

## *Original Paper*

# A Study on Creation Principles of *Five-storied Pagoda*: From the Perspective of Eco-aesthetics

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### **Abstract**

*The novel-Five-storied Pagoda-written by Japanese novelist Koda Rohan manifestly presents ecological consciousness from the perspective of the natural principle, the holistic principle, and the harmonious principle, which are the three principles of ecological aesthetics. By perceiving the harmonious atmosphere among man and nature, individuals themselves, individuals, and society in texts, we can learn that Koda Rohan insisted on traditional Japanese aesthetics and prospectively reflected on the modern aesthetic ideology of Japanese society after Meiji Restoration. This paper explores the aesthetic features of—Five-storied Pagoda—by analyzing text expression from a new angle, and probes into the relationship with the three principles of eco-aesthetics. It is aimed to determine the consensus between eastern aesthetics and ecological aesthetics, and it can be inferred that the consensus will, to a great extent, make a special contribution to enriching the construction of ecological aesthetics.*

### **Keywords**

*ecocriticism, eco-aesthetics, mysterious profundity*

## **1. Introduction**

Spawned from the worldwide ecological crisis, the North American scholars took the lead in putting forward ecocriticism in the 1990s. Ecocriticism is a kind of literary criticism based on the guidance of ecological holism. According to Wang Nuo, who is a leader in ecocriticism research in China, ecocriticism “explores the ideological cultural roots leading to eco-crises through literary research as well as the eco-aesthetic experience and its expression in literary texts” (Wang, 2007, p. 62). Wang Nuo pointed out that eco-aesthetics is an important part of ecocriticism and the main aesthetic principles can be summarized as the natural principle, the holistic principle, and the harmonious principle. Ecological

aesthetics can also be called eco-aesthetics. It pursues harmony and symbiosis among human beings, nature, and human society. Also, it expands our vision from the human system to the whole ecological system. Previous studies on ecocriticism have emphasized that eco-aesthetics symbolizes the reconstruction of traditional aesthetics. Accordingly, this paper explores the aesthetic features of *Five-storied Pagoda* by analyzing text expression from a new angle, and probes into the relationship with the three principles of eco-aesthetics.

## 2. The Holistic Principle among Nature, Human Beings and Human Society

According to the holistic principle of ecological aesthetics, “The central spirit of the ecological holism is: the benefit of the ecosystem is considered of highest value but not the benefit of human beings. The basic rule to judge everything is to see whether it is beneficial to maintain and protect the wholeness, the harmony, the stability and the sustainable existence of the ecosystem” (Wang, 2007, p. 48). Hence, it can be seen that ecological aesthetics takes ecological wholeness as a fundamental position and its pursuit lies in whether the harmony and symbiosis of the ecosystem will be realized. For my part, the main theme and expression of the text are presenting the principles of ecological holism.

### 2.1 Harmonious Co-existence between Human Beings and Nature

*Five-storied Pagoda* is set at the last stage of the Edo period of Japan. It describes a lot about the luxurious life of townsmen and the fierce competition among craftsmen, revealing the hedonism and utilitarianism of townsmen’s life at the end of feudal society. Those human beings blindly seek after wealth by exploiting resources and requesting from nature without limit will inevitably destroy the balance between man nature. To support this argument, Koda Rohan sets an imaginary plot in which a destructive storm destroys the town to present the imbalance between man and nature. The storm, to be more exact, is a symbol of punishment from God, which is to satirize the people who are overconfident in “wisdom, coordinating force and powerful strength” (Koda & Wen, 2019, p. 126). Likewise, Engels, who is also known as an ecologist, held the opinion that “Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us” (Engels & Yu, 1984, pp. 304-305). As we all know, it is the rapid development of modern natural science that greatly contributed to the construction of western ecological aesthetics. In comparison, the budding ecological consciousness in Japanese literature had revealed the relationship of dialectical unity between man and nature before ecocriticism.

The outlook on nature of Japanese can be originated from “nature worship”, which is native religion from ancient times. “Nature worship” is to admit the existence of God, spirit, or soul in the natural environment, to be more specific, phenomena and objects such as mountains, rivers, and forests. Besides, it is believed to pray for god’s protection which helps to remove disasters and invite blessings. In other words, nature worship is not only a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder but also the feeling of dependence and intimacy. When expounding the Japanese outlook on nature, the

scholar Takumi Higaki has explained that “most of Japanese would like to get close to natural things such as mountains, rivers, and trees, and they hope to be integrated with nature” (Higaki, 2010, p. 17). Nowadays, the outlook on nature has already penetrated Japanese traditional culture and has become an important component of Japanese national spirit, and the novel just tends to reveal it in detail. On one hand, humans are born to be weaker than nature in forces. For example, when stormy night comes, the response of the townsmen is described as follows.

