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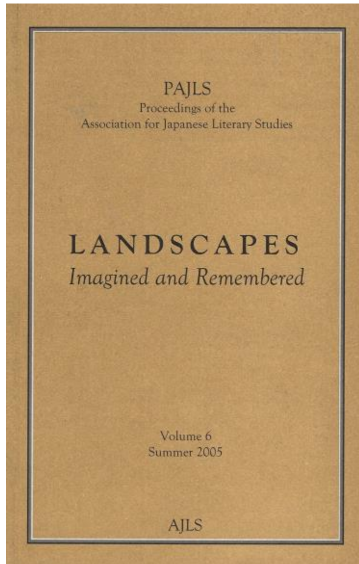
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 6 (2005): 195–202.



PAJLS 6:
Landscapes: Imagined and Remembered.
Ed. Paul S. Atkins, Davinder L. Bhowmik, and Edward Mack.

Majestic Landscape, Marginal Space:
Mountains in Late Meiji Japanese Literature

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Mountains, a prominent feature of Japan's topography, have long played a vital role in Japanese aesthetics, functioning as sublime elements, famous landmarks, and reminders of home in literature and art. They have also held significant religious meaning as abodes of gods and demons, sites of prominent Buddhist monasteries, and destinations for pilgrimages. Modernization, however, changed the face and function of mountains in Japan. With the advent of industrialization, the economic importance of mountains grew as demand for raw materials such as copper and lumber increased and techniques to harvest those resources advanced. With rapid urbanization also came a desire to reconnect with the natural environment and mountains became sites for leisure activities such as mountain climbing.

Just as actual mountain landscapes were transformed by the forces of modernization, so too were literary landscapes. "Nature" in the literature of this period is neither stable nor monolithic but is, instead, a highly plastic concept, molded into shapes that vary by genre, author, and work. Embedded in the diverse textures of these literary natures are traces of the impact of immense social and cultural changes precipitated during Japan's modernization. Thus, an examination of mountain landscapes emerging in early twentieth-century Japanese texts can be situated as part of a larger project that explores how Japanese society redefined and reinvented "nature" as part of the modernization process.

A comparison of four texts written between 1894 and 1908 illustrates the breadth and variable quality of the treatment of nature in this period. The texts are Shiga Shigetaka's *Nihon fūkei ron* (Theory of Japanese Landscape, 1894), Tokutomi Roka's *Shizen to jinsei* (Nature and Man, 1900), Shimazaki Tōson's *Hakai* (The Broken Commandment, 1906), and Natsume Sōseki's *Kōfu* (The Miner, 1908). By genre and tone, these texts can be broken into two groups. The two earlier texts—Shiga's *Nihon fūkei ron* and Tokutomi's *Shizen to jinsei*—translate sublime mountain vistas into symbols of a timeless, unified Japanese nation, part of the project of nation-formation that occurred during Japan's modernization. The latter two—Shimazaki's *Hakai* and Sōseki's *Kōfu*—depict remote mountain locations as conflicted spaces, populated by marginalized peoples.

In the first of the four texts, *Nihon fūkei ron*, geographer Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927) maps sweeping images of mountainous landscapes onto a mighty,

eternal Japan. While Shiga's *Nihon fūkei ron* is a complex mixture of elements, much of the work can be characterized as a scientific treatise that charts geological developments, climatic conditions, and plant classifications. In chapter four, "The Abundance of Igneous Rock in Japan," Shiga outlines the birth of Japan's mountain ranges as chains of volcanoes. He attributes great vitality and grandeur to these formations. The heat of the lava, its brittleness as it dries, and the force of water that sculpts irregular shapes into its surfaces are nearly palpable in Shiga's description. The following passage demonstrates Shiga's passionate belief in the critical role Japan's singular geography plays in the creation of its culture:

> If every Japanese poet composed poems about mountains that were volcanic mountains or active volcanoes, or at least held this sense in their hearts, then capturing the protean magnificence of volcanic rock, or the incredible vitality of an active volcano, they would command a view that reached to the ends of heaven and earth. Yet, if they do not depict these, then writers, painters, and sculptors will feel endless regret.[1]

Immediately following this passage, Shiga reproduces three pages of waka poetry that take these volcanoes as their themes. Curiously, he arranges the poems in order of the elevation of the volcano referred to in each poem. This odd juxtaposition of scientific treatise and cultural record characterizes the entire work.

Shiga's treatment of time is intriguing as well. In chronicling Japan's geological formation, he describes a primeval landscape located tens of thousands of years in the past but then instantaneously moves on to the Japan of his time. Moreover, as Richard Okada notes, the narrative is written in tenseless classical Japanese.[2] This temporality produces the impression that the prehistoric volcanic formations are taking place at the present moment. This collapses history and gives the mountainous geography of Japan an ageless quality.

