

The Role of Japanese Aesthetic Concepts in Environmental Conservation
—Focusing on the Philosophical Aesthetics which is accustomed in Japanese
traditional arts or custom associated with the appreciation of nature such as ‘*Nihon*
Teien’, ‘*Cha no Yu*’, ‘*Haiku*’, and ‘*Bonsai*’—

Dr Lé Lé Wynn,
Professor & Head, Department of Philosophy
University of Yangon

Abstract

The main objective of the research is to explore the role of Japanese aesthetic concepts in environmental conservation of today’s world. The research focused on the two main concepts such as the ‘climate’ (*fūdo*) in Watsuji Tetsurō’s cultural theory and the ‘everyday aesthetics’ in Saitō Yuriko’s environmental philosophy. In order to achieve the aim of the research, it is specifically focused on some Japanese traditions which are associated with the appreciation of nature such as ‘*Nihon Teien*’, ‘*Cha no Yu*’, ‘*Haiku*’, and ‘*Bonsai*’ from the standpoint of the Philosophical Aesthetics. In the nowadays’ environmental issues, we cannot ignore the crucial role of aesthetic appreciation of nature because of its indispensable factor for awakening the human conscience with regard to ethical responsibility to the natural environment.

The main aesthetic concepts highlighted in this research are *wabi-sabi*, *mono no aware*, and *mujō* which reflect the uniqueness of Japanese way of thinking namely, ‘syncretism’. The aesthetic concepts in Japanese culture are ordinarily interrelated with their ‘nature appreciation spirit’ as their cultural gene. For that reason, the Japanese people easily to adopt the ‘natural objects’ or ‘natural phenomenon’ into their everyday life, but not only as it is, with the deep philosophical contemplation of the law of nature. In addition, the Japanese aesthetic concepts such as *wabi-sabi*, closely related with the sense of ‘eco-friendly’, and it can lead the people to be aware and practice of ‘eco-friendly’ life style. In other words, the tendency of appreciating or experiencing aesthetic taste in everyday life is closely connected with ‘a culture of recycling’ which is most prominent in Japan rather than other countries. Hence, it can lead the people to practice some important moral principles of nowadays’ human being towards ‘natural environment’. For example, the ethical concept of ‘frugality’ in environmental ethics necessarily relates to the keeping old things and reuses them or doing ‘recycle’ called ‘a culture of recycling’ against ‘consumerism’. It also encourages the tendency of ‘co-existence’ between nature and culture or human being by the sense of ‘eco-aesthetics’.

Key words: Japanese Aesthetics, Environmental Aesthetics, Wabi-Sabi, *mono no aware*, *mujō*

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Introduction

Like all organism, human beings rely on the natural environment for survival and well-being. But, unlike other living beings human needs not only physical nutrients, but mental supplement such as aesthetic feeling plays a vital role for his survival. Appreciation of beauty is one of the distinctive element that distinguishes humans from other creatures, that is, we like to live in beautiful places full of blooming flowers, green trees, singing birds as mental nutrients while we need fresh air and clean water with full of minerals as our physical nutrients.

The natural environment provide our aesthetic needs through its amazing beauty such as ranges of purple mountain, snowy peak, green forests and prairies, the far-reaching spaces of blue oceans and colourful seashells, flowing yellowish rivers, the twittering sounds of birds and beasts with their mates, colourful flowers in bloom, and so forth. In my view the beauty of nature has always stimulated awareness that we have to preserve our environment to preserve this beauty.

Today this beauty is rapidly vanishing; mega cities have replaced many beautiful landscapes and this has left human beings empty-hearted. It may be one of the causes in the rise of crime and violence in the inner cities of mega polices.

The phenomena of natural world have historically been the subject and object of aesthetics. When we use

the term 'natural' it has been conceptualized as the beautiful, pastoral, sublime, and picturesque. These aesthetic categories have historically functioned to frame and construct the natural world for us against a human, technologically determined environment. Environmental Aesthetics leads into questions and forms an analysis of our aesthetic relationship and judgments of the natural world as a methodology for setting up a better relationship that will promote environmental respect; not just preservation.¹

Aldo Leopold is one of the leading environmentalists who were keenly aware of the crucial role of aesthetics in promoting the awareness environmental ethics. His 'land ethic' is profoundly interrelated with his view of land aesthetics. He claimed that it is necessary to transport the literary knowledge gained by such studies to empirical experience or perception in order to cultivate ecological literacy, it is insufficient merely through academic study of natural history and ecology.

