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THE WAY OF BOGS, MIRES AND MARSHLANDS: MYTHS, SYMBOLS AND KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract
Recent problems in environmentalism, globalization, and global warming reveal the interconnectedness of the various biomes and types of communities within and across them. Difficulties in respecting or understanding even one of these biomes/environments contributes to the perpetuation and exacerbation of problems, at the expense of solutions. Reinterpreting bogs in the light of philosophical approaches that acknowledge their advantages and benefits, such as those of the Japanese, therefore, may be profoundly useful. The social and political difficulties often encountered today in conserving and restoring bogs stem not merely from a lack of scientific knowledge, or the lag in the dissemination of scientific knowledge to the public and decision-makers, but arise primarily from two distinct but related problems arising in relation to bogs understood symbolically and philosophically: first, bogs are a symbol of what we fear and loathe, not merely because of their inherent characteristics and the ways we interact with them, but, more importantly, as a result of the cultural shaping of our understanding; second, bogs do not easily fit into the most prevalent pattern of thinking we have, namely dichotomous or binary thinking. This paper analyzes bogs and swamps, which are disparaged and dismissed in the West, as a culturally constructed symbol in Japan, where positive valuations contrast strongly with the widespread Western aversion. It explores the ways this symbolism, emerging largely from Yin-Yang theory, Daoism, and Buddhism, and reinforced in art and literature, both shapes and is shaped by the intersections of philosophical and customary ways of thinking.

Keywords
Myths, Symbols, Knowledge, Japanese Art, Japanese Literature, Kojiki, Yatsuhashi / Eight-Plank Bridge, Tales of Ise, Dichotomies / Binary thinking, Yin-Yang, the Way, Daoism, Phenomenology of Bogs, Lotus Symbolism.

1. Introduction: Purposes and Plan

This paper analyzes bogs as a culturally constructed symbol in Japan, and explores the ways this symbolism both shapes and is shaped by the intersections of philosophical and customary ways of thinking. Recent problems in environmentalism, globalization, and global warming have shown the interconnectedness of the world's various continents and regions, and of the various biomes and types of human communities (biological and built/constructed environments) within and across them; difficulties in respecting, and in some cases even understanding, even one of these biomes/environments, therefore, contributes either to the perpetuation and exacerbation of problems, at the expense of solutions. The widespread Western distaste for, aversion toward, and dismissal of bogs and swamps (on the part of nearly everyone except environmental biologists and a few aestheticians and other theorists[2]), therefore, can introduce and worsen many environmental problems—or help resolve them. (Note that in this paper I use the terms "bogs," "peatlands," "mires," "swamps," "marshes" and "wetlands," interchangeably, not because the distinctions are unimportant scientifically, but because they *are* relatively unimportant culturally. Most of the time I will use "bog" because it is the shortest word in English.)

Reinterpreting bogs in the light of philosophical approaches that acknowledge their advantages and benefits, such as those of the Japanese, therefore, may be profoundly useful.

The social and political difficulties often encountered today in conserving and restoring bogs stem not merely from a lack of scientific knowledge, or the lag in the dissemination of scientific knowledge to the public and decision-makers, but arise primarily from two distinct but related problems arising in relation to bogs understood symbolically and philosophically.

The first problem is what Allen Carlson and Oliver Rackham call bogs' "bad press." Bogs are a symbol of what we fear and loathe, not merely because of their inherent characteristics and the ways we interact with them, but, more importantly, as a result of the cultural shaping of our understanding. The construction of bogs as a threatening and disgusting symbol began over the past two and a half thousand years or more, since (at least) the Axial Age (around 500 B.C.E.)—at least in the Western world, by which I mean the Graeco-Roman, Judaeo-Christian, and Middle Eastern (from ancient Mesopotamia through contemporary Islam) "worlds." This is not to say, however, that these are the only, or most important, or widespread, or persuasive ways of understanding bogs, for there are enormous differences in this cultural shaping between Europe and North America on the one hand and China and Japan on the other, which this paper traces. In Japan, unlike the West, bogs function as an enormously *positive* symbol.

The second—and related—problem is more subtle and abstract. This is that bogs do not easily fit into the most prevalent pattern of thinking we have, namely dichotomous thinking based on the logic of negation (A≠-A), the Law of Excluded Middle -(A & -A) and on the logic of binary oppositions, which has become increasingly important over the past three hundred years, with the rise of modern science—where, however, it has proven annoyingly unhelpful in the analysis of human biology and psychology, as the forced choice between the opposing terms of the "nature/nurture" debate repeatedly reveals. Dichotomous thinking in the sciences has, fortunately, undergone substantial modification recently with the increasing sophistication of statistical methods, which allow for the necessary qualification of "mutually exclusive" categories.

Binary thinking expresses thoughts in terms of pairs of mutually exclusive qualities, states, or actions: nature/culture, body/mind, physical/mental, material/spiritual, real/ideal, active/passive, assertive/receptive, free/determined, the "raw" and the "cooked," land/sea, freshwater/saltwater, wet/dry, hot/cold, hard/soft, etc. Western binary oppositions in particular, frequently attach positive valuation to one of the pair and negative to the other. This valorization is opposed to Chinese-style yin-yang thinking and its subsequent concepts in Korea and Japan, in which both elements of a given pair are viewed as equally valuable, their positive and negative attributions emerging only when they are out of balance or out of sync, or appearing in the "wrong" situation or time,[3] making it easier to accommodate both sides of the equation.

