

Value, Time, and Holism: Forest Aesthetics & Capitalism in Early 20th c. Japan
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“Forest aesthetics” (*Shinrin bigaku*) emerged in early twentieth-century Japan among forestry scholars, government officials, nature writers, and others as a way to call attention not only to the aesthetic value of Japan’s forests (beyond their economic value), but to the unique “forest-loving” character of the Japanese people. Proponents of forest aesthetics located Japan’s cultural character outside of historical time, as the timeless product of a holistic unity of folk and landscape. Japan’s richly forested landscape shaped Japan’s forest-loving character.

Yet, the record of deforestation at this time calls into question the basic claims of forest aesthetics. I explain this contradiction by presenting forest aesthetics as a retreat from social realities and the excesses of capitalism—environmental degradation, new temporalities such as the introduction of modern abstract time (e.g. the solar calendar and 24-hour clock time), an accelerated pace of production and daily life, alienation, etc.—into an ideology of nationalistic aesthetic feeling and timeless culture. While forest aesthetics contributed to broader efforts to regulate the population under a constructed narrative of unchanging culture, it did little to effectively address Japan’s environmental problems. In fact, because it operated to mask capitalism’s excesses, it contributed to the legitimation of the capitalist status quo and to the perpetuation of Japan’s environmental problems.

A critique of forest aesthetics is necessary, given the way it informs present-day Japanese reactionary ecological theory and the extent to which the latter impacts environmental philosophy elsewhere in the world. For example, from the 1970s, Japan has witnessed the emergence of an ideology called “forest thought” or “forest culture”. Its proponents assert that Japan’s unique feeling of unity with the forest can provide a model for the “forest-dominating” West to emulate and a solution to the world’s ecological crisis. This argument has resonated in recent decades with certain branches of environmental philosophy in Europe and the U.S. Yet, I argue, today’s “forest culture” is just as problematic as the earlier forest aesthetics. It is concerned not with global environmental degradation but with local “homeland,” culture, and the purity of the ethnic community. This ideology is tied to discrimination targeting ethnic others (e.g. Koreans in Japan) and to an ahistorical and selective appropriation of the past whereby the concrete ecological disasters of the past are either downplayed or attributed to people and forces outside (or ideologically foreign to) the ethnic community and its landscape.

Thus, this study calls attention to a path of inquiry that is unlikely to lead to viable eco-historical change. Nevertheless, a study of forest aesthetics and forest culture can provide a way to consider the problem of capitalist social reproduction, that is, how capitalism reproduces itself together with the environmental problems it generates. The themes of value, time, and holism, which run throughout Japan’s early twentieth-century forest aesthetics discourse and today’s forest culture, might be re-envisioned as part of an alternative theory of eco-historical change, leading away from capitalism’s environmentally destructive ontology of the humanity-nature relationship.