In his *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold states that "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically *and esthetically* right. . . A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, *and beauty* of the biotic community, A thing is right when it tends to preserve the *integrity, stability, and beauty* of the biotic community,"²

¹http://unnatural.ucsc.edu/environmental_aesthetics/index.htm

²Aldo Leopold (1981). '*A Sand County Almanac*', *The Land Ethic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.262.

and he constantly gives emphasis to the crucial role of “perception” of the land or ‘land aesthetics’.

It means that integrity, stability, and beauty are all necessary for preserving the natural environment. Of these, integrity and beauty are especially human concerns because nonhuman beings that live in the biotic community are not concerned with ethical or aesthetical value. Besides, it seems to suggest that both ethical and aesthetical considerations are crucial for the environmental conservation.

At this point, Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who gave great contribution to the fundamental ideas of environmental aesthetics, in his *Critique of Judgment*, stated that beautiful items in nature such as flowers, birds, and seashells provide a source of disinterested pleasure because their significant form alone can lead us to pleasurable imagination and understanding. “Beauty is a symbol of Morality,” and “The enjoyment of nature is the mark of a good soul” are key sayings of Kant. For him, the shared enjoyment of a sunset or a beach shows there is harmony between us all, and the world. In this respect, judgments of pure beauty, being selfless, initiate one into the moral point of view.³

In fact, it can be said that Kant’s idea of aesthetic appreciation toward nature is a primary conceptual source of ‘non-cognitive theory’ of environmental aesthetics which places imagination rather than

³Barry Hartley Slater. ‘Aesthetics’, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu> (2006)

knowledge at the center of aesthetic experience. In aesthetic study of environment, there are two main streams such as 'cognitive theory' and 'non-cognitive theory'. These two trends reflect the role of knowledge in theories of the aesthetic appreciation of the environment. Some scholars who accept cognitive theory argue that ecology, geology, and other natural sciences structure and guide "appropriate" aesthetic reactions kinds of ideas in environmental aesthetics. Contrary to it, some scholars who accept non-cognitive theory emphasize common features of the aesthetic response to the environment: for example, multisensory engagement, imagination, and emotion.

Additionally, in eastern traditions, the several philosophical contributions for cultivating the human awareness of natural environment can be found. In Indian traditions, the sanctity of life, duties to animals and birds, and flora in Hindu tradition, Law of *Kamma*, the Four Cardinal Values, Sharing Merit, Middle way (*Majjimapadipaddā*), and *Jātaka* Stories in Buddhist tradition are considered as the traditional guidance for the people to live together with natural environment harmoniously. In Chinese traditions, ethical and aesthetical views of nature can be found in the practice of calligraphy, landscape painting, and poetry of Taoism. Especially, the Taoist conceptions of nature have been great impact on the Japanese culture since ancient times and it can be found in the Japanese Landscape Gardens, Way of Tea, Bonsai, Ikebana, and Haiku Poems.

On the topic of environmental aesthetics, the idea promoted by Saitō Yuriko is noteworthy. Emily Brady, a significant scholar in this field, gave comment on Saitō's idea of it. Brady said that Saitō's work lies somewhere between both theories of 'cognitivism' and 'non-cognitivism' in environmental aesthetics. In order to construct her theory, Saitō supports the role of science but challenges its centrality, arguing for a crucial role of appreciative frameworks, including other forms of knowledge such as folklore or myths in which traditional aesthetic or moral values are accumulated. On her account aesthetic appreciation can be enriched by a range of sources, but it must begin and end with the sensuous surface of aesthetic objects and environments. Saitō emphasizes the importance of valuing a range of environments, from the beautiful to the "unscenic" to the everyday.⁴In fact, Saitō's ideas are drawn from Japanese aesthetics, which values such qualities as imperfection, incompleteness, impermanence, transience, change, and the effects of weathering. In this sense, it is clear that Saitō's inclination to appreciation of nature as nature itself reflects the Eastern sense of aesthetic appreciation toward nature.

⁴Emily Brady. (2009). "Environmental Aesthetics." *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. (edt. By J. Callicott and Robert Frodeman).Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA,pp.317-318.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the role of aesthetic appreciation of Nature is crucial for awakening the human's conscience with regard to ethical responsibility to the natural environment. In this sense, environmental aesthetics stresses its interest in the potentialities of artistic representations which can stimulate aesthetic appreciation which will lead to realization of the ethical obligations of human being towards nature. In fact, it is an undeniable fact that the power of aesthetic stimulation of the perceptual faculties of humans is more effective than the power of ethical guidelines to their conceptual awareness of them.

