

READING SYMBOLS IN JAPANESE GARDEN

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Abstract: Creating a Japanese garden raises a number of methodological questions. The form of these gardens are well known, but their religious symbols are not well researched in English literature. The aim of the research is to introduce and interpret the religious symbols and references present in Japanese gardens, to categorize their appearance by taking into account their unique characteristics, their role in the garden, contributing to a deeper understanding and the understanding of the form-shaping approach. The gardens presented by this study are closely related to the practice of the religious community that creates or maintains them. The garden elements do not only serve an aesthetic purpose, but with their spatial presence they constantly refer to religious teachings or attitudes for those who are able to read them.

Keywords: art, buddhism, forms, purpose, sacrality

1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in Japanese culture, including horticulture. It is the works of the British architect, Josiah Conder, from the turn of the 20th century where we have found the first detailed descriptions about the design and rules of Japanese gardens. Information on the subject is available through a number of channels and is becoming increasingly accessible. During our research, we managed to find and classify nearly five hundred English-language publications (books and journal articles) dealing with the history and art of Japanese gardens. Most of the publications contain descriptions and illustrations of the

formal elements, without exploring the religious messages and philosophies that influence horticulture. The intellectual content important for the rich and artistic image and forms of the Japanese garden are therefore pushed into the background. The aim of the research is to introduce and interpret the religious symbols and references present in Japanese gardens, to categorize their appearance by taking into account their unique characteristics, their role in the garden, contributing to a deeper understanding and the understanding of the form-shaping approach.

About the literature

The first English-language book that, beyond the general description of the island country, also mentions Japanese garden as the surrounding of buildings is from Edward S. Morse who published his richly illustrated book titled "Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings" in 1885, complementing the work of J.J. Rein on Japan (Rein, 1883). The book describes the Japanese house, its types, the layout of the interior, the entrances and the access to them, the garden, and other related topics. The section on the garden includes 23 pages on specific garden elements such as stone monoliths, stone lanterns, bridges, summer pavilions, ponds, paths, dwarf trees, flowers, plants. The book also includes illustrated descriptions of a few private gardens.

Morse did not discuss the principles behind the art, which were unknown for him, but he acknowledged their positive impacts in art. According to his description, Japanese people are masters of creating artworks in a simple manner.

The British architect Josiah Conder arrived to Japan in 1877, and soon became a professor at the Imperial Technical University. His first book titled "The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement" was published in 1892. A year later an exceptionally richly illustrated book of his was published titled "Landscape Gardening in Japan", dealing with the history and principles in Japanese garden art. The source of his work was the book "Tsukiyama teizōden" from Akisato Ritō, written in 1829 on the subject of garden construction. Conder's book focused on the artistic composition of the garden, with some of the philosophical aspects also mentioned briefly in the Introduction, for instance: "The ideal Japanese garden serves primarily as the site of retreat for solitary relief and meditation" (Conder, 1893). Conder referred to the form as an artistic expression of

the philosophical background, but did not discuss its Western interpretation, only highlighted its mystique and sacredness.

Information on Japanese gardens are increasingly accessible through various media today. With our research, we managed to find and classify almost 500 English-language publications, books and journals on the history and art of Japanese gardens.

We can conclude that most of the publications deal with the description of compositional elements of Japanese gardens, without a deeper exploration of the spiritual messages and philosophies that influence the garden art.

Displaying the aggregate number according to the year of publication (**Fig. 1**), we can observe a linear increase from Conder to circa the 1950s. The books on Japanese gardens exploded in number afterwards, while the number of journal articles started to grow rapidly from the 1960s, 1970s. The exponential growth after the Second World War is remarkable, the analysis of the reasons could be the topic of another specific research.

2. Materials and methods

Our research was based on publications which do not only describe the design of garden elements, but also look at the content beyond the form. Most of the literature does not fully explore the approach that determines the form, since the primary goal of the author was to provide a simple and easy-to-understand introduction of the garden scenery and the symbols. Thus, in addition to the publications on Japanese gardens, we also introduce the doctrines of the related religions, which provide the keys for understanding the garden scenery. The introduction of spiritual aspects of the elements of monastery and tea gardens covered by the research also reveals details of their history and everyday function.

