

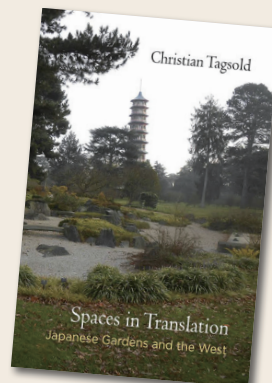
BOOK REVIEW

*Spaces in Translation:
Japanese Gardens and the West*

By Christian Tagsold

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017
256 pages.

Reviewed by Arno SUZUKI



Why are Japanese gardens spread all over the world? This book answers the question by analyzing factual evidence without any bias. Citing some preceding authors such as Kendall Brown, Wybe Kuitert, Inoue Shōichi, and Yamada Shōji, who respectively demystified or deconstructed prevailing reputations of Japanese gardens or related authorities, Tagsold presents a more comprehensive picture by examining literary and field evidence from around the world. He excavates levelheaded or realistic accounts from a flood of romantic or mystifying explanations, and he uncovers background stories of how, together, the West and Japan created an “image” of Japanese gardens. His discoveries imply that a culture can be commercialized or utilized for other purposes. This book also suggests how to adjust Japanese gardens for enjoyment and appreciation by visitors from different cultures.

The first chapter clarifies how the Japanese garden was introduced and adopted in the West just like its Chinese predecessor. By showing what is common to both gardens, including their natural look and religious or philosophical connotations, Tagsold indicates that these characteristics alone cannot explain the popularity of Japanese gardens. They were instead a fashion trend in the West influenced by Japan’s diplomatic efforts. For example, the West’s reaction to Japanese *bonsai* turned positive after the country regained a good reputation, while Chinese dwarf trees remained in criticism as a distortion of nature even though they were fundamentally the same.

The second chapter explains how Japanese gardens were introduced in the West around the turn of the century. Along with some promotional literature and Western visitors’ testimonies, events like world fairs prompted the export of “Japanese gardens.” They, however, were more “Japonesque” than Japanese. In the third chapter, the author details the spread of Japanese gardens in the West. He makes a convincing argument that it was not just Westerners who misinterpreted or misrepresented “Japanese gardens,” it was the Japanese government, cooperating scholars, and new industries who promoted a dramatized image of them. The West, then, conveniently purchased the image as a marketable commodity or a desirable setting for their businesses.

The next two chapters examine the theoretical framework of “Japanese gardens.” Tagsold poses a question on cultural essentialism, referring to some existing gardens as examples. Chapters 6 and 7 are fieldwork-based, and Tagsold discusses his, or the

Westerners' reactions to each garden element he observes. Apparently, some elements in Japanese gardens make visitors feel admonished or excluded.

Tagsold, as if he is hitting back at these “admonishing fingers,” unearths a misrepresentation: that some gardens are purporting to be Japanese-made by displaying Japanese names as their creators on informational boards and in brochures. He investigates the background of these “Japanese garden masters,” and reveals that some of them are not as authentic as the patrons may believe. Some had not grown up or worked in Japan, some did not have proper credentials, others were not responsible for the project as it appears. This logic is similar to Kuitert's decertification of Musō Soseki, a leading garden creator in medieval Japan, from being a respectable Zen master. It also resembles Inoue's deconstructing of the reputation of Katsura Villa by unveiling the imperfect background of Bruno Taut, allegedly the first person to acclaim its beauty. Yamada did the same to Eugen Herrigel, the author of *Zen in the Art of Archery* and also to Suzuki Daisetsu, the popularizer of Zen to the West, to deny the Zen influence on Japanese arts. They all rebutted established ideas.

Chapter 8 deviates from the previous ones. It discusses the Hungarian writer Krasznahorkai's novel in which a young man runs around Kyoto trying to find “the perfect garden.”¹ The “garden” here is a metaphor for Japanese culture; it is incomprehensible to those from other cultures or times. After clarifying “the gap between East and West and between past and present” by citing the novel, chapter 9 lists examples of freely interpreted and commercialized “Japanese gardens” as they appear in reality. What the West, or anybody in our time, would expect in these garden designs becomes so clear that most readers must be convinced that there is no point in authenticating or defining what is “Japanese.”

One question occurs in the reviewer's mind. Are Japanese gardens really so “closed off” to the West as Tagsold indicates? Japanese gardens' fenced enclosure divides the inside from the outside; it does not separate a particular group of people from another. The author's criticism toward other Japanese authors for mystifying Japanese arts may also be a misunderstanding. Tagsold says that Shigemori Mirei's illustrated encyclopedia served “to canonize only Japanese gardens located in Japan,” because it did not list any gardens overseas; but this is arguable. Shigemori, a garden designer and independent historian, did his research in the 1930s when traveling abroad was almost impossible for private citizens, and he wanted to discuss the gardens he had seen and surveyed.² Sano Tōemon, who appears in this book as the recalcitrant gardener for Isamu Noguchi's projects, articulates skepticism about theories and methods. He is afraid that manuals mislead because they cannot cover the wide variety of real situations. The same circumspection probably kept some classic gardening textbooks within a small group of practitioners. In fact, many garden artisans who practice traditional Japanese gardens in Japan will instruct anybody including foreigners, according to a survey.³ The student has to be ready for the practical training, however. Another question is whether we should draw such a clear line between the West

1 Krasznahorkai 2006.

2 Personal communication with Chisao Shigemori, 2017

3 Suzuki 2015.

4 Suzuki 2013.

and Japan, or the East. Many Westerners have absorbed the Japanese teaching method, been immersed in the culture, and acquired traditional Japanese arts. Some evidence indicates that cultural understanding does not depend on genetics or nativity but on experience.⁴

That being said, Tagold has successfully spoken for most visitors to Japanese gardens nowadays, not just for Westerners. Japanese garden creators and public Japanese garden managers may want to take his suggestion and stop imposing a “we will teach you” kind of attitude even if it is well intended. They probably should not force visitors to be quiet and meditative. This book also shows that “Japanese gardens” which Japanese people have created may not be strictly Japanese. People can easily distort their own culture. The world, therefore, should be careful not to buy a fake or valueless product for the price of an authentic treasure.

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