

# Ecocriticism in Japan

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## CHAPTER 30

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# ECOCRITICISM IN JAPAN

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YUKI MASAMI

### OVERVIEW

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“‘Ecocriticism’? That doesn’t sound entirely new. In Japan, there is more than a thousand-year-old literary tradition of paying attention to nature. Take a look at *tanka*, *haiku*, or any of the many sorts of literary works in this country—there are few that do not touch upon something about nature.” Such a reaction was, and to some extent still is, commonly encountered in Japan when you talk about ecocriticism to those who haven’t heard of it. An association between literature and nature is so deeply imprinted in the Japanese mind that “ecocriticism” may not sound entirely foreign to those who share such a cultural upbringing. But although literary interest in nature and ecocriticism may have some similarities, they are actually radically different: ecocriticism characteristically accompanies a concern about environmental crises, while literary study of nature does not necessarily imply such awareness. Perhaps because the distinction between ecocriticism and thematic literary studies concerning nature has not been clearly perceived, it has taken a long time for ecocriticism to spread its roots deeply in Japan’s literary and cultural soil.

With the exception of a few self-driven literary studies which encompass environmental awareness (e.g., Takahashi 1978), environmentally oriented literary criticism did not exist in Japan until it was imported from the United States in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup>

In the nearly two decades since ecocriticism was introduced to Japan, its process can roughly be divided into three stages. The first phase (early 1990s to 2000) focuses on the introduction of the literary movement, mainly by means of translation. The second phase (the 2000s) sees the development of a comparative approach, mostly practiced by scholars of American and British literature who attempted to apply an ecocritical approach to Japanese literature. The third, overlapping, phase (the late 2000s to the present) is characterized by a cross-fertilization between ecocriticism and Japanese literary studies. This last stage marks a major shift in Japan’s academic landscape of literary environmentalism, with the emergence of Japanese ecocriticism. I will give an outline of

each of the three stages and show how ecocriticism was initiated and has been developing in Japan.

## THE FIRST PHASE: TRANSLATION

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The idea of “ecocriticism” was brought into Japan’s academic arena around 1993 when the leading American ecocritic Scott Slovic gave lectures on nature writing and ecocriticism throughout the country during a one-year stay as a Fulbright visiting scholar. Not only promoting a new literary approach, Slovic also helped form a community of interested individuals, a community that quickly developed into the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in Japan (ASLE-Japan) founded in May 1994. The majority of the initial sixty-one members (including five graduate students) of the organization were literary scholars, mostly Americanists (ASLE-Japan Newsletter 1).

Around the same period of time or even earlier, in the country’s environmental zeitgeist, there was a period of intensive publication of American nature writing in Japanese translation. For instance, in 1993 and 1994, under the series title of “A Naturalist’s Bookshelf,” Tokyo Shoseki, one of Japan’s major publishers, issued translations of seven works such as Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, Gretel Ehrlich’s *The Solace of Open Spaces*, and Gary Snyder’s *The Practice of the Wild*. Another major publisher, Takarajimasha, had eight works including John Muir’s *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Henry Thoreau’s *Faith in a Seed*, and Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge*, translated and published in its “American Nature Library” series, which continued from 1993 through 1995. Likewise, in 1994 and 1995, Hakusuisha’s *Collection of the Best American Naturalist Writing* brought out translations of six works such as Rick Bass’s “Wild to the Heart” and Gary Nabhan’s “Desert Smells Like Rain.” There are a number of other works published in translation during that time, such as Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* and Robert Finch’s *Common Ground*. Some other works including Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*, Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Lauren Eiseley’s *The Night Country* were made available in translation even earlier in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In addition, literary periodicals and journals had special issues of literature and environment, offering major literary and scholarly works—again, mostly from the United States—in translation to an interested public. For instance, the literary journal *Folio A* featured American nature writing in 1993, and a nationwide literary periodical *Eureka* highlighted nature writing in March 1996; both journals provide translations of literary works as well as seminal scholarly articles. The growing trend towards introducing ecocritical theory and practice in translation is evident in many other publications as well (cf. Slovic and Ken-Ichi 1996; Ito et al. 1998). Such a boom of translation in the 1990s played a significant role in publicizing ideas of nature writing and ecocriticism, by making a number of landmark works in the field of literature and environment accessible for a Japanese-speaking audience. (For more detailed information regarding related publication movements in the mid and late 1990s, see Ikuta 1998, 279.)