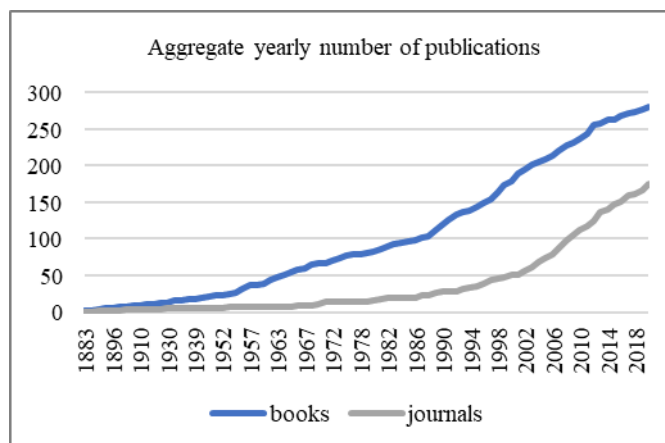


Fig. 1. English-language publications on Japanese gardens (Author, 2018)

3. Results and discussion

Shintoism

In Shintoism, a purged place where a god or spirit (*kami*) resides is named garden (*niwa*). The most characteristic feature of these gardens is the rock (*iwakura*) (Goto and Takahiro, 2016), which is compelling and prominent in the view. This garden element is also worshipped as *yorishiro*, which refers to the fact that it is a place where a *kami* resides. And the role of the rope (*shimenawa*) is to mark the place, the garden element that is worshipped as *yorishiro* (Keane, 1996).

The rocks are usually replicas of original rock formations existing in nature. Nevertheless, often the rock formations also refer to the belief system of a specific religion.

Buddhist cosmology

Situated in the centre of metaphysical and spiritual universe, Sumeru (Mount Meru), that is *shumisen* in Japanese, plays an important role in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. The top of the mountain is the symbol of heaven. This centre is surrounded by a ring of eight lower mountains with eight oceans in between. Man resides in the outer range of mountains situated at the eighth oceans (Goto and Takahiro, 2016). This image also appears in Japanese gardens in

a similar way, as a central rock surrounded by several lower rocks. The Buddhist temples and stupas are also symbolic representations of this mountain (Pressing, 2007). The first Buddhist symbol in Japanese gardens was also representing this mountain (Berthier, 1989).

The image of Pure Land

An approach similar to the one related to Meru Hill appears in the so called Pure Land stream of Buddhism. According to their doctrine, there is a place where Amitabha Buddha resides, and where enlightened Buddhist practitioners get to after their death, breaking the endless cycle of rebirth (Skilton, 1997). This place had inspired garden designers, and some of the gardens created in the Heian Period reflected this idea. An island is floating in the foggy ocean, accessible via a bridge, as a reference to the fact that accessing the island (the Pure Land) is possible with the help of Amitabha Buddha (Keane, 1996).

Metaphysical goals using mandalas

The Shingon school of Buddhism was a mystic school in Heian Period Japan. It had more or less united the concept of Buddha with the Shintoist *kami*. It had happened that a Shinto shrine had been installed in the area of a Buddhist monastery. They considered the hills in a similar way as well as the rocks where,

according to Shinto, a kami resides. These are places where enormous power is concentrated. During their practice, even the hard conditions of their retreats into the hills did not prevent them to partake of this power (Yamasaki et al., 1988). In their practice they used mudras, mandalas and mantras, which had influenced the architecture of the temples and the composition of the religious spaces. To some extent, even the location of the sculptures of Buddha and the pagodas had referred to mandala. Why the use of mandala was so

important for this school? The mandala (**Fig. 2**) is not merely a kind of depiction of the belief system of the school, but as they believed the image had also had a sort of mystical power that was possible to invoke by a ritual motion of the hands or by chanting a mantra. The architecture of Shingon monasteries also relates to this, although the layout of the buildings is not considered as a mandala in the classical sense, but it serves the same metaphysical goal that we can see in the case of the mandala (Keane, 1996).

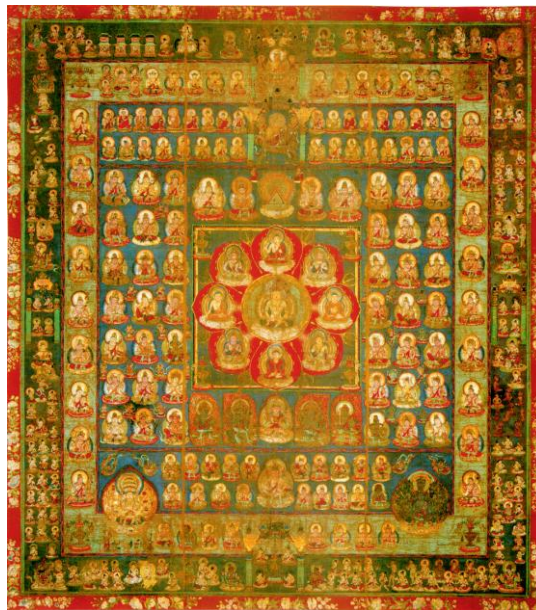


Fig. 2. Womb realm mandala, Shingon tantric school, 9th century (Ismoon, 2019)

