

Analyzing Satoyama: A Rural Environment, Landscape, and Zone

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Introduction

Like pastoral landscapes in the West, Japan's *satoyama* is perceived as an ideal agrarian environment in which people are thought to live in harmony with nonhuman nature. Generally characterized as mosaic environments of different types of ecosystem such as forests, agricultural fields, irrigation ponds, and human villages, *satoyama* can be found throughout Japan with about forty percent of the land being categorized as *satoyama*. Due to outmigration from rural villages to urban areas, however, and a marked decrease in the farming population during the era of post-war economic growth, not all *satoyama* areas are well-maintained in either an ecological or a social sense. Nonetheless, since the 1990s *satoyama* areas have increasingly attracted interest as an ideal symbiotic environment for a sustainable future.

Unlike the centuries-old tradition of Western pastoralism, *satoyama* was "found" rather recently, attracting the attention of academics in the 1970s and becoming more popular in the mid-1990s in what is often called "the *satoyama* boom." From the late 1990s onward, local and national governments in Japan have been promoting the notion of *satoyama*, facilitating campaigns which include inviting urban residents to join activities such as planting, growing, and harvesting rice. The Japanese government has developed a *satoyama* campaign on a global scale as well; together with the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment has launched a "Satoyama Initiative" which aims to "conserve sustainable human-influenced natural environments . . . through broader global recognition of their value" ("Satoyama Initiative"). A series of such recent campaigns gives the impression that *satoyama* has gained recognition as an important model environment for a sustainable future for both human and nonhuman lives.¹ But at the same time,

as I will argue in this essay, the idea of satoyama has been accompanied by a nationalistic mood somewhat similar to what the US government experienced more than a century ago, and to some extent still does, in its public promotion of national parks as the nation's iconic landscape.

Curiously, the beginning of the satoyama boom coincided with the end of Japan's modern economic prosperity: the unprecedented bubble economy which started in the mid 1980s came to an end in the early 1990s, immediately after which the satoyama boom began.² That the notion of satoyama gained popularity at the same time the bubble economy collapsed seems to suggest a collective shift of interest from money to nature.

What does such a sudden collective shift of interest imply? Does it suggest a radical transformation of value, that is, a change from a money-worshipping attitude to one of appreciation and respect for the natural environment, as seems to be indicated by a Japanese government report on the nation's economy and its environmental policies? The report illustrates some of the major characteristics of the 1990s, such as environmentally-conscious policies and practices (e.g., the increased presence of NGOs and their local environmental activities) and the introduction of regulations (e.g., the Container and Packaging Recycling Law enacted in 1997).³ Thus, it appears that Japan experienced a rise in environmental awareness in the 1990s, a part of which is most certainly due to the growing attention paid to satoyama. The more likely explanation, however, for the swift transition to the satoyama boom after the end of bubble economy is that satoyama became an alternative object of consumption after the failure of a money-worshipping economy. While the apparent shift of public interest from money to satoyama may indicate an incipient change in societal values, it is just as likely to reflect a shift of society's attention from one commodity to another.

In this essay, I would like to discuss the aesthetic, cultural, and political appropriation of satoyama. To date, there is neither a single authorized definition of satoyama nor a standardized way of understanding it. Some people experience satoyama through a weekend trip during which they enjoy a relaxing time in the bosom of nature, away from the din and bustle of city life. For those living their lives in a place deemed satoyama, however, it is not a place of leisure but rather a place for working and living, a place in which they negotiate with nature to make their living. While these are just two of the many ways that the idea of satoyama has been registered and interpreted in the public mind, I would like to suggest that satoyama can be classified broadly into two categories, either as an imagined environment or as a lived environment. In what follows, I will examine literary and cultural representations of satoyama in order to highlight the differ-

ences between imagined and lived environments and to explore the implications of such differences.