When we consider about the role of philosophical studies in contribution to environmental conservation and sustainable development of today's world, 'ethics' and 'aesthetics', the two areas of philosophical study play in the significant role like other areas of environmental study such as ecological, geographical, geological, biological, and so forth. In fact, the former can lead the people who are lack of knowledge in more practical sense rather than the latter because of its power to make connection with mental faculty of the people directly by which their emotional instinct of nature can be evoked.

The power of aesthetic stimulation of the perceptual faculties of human beings is as important as the power of endowing with ethical guidelines for human awareness that they are responsible to preserve the natural environmental for sustaining peaceful or harmonious co-existence of human beings with

nature. However, if it is made the comparison between 'moral suggestion' and 'emotional stimulation', the latter is more effective to convey the message than the former because of its functions of direct communication to perceptual faculties of the people.

In the Japanese thought which pays special intention on the relationship between 'nature' and 'human culture', the Watsuji Tetsurō's philosophical conception of *fūdo*⁵ can be considered as a significant one. Watsuji's assertion of the spatial nature of human existence which is intimately interrelated with natural as well as social environments is considered as a very important suggestion for our ongoing movements of environmental conservation.

As mentioned in the title of this work, the main objective is to explore **the role of Japanese aesthetic concepts in environmental conservation** of today's world. In fact, the most two influential impacts that urged me to make decision for doing this research work are the concept of 'climate' (*fūdo*) in Watsuji Tetsurō's cultural

⁵Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) was one of the philosophers in Japan during the twentieth century who brought Japanese philosophy to the attention of the world. The influence and tone of his work clearly shows him to be a like-minded thinker. In his philosophical concept *fūdo* (Climate) is considered to the entire interconnected network of influences that together create an entire people's attitudes and values. For him, one's environment was central in shaping persons and cultures.

theory and the conception of 'everyday aesthetics' in Saitō Yuriko's environmental philosophy.

It is specifically focused on Japanese traditional arts or custom associated with the appreciation of nature such as 'Japanese Garden', 'Cha no Yu', 'Haiku', and 'Bonsai' from the standpoint of the Philosophical Aesthetics. In relation to our nowadays' environmental issues, it is very noteworthy fact that there is in needs of illuminating the crucial role of aesthetic appreciation of nature is indispensable factor for awakening the human conscience with regard to ethical responsibility to the natural environment. In this respect, it can be considered that the aesthetic concepts closely related to Japanese traditional culture which place a special emphasis on nature appreciation may be one of the effective encouragements to evoke our nature appreciation spirit.

In order to explore the role of Japanese aesthetics in environmental conservation and sustainable development by means of its significant conception 'nature appreciation' and 'aesthetics in everyday life', there are five chapters to support for achieving the aim of this work. In the first chapter, it is clarified the conception of 'environmental aesthetics' with its function in environmental conservation and sustainable development of today's world. And then, one of the key concepts, 'climate' (*fūdo*) in Watsuji Tetsuro's cultural theory is reconsidered as a theoretical ground of the main objective in the second chapter. In the third chapter, the conception of 'everyday aesthetics' claimed by Saitō

Yuriko is reconsidered as another theoretical groundwork which is mainly able to support the achievement of the aim of the research. One of the key ideas, the nature appreciation thoughts in Japanese tradition, is highlighted in the fourth chapter. In the last chapter, the main objective of the research, the role of Japanese Aesthetic Concepts in environmental conservation and sustainable development, is clarified.

I. The Role of Environmental Aesthetics in Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development

Aesthetics is a sub-field of philosophy that is of special concern to our appreciation of things as they affect our senses in a pleasing way. Traditionally, it focuses primarily on the fine arts and the works of art are usually designed to please the senses of beholders. Nevertheless, aesthetic appreciation in human beings is not only kept a tight rein on art objects, but instinctively extended toward the natural world at large. Moreover, the aesthetic appreciation of human beings reaches beyond the beauty of nature to our everyday life. In this respect, there are two kinds of 'environment' of which aesthetic appreciation of human beings concern such as 'natural environment' and 'environment encompasses our surroundings'.

