

APPROACHING ZEN GARDENS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-
ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

Interpretative social scientists have recently come to view good ethnographies as “true fictions,” but usually at the cost of weakening the oxymoron, reducing it to the banal claim that all truths are constructed. The essays collected here keep the oxymoron sharp. . . . Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted – and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact.

James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”, *Writing Culture*

Both Figures 1 and 2 show the same material, the dry landscape in Daisen-in Temple, located in Kyoto, Japan. Figure 1 is focused, whereas Figure 2 is blurred. The focused photo provides a clearer view, and an explanation such as “the sand represents waves of the ocean, and the rocks symbolise sacred mountains”, might have wide appeal. Thus seen in focus, the garden can be



Fig. 1. Dry Landscape Garden in Daisen-in Temple. (Focused)
Photographed by ASANO Kihachi.



Fig. 2 Dry Landscape Garden in Daisen-in Temple. (Unfocused: Computerized)
Originally photographed by ASANO Kihachi.

read as a text, and we can question the meaning of the details that are visible within it. My attempt is, however, to deal with the blurry photo, the one lacking a focal point, which is therefore hard to *see* or *read*.

With the blurry shot of the garden, imagine that vision is no longer prioritised in the perceptual order. Imagine that the garden lies quietly at the foot of the mountain. Imagine yourself standing barefoot on a floor at some distance from the garden. Visiting the garden is not limited to visual engagement: it does not only equate seeing or watching; it involves the inter-relations of a variety of senses. Visual information is but one of many sensory components that a person with normal vision is likely to experience during an actual visit to the garden. However, the overwhelming majority of narratives heretofore produced regarding such gardens only deal with how to understand what is seen. Reading the garden as a text is one possibility, but it is not the possibility that concerns me in this essay.

By using the example of the Daisen-in garden in Kyoto, the purpose of this paper is to criticise a dominant narrative in the anthropological discourse on material culture, that of the interpretative and structuralist approaches. The discourse concerning material culture in anthropology often extracts meanings from objects, then applies the principles derived in the process to a wider and

autonomous context of the objects themselves. According to the discourse, the garden is merely a *representation*, *symbol* or *manifestation* of something, such as an idea or system of thoughts. Consequently, scrutinising what the garden represents and symbolises is not only the best available narrative, but such a semiotic approach seems to be the only one. I find this disputable as it still does not answer the question of how such representations and symbols are communicated in and made part of the experience of the visitors to the garden. In other words, the notion of subjectivity is overlooked in this approach. I argue this based upon my own experience in the garden, although one problem that emerges here is that an experience as such belongs to the realm of private property and thus is often thought to lack academic relevance.

Nevertheless, I aim to scrutinise how a phenomenological approach has come to the forefront of the anthropological discourse in answer to the question above. First, I will summarise how an anthropological narrative, that of Joy Hendry, an English anthropologist, explains the dry landscape garden. Next, I will point out some problems with this narrative, parallel to describing how and why phenomenology has appeared within anthropological studies. Finally, I will reach an understanding of the garden in relation to its wider context, while still paying attention to the subjectivity and specifics of the garden. How does phenomenology outline the problems of the anthropological discourse? How can we discuss the garden in relation to a wider context without losing its particular actuality? How should anthropologists approach the garden at all?

Figures 1 through 6 display photos of the dry landscape garden of Daisen-in, which is one institution within the larger Daitokuji temple complex located in Kyoto. Joy Hendry accounts for this garden in her ethnography, which is marked by the most common way of accounting for material culture in the anthropological discourse: That is to reduce the objects under scrutiny to terms or meanings that eventually develop independently of the objects themselves. Such a narrative searches for another principle or reality, detached from the original object from which it was derived, and applies these principles or realities to other situations of other kinds.

Hendry's intention is to add to the many existing arguments regarding the social structure of Japanese society. She illustrates how the dichotomy of inside and outside, frequently presented as important concepts in studies of Japanese society, requires a further explanation: "The aim [of her study] is to break down a neat culture/nature distinction which we [Western readers of Japanese studies] find so hard to relinquish".¹ In examining the role of a fence that she observed in the Daisen-in garden, Hendry extracts a principle which she calls "wrapping".



Fig. 3. The northeast corner of the garden.
Daisen-in temple post card

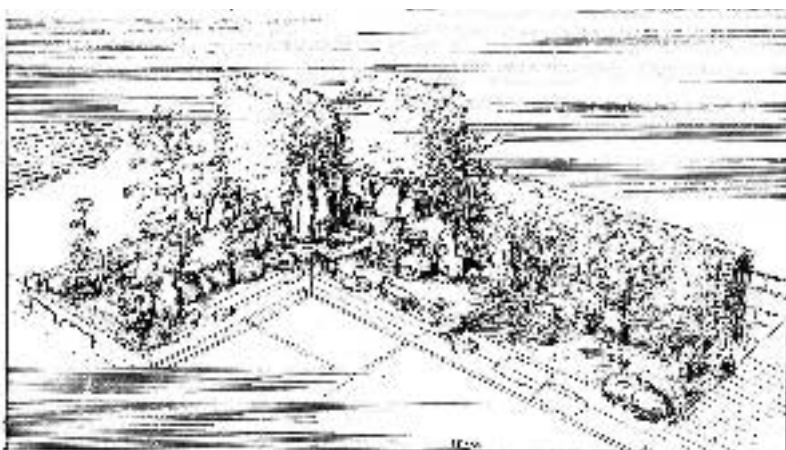


Fig. 4. Drawing of the northeast corner.
Mirei Shigemori, *Nihon Teien-shi taiki* [History of Japanese Gardens].
CD-ROM no 1. (Tokyo: Shakai Shiso-sha, 1998)

This concept of “wrapping”, she argues, is present throughout Japanese society in various manifestations. It is seen whenever something is “enclosed” in another item: a body wrapped in a kimono, a gift wrapped in cloth or paper, and even a miniaturised version of the world wrapped in the larger surroundings of a theme park. Her original term “wrapping”, she claims, is more suitable than



Fig. 5. The Great Sea in the South corner of the Garden.
Photographed by ASANO Kihachi.



Fig. 6. The northwest rear of the garden.
Daisen-in temple post card.