This pattern of mutually exclusive binary opposites is not exclusive to scientific thinking, of course, as Claude Lévi-Strauss showed in his book *The Raw and the Cooked*, nor to Indo-European languages. In China, where it is known as "Yin/Yang," it has a political dimension (Big states/ Small states; Important states/ Unimportant states; Action/ Inaction; Stretching/ Contracting; Ruler/ Minister; Above/ Below, Speech/ Silence, etc.), and indeed is raised to the level of metaphysical principle in Taoism and Confucianism, where, however, the oppositions are thought not to exclude each other but to include each other:

> The way that is bright seems dull;
> The way that leads forward seems to lead backward;
> The way that is even seems rough.
> The highest virtue is like the valley;
> The sheerest whiteness seems sullied;
> Ample virtue seems defective…
> The great square has no corners…
> The great image has no shape.[4]

The "Way" of this chapter's title refers to the "Way" (Chinese *Dao*, and Japanese *Doh*) of ancient Chinese cosmology, of Taoism and Confucianism, the Way of Heaven, that is, the way things are, the "flow" of the universe, in which both human beings and the natural world participate with "Heaven." Taoism recognizes a fundamental harmony or correspondence among the way of Heaven, the way of the Earth, and the way(s) of humankind, that is, between the "divine" or cosmic order, the natural order of the physical environment, and the human or micro-cosmic order.[5] (Note that we have three, not two, components here, which messes up the dichotomy.)

This Tao means "way" in the sense of a route or path (cf. English "highway," "by-way," "right-of-way"); the character used to write it is identical to that used ordinarily for "road." In this sense, bogs often do not support "ways"! (This lack of support does more than compromise human coming and going: it imperils human habitation/housing, and agriculture and other kinds of work as well—although interestingly its very unreliability was utilized as an asset by Finns who knew how to traverse their bogs when they were at war with the Russians, so as to ambush them into inescapable traps.)

And bogs do get edged out of the metaphysical picture in China; they are marginalized philosophically, and are not much represented in painting, other than Buddhist lotus ponds (which, of course, are Indian in origin, rather than Chinese). By extension the Way also has come to mean a way of doing things, a manner or pattern or process—from which it was extrapolated to the full range of Daoist significance.

In English, these two meanings have come to diverge, so that we speak of "finding *my own* way," or "doing things *your* way," two ways of speaking that allow English-speakers to jettison a third component of the term, one that remains essential to Taoism, the implication of a common or shared route. A highway, bi-way, or right-of-way is what it is if and only if more than one person uses it.

Finding the Way in Taoism—or in the Way of Tea (*sado*), the Way of Calligraphy (*shodo*), the Way of the Warrior (*bushido*), the several Ways of martial arts (*aikido*, *judo*, *kendo*, etc.)—is not at all the same thing as picking one's way across a vacant lot or bush-whacking through a jungle. Rather, it is a way that, however demanding it may be, has been made easier for us precisely because others have gone there before us.[6] It is, in a sense, a "path of least resistance," the way that, provided you follow it, will permit you to realize your goals, to do what must or should be done, with the least effort, without encountering the resistance that is otherwise—and usually—so characteristic of human action and achievement. (It is in this sense that people sometimes speak of Taoism as non-action—a term I must object to since it sets up a dichotomy between action and non-action, a dualistic way of thinking that is precisely what Taoism objects to.)[7]

The specific conceptions of how these dichotomies are related differ in Taoism and Confucianism, and have changed throughout Chinese history as the schools of thought have developed. But in general, two important differences persist between the Chinese Yin/Yang dichotomies and the Indo-European ones. First, the Chinese pairs are not true opposites, not mutually exclusive, but are complementary, with each containing within it the seed of the other, and each giving rise to the other;

> Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
> The difficult and the easy complement each other;
> The long and the short off-set each other;
> The high and the low incline towards each other...[8]

Second, as already mentioned, the Chinese systems do not include good/evil, or positive or negative valuation, and do not associate one of each pair with life or death.

Regardless of which dichotomous pattern we examine, however (Chinese, Indo-European, or another), bogs do not fit readily into such dichotomies. As a result, once we adopt such a logic, bogs are difficult to make sense of, and difficult to know. Thus, we will not be surprised to find that systems that reject the logic of negation and the law of excluded middle, such as Buddhism, and systems that consistently open up third terms, terms of mediation to oppose the dichotomies, as does much of Japanese thought and practice,[9] will prove much more receptive to bogs and are able to view them more positively. The salvation of bogs may well depend upon utilization of a new conceptualization (new to the Eurocentric West, that is) based on Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism or Japanese models.

2. Bogs in the West

In the Eurocentric West, bogs have almost exclusively negative connotations, associated with either chaos which must be overcome, with evil, or with loss of control leading to death. These connotations obstruct our efforts to conserve and renew bogs as much-needed environments. In the Americas, the only good swamp is a drained swamp. All three capital cities of North America, Washington, D.C., Ottawa, and Mexico City, are built on former swamp-land—widely regarded as triumphs of engineering

and good reason for self-congratulation (indeed they make good capitals because landowners donate acreage that is unusable as is and too expensive for an individual to drain); in the latter case, the Aztecs who originally founded Mexico City believed the site for the city was chosen for them by the gods. Bogs' capacity to resist even modern efforts to subdue them give them a notorious and legendary—almost mythic—place in the folk culture of North American industrialization. The terrors of the Panama Canal, where the mosquitoes of the malarial swamps killed thousands of workers, and the both ludicrous and tragic attempt to build the Canadian trans-continental railroad across the boggy shore of Lake Superior are recorded in the history textbooks of North American schoolchildren.