The sense of timelessness is augmented by the narration of the text. The omnipresent narrator does not maintain a fixed temporal or spatial position. Rather, Shiga's narrator drifts high above the islands and deep under the seas as he passes through thousands of years of geological development. This narrator, unlike that of the Tokutomi text discussed next, does not identify a particular season or face a particular direction. Yet in chapter six this shapeless guide takes a dramatic turn and speaks directly to readers, saying: "Ladies and gentlemen, it is not sufficient to pour a sincere heart into peach

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[1] Shiga Shigetaka, *Nihon fūkei ron* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), 87. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

[2] Richard Okada, "'Landscape' and the Nation-state: A Reading of *Nihon fūkeiron*," *The Study of Meiji Japan,* eds. Helen Hardacre and Adam L. Kern (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 5.

blossoms and verdant growth. You must pour your hearts into moisture, active volcanoes, dormant volcanoes, igneous rock, and the erosion of rushing currents."[3] Directly addressing the audience in this way reduces the gap between narrator and reader.

In addition to urging artists and authors to portray the forceful elements of Japan's topography, Shiga encourages the general population to engage in mountain climbing. The sport had been popularized by foreigners, the most famous being Walter Weston. Weston, also known for characterizing Shiga as Japan's Ruskin, writes:

> Until thirty or forty years ago these mountain regions were virtually *terra incognita*, not only to Western people but to the large majority of Japanese themselves. They then attracted the attention of English explorers, who began to penetrate into the hidden recesses of their wild and romantic fastnesses year by year. . . . Today, however, their mysteries are being unveiled.[4]

Europeans, claiming to have "discovered" the mountains of Japan, refer to them as the "Japanese Alps." By encouraging the Japanese to physically set foot on Japan's mountain landscapes, however, perhaps Shiga feels they would reclaim this territory as their own. The central government's establishment of a post office on Mt. Fuji in 1907 might similarly be viewed as a gesture of ownership.

Strangely, Shiga himself refers to the mountains as the Japanese Alps, validating the Europeans' claim to the discovery. This phrase continues to be used in Japan today. As Richard Okada notes, Shiga further perpetuates the imperialist gesture applied to his own country when he asserts the superiority of Japanese mountains over those of other Asian countries by affixing them the title "Mount Fuji."[5] For example, Shiga suggests that Taishan of the Shantung Peninsula be renamed Mt. Fuji of Shantung, while the Taiwanese mountain Lushan be renamed Mt. Fuji of Taiwan. Shiga, then, is doubly complicit in facilitating these imperialistic strategies of renaming.

Many scholars conjecture that Shiga wrote this piece in an attempt to forge a national identity and stimulate patriotism among the Japanese. Such an effort would not be surprising given that Japan's sense of identity had been ruptured and its confidence shaken when Western powers forcibly entered the country, displaying superior technology, particularly weaponry. Given the popularity of the piece at the time of its publication, and the criticism it later received as being blatantly imperialistic, the work clearly struck a chord with nationalist sentiments circulating at the time.

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[3] Shiga, *Nihon fūkei ron*, 317.
[4] Walter Weston, *A Wayfarer in Unfamiliar Japan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 157-58.
[5] Okada, "'Landscape' and the Nation-state," 17.

There is an irony to Shiga's treatment of Japan's natural elements. The Restoration government had long been promoting a sense of nationhood and pride in Japan's strength, uniqueness, and continuity among its citizens. Curiously, however, as Julia Adeney Thomas has noted, "The government rejected calls by Shiga Shigetaka . . . for Japan's national anthem to evoke the love of Japan's mountains, streams, and valleys. Instead they chose *Kimigayo*,[6] which . . . safely avoids references to the landscape. The government threw its energies into gearing up for the industrial use of natural resources, not into transforming nature into a national symbol."[7]

Thus, Shiga's characterization of Japan's landscape in *Nihon fūkei ron* is only one of many possibilities. Despite powerful descriptions of erupting volcanoes and shattered igneous rock, Japan's mountain ranges are no more or less "real" than the delicate cherry blossoms described by its poets for centuries. Nor does identification of volcanic ranges skirting Japan's east and west coasts and meeting north of Hokkaido "naturally" make that recently colonized island an inherent part of Japan. Shiga merely chooses different focal lengths and angle widths when pointing his lens at an emerging Japanese empire.