For that reason, studying aesthetics since in late twentieth century might be divided into two broad area of interest such as 'philosophy of art' in traditional approach and 'the investigation of aesthetic experience' more generally, including experience of the natural world. The former usually be of special concern to theoretical questions about the nature of art itself such as how to make a distinction between works of art and other artifacts, what are the special qualities of individual art forms, and what values art embodies. The latter put emphasis on the 'aesthetic experience' go beyond the

experience of mere appreciating art works and scrutinize human responses to more universal conception of beauty and other aesthetic qualities wherever they are manifested such as 'environmental aesthetics' is most significant.

Environmental aesthetics is a relatively new subfield of philosophical aesthetics. It arose within the analytic tradition was largely concerned with philosophy of art in the late part of the twentieth century. Environmental aesthetics originated as a reaction to this emphasis, pursuing instead the investigation of the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. Since its early stages, the scope of environmental aesthetics has broadened to include not simply natural environments but also human and human influenced ones. At the same time, the discipline has also come to include the examination of that which falls within such environments, giving rise to what is called the 'aesthetics of everyday life' so called 'everyday aesthetics'.

This area involves the aesthetics of not only more common objects and environments, but also a range of everyday activities. Thus, early in the twenty first century, environmental aesthetics embraces the study of the aesthetic significance of almost everything other than art.

In this respect, the term 'environmental aesthetics' is associated with a variety of disparate sorts of cases such as aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, of works of art situated in nature, of works of art. For example, landscape paintings that are representation

about nature, and other works of art that take nature as their medium such as creative arrangement of gardening. It can be considered as a special category that seems to bestride between 'culture' and 'nature'. Nevertheless, the philosophical challenge is the same in each case that are to determine the proper object and mode of appreciation.

While these issues have not been definitively decided in the case of art appreciation, it remains helpful to use that example as a counterpoint against which an account of environmental appreciation can be constructed.

The discipline of Environmental Aesthetics proposes a philosophical and phenomenological analysis of human relationships to environments be they man-made or natural. Theorists have used this analytical structure to examine specifically human relationships to the natural environment and to create an appropriate way for environmental preservation and engagement. Through the process of mindful, aesthetic interaction with the natural world, individuals, societies, and cultures can make available the environmental awareness away from ego-centric attitudes of human beings. By means of it, a participatory ethical relationship to the natural world can be available.

Nature and the natural environment have traditionally been the subject and object of aesthetics. The term 'natural' has ordinarily been conceptualized as the beautiful, idyllic, sublime, and scenic. These aesthetic

concepts have functioned to attach and construct the natural world for human beings against technologically determined environment. For that reason, environmental aesthetics poses questions and forms an analysis of aesthetic relationship and judgments of human beings towards the natural world as a methodology for coming to a better relationship that will promote 'environmental respect'; not just preservation. In addition, it attempts to situate human beings within the natural world in contrast to situating them above and against it.

However, the scope of environmental aesthetics is wider than that traditional conceptualization of nature orientation perspective by means of the new approach of aesthetic studies as 'aesthetic experience' in 21st century. Hence, 'aesthetic engagement' between human beings and their social environments is also noteworthy idea in the studies of environmental aesthetics. Moreover, it is significantly interrelated with the crucial role of aesthetics in undertaking the environmental conservation and sustainable development.

The idea of 'aesthetic engagement' involves an active experience to both natural and artificial (imitation of natural) environments. With the intention that the aesthetic experience of both environments increases the value of these environments and provides an opportunity to talk about it and about oneself at the same time. By simultaneously enhancing the self and the environment or a particular aspect of it, aesthetic engagement constitutes recognition of oneself in the environment.

Aesthetics has generally been understood in relation to art and art history, but it has now been allowed to run free from this traditional framework of interpretation because of the needs of nowadays' new patterns of humans' societies. Today's worldwide urbanization has profoundly transformed humans' relations with their 'natural' and 'fabricated' environments. The latter is often considered as an entirely artificial setting, but the presence of ecological dynamics shows that it remains a living environment for many species. Experiencing the city, in fact, bears out to a natural dimension that contributes to a renewed appreciation of the urban life setting. The numerous mobilizations in support of nature in the city are accompanied by an appropriation of the urban environment that has been encouraged by the awareness of overall ecological issues. The fact that urbanites are expressing a desire to reconnect with nature in the city is in keeping with the elimination of the subject-object dichotomy.⁶

On the topic of aesthetic engagement to the two categories of environment such as 'natural' and 'social' or 'manmade', the new conception of 'everyday aesthetics' and 'artification' introduced by Yuriko Saitō is most significant in today's studies of environmental aesthetics. Everyday Aesthetics is a recent subfield of philosophical

⁶Nathalie Blanc (trans. Miriam Rosen). *Aesthetic Engagement in the City*. <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=683>

aesthetics focusing on everyday events, settings and activities in which the faculty of sensibility is saliently at stake.