Satoyama as Landscape

Although there is no single authorized definition of satoyama, the most comprehensive research on this topic defines the term as “landscapes that comprise a mosaic of different ecosystem types including secondary forests, agricultural lands, irrigation ponds, and grasslands, along with human settlements” (Duraiappah 3). This definition illustrates important characteristics of satoyama, such as the significance of traditional human use—or what some may call “wise use”—of the natural environment, and the resultant rich biodiversity in the natural and socio-economic environments that encompass satoyama. But this definition also creates an awkward impression with its use of the word “landscapes.” As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, “a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view,” the word “landscape” involves separation between the viewer and the viewed and distance between them. The choice of “landscapes” to define satoyama makes sense if the definition is limited to satoyama as a picture that illustrates “the complex relationships across different ecosystem types that were part of the agricultural landscape” (Duraiappah 8). But the definition quoted above assumes not only physical but also psychological distances that separate the viewer from what she/he sees.

The idea of satoyama as a landscape thus leads to a romantic view that lacks a critical perspective from which to examine the socio-economic problems of an agrarian living environment. In fact, there is a prevailing romantic tinge—what the ecologist Yumoto Takakazu describes as a kind of backlash to the colonial mentality, similar to what Edward Said defined as Orientalism—in popular satoyama discourses. Yumoto points out that the recent tendency to idealize satoyama shares a similar structure with nineteenth-century West European Romanticism, which exhibited back-to-nature attitudes in reaction to the sweeping industrialization of the period (Yumoto 17–18). Such a romantic ideology leads people to celebrate human connectedness with the natural world without their critically reflecting on the implications of such a romantic attitude. Analyzing some of the popular—mostly visual—representations of satoyama, such as the series of documentaries produced by Japan’s public broadcasting organization NHK, I wish to examine how romantic notions of human relationships with the natural world operate in constructing environmental consciousness in contemporary Japan.

The romantic mood that the word satoyama creates is often associated with

nostalgic feelings, which are largely evoked by the word *sato* in *satoyama*, which literally means “homeland” as well as “human settlement,” evoking ideas of “good old Japan,” an archetypal image of homeland with well-cared rice paddies and the forests that surround them. As I will show later, this idea of *satoyama* carries the metaphor of a Japan that few, if any, have actually experienced.

Satoyama as a physical environment has existed for a long time, even before the term started to be shared.⁴ However, as I mentioned previously, the word *satoyama* has only recently registered in the public mind, first among academic researchers in the 1970s when the forestry ecologist Shidei Tsunahide revived the term, and then more broadly among the general public with the *satoyama* boom in the 1990s. The recent popularization occurred partly as the result of powerful representations of *satoyama*, which helped heighten people’s awareness of and interest in them.

A representative example is Imamori Mitsuhiro’s photography. Born in 1954, Imamori is a self-taught photographer who, in the late 1980s, became known for his photos of insects. Imamori’s first work that focuses on *satoyama*, published in 1995, was *Satoyama Monogatari*, which received Japan’s most prestigious photographic award, the Kimura Ihei Award. Several more of Imamori’s works on *satoyama* followed, such as *Satoyama no michi* (A Path in *Satoyama*) published in 2001, *Satoyama o arukō* (Let’s Walk in *Satoyama*) in 2002, and *Satoyama no okurimono* (A Gift from *Satoyama*) in 2008. In addition to the production of visual images, Imamori has presented essays that have played a pivotal role in publicizing *satoyama*. Imamori’s photographs characteristically present an agrarian landscape of secondary forests, rice paddies, and grasslands, which correspond to most of the elements of *satoyama* found in the definition we have seen. The one element that Imamori’s photos often lacks is human settlement. As a matter of fact, a physical *satoyama* environment necessitates communal work in agriculture and forestry as well as socially and ecologically sustainable village governance. Imamori’s stunning photographs of agrarian landscapes, such as rice paddies in season and of neatly arranged *shitake* mushroom logs in forests, chronicle the consequences of the good care by the local people, but such impressive photographs rarely illuminate the communal work that was indispensable to maintaining such lovely *satoyama* environments. Lack of attention to collective aspects of human interactions in *satoyama* also pervades other visual representations that Imamori has been involved in.

