

Understanding the Japanese Satoyama  
Japanese Nature in Visual Documentary

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JAPN 314 Visual Culture & Media

October 6, 2016

**Q1. Other Countries' Attraction to Japanese Satoyama**

I think the reason Japanese Satoyama is attractive to other nations and people is due to the fact that it is an example of successful nature preservation in the midst of a functioning, self-sufficient town. Contrary to the common idea that nature preservation requires the removal of manmade influences, in Japanese Satoyama, nature thrives because of the harmonious balance between humans and the environment. For example, the manmade creek running through the town is a prime example of nature thriving due to human actions. Not only is the creek entirely artificial, but it is also maintained by the townspeople rather than the forces of nature. Due to the people's careful maintenance, the creek water is very clear, so fish that do not have a protective layer of scales are able to live in the creek. The creek is home to a number of different aquatic species and is the hunting ground of terrestrial species as well.

Another reason others are attracted to Japanese Satoyama is because nothing goes to waste; all aspects of the environment are used, shared, sold, or returned to nature in order to avoid creating excess waste. For example, the reeds that provide shelter for many of the species in the ecosystem are carefully cut down to pave the way for new growth in the spring. Rather than discarding the cut reeds, locals utilize the strong winter winds to dry out the reeds and later turn the dried reeds into various furnishings. Fishing in Japanese Satoyama is an additional example of how nothing goes to waste. Traditional traps do not use bait, which reduces the number of fish caught in each trap, meaning that the fish population is safe from overfishing. The low number of fish trapped allows for the caught fish to be either sold or eaten the same day. If there is an excess of fish, some are given back to nature as food for the local birds or saved for future consumption through fermentation. By eliminating the creation

of waste, Japanese Satoyama is appealing to those who want to lessen their manmade “footprint” on the environment and become more self-sufficient.

## **Q2. The Uniqueness of Japanese Satoyama**

In comparison to similar locations around the world, I believe what makes Japanese Satoyama unique is the cultural aspect, such as the preservation of community traditions and the connection between religion and nature. The most valued element of Japanese Satoyama is the mutual relationship between people and the environment. Some of the practices that honor this relationship have developed into community traditions; for example, townspeople gathering to cut down reeds each year and the annual creek cleaning are community events that have been practiced for hundreds of years. Additionally, the sharing of excess food and materials with neighbors in order to eliminate waste is another practice of community. Other Satoyama-like ecosystems around the globe cannot boast similar cultural traditions.

I think the influence of Shinto beliefs on Japanese people's attitude toward nature is another unique element of Japanese Satoyama. In the Shinto religion, it is believed that kami inhabit all elements of the natural world, which causes people to have a deep respect for everything from rocks to rivers. This is evident in the Japanese Satoyama practice of balanced give and take with nature. For example, the Satoyama townspeople recognize that their reliance on water is no greater or more important than other organisms in the environment, so water in the community is treated with respect and used sustainably for everyone. An additional example is the celebration of the autumn rice harvest through ritual offering of fresh foods. The belief is that people must give thanks to the rice paddy gods for the successful harvest before the gods depart to spend the winter in the mountains. This relates back to the Shinto belief of kami inhabiting natural locations; a uniquely Japanese belief that is dated thousands of years ago.

**Q3. Final Thoughts on Satoyama**

In my opinion, Japanese Satoyama is an ideal model for functional nature preservation; the preserved ecosystem remains functional even with the human involvement. I think the most significant element of Japanese Satoyama is the fact that the people do not focus solely on preserving the natural environment, but utilize the benefits in a mutually advantageous manner. For example, the pools of water in the house that are connected to the creek are utilized by the fish and the people equally. The benefit for people is the continuously running fresh water used to wash dishes and food, while the benefit for the fish is the access to food scraps and a clean, sheltered living environment. By working together, both people and fish reap the benefits of endless fresh water while maintaining the sustainability of the water system itself.

I think another key element of Japanese Satoyama is the people's understanding of nature's way. At the end of the documentary, Sangoro said "Everything has its season," meaning, "When the right time comes, everything will be fine." I believe this idea is influenced by the four seasons in Satoyama. In each season, people and animals take distinct actions; for people, early spring is prime fishing season, summer is the time to clear out overgrown vegetation, autumn is for the rice harvest, and winter is preparation for the new cycle. Doing things at the right time and in the right order appears to be a central part of the natural cycle in Satoyama. As demonstrated in Japanese Satoyama, if we follow the seasons' rhythms and cooperate with those we share the environment with, humans can live in harmony with the environment.