

# The Future of Snow Appreciation: Urban Space and Landscape in Japan

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## **Encounter with snow scene**

One of the most famous description on an encounter with snow may be “Yukiguni”, translated and published in English as “Snow Country”, a Japanese novel written by Yasunari Kawabata. It begins with a brief sentence on an encounter with a snowy landscape upon emerging from a long tunnel while the hero was sitting in a train. The hero, ascribed to the author, came from Tokyo into Niigata, while the amount of snow fall in these areas was quite different. The deep snow in Yukiguni shows sharp contrast with ordinary winter scenes in Japanese cities where little snow falls. It evokes for those living in less snowy regions the romantic illusion of isolated communities surrounded by the sea of snow. The strong contrast experienced while emerging from a tunnel is characterized by the difference of overall colors of two scenes, that is, black and white. Especially the contrast between darkness and brightness is unordinarily impressive, abrupt truncation of monotonous continuity.

This kind of contrastive image induces strange reversal of connotation of colors. Traditional folktale on the snow ghost, or Yukionna, meaning literally a snow lady, sometimes connotes death in snow, which is white, the color of purity, instead of black, the color of death. Even today, many Japanese think of the seductive power of Yukionna when caught in a menacing blizzard. Wandering in snow is usually dangerous but enchanting because snow fall is usually scenic and ephemeral, which should not be missed.

Waking up the morning after the first snowfall in the night before, we cannot help going to the window side to confirm the reason of sensible difference in the outside, which is usually experiencable from the inside. Soundscape changes and the brightness of the air is different. The ordinary everyday sounds and noises we normally hear in the outside will be muffled. Acoustically absorptive capability of snow piled upon everything seems almost suffocating, distinguishing snowy weather from other kinds of weather by its silence. Yet the silence of snow can be eloquent, pervading our inner experience in unque ways, as if we are being sheltered by calmness. The same is true with visual experience. Opening a curtain or rain shield door to witness what has happened outside is exciting. The reflectivity of white snow is much brighter than anything else on the ground. Brightness and whiteness of snow highlights itself and conceals details of what has been visible before snow falls. It is, however, never the same for people living in snowy countryside who suffer from heavy snowfall and long and

dark weather for several months of the year. Snow is annual routine irresistible to accept with patience for them.

## **Duality of the meaning of snow**

Both romantic and practical aspects of snow have already been noted in “Hokuetsu Seppu” by Bokushi Suzuki, written as reportage on snow in Hokuetsu region in eighteenth century. Hokuetsu is an old name of a region located in the northern part of Honshu, the main island of Japan. In this region, every winter snow used to average three or even four meters deep, now sometimes less than half of that owing to the warming of the earth. What Suzuki depicted from folklores enables us to envision the duality of the meaning of snow and the ambivalent sensitivity toward snowy weather in Japan.

Deep snow hides everything under its white carpet, changing our relationship with what we perceive to be the ordinary environment in other seasons. It deprives us of the immediate sense of the tactile quality of physical objects surrounding us daily and this sensuous denial can occasionally lead us to delusional visions. Landscape becomes monotone and only the lower part of things are left uncovered beneath the snow piled upon them.

As mentioned above, snow can be elusive, sometimes fatal to death and sometimes attractive on the contrary. It enhances an image of oppressiveness by its gravitational quantity, while evoking a sense of separation under a sheltered interior space safely divided from the freezingly cold exterior environment.

## **Tradition of snow and human experience in Japan**

Deep snowfall in northern regions, especially Hokuetsu, inevitably begot the practical contrivance of “Gangi” or covered sidewalk, as a shelter from the oppressive volume of accumulated snow. These covered sidewalks became symbolic of the notion of human shelter and protection from the snow in severe urban environments thereby promoting residents’ mental stability and facilitating daily communication. Their protective cover also suggested a summertime shady trail covered with trees under mountain or hill, much like portiocos in Bologna, Italy and elsewhere in the West and the East.