Not content with merely bringing in the literary movement, the emerging ecocritical communities such as ASLE-Japan recognized the importance of collaboration with ecocritics in other countries and regions. The 1996 publication of *Environmental Approaches to American Literature*, a collection of essays by fourteen scholars from Japan and five from the United States, is perhaps the prototype of the now increasingly common attempts to create transnational ecocritical networks. Another example is the international symposium of ASLE (U.S.) and ASLE-Japan, which was held in Hawai'i in August, 1996. Some fifteen participants from each organization gathered to discuss American and Japanese environmental literary works by such writers as Gary Snyder, Miyazawa Kenji, and Ishimure Michiko and as well to talk about the agendas of the then newly born ecocriticism, such as issues of communication by means of journals, newsletters, and translation.

The introductory phase seems to have been completed with the publication of a nature-writing guidebook compiled by ASLE-Japan (2000). The guidebook, which provides concise yet informative descriptions of one hundred and twenty works from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan, helped facilitate the discussion of norms for nature writing in Japan.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that a majority of the works presented in the guidebook are from the United States and the United Kingdom, with one-sixth of the collected works being from Japan. Perhaps this apparent disproportion reflects the country's scholarly situations of ecocriticism in the late 1990s in two ways. On the one hand, the inclusion of a small number of Japanese works illustrates the simple fact that there were few Japanologists who worked on ecocriticism at that time: the guidebook was planned, written, and edited mostly by ecocritics of American and British literature in Japan, who were not necessarily familiar with literary environmentalism in Japan. On the other hand, presenting twenty works of "Japanese" nature writing reflects those literary scholars' intention of going beyond their specialties to explore internal issues of literary environmentalism as well.

## THE SECOND PHASE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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As previously mentioned, the majority of those who initially worked on ecocriticism in Japan specialized in American or British literature, but their interests were not necessarily focused on the movements within the United States or the United Kingdom alone. In fact, the very nature of environmental issues led their attention to where they live, urging them to open up a path where the foreign-born idea of ecocriticism could meet the local culture and literature. Scholars who had learned ecocriticism via the movements abroad groped for ways to apply ecocritical concepts and methodology within a Japanese context. The attempt, however, to employ such imported concepts as "sense of place" and "land ethic" was rather hesitantly made in reading Japanese literature, simply because those scholars were not necessarily well versed in Japanese literature, which was considered the domain of traditional literary scholarship. It will take a while yet to see how successful the efforts to apply ecocritical concepts to Japanese literature has been,

for the key concepts as well as theoretical dimensions of ecocriticism have just started to be discussed in the established scholarly communities of Japanese literature.<sup>3</sup> What is clear is that the non-Japanologists' struggle to explore ways in which to apply ecocriticism to Japanese literary studies demonstrates the inception of a comparative approach, which would characterize the second phase of the development of ecocriticism in Japan.

The increasing interest in a comparative approach can be observed in two tendencies: creating dialogue with ecocritics in other East Asian countries, and a more committed effort to apply ecocriticism to the interpretation of Japanese literature. As mentioned above, for the first decade of its development, ecocriticism was examined and practiced mostly by scholars of American and British literature and, to a much lesser degree, attracted the interests of Japanologists. Eager to find a way of developing ecocriticism in an East Asian context while continuing to work on collaboration with Japanologists, interested communities and individuals sought out intellectual exchanges with ecocritics in East Asia. The 2003 international symposium in Okinawa hosted by ASLE-Japan demonstrated such an inclination to ecocriticism as practiced in East Asia, seeking out dialogues among writers and scholars from Korea, Taiwan, the United States, and Japan. This direction was further endorsed at the first ASLE Japan-Korea joint symposium that was held in Kanazawa, Japan, in August of 2007, in which scholars discussed literary environmentalism in Japan and Korea.<sup>4</sup> What was significant about this joint symposium is that, instead of using English as an official language, it provided an interpreter-supported multilingual environment, in which the English-, Korean-, and Japanese-speaking participants could use their first language, in order to facilitate truly intercultural exchanges of ideas and visions. Those two cross-cultural scholarly events were developed into publications: *Dialogue between Nature and Literature* (Yamazato et al. 2004) is based on the Okinawa symposium, and *Poetics of Place* (Ikuta et al. 2008) the joint symposium in Kanazawa.

