appreciate the snow-clad object and landscape without any wish or expectation of viewing them unconcealed.

Finally, snow is appreciated in the Japanese tradition for symbolizing transience. Though accompanied by a tinge of sadness, qualities such as transience and evanescence are celebrated aesthetic values in Japanese aesthetics. While impermanence, the universal human predicament, generally gives rise to pessimism, the Japanese traditionally sought solace in finding the same condition in nature. Focusing on more permanent phenomena or stable objects in nature would make one become more aware of and feel sorry for one's own evanescence. In contrast recognizing and appreciating the ephemeral aspects of nature would gently assure us that nothing existent can escape this condition of transience, leading us toward a sympathetic understanding and acceptance of the phenomenon.

Among various weather conditions, snow most eloquently symbolizes transience, not only by being passing phenomenon, but also by constantly accumulating, by transforming the landscape, and by eventually melting away without a trace. Particularly for aristocrats who were painfully aware of the fragility of their existence, wealth, prestige, power and love affair, snow, as well as falling cherry blossoms, gives a powerful expression to both its own and human mutability. Indeed some verses quite explicitly draw a parallel between human life and the transient nature of snow, sometimes by pointing out the cumulative aspect of snow, as in:

As each year in turn
gives way to its successor,
the new one brings in

still greater descent of snow,
still steeper descent into age. (Ariwara no Motokata, tenth century, *Kokinshu*)¹⁸

In some others, the melting phenomenon of snow is compared to the changing heart of human affair, as in:

If your thoughts of me
resemble masses of snow,
I cannot trust them,
for I know they will be gone
after the coming of spring. (Oshikochi Mitsune, *Kokinshu*)¹⁹

Yet some other times the whiteness of snow evokes the human aging symbolized by white hair:

It is not only white snow
which falls and accumulates
in the mountain village;
I, too, accumulate years
with increasing white hair.

(Ki no Tsurayuki, tenth century, *Shin Kokin Shu*, #676 my translation)

In conclusion, snow in the Japanese aesthetic tradition has been an object of appreciation for many reasons: ranging from purely sensory appeals to its expression of the quintessential essence of winter, from its power to obscure and hide other objects to its symbolic illustration of transience. Within these various appreciations of snow lay several important characteristics of Japanese aesthetics in general. First, it represents a tendency toward aestheticism in Japanese culture; that is, a phenomenon which can easily be treated with only practical considerations becomes an object of intense aesthetic experience. Second, appreciation of snow is enriched by its power to obstruct an easy access to an object, either literally or visually. This kind of appreciation exemplifies the Japanese tendency to turn a source of inconvenience and disappointment into a positive experience through aesthetic conversion. Finally the transience of snow is particularly cherished because it provides a highly aestheticized parallel to human impermanence, thus facilitating the acceptance of one's own transience.

Notes

- 1 Sei Shonagon, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, tr. by Ivan Morris (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 135.
- 2 Sei Shonagon, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- 3 Included in *Fujiwara Teika's Superior Poems of Our Time*, tr. by Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1967).
- 4 Included in *A Net of Fireflies: Japanese Haiku and Haiku Paintings*, tr. by Harold Stewart (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1974), p. 103.
- 5 Included in *Traditional Japanese poetry: An Anthology*, tr. by Steven D. Carter (Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 1991)

- 6 In *A Net of Fireflies*, p. 104.
- 7 Included in *Snow Falling from a Bamboo Leaf: The Art of Haiku*, tr. by Hiag Akmakjian (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1979).
- 8 Included in *Masterpieces of Japanese Poetry Ancient and Modern*, tr. by Asataro Miyamori, in 2 vols. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970).
- 9 The ritual of eating snow is recorded in *Honcho Shokkan (Encyclopedia of Eating of This Nation)*, published in 1692 and the treat of snow with Amazura syrup is recorded in *Kokon Chomonshu (Anthology of Anecdotes from Ancient and Modern Times)*, published in 1254. Both were cited in Takeshi Nakata's "Yuki no Bungaku to Fudo" (Literature and Climate of Snow) in *Yuki to Bungaku (Snow and Literature)*, ed. by Nihon Bungaku Fudo Gakkai (Tokyo: Kyoiku Shuppan Center, 1979), pp. 89-90.
- 10 In *A Net of Fireflies*, p. 102.
- 11 Included in *Brocade by Night: 'Kokin Wakashu' and the Court Style in Japanese Classical Poetry*, Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 147.
- 12 Sei Shonagon, *op. cit.*, p. 184.
- 13 Included in Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 290.
- 14 Kenko Yoshida, *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*, tr. by Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press 1967), p. 232.
- 15 This point is explored by Koshiro Haga in his "The Wabi Aesthetic Through the Ages," in *Tea in Japan: Essays in the History of Chanoyu*, ed. by Paul Varley and Isao Kumakura (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).
- 16 Cited by Haga, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
- 17 Included in McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 536.
- 18 Included in McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 442.
- 19 Included in McCullough, *op. cit.*, p. 214.