In the myths of many cultures, the primordial chaos that preceded the world as we know it is often characterized as a bog, a swamp or a soup, and civilized life begins with the separation of the bog into water and dry land. (*The Book of Genesis* is a little murky on this division.) In ancient Egypt, the marshlands were the original, primeval chaos; culture and human society came with agriculture, with the creation of the garden out of chaos, which was subdued. In ancient Greece, we are told: "First Chaos came into being, [next...Gaea (Earth), Tartarus and Eros (Love)]. From Chaos came forth [Erebus and] black Night. Of Night were born Aether and Day...and Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams; also the Hesperides and Blame and Woe and the Fates, and Nemesis to afflict mortal men, and Deceit, Friendship, Age and Strife, which also had gloomy offspring."[10] Perhaps understandably, given his depressing legacy, "there were no cults of Chaos."[11] (For the Greeks, the separation of Earth (Gaea) and water (Oceanus) occurs only much later, after Earth has given birth to Oceanus.[12]) In China, too, everything originates in a sort of primal "soup," *hundun*—literally the word from which "*wan-ton*," the word for dumplings, is derived. The wan-ton is that which has not yet been differentiated into solid and liquid, in which distinctions of the yin-yang system are not yet apparent. In this sense, the bog precedes the Yin-Yang system.

In everyday English, we speak of being "swamped" when we are overwhelmed by something unpleasant (we are "swamped" with work, but never with joy). We say we "bog down"—or more often, "*get* bogged down"—in problems, worries, traffic. The significance of that expression "to get (+Verb past participle)" is that it is something that happens *to* us, over which we have no control, as opposed to something that we do or that is under our own control; bogs and mires are places where control is threatened or taken away. (The fragility of our control is mirrored in the apparent lack of "control" and constancy on the part of the bog itself, which is often subject to tidal and/or seasonal variation.) Similarly, we get "mired" in the legal or prison system, in the bureaucracy, in requirements, etc. The use of these verbs implicates fate and other forces beyond our control, and resistant to our wills. Bogs, therefore, exemplify our inability to resolve that excruciating and crucial intellectual and spiritual dilemma that Western man recurrently faces: is he free or determined? active or passive?

I use the masculine pronoun "he" here deliberately: the Western philosophy that has discovered and framed the problems of free will and determinism has in fact been written almost

exclusively by men. Now, not all philosophy written by men finds free will and determinism to *be* a problem; Roger Ames in lectures has pointed out that this problem does not occupy much of a place in East Asian philosophy, perhaps because, as we have seen, the seeming opposition between activity and passivity is understood so differently.

But the issue can arise for men in ways that it does not for women, since for women one of the most important, even paradigmatic parts of their *active* experience, pregnancy, is also *simultaneously* and inherently a *receptive* (and in some ways even passive) experience as well.

There are going to be, in other words, sex- and gender-based threads in the warp of this discussion, as in any analysis that takes as its subject the dichotomization of the world and of human experience. For we have a long human history, in many different cultures, not simply of dividing the world into pairs of opposites, but of associating those sets of opposites with men or women exclusively: active/passive, strong/weak, hard/soft, rigid/flexible, straight/curved, etc. In China, the binary oppositions (which, remember, are complementary and mutually dependent, rather than opposed to each other, and which do not lead to Good and Evil) contain a number of pairs that are specifically associated with landscape:

Yang/Male	Yin/Female
Above	Below
Heaven	Earth
Spring	Autumn
Summer	Winter
Day	Night
Mountains	Water
Rain	Clouds[13]

The specific associations assigned to each pair (sex) are not universal—and I want to make clear that I am certainly not advocating *either* the general habit of associating characteristics with one or the other of the sexes *or* any of the particular assignments made, since I believe them to be both mistaken theoretically and hurtful in practice.

3. The Phenomenology of Bogs

The habit of postulating such oppositions is hurtful to bogs—because bogs are neither one thing nor the other, or they are both one thing *and* the other: water/land, wet/dry, soft/hard, reliable/unreliable, freshwater/saltwater, permanent/changing, etc. They are prior to the dichotomies of myths, and outside those of language. Defying our usual dichotomies, bogs mediate between these more common and familiar categories. (We may speculate here, as mentioned above, that the Buddhist logics that either allow accommodation of *both* A and -A, or insist upon *neither* A nor -A, or both, might be part of the reason that bogs turn out to be viewed more positively in the Buddhist countries of East Asia.[14])

Not only do bogs both bridge and fall between the pairs of our binary oppositions, they also occupy very ambiguous status with regard to sexual symbols. (See the work of Professor Seppo Knuttila for his exploration of the many layers of connection between bogs and dangerous or perverted sexuality.[15]) They often lack such archetypal phallic symbols as mountains and trees. Those phallic symbols bogs do sustain, snakes, are themselves very ambiguous-—and threatening enough to have become in Judaism and Christianity the very symbol of evil and of Satan, in the Garden of Eden, which is also the site of the triumph over chaos. Bogs have threatened, moreover—and indeed they have come close to *preventing*—a number of archetypal masculine projects of industrialization and colonial expansion, such as the ditch for the Panama Canal, and the Canadian railroad mentioned earlier.

The primal or archetypal association of bogs with sexuality of a disturbed and disturbing sort may be seen even in the mythology of Japan—a culture I discuss at length below because it generally has such *positive* views of bogs. But in an early myth, the first copulation of the primal couple, the female deity Izanami and the male deity Izanagi, produces a most distressing "child"—a leech, a creature of the swamp. This leech child is deemed illegitimate and must be discarded; the couple must go back and try again.