Unlike the first-phase ecocriticism that almost exclusively focused on American and British literature of the environment, the publications of the second phase demonstrate a subtle yet increasing tendency to use a comparative ecocritical approach towards Japanese literature. This inclination is most clearly represented in monographs written by ecocritics specializing in American literature.<sup>5</sup> In his book on American nature writing from Henry Thoreau to Annie Dillard, Noda Ken-ichi includes a chapter on Japanese nature writing, in which he examines the discourse of the wild in a story written by Japanese photographer and writer Fujiwara Shinya. Comparing Fujiwara's artistic approach to the wild to that of Annie Dillard's literary representation of the wild, Noda shows a critical hesitation in using the term "Japanese nature writing," asking what "Japanese" implies in a literary and historical imagination of the environment. Noda says:

The idea of "Japanese nature writing" brings about many questions. For instance, is there any original cognitive mode, rhetoric, style, or thought pattern that can be characterized as "Japanese" in what can be defined as Japanese nature writing? The truth is that modernity has oppressed a variety of modes which had operated actively, replacing them with a dominant, homogenized mode. We are all located

in modernity, which is so complex that it cannot be approached with general conceptual categorizations such as East, West, Asian, and so forth. (Noda 2003 203; my translation)

Hinting at the danger of a nationalistic, ideological attitude regarding Japanese-ness, Noda's analytical observation draws attention to the issue of modernity as an imperative topic to be addressed in ecocriticism in Japan and beyond.

Another pioneer work in comparative ecocritical practices is Yamazato Katsunori's 2006 book titled *Poetics of Place: Reading Gary Snyder*. In one chapter, Yamazato discusses the work of Miyazawa Kenji, internationally renowned Japanese poet and writer of the early twentieth century, in comparison with Gary Snyder, examining the writers' representations of sense of place and their literary and cultural implications. Noda and Yamazato are both Americanists by profession, contributing to Japan's development of ecocriticism (they served as the first and second president of ASLE-Japan respectively); their modest yet deliberate inclusion of ecocritical interpretations of Japanese literature suggest that a comparative approach to ecocriticism had finally started to take shape. Yuki Masami (2010), who also started her career as an Americanist, published *Remembering the Sound of Water*, which is more distinctively comparative in scope, examining the theme of relationships between language and perception of the environment in the works by American and Japanese writers such as Gretel Ehrlich, Terry Tempest Williams, Ishimure Michiko, and Morisaki Kazue.

## THE THIRD PHASE: ECOCRITICAL INTERVENTIONS IN JAPANESE LITERATURE

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As demonstrated by Karen Colligan-Taylor's 1990 book titled *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan*, discussions regarding literary environmentalism in Japan began outside the country as early as 1990. Domestically, however, ecocriticism did not really begin to be discussed by scholars of Japanese literature until the late 2000s. Perhaps it was ignored as an ephemeral literary trend in tandem with the environmental movement, or perhaps Japanese scholars did not care for the seemingly political stance of ecocriticism. Whatever the reason, it took more than a decade for ecocriticism to be perceived by domestic Japanologists as a possible critical tool for literary studies in the age of the environment. In 2008, the Association for the Modern Japanese Literary Studies, an academic organization with over one thousand members, held a symposium on representations of the environment. It was interdisciplinary in approach with panelists including an ecocritic (Americanist) and a philosopher in addition to scholars of modern Japanese literature. Another notable event was the two-day international symposium on ecocriticism and Japanese literary studies, which was hosted by Rikkyo University in Japan in collaboration with Columbia University in the United States and

held in Tokyo in January of 2010. It was probably the first large-scale scholarly meeting in which Japanese literary works were ecocritically approached by a number of domestic and overseas Japanologists as well as ecocritics and scholars in related fields. Some thirty presentations examined a wide variety of Japanese literature which included Manyōshū, the oldest existing collection of poetry compiled in the middle of eighth century; *The Tale of Genji*, an eleventh-century Japanese classic regarded as the world's first novel; literary and cultural legacies of the Edo period; and works by contemporary writers such as Oe Kenzaburo, Hino Keizo, and Kato Yukiko.