With Imamori as the visual director, the public broadcasting organization NHK began producing high-definition programs on *satoyama* in 1998. The collaboration between NHK and Imamori has continued, with the production of two

more programs in 2004 and 2008. One of these—*Satoyama: Japan's Secret Water Garden*, the English version of *Satoyama II: Inochi o meguru mizube* (2004)—was even televised on BBC and later PBS. The English versions have some major editorial changes to the extent that in NHK's original documentaries "satoyama is portrayed as an endangered icon of both culture and nature, and is approached with a wistful nostalgia mixed with a fear of impending loss," whereas in the English version "satoyama functions more as an image of cultural nationalism, an exotic advertisement for an eco-friendly Japan" (Meli 320). Thus the idea of satoyama is modified and edited differently for consumption in different cultures, and this seems to reflect NHK's intension. Just like the government-led Satoyama Initiative, NHK's focus on satoyama is global as well: in addition to exporting Japanese satoyama to English-speaking audience, NHK attempts to import visual representations of satoyama-like environments in other countries such as Finland, Poland, and China, thereby expanding a notion of satoyama in a global context.

Imamori and NHK's work played no small role in getting the idea of satoyama registered in the public mind. Satoyama by definition requires human care and work, and NHK's shows certainly do illustrate how the residents of satoyama have traditionally taken care not only of their rice paddies and vegetable fields but also of rivers, streams, wetlands, and forests in order to maintain sustainable living for both humans and the nonhumans that coexist with them.

However, just like Imamori's photography, NHK shows do not pay much attention to human communities. Their focus is almost exclusively on individual, rather than communal, interactions of humans with their natural surroundings, featuring for instance an old man who lives his everyday life working in rice paddies and the surrounding forests. Communal aspects of human interactions in satoyama are illustrated as background at most, against which the protagonist stands out. The absence of focus on the local residents' communal life suggests that the NHK's representations of satoyama are rather selective and partial. In rural environments such as satoyama, people's lives are traditionally ordered in communal groupings rather than individualistically; at least in the past, a communal lifestyle was required for the farm and forest work to maintain the environment of production.

There is no doubt that drastic changes in the structure of energy supplies from charcoal to petrol, the modes of industry, and the resultant changes in foodways, lifestyle, and values, brought about radical transformations during Japan's unprecedented rapid economic development that started in the 1960s. These factors contributed to the depopulation of rural areas and the resultant decline of

communal life in satoyama. It goes without saying that such socio-political issues cannot be addressed without paying attention to human-human relations. In this respect, environmental literature, which originally started out by questioning literary conventions that tended to focus exclusively on the human world, assumes an important role in the ongoing interdisciplinary yet still ecologist-led discussions on satoyama, for its “literary” function of bringing attention to human values. Even though it is by definition critical to the values of an exclusively human world, environmental literature demonstrates how individual and societal attitudes to the environment reflect and are reflected by human-human interactions.

By not addressing socio-political issues regarding the decline of satoyama yet providing abundant high-definition images of satoyama ecosystems, the NHK programs are targeting their appeal to children and young people. Watching fascinating images of how nature works seemingly in partnership with the human interactions in natural environments, children will truly be excited about such a lifestyle. In addition to appealing to children, the NHK shows try to invite adult viewers to virtually re-experience a childhood in the “good old days” of satoyama. In fact, the first show of NHK’s satoyama series began with a narration of “Remember when you were a child,” as it invited viewers to look back upon their childhood while showing boys playing in the water that runs through their community, splashing and shouting out loudly with joy. Given that the majority of contemporary viewers have never had such a bucolic experience in satoyama, it is likely that NHK intends to present satoyama in a way that leads viewers—children and adults alike—towards an imaginary satoyama utopia.

I should note here that an appeal to children is not necessarily problematic: it is certainly beneficial for environmental education if NHK’s shows help nurture children’s fascination with the ecosystems found in satoyama. What these NHK shows lack, however, is any effort to address issues like why such a “fascinating” way of life is not practiced anymore, or why people originally abandoned satoyama. In short, NHK’s presentation of satoyama does not go beyond idealized landscapes.