Emotions and religious experience

Art had been present in gardens also in the form of poetry (e.g. poetry competitions held in Buddhist monastery gardens). In poetry, the use of "dependent words" (kakekotoba) was typical, expressing double meaning by the means of homophone sounding of specific garden elements. One of the meanings expressed an emotion, while the other referred to a natural feature or phenomenon. For example the word *matsu* means pine tree as a noun and *wait* as a verb or *kaeru* refers both to homecoming and frog (Hirano, 2014). The notion of homecoming represented by the frog

is also present in Shinto, as a metaphor expression of the fact that in the course of everyday life man is not in the status of "home".

The haiku below is one of the renowned works of the 17th century poet, Matsuo Bashō:

"The old pond —
a frog jumps in,
sound of water."

Buddhist monks were also inspired by the natural scenes of gardens to write poems, which were the descriptions of a specific spiritual experience, as simple and concise

expressions of a flash-like revelation in lyric poetry.

As a Buddhist monk, Musō Soseki was not only a master, but also a garden designer and poet of the period (Soseki et al., 2013):

"In this small hut
are worlds beyond number
Living here alone
I have endless company
Already I have
attained the essence
How could I dare
to want something higher"

The art of Zen Buddhism

The advance of Zen Buddhism to Japan resulted in a novel garden scenery, the source

of which originates from the Chinese landscape painting. It is mostly enclosed spaces, with austere simple forms, which support introversion and immersion. The goal of the practice in Zen Buddhism is to reveal the real nature of consciousness behind the superficial secular life, which, although hidden, continuously exists before our very eyes.

The Zen doctrine despises shallowness and excessive decoration (**Fig. 3**). Beyond the puritan, simple forms of the monastery gardens, this attitude is also conspicuous in various forms of art related to the stream (sumie painting, ikebana flower decorations, tea ceremony, shakuhachi flute, haiku poetry).



Fig. 3. Splashed-ink landscape, 1495, Sesshū Tōyō (Lippit, 2012)

Regarding Zen arts, two phrases are related to the above written. As a word of Chinese origin, *yūgen* means a sort of mysterious depth. This also means that something exists that is so deeply inside that we can not see it. In Zen practice this refers to the real nature of consciousness. And *yohaku no bi* means the beauty of empty space, which may also be observed through the subtle representation of the mysterious, dim, invisible spaces in ink painting (sumie) (Keane, 1996). We can relate

two Buddhist phrases to these artistic concepts. First, *suññatā* that is usually translated as emptiness. This emptiness may refer to the objective nature of matters and of course of events, that none of them exist on their own, independent of the other. But may also refer to the opportunity that we have for filling the emptiness. The other phrase, *kenshō jōbutsu*, is the forth of the four principles of Zen. *Kenshō* means the revelation of our own nature, by which man transforms to buddha (*jōbutsu*).

These two examples demonstrate that the artistic phrases expressed the subject matter of the Zen practice, while artistic forms and artworks reflected the spiritual attitudes.

Revealing attitude in karesansui gardens

The karesansui gardens of the Zen Buddhist monasteries are literally dry landscape gardens. According to sakuteiki (Takei and Keane, 2008) this is a place where neither lakes nor ponds exist. The objective was to create a view that is possible to observe looking out from the central building in the garden. The view referred to the compositional principles known also from Chinese painting. Chinese landscape paintings depicting hills often showed the wise hermit in the broad context of the natural world. This broad natural scenery was relocated into the tight enclosed space of the monasteries.

We cannot emphasise enough that the image of a monk sitting in a dry garden for the purpose of meditation is false. According to the monastery rules, in traditional monasteries the place of meditation for the monks is the meditation room (zendō), while other exercises

may be carried out anywhere else including the garden. The garden is not a subject of meditation, the Zen meditation is formally determined, practitioners must look downwards in an angle of 45 degrees, and not to observe the view in front of them. Nevertheless several activities may take place in the garden, such as maintenance, raking, cleaning. These may evoke a meditative state of mind. Regarding the scenery, it is important that water does not appear in dry landscape gardens, but the arrangement of the stones may refer to it (**Fig. 4**).