The direction of comparative and collaborative studies of environmental implications in Japanese literature can also be observed in published works. One example is the special issue of ecocriticism in the journal 'Susei Tsūshin' (2010), to which twenty-one scholars of Japanese, American, and British literature as well as from other fields such as linguistics, contributed essays on ecocritical practice and theory. Another example is a book titled *Kankyo to iushiza* [Views of the Environment: Japanese Literature and Ecocriticism] (2011), which collects twenty-three essays—mostly written by scholars of Japanese literature—which were delivered at the international symposium in Tokyo the previous year, as I have mentioned. The book has four sections: Second Nature and Wild Nature, The Modern and the Pre-modern in Descriptions of Nature, Environment as Cultural Representations, and Center and Periphery. They represent the major framework of the emerging field of Japanese ecocriticism. It is important to notice that those themes are not so different from considered central in ecocritical arenas in the rest of the world. In fact, as the transcript of the keynote roundtable at the opening of the book emphasizes, ecocriticism has finally started to be perceived among Japanologists as a powerful tool to deconstruct urban-born, hierarchical, and ideological views of nature that have fashioned Japanese literary tradition (Shirane, et al. 18–33). Perhaps *Views of the Environment* signals the birth of Japanese ecocriticism; ecocriticism that could be expected to shift scholarly interests as well as the theoretical matrix in directions that are yet to be clearly defined.

At the crossroad between ecocriticism and Japanese literary studies, there are quite a few issues which should be examined. For instance, at the roundtable in *Views of the Environment*, Haruo Shirane claims the importance of paying greater attention to literary representations of coded nature, or “second nature” as he calls it, whose ideological elements have not been fully discussed (Shirane et al. 18). Coded nature dominates Japanese literary traditions including haiku; therefore, Shirane's remark can be an allusion to the danger of the West's idealization of an Eastern literary imagination. Responding to Shirane, Noda Ken-ichi mentions that the issue of coded nature, especially that of Romanticism, has continued to be critical in American and British ecocriticism, the observation of which implies that theoretical approaches developed in American and British ecocriticism will provide a helpful framework within which to ecocritically examine Japanese literature (Shirane et al. 21). This is just an example, but it is also evidence of the fact that exchanges between literary scholars of different fields with shared interest in literature and environment bring about a cross-fertilizing intellectual matrix of literary environmentalism.

If the burgeoning Japanese ecocriticism can promote a revisionist examination of conceptually appropriated ideas such as East and West, monotheism and animism, or Christianity and Buddhism, it will operate as a disturbing yet creative force in the field of ecocritical theory and practice, helping remap a conceptual terrain of human relationships with the environment.

## NOTES

Throughout this essay, name order follows the cultural convention of the country where the named person is originally from. For instance, Japanese are referred to with a family-name given-name order, and Americans are mentioned with a given-name family name order.

1. The direction of influence may not be one-sided. Shirane et al. discuss Japanese literary influence on the American movement of nature writing as well, pointing out that writers such as Gary Snyder were inspired by haiku and other Japanese literature (Shirane et al. 16–17).
2. While in the United States “environmental literature” started to replace “nature writing” by the late 1990s, there has been a tendency that “nature writing” is preferably used in Japan. Perhaps the term “environmental” is so politically charged that, whether consciously or not, scholars as well as writers may try to bypass the word.
3. As one of the early cases of a Japanologist recognizing an applicability of ecocriticism, Hojo Katsutaka in his 2007 article suggests the theoretical usefulness of ecocriticism in the field of Japanese history studies (Hojo 40).
4. Interestingly, it was in the United States that the importance of a scholarly network of ecocritics in East Asia and the idea of a joint symposium in East Asia were first discussed. The root of an East Asian ecocritical network can be traced back to a series of gatherings at the ASLE biennial conference in Eugene, Oregon, in 2005. For details regarding how an East Asian scholarly network in ecocriticism was developed, see Yuki 2008.
5. In addition to monographs, there are some notable collections of essays which attempted a comparative approach, such as Noda Ken-ichi and Yuki Masami, eds., *Ekkynosurutoposu* [Topoi Crossing Borders: Critical Essays on Environmental Literature] (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2004), and Scott Slovic, Ito Shoko, Yoshida Mitsu, Yukota Yuri, eds., *Ecotopia to kankyo-seigi no bungaku* [Literature of Ecotopia and Environmental Justice: From Hiroshima to Yucca Mountain] (Tokyo: Kouyo Publishing, 2008).

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