Now, what has caused such a distressing thing as this leech-child? Why have things gone so wrong? It is nothing other than the woman having violated sex-based behavioral and linguistic taboos. She has acted like a man, by both initiating their relationship by speaking before he does, and commenting on the male deity's sexual desirability. (What she said was, "What a lovely young man.")[16] They have to go back and do it *right*, letting the male speak first; interestingly, they start over by going behind a phallic symbol and coming out to meet each other again.

We meet this leech again in 20th-century philosophy, as Margery I. Collings and Christine Pierce analyze the work of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre:

> In his analysis of slime, Sartre insists that it is a horrifying image, soft, clinging, leech-like, and, regardless of its docility, threatening. Normally, the phenomenon of possession is characterized by the For-itself asserting its primacy, yet the slimy reverses these terms:
>
>> The For-itself is suddenly compromised. I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me… It is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking… I cannot slide on this slime; all its suction cups hold me back… it is a trap… Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet feminine revenge which may be symbolized on another level by the quality sugary.[17]

Collings and Pierce point out that Sartre associates the soft and slimy (i.e., that which is bog-like) both with the female and with the inability to assert the freedom and choice proper to the For-Itself. Sartre develops this association of the slimy and that which threatens self-control and self-assertion into philosophy per se.

Some of what Sartre sees as is threatening about bogs is grounded in physical experience. Bogs can be physically treacherous; they can suck the unsuspecting traveler down to her death. Bogs are slimy, full of dangerous predators, and unstable. This instability is especially important phenomenologically, for precisely *because* they are *terra infirma,* bogs are also *terra incognita*. Because they are unstable, they are difficult to explore, at least for outsiders. (Hence their value as hiding places for refugees, escaped criminals and soldiers, and so on; swamps' history of trapping Russian invaders has endeared them to the Finns, as my Finnish colleagues tell me.) In part because they are represented to the outside world *by outsiders* who do not know them, bogs, like deserts and jungles, have acquired often negative connotations and are regarded as dangerous. The story of bogs, like the story of the Gobi and the Sahara deserts, is not told by the residents, by those to whom it gives life. It is told—and I'm speaking here of world history—by those who pass through (if they are lucky enough to get out alive), who have been raised in other ecological niches, who don't know how to make their living in and by means of bogs, or even necessarily how to find their way out of them.

Yet what seems so treacherous to an outsider need not be so to one who knows the terrain. The people who live in the area know the specifics, know where to go—and they have often developed techniques that enable them to deal with the dangers in quite reliable ways—to render familiar and safe what remains treacherous to those who do not know it.

But to the extent that they are unexplored, bogs remain unknown, and what we don't know, we fear. That is, as psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung has shown, we project onto the unknown what we cannot face in ourselves. This principle can be seen in relation to bogs in the work of many writers and film-makers, most famously American novelist Ray Bradbury and British director Alfred Hitchcock.

In addition to their potentially treacherous physical instability, bogs may change a great deal—we may call this their *temporal* instability. We see this in the United States, in housing developments built on wetlands. Once again, as such, they are unlike things that belong to permanent hard-and-fast categories. As a result, (third) utilizing bogs successfully and even surviving in them depend upon *local* knowledge rather than abstract or absolute or objective knowledge.

For several reasons, then, bogs are inherently hard to know—because they are unstable, and because they change so much through time, they are hard for outsiders (the ones who write science) to explore, and therefore difficult to fit into patterns of objective knowledge. For this reason and because they fly in the face of our deeply entrenched habits of thought, specifically, as we have seen, the habit of dichotomization, or thinking in terms of pairs of opposites, bogs do not fit easily into scientific knowledge. Thus, they pose a challenge to our familiar ways of thinking, at the same time that they physically resist our attempts to explore them, and therefore remain open for the projections of our deepest fears. The words "bogs," "swamps," etc., are not merely objective references to particular types of terrain or environment. Like mountains and deserts, forests and jungles, oceans and rivers, they are as much symbols as they are physical spaces, and like these six, they touch the deepest cores of our

individual and collective psyches. In fact, such symbols don't merely touch our psyches, they structure them, they give basic shape to the confusing stews of our deepest longings, desires, and fears.

What is dangerous about wetlands, then, is that they cannot be approached by outsiders, by strangers. To find one's way in a bog, one must know the area, must have local knowledge. The Way of the Bog, then, is a kind of particular, local knowledge difficult to reconcile with the universal, objective and absolute standards we prefer for modern thought.

4. Bogs and Mires in East Asia

These symbols, however, are not God-given, universal, or unchangeable. They are the product of cultural shaping. In East Asia, for instance, bogs are treated—and understood—quite differently than in the West. In China, Korea and Japan there is a wide range of positive connotations and depictions to be found—in the language, art and literature.

A. China

First, China. Chinese gardens and landscape painting are based on the yin/yang framework developed within Taoism and Confucianism. In both, the yin forces of water and clouds must be balanced with yang forces of mountains and land.

The word for landscape in Chinese, as in Japanese, is literally "mountains and water." (It is commonly acknowledged that the Japanese learned from the Chinese painters of the Song dynasty (960-1160) types of landscape painting that were quite different from their own earlier native styles, as seen, for example in paintings of Shinto shrines.)[18] Both the Chinese and the Chinese-influenced Japanese traditions of painting show the same combination of contrasting (yin/yang) qualities, but the physical topography of China has kept the two terms in sharper relief, and Japan, as we will see, has developed a much richer tradition of bog-painting.