The Yasha, who is the representation of the storm, “threw down the fence, kicked down the walls, tore down the gates, tore down the roofs, and smashed the tiles on the eaves” (Koda & Wen, 2019, p. 214). Confronting with terrible natural disasters, every family is at a loss and overwhelmed. Consequently, the plot of a storm is set to warn readers: human beings can never conquer nature. Once we fail to maintain harmonious co-existence relations with nature, the balance between man and nature will be broken.

On the other hand, human beings have been exploring and understanding the laws of the natural environment, forming an interdependent and mutually restrictive relationship with nature. Just as Koda Rohan appreciates the courage of the protagonist, Jubei, for his brave fight against the storm. The texts mention that in face of the powerful storm, Jubei stands on the shaky tower, determining to protect the tower regardless of death.

“At the crossroads of life and death, Jubei bit his teeth, kept his eyes open and clutch the spare chisel difficultly, waiting peacefully for his destiny” (Koda & Wen, 2019, p. 214).

That is, in the contest between man and nature, both the spiritual power of man and the forces of nature are maximized, and both sides are evenly matched and eventually reach an idealized reconciliation: Jubei is undaunted by the storm and god retreat. Thus, the plot shows that man and nature can live together in harmony, which is in line with ecocritics’ opinion that human beings have to live in co-existence with nature.

According to the holistic principle, an ecological society has the virtue of honesty and the aesthetic consciousness of simplicity to keep the sustainability of nature, and the opinion can be confirmed in the text. Firstly, Koda Rohan fiercely criticizes people who are extravagant and deceitful, revealing the alienation of human beings caused by the rapid development of the commodity economy. Secondly, the social ambition of Koda Rohan can be expressed through Jubei. According to the narration of the novel, the shoddy and specious temple which is constructed for profits comes to be in danger when a storm comes, while the tower built by Jubei stands still because of its firm foundation. In addition, the shrewd craftsmen treat their work perfunctorily, while Jubei becomes the representation of artisan spirit because of loyal and sincere morality. Compared to craftsmen who hang out in brothels and enjoy drunk, Jubei is frugal in his poor life, however, sticks to the principle of self-reliance and constantly pursues his dream. The protagonist Jubei seems to be an ordinary craftsman who is not humane, but in my opinion, is appreciated as a gentleman by Koda Rohan. In the same way, Rousseau, who is one of

the founders of eco-theories, supposed that we may have more time and space to live “spiritual life” only if we are free from the bondage of material things. That Koda Rohan criticized the real society which had been impetuous and extravagant is in line with Rousseau who advocated simplified material world and enriched spiritual life.

### *2.2 Harmony and Symbiosis among Individuals and Human Society*

Overall, the harmonious and peaceful beauty in text expression is not only reflected in the relationship between man and nature, but also in the relationship among individuals themselves and human society. As ecocritics emphasize that human society is one of the vital subsystems of the ecosystem. Therefore, the harmony and stability of human society should also be ensured based on the holistic principle.

For instance, in the master line of the novel, although the protagonist Jubei is misunderstood for being inhumane in competing with master craftsman Genda who also wanna undertake the work of building a tower, Jubei eventually realizes his dream of building the tower which will pass down to future generations. With the completion of the tower, Jubei final the reconciliation of beautiful ideal and frustrating reality, and achieves recognition from others because of his sophisticated skill and spirit of perseverance. What’s more, in the process of fighting against the storm, Jubei fights side by side with his master Genda. Accordingly, Jubei reaches a relationship of symbiosis both with himself and with human society. We can infer that in Koda Rohan’s opinion, the contradictions and conflicts in human society may come from many aspects, such as man and man, man and society, even from individuals themselves. However, the contradictions can be reconciled, and it is the contradiction and reconciliation in narration that makes the work tend to be delicate and harmonious. In short, that Koda Rohan seeks symbiosis and harmony in human society agrees with ecological aesthetics which also calls on ecological justice.