In 1900, six years after Shiga's publication of *Nihon fūkei ron,* the novelist Tokutomi Roka (1868-1927) perpetuated the image of Japan as home to majestic panoramas in his equally popular collection of literary sketches, *Shizen to jinsei*. The laudatory tones of the two texts are similar, and clearly Tokutomi was influenced by Shiga's work. Like *Nihon fūkei ron*, *Shizen to jinsei* treats a variety of natural elements, such as trees and flowers, in addition to celebrating the majesty of Japan's mountainous topography. Tokutomi's mountains also rise regally above the clouds and mist, their peaks demarcated against the sky.

In some ways, however, Tokutomi's *Shizen to jinsei* is quite different from Shiga's *Nihon fūkei ron.* Tokutomi's descriptions are softer than Shiga's, as he applies infinite shades of color to depict the landscapes rather than using harsh images of igneous rock. As Shiga's narrator flies high above Japan while surveying the topography, Tokutomi's narrator assumes a distinct persona, frequently expressed in the first-person. He surveys the landscape from a specific vantage point, such as glancing out of an abode's north-facing window, and intimately relays his experiences to the reader. Although readers are not present as the narrator gazes at the various landscapes, he describes the scenes as though they are. Thus he creates a sense of communality, perhaps in an attempt to participate in a shared Japanese identity.

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[6] The anthem *Kimigayo* suggests that boulders will be reduced to pebbles before the reign of the emperor ceases.

[7] Julia Adeney Thomas, *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 167.

Tokutomi's is also an immediate portrayal rather than a timeless one, which is evident from the following passage:

> Let him, who has a mind to enjoy it, watch the dawn on Mount Fuji today. At six in the morning you must stand on the beach at Zushi and look. . . . The sea and mountains are still sleeping. Suddenly a line of pink trails sidelong above the summit of Fuji. Endure the cold air yet a little while, and look again. See how the rosy light is nearing the summit second by second—first it is ten feet above, then five and three and one, till the top is reached.[8]

In addition to describing the scene instant by instant, the narrator also identifies the season for the reader. While the season is not specified in all of the descriptions, it is usually apparent because the vignettes are organized chronologically. Enhancing this sense of the immediate, most episodes, even if they begin in the past as in the phrase "in the fall of last year at sunset," eventually shift into the present tense.

Despite differences in narration and temporality, the impressions left by *Nihon fūkei ron* and *Shizen to jinsei* are comparable. Both authors celebrate the majestic mountains of their native land. Both invite their fellow Japanese to join them in this experience, particularly through mountain climbing. Both create an image of a patriotic, unified country that has endured for centuries if not millennia.

Japan at this time is, however, still in the midst of actualizing political centralization and developing a national identity. At times, there appears to be a unified sense of statehood, as in the celebration of the promulgation of a constitution in 1889, or the popularity of Japan's entry into the Sino-Japanese War in 1894. Dissenting forces, however, also exist. This is evident in Uchimura Kanzō's refusal to bow before the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1891, and passage of the 1900 Peace Police Law, banning the Social Democratic Party. Thus, while both *Nihon fūkei ron* and *Shizen to jinsei* can be classified as non-fiction, their mountainous landscapes actually inhabit a fictitious entity, a nation neither timeless nor unified.

In contrast to the sublime, homogenized images created in *Nihon fūkei ron* or *Shizen to jinsei*, the fictional landscapes of Shimazaki Tōson's *Hakai* and Natsume Sōseki's *Kōfu* are marginal spaces caught in the crisis of modernization. They are not sites for the recreational mountain climbing promoted by Shiga and enjoyed by Tokutomi, but are hermitages for outcastes and forced labor camps for convicts. Although fiction, both novels are based on experiences of actual people, whose existences the authors portray as lives eked out in rugged, desolate surroundings. Complicating the lives of these

[8] Tokutomi Roka, *Nature and Man*, trans. Arthur Lloyd, M. von Fallot, and H. Ono (Tokyo: Kogakukan, 1913), 61.

mountain residents are the changes rendered by modernization, with its educational reforms and steam-driven machines.

Shimazaki's *Hakai* is set in the Kiso Mountains, part of the Japanese Alps described by Shiga. Shimazaki (1872-1943) was born and raised in these mountains. While at times he characterizes the peaks as sublime, the slopes are also rugged, the cold is brutal, and life is difficult:

> Under the massed grey clouds hanging low overhead, the bleak Chiisagata valley looked even darker and wilder than usual. The Eboshi mountains were invisible. Maybe the snow had already come to Nishinoiri, where his father lay. Down here the cold wind had stripped many of the trees, leaving even their topmost branches bare and bringing a forlorn, wintry air to the upland scene. The harsh Shinshū winter, the very thought of which makes one shiver, had come at last. The mountain folk had already started to wear their winter caps. . . .[9]

In such a place only the strong survive and then only if they are fortunate. For example, there is the elderly teacher, born to a samurai family, who is forced to retire early, with no pension, because his body and will are broken and he is drinking himself to death. His first wife, also of a prominent family, died young. His second wife fares better because, as the protagonist describes her, "women of north Shinshū are tough and dogged, better workers than their men."[10] The protagonist, Ushimatsu, is similarly described as "a typical product of northern Shinshū, a well-built young man who had grown up among the craggy hills of Chiisagata."[11] His father, too, is strong and healthy but this does not save him from the violent death he meets when gored by a bull.