Miniature landscapes inspired by the same Song-dynasty school of landscape painting but created of real rock are found in the Japanese gardens known as "*karesansui*" or dry landscapes. Such paintings and gardens represent what we call "ideal" landscapes, by which we mean not that they are perfect (in our contemporary vernacular use of the term "ideal"), nor that they represent ideas in some Platonic or eternal or absolute sense, but that they are images of actual landscapes *as they have been internalized by the mind of* the painter. In the ordinary course of events this would typically have been a Confucian scholar and/or Buddhist monk or Taoist devotee, one who has spent time in the mountains immersing himself in the Way of the universe. (I must point out here that Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism are not mutually exclusive practices and beliefs in East Asia, especially not since the so-called “Song Synthesis” of the three philosophies during the Song Dynasty, when Chinese landscape painting escaped the strictures of Persian-influenced Tang painting.)

The practice of such a painter was to spend hours, days, months, even years alone (although sometimes with a servant or two) in a wilderness retreat, contemplating the universe, the Tao, and

the writings of other great scholars and monks who had preceded him. He would write poetry, practice calligraphy, and paint, meeting occasionally with friends to exchange poems and paintings.

The literal copying of a scene would be utterly beside the point, for the classical Chinese approach is to see in such a mind the very shape of the cosmos itself. Within this Chinese philosophical and artistic framework, the depiction of the mixed-up mess that is a wetland is *relatively* uncommon, although it is by no means as rare as art historians' discussions, which are framed wholly within the philosophical context of yin/yang, would lead one to expect. There is in China a far richer history of visual celebration of wetlands than has been recognized.

These images, in other words, represent less the physical topography of a place than the perfect fusion of that physical world with the human mind, the harmony or interpenetration between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the physical and the spiritual, whose realization is the Tao.[19] From earliest times Chinese civilization took its shape from the distinctive extremes of this topography: it originated along the northern plan of China, the most intensely cultivated and thickly populated part of the country, (it supports about a third of the population), through which the Yellow River flows:

> The plain is really one great delta created by the silt of the river, and no other river in the world brings with it so much silt. The Nile contains 1.5 kilos of silt per cubic meter of water, the Yellow River an average of 37 kilos [over twenty-five times as much], and there are tributaries in which as much as 760 kilos have been measured. At its mouth, the river creates 23 square kilometers of new land every year.[20]

Before reaching this plain, the river has sped through 2,400 miles of winding valleys in the Tibetan Himalayas, and eventually clears the hard rock of the mountains that have contained it, opening out across the plain for the last seven hundred miles of its journey to the sea. On the plain it widens and loses speed, allowing the silt to sink to the bottom, thus raising the level of the riverbed and the level of the water. In some places, the riverbed now is raised more than thirty feet above the surrounding plains, and the only thing that prevent constant flooding is the system of embankments people have built over the centuries to contain the water. Even so, floods are frequent and devastating. They have entered the mythology, and the first emperor of the legendary Xia dynasty, Yu the Great, earned his reputation as a true emperor for his willingness to lead the people in their building of dikes and canals after the great flood of 2298 B.C.E. Constant records that have been kept since 602 B.C.E. reveal a pattern of severe flooding two out of every three years for the past two and a half millennia. These waters are not friendly—although they are desperately needed. They irrigate and kill; they provide food and take away shelter and livestock.

This pattern of flooding and receding suggests the significance of the "mountains and waters" of the Chinese term for landscape. The two live in a constant dynamic interplay: the mountains are all that resist the waters, they remain visible even during the flooding. A polar opposition is set up

that reverberates throughout Chinese thinking, albeit always with the recognition that each pole of an opposition is necessary to create the other, and that within each term lies the seed of its opposite.

At the same time, while mountains and waters, dry and wet, hard and soft, firm and flexible, are always apparent as reciprocal forces within the Chinese landscape, the timing of the flooding is such that they take turns asserting themselves and yielding, becoming more prominent or receding. This is a landscape pattern that encourages the recognition of change—a recognition that is essential, of course, to the Chinese yin/yang worldview and to Chinese philosophy. The only sure thing in an uncertain world is change itself.

Whereas the Chinese landscape paintings for the most part focus on the dramatic mountains and rivers so characteristic of the Chinese landscape, the Japanese paintings have developed a genre of their own—largely unsung in precisely these terms until our conference—that celebrates the far less dramatic landscapes of the marshes.

B. Japan

In all world history, the Japanese have been perhaps the most enthusiastic appreciators of the aesthetic possibilities of bogs and wetlands—although the fact that it is bogs and wetlands that Japanese painting and design single out has gone largely unnoticed by art historians. That is, the field of academic art history and aesthetics has focused largely on the ways in which Japanese art, especially landscape painting, has been influenced by Chinese landscape painting. Chinese landscape painting celebrates sublime and dramatic mountains, rivers, and waterfalls. While much of Japanese painting does emulate this style, there is another important stream that is quite different—that focuses on the *lack* of drama, the subtleties of marshes and their patterns.