That is how the riverbed, that is ordinarily hidden by the turbulent flow of water, appears in the view. Here we would highlight the moment of becoming visible, which is a strong allusion to the subject matters of the previously mentioned *yūgen* and *kenshō*. Another instance of composition, the dragon gate waterfall, represents a similar allusion to the religious practice. The story about the denomination of the waterfall (Mansfield and Richie, 2012) highlights a human attitude that is important from the aspect of monastic practice, effort and steadiness.



Fig. 4. A mountain, waterfall, and gravel river at Daisen-in (Ivanoff, 2004)

For the outsider, these types of sights in the monastery garden provide an aesthetic experience, while for the monks they are suitable to evoke and sustain attitudes in relation to their religious practice.

The burning house and the tea garden

According to Musō Soseki, the observation of nature alone is also suitable to evoke the *kenshō* (Goto and Takahiro, 2016). In his opinion, the image of the natural scenery is the mirror of Buddha-nature, that is to say, through the Zen practice it is possible to perceive our own nature simply by observation.

Another type of gardens that is closely related to Buddhism is the Japanese tea garden (*roji*). The name referred to the path leading to the tea house located in the rear part of the garden, and was later related to a Buddhist doctrine. The character that means garden appeared in the 17th century in the Lotus sutra (NBMR, 2021), in the parable of the house on fire. In brief, in this parable is a house on fire where children play inside obliviously. Their father tries to warn them but they do not notice it, so that he is not able to get them out of the house. The father then comes to the idea of offering presents provided they come out. This attracts the attention of the children who come out of the burning house to a particular area. The area they arrive to is expressed by these characters. The tea garden is usually translated as dewy earth, but as we can see at the first character it also has a meaning that refers to showing or revealing something.

露 – dew; to show, to reveal

地 – earth; ground, field

If we consider the garden with regard to the parable of the house on fire, then the city, the outer world represents the burning house, while the tea garden the area where we arrive to leaving the burning house behind. The garden is sectioned into several units, the outer garden, the inner garden and the tea house. Arriving from the rush of the mundane world, we can walk down this route. Regarding the parable it is important to note that the story does not say that the children take notice of the burning house when leaving it, it only explains that with the use of presents, which we may also call as smart tools, they are not inside the burning house anymore. The questions of what happens in that area and how does it contrast the image of the burning house, may perhaps be answered through the practices and activities in the garden. The Buddhist attitude appears here so that the directed steps that we make here serve for the purpose of calming down. We can not walk down the garden in any way we want, we can not rush, since there are several places to pause, where we can observe the view of the natural scenery.

It is the contemplation itself what suggests that we are supposed to discover something in this space, something that we did not take notice of yet. The space, from this aspect, is an opportunity. Although we are not in the burning house anymore, yet we can not see this. The presents in the story, the smart tools, may be paralleled with the activity that takes place in the tea garden, that is having a tea, so that the tea is

the present itself, that beckons into this space from the burning house.

Conclusions

In the beginning, Japanese gardens related to religions served to represent the specific belief system, rocks, islands, bridges in the garden were simply tools of pictorial description. Applying the rules and regimes of the belief system to the garden composition, mystic schools wanted to use the garden as a tool in achieving the religious objective then. This is where we can observe a change in the function of the garden scenery.

With the advance of Zen, the truth behind the scenery appeared in the gardens analysed. The facilitation of a certain human attitude (calming down, effort, steadiness) with the deliberate use and composition of garden elements is related to this search for the truth, and serves the religious practice.

Besides, the space of the garden may also be considered as an opportunity, since the tea garden provides an opportunity for discovering something by leaving the rushing world behind. And, according to Soseki, the contemplation of the garden scenery is an activity equal to meditation, since the natural scenery observed is a clear reflection of the Buddha-nature.

Regarding composition, the question is what role the garden scenery might play if the view is not related to some mental practice. The scenery that we can observe in monastery gardens is possible to relate to the compositional principles of Chinese landscape painting. However, for us who are not living in a monastery, and are not related to the practice of the specific religion, the garden scenery does not become animated, and remains no more than a painting with a related story.

Table 1. Religious purposes of garden images

Religion	Garden image	Religious purpose
Shintoism	Represent nature	to describe the belief system
Buddhism	Represent buddhist cosmology	to describe the belief system
Pure Land Buddhism	Pictorial description of celestial realm	to emphasize the possibility to get there
Shingon School of Buddhism	Using mandala images	to revoke mystical power during the practice
Shintoism and Buddhism	Homophone sounding of garden elements	to describe emotions or religious experience
Zen Buddhism	Dry landscape garden	to evoke and sustain religious attitudes
Zen Buddhism	Tea garden represents mountain pathway	to leave the burning house behind

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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