It is understandable that NHK’s programs aim to attract people with beautiful visual images, and granted, critical remarks on the social and political explanations on the decline of satoyama would be a nuisance towards that goal. The beautiful visual images provided by NHK and Imamori in the shows are soothing and fascinating, but they do not invite their audiences to question their societal values, which sustain an urban lifestyle that does not require rice paddies and forests for people to make their living and thereby facilitates the decline of satoyama. The forest journalist Tanaka Atsuo observes that, seen through a

camera, satoyama managed by a volunteer group from outside was somewhat different from that which was managed by local residents. For instance, Tanaka noted that for a volunteer group the act of cutting weeds is complete when they finish cutting weeds, whereas for local residents, weed cutting is the beginning of circular agricultural activities in which weeds are used as manure, which in turn nurtures the soil.⁵ This suggests a difference between imaginary satoyama and lived satoyama, or to put it differently, a difference between satoyama-as-landscape and satoyama-as-place.

Satoyama as Zone

There is a curious literary phenomenon in which writers celebrate satoyama while struggling against the romantic mood ingrained in such a celebratory view. In other words, there is an interesting tension between a yearning for satoyama and the struggle against such a yearning. I would like to explore the implication of this tension between romantic and counter-romantic views of satoyama taking Taguchi Randy's work as an example. In Taguchi's work focusing on Fukushima after the triple disaster of the mega-earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown of Tokyo Electric Power Company's (TEPCO's) Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant on March 11, 2011, there is a unique view of satoyama, which presents a perspective from which to see rural Fukushima as bucolic satoyama *and* nuclear exclusion zone. In what follows, I discuss Taguchi's literary vision of satoyama as an amalgamation of dystopia and utopia.

There are seventeen nuclear power plants in Japan. From north to south, they are located in Hokkaido (one), Aomori (one), Miyagi (one), Fukushima (two), Niigata (one), Ishikawa (one), Fukui (four), Ibaraki (one), Shizuoka (one), Shimane (one), Ehime (one), Saga (one), and Kagoshima (one). And as one might imagine, they are all located in rural areas, far from metropolises such as Tokyo. After the 3/11 accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, a twenty-kilometer exclusion zone was established for the first time in Japanese history.

Prior to the nuclear accident and radioactive contamination, Fukushima had long been famous for its production of high-quality rice, meat, vegetables, and fruit. In fact, the prefecture of Fukushima was, and still is, eager to tout its region as satoyama, publicizing it as a good destination for tourists. Looking at Fukushima Prefecture's official website, it is evident that the area that the prefecture proudly presents as satoyama corresponds with what is now designated as a radioactively-contaminated zone. Having nuclear plants located in areas which otherwise are perceived as satoyama is not unique to Fukushima: the same is true in Fukui, Ishikawa, and many other places.⁶ Indeed, the fact that nuclear power

plants are located in, or in the vicinity of, satoyama is not strange at all when considering that the towns with nuclear power plants have the following in common: depopulation, underdeveloped transportation, and few plants and factories that support local economies. It is not hard to imagine that such conditions encouraged a local government to welcome nuclear power plant development, with the expectation of economic prosperity (Hasegawa 48–49).

What does it mean that satoyama has been—if not now, potentially could be—turned into a radioactively-contaminated zone? I would like to examine the implication of the physical correspondence between satoyama and the nuclear exclusion zone by examining the following two books written by Taguchi Randy. One is *Yorubenaki jidai no kibō* (Hope in the Age of No Reliance), which was published in 2006 and includes an essay about Taguchi's short visit to a village downwind from Chernobyl. The other is the more recently published collection of novellas *Zōn nite* (In the Zone), which has its setting in Fukushima, questions modern values, and explores an alternative way of perceiving and negotiating with the surrounding world in response to the accident at Fukushima Daiichi.