## **3. The Natural Principle and the Harmonious Principle in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics**

The holistic principle highlights a global perspective, while the natural principle and the harmonious principle demonstrate the purpose and method of eco-aesthetics. That is, the two principles explain who the aesthetic object is and how to conduct aesthetic activities. Then, I will analyze specific texts and compare text expressions with the natural principle and the harmonious principle.

### *3.1 Relevance between “Mysterious Profundity”, “Tranquility” and the Natural Principle*

In general, the text expression of the novel embodies the aesthetic theories of “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility” which are vital parts of Japanese traditional aesthetics. The texts describing the nature environment ingeniously depict the feeling of serenity and peace, revealing the subtle connection between people, scenery, and the natural environment. The texts are as follows.

They walked along a meandering path, then walked across the damp red clay ground, later stepped on the stepping stones which were placed at particular intervals and paved with interest, after a while, they burrowed through the emerald-green square bamboo groves and the shadow of parasol trees, eventually

entered a small folding door, there was a courtyard with almost no flowers and plants in it. The courtyard was surrounded by silence. Some pine leaves were falling on the Uraku stone lanterns and a piece of moss growing in the square star basin. Spontaneously, a refreshing feeling arose (Koda & Wen, 2019, p. 223).

In terms of natural things, “stepping stones”, “square bamboo”, “stone lanterns”, “basin”, “moss” and other scenery typically constitute a Japanese dry landscape garden. Instead of flowers and plants, the garden focuses on silent and cold scenery, to name a few, the shadows of parasol trees, pine leaf and moss, creating the ethereal and distant sensibilities which were condensed into the beauty of “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility” in Japanese traditional aesthetics.

The aesthetic theories of “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility” include two aspects in common. Firstly, the aesthetic objects are natural things. In other words, the two kinds of aesthetic consciousness are based on the interaction with nature, representing the Japanese understanding of the relationship between man and nature. When discussing the outlook on nature of the Japanese, Wu Shunli pointed out that “natural beauty forms the foundation and main part of Japanese national aesthetic ideology” (Wu, 1996, p. 133). The ancient Japanese realized that “nature is beauty” by putting themselves in natural environments such as mountains, rivers, lakes, and other scenery. “Nature is beauty” means “nature is the source of beauty, the blueprint of beauty, and the ultimate of beauty” (Wu, 1996, p. 131). Therefore, natural things are wonderful aesthetic objects whose beauty is not necessary to be decorated by human behaviors or words. This natural consciousness that was carried on from ancient times has been deeply rooted in later generations and has become the ideological basis of Japanese aesthetics. Furthermore, in medieval Japan, the Dhyana sect culture spread to Japan through mainland China, which greatly contributed to the construction of traditional Japanese aesthetics. “Mysterious profundity”, which is also called “Yugen”, may involve subtle, tranquil, profound, and mysterious feelings, regarding the universe as “artistic noumenon”. “Tranquility”, which is also called “Sabi”, points to the aesthetic sense coming from simplicity, humbleness, and subdued refinement (Onishi & Wang, 2017, pp. 17-21). It represents the serenity that comes with age, emphasizing the unification of object and subject. According to the features of “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility”, both of them appreciate the natural things which possess the beauty of light and shadow and the beauty within simplicity and imperfection. Such as the room full of dimness, the teaware which has a simple shape and color, as well as withered leaves and others. Consequently, instead of spectacular or gorgeous natural scenery, traditional Japanese aesthetics prefer the aesthetic sensibilities of simplicity and tranquility within nature. The Japanese believe that not only the magnificent scenery, but also the beauty of imperfection can be found in natural things.

The aesthetic theories of “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility” are similar to the natural principle of ecological aesthetics. When expounding the natural principle, Wang (2007, p. 50) pointed out that eco-aesthetics is, first of all, concerned with nature and appreciate the beauty of nature. Compared with