Then there are the *burakumin*. They are Japan's outcaste community, ostracized because of their work butchering animals. In 1871, the emperor raised their status from *hinin*, or non-persons, to "new commoners." The edict from Tokyo, however, has not ended the discrimination they suffer, nor eliminated the stereotypes that characterize them as dark-skinned, bestial, and ignorant. At the end of the novel, Ushimatsu's mentor, who is a prominent *burakumin* teacher and orator, is murdered while touring the mountains brazenly speaking out against discrimination. Ushimatsu, on the other hand, has successfully concealed his *buraku* heritage and begun a promising career as a teacher. Years earlier, to ensure the success of his only child, Ushimatsu's father renounced his position as head of a *buraku* and relocated Ushimatsu to a non-buraku village. To prevent detection by residents of their former village,

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[9] Shimazaki Tōson, *The Broken Commandment*, trans. Kenneth Strong (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974), 125.
[10] Ibid., 40.
[11] Ibid., 4.

Ushimatsu's father takes on the lonely life of a hermit as a cattle herdsman in the mountain pastures above their new home. He commands Ushimatsu never to reveal his outcaste origins in order to avoid ostracism. But after the violent deaths of both his father and his mentor, Ushimatsu can no longer tolerate the lie he is living. He confesses his *buraku* heritage, resigns his teaching position, and sets off for a new life in America.

Clearly, the mountains described in this text differ from those in *Nihon fūkei ron* and *Shizen to jinsei*. These mountains are borderlands, where wives of former samurai work the fields, young *burakumin* students are ridiculed, bureaucrats plot ways to secure the few social trappings available, and gifted teachers lie about their pasts in order to retain their positions. The characters inhabiting this isolated region are not Tokyo intellectuals who have the time and resources to climb mountains for pleasure. The protagonist is not a conforming member of the new nation-state, but someone who sacrifices everything, including life in his Japanese homeland, to retain his individual identity.

The mountainscapes in the novel *Kōfu* by Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) retain even fewer of the sublime qualities found in the Shiga and Tokutomi texts. As evident in the passage below, Sōseki's mountains are stark and jarring, not at all majestic:

> One thing I couldn't help noticing was the color of the mountains filtering through the rain. It was completely new. Suddenly the trees were gone and the hills were bare, transformed almost before I knew it into patchy bald heads as red as cinnabar. . . . The moment the red mountain made its fairly violent attack on my optic nerves, I thought to myself, "Finally, we're coming close to the copper mine."[12]

This is where the protagonist, a disaffected nineteen-year-old from a prominent Tokyo family, has found himself. This character, like Ushimatsu of *Hakai*, refuses to conform to the expectations of society, particularly those of his family. Instead, he has fled from his betrothed as well as a temptress who haunts him. Having left Tokyo with nothing but a few *sen*, and having made no plans for the future, he finds himself tired and hungry. When offered a job by a questionable character with black teeth whom he meets along the road, he quickly accepts it and resigns himself to becoming a miner at the Ashio copper mine.

This mine was infamous for its horrible working conditions and the pollution created by copper tailings deposited in a nearby river. Many of the miners and other laborers are convicts who have no choice but to work there. Others are fleeing from the law or social obligations, as the protagonist is. Some are orphans. As the mountains in *Hakai* do, this mountain represents a

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[12] Natsume Sōseki, *The Miner*, trans. Jay Rubin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 67.

marginal space, where those who do not fit into a homogeneous Japanese society attempt to carve out a living. On the other hand, the mountain also provides these individuals with some measure of freedom. At the end of the novel, the protagonist, who has passively conformed at various junctures, both in Tokyo and later at the mine, chooses a path of self-determination and abandons the mountain.

Embedded in the surfaces of the diverse landscapes of these four texts are remnants of the shifting social currents circulating at the time of their publication. There are visible signs of the turbulence created as social classes shift, rural areas adjust to the widening reach of the political center, and an emerging nation-state struggles to forge a consistent image to present to the world. Whether homeland as source of national identity or borderland as site of social critique, the disparate landscapes constructed in these Meiji texts demonstrate the contradictions, born of society, that inhabit mountains in the modern Japanese imagination.