There is a story:

> Once a man who had decided that he was of service to no one resolved not to stay on in the capital and to seek somewhere to live in the East. He set out with one or two old friends as companions. None of the company knew the route, and they wandered lost, as far as a place called *Yatsu-hashi*—Eight Bridges—in Mikawa Province. (The name derives from the eight bridges built to span the rivers that fork like spiders' legs and drain the water from a large marsh in that area.)
>
> They dismounted by the edge of the marsh and ate a meal of dried rice in the shade of a tree. In the marsh, iris flowers were blooming prettily. One of the group, on seeing the flowers, said, "Shall we make a travel poem, each line beginning with the syllables of the name of this flower?" So, he recited:
>
> In the capital is the one I love, like
> Robes of stuff so precious, yet now threadbare.
> I have come far on this journey,
> Sad and tearful are my thoughts.

> All were moved by this same sadness, and wept, their tears falling on the dried rice and making it sodden.
>
> They continued on their journey and came to a wide river, called the Sumida, which divides the provinces of Musashi and Shimosa..."[21]

Perhaps no piece of secular narrative literature in world history has had greater impact on the decorative arts than this brief passage from a 9th-century Japanese book of fictional tales called the *Tales of Ise*.[22] It is of particular interest to us here today because it takes place in a marsh, because it is an indication of the millennium-old interest the Japanese have taken in bogs and of the decidedly positive value the Japanese ascribe to wetlands, and because it leads in the end to some deep truths about not only the values that bogs hold for all human beings, but about the difficulties we encounter in trying to think about them using our accustomed ways of thought. Let us consider some first-hand data to work with yourselves upon which to judge my generalizations and philosophical abstractions.

In English the motif from this story goes by the name "Eight-Plank Bridge," (*Yatsuhashi* in Japanese), and there have been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of illustrations of it, in paintings and woodblock prints, on textiles and ceramics, and in these days of photographic reproduction, on the coasters and headscarves and umbrellas available from museum shops. This Eight-Plank Bridge motif from *The Tales of Ise* recurs in Japanese garden design as well as in pictures, up to the present time. The Japanese penchant for reducing complex images to utter simplicity, even minimalism, and the lush colors of the irises contrasted with a background for the marsh itself of either neutral or gold-leaf, often obscures for Westerner viewers the complex emotional responses the image is meant to evoke. One *sees* only spare yet rhythmic compositions. Yet remembering the story that inspired them, one *feels* the complex and subtle emotions of the original hero—he wasn't even given a name—and his friends: their loneliness, their sense of isolation in this all-but-incomprehensible wilderness landscape (remember they were until this moment urbanites, voluntary exiles from the Court), adrift (for reasons that are lost to us but must have been easily comprehended by the original readers)—adrift in the *anomie* that comes from not having a place in the world, yet finding oneself responsible for one's own situation in the world, without the normal social bonds and responsibilities that tie us down but also give meaning to our lives. They are in a peculiarly Modern situation, in a sense, for they have decided to try to take their fates into their own hands, to leave the Capital city (Kyoto) and they find themselves in, of all things, this marshland.

The moment acquires its intensity as much from what is not said as from what is said. (One is reminded of the Yin/Yang pair "Speech/ Silence.") There are only four sparse lines, only four direct references to feelings or values: "the one I love," "so precious," and the contrasting "so far," "sad and tearful." The visual arts tradition is even more elliptical in the way it passes the story on to us: in most of the so-called "illustrations" of this episode, the human beings themselves are eliminated — they have become unnecessary, for they live on in our minds (in fact, are they not us? They are our

minds!), and there are no actions. Even the few objects that do appear in the tale, like the rice cakes, the tears, are omitted from the depictions.

Yet the travelers whom you think of when you see these garden marsh landscapes, for all their loneliness, have two noteworthy consolations—their ability to write poetry, and thus to give voice to their desolation (which, of course, causes them to be remembered forever, and not only by their own countrymen, but by any of us who share this moment through the artistic evocation of their loneliness)—and also their *camaraderie*, their friendship, the fact that their loneliness is shared (and they know that it is). We might imagine that these two strengths, their art and their friendship, provide them with the firm ground that keeps them alive in the treacherous waters of a tenuous existence.

It is, in other words, the peculiar combination of solidity and fluidity in their position that has made this a story worth repeating, reimagining, and re-imaging, for over a thousand years.

It is therefore, I would suggest, no accident that this most poignant and persistent of stories takes place in a marsh, in a landscape that combines countless oppositions—land and water, hard and soft, reliable and treacherous, static and flowing, known and unknown, human and alien, warm and cold, beauty and desolation, friendship and loneliness.

But the marsh does not merely, like the Chinese and Japanese term for landscape, *sansui*, juxtapose terms for two opposing forces. It combines them, mixes them together, allowing for their mutual fertilization and enrichment, allowing for altering proportions, allowing for commingling and separation, for solution and dissolution, for the delirious unknowable ebb and flow of encroaching water and reassertion of dry land in what is, if we dare to submit to it, one of the most penetrating and poignant experiences of human life. The marshland is the perfect setting, the perfect physical counterpart (and therefore symbol) for a story that itself combines opposites: loneliness and camaraderie; being tossed about by fate, and taking fate into your own hands. It is this ambiguous physical environment that turns out to give birth to great art, and by means of art to a meeting of minds and spirits across the centuries. It is in the marsh that our lonely travelers find their voice as poets.

This marsh-story is only one of a number of important *nexus* of positive connotations for bogs in Japanese culture. Indeed one of the most poignant words in the whole Japanese language, *uki-yo*, is also a reference to marshland. It means literally "floating world," and it is the Buddhist term (albeit written with different characters) for this life which is invariably full of sorrow and disappointment and suffering, since it is ever-changing, invariably transitory, like water. The most common image associated with the root word *uki-* is of reeds, rushes or weeds floating in water—a marsh. It has come to stand for a whole aesthetic, if you will. For the term *uki-yo* or floating world has been taken over by the culture at large to connote a general aesthetic—or rather, to connote two related yet ultimately opposing aesthetics.