In Taguchi's literary exploration, pastoral satoyama is contrasted with the seemingly opposite environment of a nuclear exclusion zone, a place in which all life is threatened by radioactive contamination. Fukushima, which is located about 220 km (140 miles) north of Tokyo and which had twice as much of its population involved in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries as the national average, used to be a popular destination for those who rejected a sleepless city life in pursuit of a more sustainable agrarian life in satoyama. Until the mega earthquake and subsequent meltdown in March 2011, TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant had been providing power to the nation's capital since its operation began in 1971. Contaminated with radioactive material, Fukushima is not likely to be perceived as a pastoral satoyama any longer, but as a hazardous nuclear exclusion zone. Taguchi's work questions such an apparent shift of perception regarding Fukushima from a satoyama utopia to a nuclear dystopia. Unlike the common definition which sees satoyama as a landscape, Taguchi's view of satoyama is more ambiguous. Visiting and describing those who have decided to remain and continue to live their lives in radioactively contaminated places, Taguchi perceives a nuclear exclusion zone as *place*—not as an environment viewed from a distance but as a living environment in which people live their lives. Taguchi's essay on a village downwind from Chernobyl and novellas on the exclusion zone in Fukushima describe physical and mental travels between satoyama as landscape, satoyama as place, and satoyama as zone.

Given that Taguchi consciously defines herself as a rootless, placeless per-

son, her attempt to see satoyama as a place, in which people live their lives based on their daily dialogues and negotiations with the surrounding environment, may involve an idealization of a place-based life. But at the same time, her self-analytical exploration of the meaning of place helps her to maintain a critical distance from a romantic attitude that may lead to an idealization of satoyama. Taguchi wrote an essay on a contaminated village downwind from Chernobyl in 2006 before working on a series of novellas on the zone in Fukushima since 2011. What is commonly pursued in these works is an unchanging bond between life and place, as is suggested in the following passage from Taguchi's essay on a village near Chernobyl:

The old folks [in the contaminated village] are living with the land. They till fields, keep cows, horses, and chickens, and live with dogs and cats. They clearly know what life means. For them, life is not something, like earning money by doing nothing in particular and relying on others to live. For them, life is to feel the seasons and live and be allowed to live as a part of nature. In order to live such a life, they have accepted radiation. (Taguchi, *Yorubenaki jidai no kibō* 190)⁷

The downwind villages and towns used to be satoyama or satoyama-like environments; after the nuclear accidents in Chernobyl, and later in Fukushima, satoyama turned into a zone, and most of the residents left. But in both cases, some remained.

In Taguchi's essay on Chernobyl, "place" is a keyword that demonstrates residents' intimate relationships with their living environment. In her novellas on Fukushima, however, "zone" operates as a keyword. In Taguchi's conceptualization, place and zone are distinct yet share several aspects. In an interview I conducted in February 2012 and which was published as a part of a book, Taguchi compares and contrasts place and zone in the following way:

A zone is transformed and no longer the same as that which local residents knew as their place. Physically it is the same as it was, but it is a different world having as well the image of a contaminated place.

A zone is the unknown world for everybody. It is a suspended, strange place. Even the native people of the place feel out of place It is a place like nowhere.

People in [a village downwind of Chernobyl] chose to come back to such a nowhere-like place as their home and created a different reality. (Yuki 91–92)

I have examined Taguchi's novellas collected in *In the Zone*—that is, “Zōn nite I” [In the Zone I], “Zōn nite II” [In the Zone II], “Ushi no rakuen” [A Paradise for Cows], and “Morumotto” [Guinea Pigs]—elsewhere and wish only to point out the following: Taguchi's novellas in *In the Zone* are mosaic in structure, a choice which implies an absence of a consistent point of view that could explain how to live in a nuclear age. In her novellas, the zone serves as the testing ground for different values, comparing and contrasting such seemingly opposing concepts as death and life, justice and injustice, and risk and safety.⁸

Taguchi's work on Chernobyl, and to some extent on Fukushima as well, emphasizes the strong, unchangeable consistency in local people's intimacy with place in a post-nuclear age, places formerly classified as satoyama but which were suddenly labeled, and avoided, as a zone contaminated with radioactive materials. The writer's gaze as such unsettles the popular perception that celebrates satoyama as a utopia and avoids radioactive-contaminated zones as dystopia. Also, by blurring the distinction between zone and satoyama, Taguchi's work questions and complicates a conventional notion of place, which involves a native/non-native dichotomy. The idea of satoyama-as-zone creates a new framework from which to critically examine the conventional concept of place and to redefine it in the context of an age of increasing mobility of people, materials, energy, as well as ideas.