Saitō claimed that ‘everyday aesthetics’ aims to illuminate the rich aesthetic dimensions of our lives that have been neglected in the modern art-centered aesthetic discourse. And, another discourse, ‘artification’ which is a new concept and practice, encourages us to experience various aspects of our lives normally not associated with art or aesthetics, such as business, education, and medical practice, from an artistic viewpoint.

Both discourses are helpful in sharpening our aesthetic sensibility and enriching our aesthetic life. However, precisely because the aesthetic dimension of our lives exerts a considerable power in shaping our lives and the world, we need to cultivate aesthetic literacy and a vigilant attitude toward the use of this power.⁷

One of the philosophical supports to aesthetics as everyday concerns of today’s societies is John Dewey’s view on art as experience. His work *Art as Experience* (1934) is regarded by many as one of the most important contributions to this area in the 20th century. He claimed that the business of aesthetics is to restore the continuity between the refined experiences that are works of art and the experiences of everyday life. Hence, human being should turn away from mere appreciating the artistic

⁷ Saito Yuriko. (2012). “Everyday Aesthetics and Artification”, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume, Issue 4.

products in museums or galleries as aesthetic objects to ordinary experience. As an illustrative example, he raised that in order to understand the Parthenon, which is widely believed to be a great work of art; one must turn to cultural context of Athens and the lives of the citizens who were expressing their civic religion through its creation. Dewey then argues that we must begin with the aesthetic “in the raw” in order to understand the aesthetic “refined.” To do this we must turn to the events and scenes that interest the man-in-the-street such as the sounds and sights of rushing fire-engines, the grace of a baseball player, and the satisfactions of a housewife. Emotions are not merely in the mind. That is because of the live animal confronts a nature which already has emotional qualities.⁸

Dewey explored aesthetics from the subjects' everyday experience rather than from objects' status as artworks and museum collections. This turn would allow overcoming object-centric approaches to aesthetics that hindered any consideration of the aesthetic beyond artistic and beautiful things justifiable by intrinsic qualities categorized as aesthetic.

From this perspective, the focal point of aesthetics was turned to the wider sphere of ‘aesthetic object’ which is not only as works of art, all things in natural environment as well as social environment can be

⁸ “Dewey's Aesthetics”. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2012 Edition. <http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/archives/sum2012/entries/dewey-aesthetics/>

appreciated by sensual experience are included in it. For that reason, the role of aesthetics became to be more significant not only in philosophy of art, but in the field of environmental studies such as 'environmental aesthetics'.

To sum up, there are at least two or more important philosophical influences in the development of the newest sub-field of environmental philosophy such as 'environmental aesthetics'. Here, the two significant ideas can be raised that is the influence of Kant's aesthetics of nature and the influence of Dewey's aesthetics of everyday. The former is the old idea of the eighteenth century philosophical aesthetics and considered as one of the foundation stone of 'environmental aesthetics'. The latter is promoted in the twentieth century which redefines the meaning and scope of philosophical aesthetics which turn its scope into 'everyday experience' from the traditional beliefs that appreciation of art objects merely enable in the museums, the galleries, and theatres. Both ideas are important because appreciation of nature is always interrelated with the everyday lives of human societies. One can easily to see that microcosm of natural sceneries are introduced into the modern urban planning of megacities such as public gardens, green-growth roofs of modern buildings, and so forth. It is the evidence that the beauty of nature which maybe 'in nature' or 'from nature' is one of the primary needs of human beings like they need food, clothes, and shelter for their physical needs yet it especially can fulfill the mental needs.

Nevertheless, it is not deniable fact that human beings have to follow the moral responsibilities towards natural environment in order to conserve the natural environment and sustaining its development. It primarily concerns with 'environmental ethics'. However, ethics alone cannot bring to mind effectively the awareness of their responsibilities towards nature because of its function is mainly concerned with suggestion of moral responsibilities or duties of human beings. On the contrary, aesthetics can definitely fulfill this need by means of its effectiveness to stimulate or convince humans' emotions and to convey the emotions from one to others. Thus, environmental aesthetics is also necessary to enhance the plans of environmental conservation and sustainable development like that of ethical concerns. Hence, it can be said that environmental aesthetics plays in significant role of environmental conservation and sustainable development.