First, "*ukiyo*" may be taken as a metaphor for the inevitable sadness of life—given that every life contains moments of parting and irreparable loss—loss which is so penetrating it inescapably

colors all the rest of one's life. Here the aesthetic draws us back to the Heian period of the *Tales of Ise*, in which the term was used by Buddhists, and the aesthetic developed by secular writers like (Lady) Murasaki Shikibu, author of the famous classical novel *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1000-1020 C.E.), the last section of which is entitled the "Floating Bridge of Dreams" (*Yume no Ukihashi*). Therefore, although the "floating" refers originally to the ephemerality of life itself (as the Buddhists see it), it comes, in this first aesthetic, to be attached to a number of words that collectively acquire a distinctive aesthetic quality by means of which the Japanese recognize the beauty to be found even in sadness, and celebrate the brevity, loneliness, and paucity of even the most restricted lives.

By the late seventeenth century, the Japanese began to use the word in an ironic sense, to denote life in the newly-instituted "gay quarters," a life devoted to enjoyment, to fashion, to pleasure, to love-making and sexuality, to newly developed (and relatively inexpensive) arts, especially performing arts and mass-produced visual arts, to fashion. It was the antithesis of Buddhist (and Confucianist) solemnity, and the floating here refers not only to the lightheartedness with which people involved in it—the newly emerging middle class of merchants and tradesmen, performers and artists—took themselves, and to their determined lack of gravity, but to their relative lack of weight within the existing religious and philosophical systems.

Thus, we have (to give only the examples available to an international audience) the "Floating Weeds," the title of Ozu's 1959 film (*Ukigusa*) about a ragamuffin band of traveling entertainers, and the "Floating Bridge of Dreams" (*Yume no Ukihashi*) which is also used for a short story by the early twentieth-century novelist Jun'ichiro Tanizaki.

As it is used in Buddhist metaphysics, (that is, outside this transforming Japanese aesthetics), the floating world has exclusively negative connotations. It is the world of suffering in which we are mired, and a world we have been born to transcend, through a variety of practices such as meditation and the cultivation of personal insight to the point of Enlightenment.[23]

The image of the mind in its state of aspiration toward Enlightenment is also an image from the marsh: the lotus blossom, which becomes a constant reminder of the potential of the human body-mind to transcend its muddy and undesirable roots and reach for the light that enables it to culminate in a beautiful and pure blossom.

The lotus blossom, like the Eight-Plank Bridge, becomes a motif for gardens, as at the royal Korean garden at Anapchi (c. 674), in the pond in the outer garden at the Zen temple Ryoanji in Kyoto, and in the pond in the Japanese Garden by Koichi Kawana at the Denver Botanic Garden.

This Buddhist metaphorical use of the lotus in its marshy silt juxtaposes beauty and ugliness, purity and filth, transcendence and the material world, joy (or *nirvana*) and suffering, light and dark, flow and solidity, graceful elegance and compaction, reach and self-containment, insight and blind ignorance, the ethereal and the solid, above and below. Born in India and nurtured in China, it is a less nuanced and more oppositional understanding of the marsh than that of the Eight-Plank Bridge

episode from *The Tales of Ise*. But the marsh in which the lotus grows is the environment that not only combines opposing forces but allows for the transformation of what is basest into what is best. It is insistently positive.

The Japanese love of marshes is not restricted to depictions of *The Tales of Ise* and the Buddhist lotuses, these two peculiar combinations of desolation and richness. The language itself has of course a number of words for the various kinds of wetlands and their related topographical forms:

SHOH (Nelson2521)	swamp, lake
numa	bog, swamp, pond, lake; and the compounds
shoh-taku	marsh, swamp
shoh-ko	swamps and lakes
shoh-ki	methane, marsh gas
numa-chi, *shoh-ki*	marshland
numa-ta	marshy rice field
TAKU (Nelson2503)	swamp, blessing
sawa	swamp, marsh, dale, valley
sawa-mizu	swamp water
sawa-be	edge of a swamp
sawa-chi	marshy land
taku-an	pickled *daikon*, or radish
sawa-da	flooded rice fields or rice fields near a swamp

Because of this association of swamps with the flooded rice fields, the *sawa-da* and *numa-ta*, the connotations of the Japanese vocabulary, unlike those of English, are overwhelmingly positive: we also have TAKU meaning "blessing" and the ordinary everyday word *taku-san*, meaning "many, a large quantity;" and "plenty, abundance."[24]

Perhaps this is why the Japanese have invented virtually an entire art of landscape devoted to various kinds of wetlands, spanning five centuries.

5. Conclusion

Japanese art history, gardens, literature, and language provide an opportunity to rethink the bog, to reinvent the symbol, in order to render it productive for the new millennium. The art, literature, and everyday language of Japan prove that bogs can be enjoyed as a positive symbol. And bogs' precarious existence at the margins of dualistic or dichotomous thinking suggests that, while they may be difficult to include, their inclusion in our systems of thinking might be just the infusion we need to improve our porblem-solving capabilities and our capacity to recognize reality as it is.