traditional aesthetic ideology, eco-aesthetics highlights the significance of nature itself rather than the aesthetic subject. For one thing, the most important aesthetic object of the natural principle is nature, which includes all of the natural things in the ecosystem. Similarly, “nature is beauty”, which is the argument promoted by the Japanese corresponds to the natural principle, appreciating the natural beauty. As can be seen from the above-quoted texts, Koda Rohan has written a lot about simple scenery such as fallen leaves and moss, so that the unique beauty coming from the overlooked natural scenery is delicately presented. In other words, the readers can experience the interest of nature both from the lively summer scenery and the wilted lotus in this novel. For another, There have been countless literary works about nature throughout the ages, but ecological scholars believe that a significant portion of these works are essentially “instrumental aesthetics”, for they are usually rooted in the subjective perceptions of human beings, overriding nature as it is. In contrast, the purpose of ecological aesthetics is to perceive the beauty of nature itself, to avoid utilitarian aesthetic behavior such as expressing ideological emotion or personal desire in virtue of natural objects. Unlike “instrumental aesthetics”, the above-quoted texts greatly weaken human presence and instead, focus readers’ gaze on just a fallen leaf or a patch of moss in an intuitive and contemplative way. This approach tends to give rise to literary expression by thinking intuitively. That the Japanese aesthetics avoids human behavior and emotion and focuses on the natural environment to the largest extent is exceedingly in line with the natural principle of ecological aesthetics.

### 3.2 Relevance between “Mysterious Profundity”, “Tranquility” and the Harmonious Principle

As a case in point, the above quotation reflects that natural scenery can enhance the sense of intimacy with a man. The aesthetic state in which man and nature are on very intimate terms is consistent with the harmonious principle of ecological aesthetics. The explanation is as follows.

In the spatial design of narrations, man, garden, and natural objects are integrated perfectly, for the movement and stillness of scenery are appropriately in harmony. The human behaviors such as “walked along” and “burrowed through”, and the time adverbs such as “then”, “later”, and “after a while” present the relaxed mood of people who leisurely wander in a secluded spot in the garden. In addition, the novel characters “burrowed through the emerald-green square bamboo groves”, and then “entered a small folding door”, suddenly found a courtyard. With the movement of characters, the space is transformed into a different scene with their steps. Finally, an open world is presented to readers. In effect, the harmonious interaction between man and nature reflects the Japanese Dhyana sect ideology hidden in “mysterious profundity” and “tranquility” theories. Similarly, from the perspective of ecological aesthetics, it is not a dichotomy between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object, but a relationship of interactive subjectivity. That is, the aesthetic stage where the subject and object are integrated is the highest ideal of ecological aesthetics. Wang (2007, p. 130) emphasized that ecological aesthetics is not to stand high above the masses and observe from afar, but to devote oneself to nature things, and sometimes, especially at the early stage, as the aesthetic subject, one should forget himself

and integrate into nature. The harmonious principle of ecological aesthetics and the engagement of subject and object advocated by Dhyana sect ideology essentially tally with each other, revealing the responsive chord between western aesthetics and East Asian aesthetics.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above discussion proves that the creation features of *Five-storied Pagoda* are highly consistent with the principles of ecological aesthetics. In general, the novel manifestly presents ecological consciousness from the perspective of the natural principle, the holistic principle, and the harmonious principle, which are the three principles of ecological aesthetics. By perceiving the harmonious atmosphere among man and nature, individuals themselves, individuals, and society in texts, we can learn that Koda Rohan insisted on traditional Japanese aesthetics and prospectively reflected on the modern aesthetic ideology of Japanese society after Meiji Restoration.

As a representative writer of pseudoclassicism, Koda Rohan was deeply influenced by Buddhist culture and Daoist culture. Accordingly, he had a profound knowledge of classical literature, thus it is reasonable that his creation principles are permeated with traditional aesthetic consciousness and East Asian outlook on nature. Moreover, based on the social background of Koda Rohan's time when new theories and new lifestyles poured in, it can be inferred that the ecological consciousness has inevitably emerged among litterateurs in the early Meiji period. Actually, in the 1860s and 1870s, Japanese society advanced rapidly under the banner of the industrial revolution, civilization, and enlightenment, and rapidly modernized within a few decades. The radical economic reforms and social change promoted by the Meiji government were at the cost of consuming a large number of natural resources and as a result, leading to a series of environmental problems. Ashio Mining Pollution occurred at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century was a typical example of a public pollution incident in Japan, which profoundly revealed the sharp contradiction between man and nature in the context of industrialization. During rapid social change, that Koda Rohan keenly captured something strange, looked back on native history and tradition, and predictably criticized the modern industrial civilization and unrestrained desires were profoundly significant.

About a century later, the emergence and rise of ecocriticism responded to the foresight of Koda Rohan. To sum up, in the process of considering further development of ecological aesthetics, we can be surprised to find the consensus in the spiritual core of Eastern aesthetics and ecological aesthetics, it can be inferred that the consensus will, to a great extent, make a special contribution to enriching the construction of ecological aesthetics.

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