Conclusion

Having examined satoyama-as-landscape and satoyama-as-zone, I have argued that they most likely represent different aspects of the same value rather than different ideas. A state of mind that frames satoyama as a beautiful—and iconic—agrarian landscape shares a way of thinking that justifies the objectification and exploitation of rural environments. And yet representations of satoyama-as-landscape have some advantages: because of the fascinating visual images, works such as Imamori Mitsuhiro's photography and NHK's high-definition programs help raise individual and societal awareness of satoyama and thus promote collective attention on the rural, agrarian environments that were neglected and forgotten in Japan's rapid industrialization and modernization from the mid-twentieth century onward. Still, the idea of satoyama-as-landscape fails to go beyond an idealization of rural environments and is therefore less likely to enable critical reconsiderations of modern values that promoted industrialization and the related economic growth on the one hand, and caused the decline of satoyama on the other.

In contrast, Taguchi Randy's work unsettles conceptual boundaries between

landscape, place, and zone, creating a conceptual soup of satoyama. If satoyama-as-landscape implies an aesthetic appropriation of the rural environment, and satoyama-as-zone demonstrates an economic and political exploitation of a marginalized place, they are similar in their objectification of rural environments. In fact, the very concept of rural is a creation of modern urban standards. However vaguely, Taguchi's employment of a concept of zone as a contested ground for different values seems to represent a post-3/11 literary attempt to radically reconsider the conventions and principles that Japanese society has lived with.

The critical examination of discourses on satoyama, which I have sketched out in this essay, suggests that we should be paying more attention to satoyama as place. However, since a place is a *lived* environment, and characteristically those who make their living in rural satoyama hardly write about their lives, there are challenges to discussing the lived experience of satoyama. And yet this should not be taken as a sign of intellectual impasse; rather, I believe it is more productive to develop such an awareness into a sense of responsibility, which should be the basis for the work of a continuous examination of individual and societal views of the environment we live in. Indeed, I wrote this essay with this responsibility in mind.

Notes

1 Whether satoyama provides a sustainable environment for nonhuman nature, including insects and animals, is a rather controversial issue. Certain insects such as stink bugs and large animals, including monkeys, wild pigs, and bears, are regarded as "pests" since they "damage" crops and vegetables, thereby threatening the lives of people in satoyama. However, some insects and animals are welcomed since they are believed to facilitate the growth of rice and vegetables.

2 This is clearly demonstrated in a chart on the back cover of *Kankyōshi towa nanika*, edited by Yumoto Takakazu.

3 http://www.env.go.jp/policy/kihon_keikaku/plan/kento-team/ref08-1.pdf

4 A group of researchers point out that the earliest historical use of the word "satoyama" dates back to 1661. For more detailed explanations, see Duraiappah 17–20.

5 See Arioka 207–08.

6 For the case of Ishikawa, refer to the official website of Shika, where a nuclear power plant is located: <<http://www.town.shika.lg.jp/shikasypher/www/movie/satoyama.html>>. Fukui designates the prefecture's thirty most important satochi satoyama, in which the four locations of nuclear power plants—Tsuruga, Mihama, Oi, and Takahama—are all listed [The preceding sentence is not entirely clear.]: <http://www.fncc.jp/joho_kensaku/syuzo_siryō/satochi_satoyama/sato1.htm>.

7 All translations from Taguchi's works in this essay are mine.

8 For a detailed discussion of Taguchi's *In the Zone*, see my forthcoming essay

“Post-Fukushima Discourses on Food and Eating: Analysing Political Implications and Literary Imagination” in Lisette Gebhardt and Yuki Masami, eds., *Literature and Art after Fukushima* (EB Publishers, Berlin).

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