Professors Richard Clymo, Harri Vasander, Tapio Lindholm, and others[25] have suggested a number of scientific and historical reasons to increase our appreciation of bogs:

their capacity for infinite renewal, most notably their capacity to clean and restore water;

their history of providing refuge from outside invaders;

their extraordinary persistence—ten thousand years was mentioned—in similar physical form (ten thousand years of the same shape suggests that the Buddhists may not be right after all—maybe it's *not* the case that everything is transitory!)

a major form of plant life, sphagnum, that "nothing eats voluntarily;"

a form of life in which decay is extraordinarily slow;

a plant ecosystem which has very little need of animals and is therefore nearly self-sufficient.

Outside of Japan, the appreciation of bogs is in its infancy. Perhaps we can nurture it to productive adulthood for everyone's benefit.

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[1] A shorter early version of this chapter was read at the 3rd International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics: "The Aesthetics of Bogs and Wet-lands," Ilomantsi, Finland (1998), organized by Yrjo Sepänmaa and appeared in Finnish, in Kirsi Martikainen and Yrjö Sepänmaa, eds., *Suo On Kaunis* (Ilomantsi: Maahenki, 1999) 132-143.

[2] Such as those presenting at the above-mentioned 3rd International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics: "The Aesthetics of Bogs and Wet-lands," Ilomantsi, Finland.

[3] A.C. Graham. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989, 331, and discussion chapter IV, *passim*. Both spellings of 'Dao/ism' have been in use. I have used the more current.

[4] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963), Book Two, XLI, 102. The political dimension of the seemingly paradoxical interconnections of the opposites can be seen in section XXII of Book One: Bowed down then preserved;/ Bent then straight;/ Hollow then full;/ Worn then new;/ A little then benefited;/ A lot then perplexed./ Therefore the sage embraces the One and is a model for the empire./ He does not show himself, and so is conspicuous;/ He does not consider himself right, and so is illustrious;/ He does not brag, and so has merit;/ He does not boast, and so endures./ It is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with him./ The way the ancients had it, 'Bowed down then preserved', is no empty saying. Truly it enables one to be preserved to the end." (Quote on page 79).

[5] "As a thing the way is/ Shadowy, indistinct. / Indistinct and shadowy, / Yet within it is an image;/ Shadowy and indistinct, yet within it is a substance. / Dim and dark, Yet within it is an essence. / This essence is quite genuine/ And within it is something that can be tested." Ibid., Book One, XXI, 78.

[6] David Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987).

[7] Roger Ames points out another aspect of the Way, namely that each person who follows the Way expands it and deepens it for those who follow; in this sense to follow the way is both a deeply social or ethical activity and a creative one. "Putting the 'Te' back in Tao Te Ching," J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 113-144.

[8] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Book One, II, 58.

[9] I have in mind such mediations as the verandah for the dichotomy of inner/outer in Japanese architecture: and gardens, *bonsai* (tray gardens) and *ikebana* (flower arranging) in relation to natural/artificial and nature/building. While such mediating categories exist in the West as well, it seems to me that they have proliferated in a different way in Japan—a claim I have no room to defend here.

[10] From Hesiod's *Theogony*, perhaps (in its present form) the later 8th century B.C.E., translated by Michael Grant. *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*. New York: The New American Library, Mentor Books, 1962, 87.

[11] ibid., 95.

[12] ibid., 95.

[13] A.C. Graham. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1989, 331, and discussion chapter IV, *passim*.

[14] For a solid and clear exposition of this philosophical issue in Buddhism, see Thomas P. Kasulis, *Engaging Japanese Philosophy*: *A Short History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018).

[15] Seppo Knuttila, "Suoviha ja muita tunneperaisia luontoseikkoja," presented at the above-mentioned 3rd International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics: The Aesthetics of Bogs and Wet-lands," and published in Sepänmaa et al, eds., *So on Kaunis*, 68-76.

[16] *Kojiki,* 712 C. E. Translated by Basil Chamberlain, https://www.sacred texts.com/shi/kj/index.htm

[17] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 776-777; quotation and introductory comment provided by Margery I. Collings and Christine Pierce, "Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre's Psychoanalysis," in Carol C. Gould and Marx W. Wartofsky, *Women and Philosophy: Toward a theory of liberation*, (Perigee, 1980), 117. Note that the press name is misspelled as 'Perigree' on the website: https://www.carolcgould.com/books.html
[18] The Chinese-style landscapes, called *sansui(ga)*, or "mountains-(and)-water (paintings)" are painted in monochromatic ink or a combination of ink and mineral pigments.
[19] Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that the images so created are independent of the actual terrain. This becomes very clear when we contrast the "ideal" monochromatic landscapes of the two countries, allegedly in the same style. The Chinese landscape paintings emphasize the dramatically contrasting qualities of the tall hard mountains and the rivers. This derives on the one hand, from the actual topography of China. Even more influential, however, has been the impact on the Chinese experience of the events caused by this topography.
[20] Cecilia Lindqvist. *China: Empire of the written symbol*. Tr. Joan Tate. London: Harvill (Harper Collins), 1991, 51.
[21] Ki no Tsurayuki, *The Tales of Ise* (Jiahu Books, 2014), chapter 8/9.
[22] Surprisingly none of the other chapters from the book acquired anything like this passage's impact on the visual arts.
[23] There are four prominent metaphors in Buddhism for the mind in its quest for Enlightenment: the extremes are represented by the dust-free mirror of the enlightened mind on the one hand and the ox or monkey on the other; the other two both have to do with water: the reflecting pond and the lotus.
[24] These definitions are taken from Andrew N. Nelson. *The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary*, revised edition. Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1966.
[25] Again, in papers presented at the 3rd International Conference on Environmental Aesthetics: "The Aesthetics of Bogs and Wet-lands," and published in its *Proceedings*.