If people are able to obtain safe shelters in snowy weather, they will have time and mind for finding the aesthetic aspects of snow scenes. Traditional “Hakkei” or eight landscapes, which can be traced to “Xiao-xiang ba-jin” or eight views around the Tong-ching Lake selected in China, became prevalent in the seventeenth century in Japan as formulated models of landscape typology, which are attributed to actual specific places. “Hakkei” was selected in many areas, where there was a lake or an estuary. It was a way of finding the appropriate combination of time, place and occasion for contemplation of landscape with a certain expected condition of the weather. One of these, “Bosetsu” or “evening snow scene”, is included as a view to be contemplated in fading sunlight into dusk of winter clear air.

Appreciation of snow scenes, called "Yukimi" or snow viewing, is sometimes not dependent upon such formalized occasions, but possible only in a sheltered interior space. A special kind of "Shoji" or paper door called "Yukimi-shoji" exists between the interior space and the exterior space, usually a garden. The door has an unusual double hung (in many cases) window for seeing exterior snow scenes from the interior without experiencing glare from the sky while sitting on the floor with "Tatami" or straw mats. Usually this experience is accompanied by special beverages and foods for enhancing sensuous drama of the season. This situation is, however, much dependent upon the spatial relationship between architecture and garden which are now rapidly changing owing to the shifts of life style and design of houses and rooms in Japanese society.

### **Techonology and snow scene**

Modern technology to cope with snow often creates peculiar elements in landscape, especially in snowy rural countries where traditional devices against snow was limited owing to technical and economical constraints. Blizzard barriers or wind deflectors in order to sweep snow on the road surface by strong wind flow, standing on roadside continuously, look like Venetian blinds for blocking shiny sunlight in summer. Avalanche shelter and snow shed stuck into the slope of rocky mountains, usually covered with grasses and trees, are manifestation of artificial resistance to heavy snow, but nothing to fight when there is no snow on them.

These objects stand in landscape like scarecrows even in the season when they are not necessary. Visually ridiculous, sometimes, but they are indispensable for such snowy area, although their form and location should be treated with much greater consideration from the standpoint of landscape design.

In similar way but more significantly, the twentieth century modernization of urban environment through technology transformed snow scenes in Japan drastically, not only physically but in the mental state as well. By decreasing the physical threat of snow, for example by heating roadways and sidewalks so that snow melts rather than accumulates, the daily experience of snow has been reduced and blurred, thereby changing snow scenes in urban areas of Japan irreversibly. Hot water sprinkler changes snow into sherbet and then water in the end, by consuming fuel and water everyday. This kind of mechanical devices systematically set into urban infrastructure requires affluent budgetary conditions of local society. From patience under snow into conquest by technology is accompanied by irreversible change of attitude toward snow, with much amenity but less sensuous duality. For example, the eventual removal of covered walkways, caused by the construction of snow melting devices, lessened the rich connotation of the old townscapes, essentially concealing the duality of snow behind the bustling turnout of skiers.

## **Greenhouse effect and the fractuation of snow fall**

Snowfall is dependent upon the global weather and climatic change which is now obviously influenced by the prevalence of environmental destruction. The greenhouse effect seems to result in less snow in winter in northern countries, but sometimes the weather becomes in reverse.

This unstableness of snowfall lasting over generations can change peoples' attitudes toward snow, together with the pervasion of modern life style supported by technology. More specifically, for example, it is possible to sky in Tokyo even in summer in the air-conditioned indoor space! This is based upon the notion that natural snowfall is undependable from business standpoint. Yet this trend is not intruding into countryside away from large cities, which is, however, threatened.

The last possible occasion for maintaining the traditional attitude toward snow is to see how snow changes when it melts. It is natural process just based upon the change of temperature, even if it is controlled artificially. The process of snowfall and snowmelt is a process of ephemeral nature, which is difficult to interfere by human being. Even the snow removed and piled up from streets can be an indication what is happening between the weather and the society. This eye of the mind to look at the elusive snow when it falls has the same sightline as what they had in heavily snowy countries. People waiting for spring looked at the mountains and tried to identify a cluster of snow with a certain shape called "Yukigata", or snow shape literally, which indicated coming weather condition of spring and summer of the year, still useful as a way for long-term prediction. Experience of snow scenes is short-term, but landscape with snow lasting over a certain period can be an index of our environmental situation.

### **References**

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