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A Note on Japanese Aesthetics**

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ANDREW T. TSUBAKI

Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yūgen: A Note on Japanese Aesthetics

THE NŌ THEATER is one of the significant cultural achievements of Japan in the middle ages (1192–1868). Its founder, Kannami Kiyotsugu (1333–1384), by combining attractive and effective techniques of rival theatrical entertainments, gave strength and prominence to the art of *sarugaku no nō*, the early form of the Nō theatre. His son, Zeami Motokiyo (1364–1444), contributed to the art by exploring its aesthetic depth, determining the basic way of training performers, and adding many outstanding plays to the repertory. In his effort to establish aesthetic principles for the art, Zeami adopted the concept of *yūgen*, the beauty of gentle gracefulness. This concept is his central idea and his entire work revolves around and develops from it.

The concept of *yūgen* that Zeami succeeded in elevating to its ultimate stage of transcendence was based on the achievements of his two predecessors. The first was Kannami's bold inclusion of the *yūgen* quality in *sarugaku no nō*, whose primary strength had been in *monomane* (literally, mime or imitation). The second was the enriched quality of *yūgen* attained through the endeavor of Inuō (?–1413), whose ceaseless

search for a higher ideal in Nō was a constant stimulation to Zeami.

In the earlier stage of Zeami's development his concern was concentrated on establishing the *yūgen* concept as the beauty of gentle gracefulness and correlating the concept with other ideals of the Nō theater such as *monomane* and *hana* (literally, flower). He was most interested in unifying in his art the old element of *monomane* and the new element of *yūgen*. This was to perfect what Kannami had left for his posterity. Concurrently, however, realizing the potentiality of *yūgen* shown in Inuō's art, Zeami was attracted more and more by the beauty of *yūgen*.

As his age advanced, so did his philosophy. His concept of *yūgen* was enlarged and elevated to such an extent that it went beyond the realm of gentle grace. The concept at this ultimate stage was identified by Zeami with various terms, including *sabi* (the serene simplicity of the aged or the feeling of tranquil loneliness). The creation of this new idea resulted in the expansion of the "realm" to the "world" of *yūgen*, as it were.

The beauty of *yūgen* at this high level was changed from the obvious to the subtle. Outwardly the distinction between *yūgen* as the gentle grace and *sabi* as serene simplicity is faint and questionable; however, if a

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reader understands the inclination in Japanese aesthetics of esteeming the hidden or merely suggested as higher than the obvious or boldly exposed, he will note this relationship being firmly established. In other words, if the beauty of *yūgen* penetrates through the wall of restraint, despite the effort of a performer to do otherwise, it is proof of the abundance of the beauty attained by the performer. This beauty, detected faintly in an expert performer, is the one with the transcendent quality of *yūgen* or the *yūgen* quality at its ultimate stage.

The most significant aspect of Zeami's *yūgen* is found in this transformation of the concept. By inheriting from poetry the concept of *yūgen* which originally meant *yojō* (overtones), establishing the beauty of gentle gracefulness in Nō, and elevating its quality to *sabi*, Zeami selected the material and carved out the basic design of the idea of *sabi*, which was later to be refined by Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) to denote tranquil loneliness, as the most representative aesthetic ideal of the middle ages.

It is almost impossible to find a parallel of this *yūgen* quality in the West, since it is something hardly ever created and appreciated by Westerners. But in Nō the beauty of *yūgen* is the core of its ideals. Without this quality the Nō ceases to exist.

"The content and the feeling suggested by the term *yūgen*," states Junzō Karaki, "is still alive in our life today." He further expounds the significance of the term to the Japanese:

The concept of *yūgen*, moreover, has been employed as the standard of judgment and evaluation without our intentional application. It is because the concept has been deeply rooted in the mind and emotion of the Japanese people since the middle ages, despite its subtle and elusive nature. This concept denotes a common feeling or a common world found at the depth of sensibility which could only be described with such words as "somehow" or "somewhere." It is a kind of a term that any Japanese would accept tacitly. *Yūgen* is an exceedingly fitting term to depict an aspect of Japanese sensibility.¹

This sensibility is "an area where artists feel at ease but scholars and interpreters often find themselves lost. For the artist is satisfied if he senses immediately and directly the aesthetic message; he is not usually

compelled to explain or convey what it is he has grasped."² This elusive character is not limited to the concept of *yūgen*. Kenneth Yasuda explains his difficulty in dealing with it and other similar concepts:

With those Japanese words that describe a more nicely discriminated aesthetic level, often I could find no happy equivalent in English; the more subtle the discrimination, the more difficult it became. The difficulty reminded me once again that we in the West are not aware of the need to name certain aesthetic qualities and the distinctions between them which the Japanese have created and named with the special kind of sensibility cultivated by them as their exclusive preoccupation over their long history. Take for instance the term *shibui*, now in vogue among our interior decorators, who have of course exploited only one nexus of its meaning. Other equally recondite terms are *yūgen*, *sabi*, *mono no aware*, *sugata*, and so on. But the effort to seize such terms in their full range of meaning is profitable. For they enrich our perceptions.³

Granting the difficulty and accepting the challenge, several attempts have been made to delineate *yūgen* in English. A review of these definitions will shed light on the extent of the difficulty. First of all, *yūgen* in the general sense is defined by Daisetz T. Suzuki:

Yūgen is a compound word, each part, *yū* and *gen*, meaning "cloudy impenetrability," and the combination meaning "obscurity," "unknowability," "mystery," "beyond intellectual calculability," but not "utter darkness." An object so designated is not subject to dialectical analysis or to a clear-cut definition. It is not at all presentable to our sense-intellect as this or that, but this does not mean that the object is altogether beyond the reach of human experience. In fact, it is experienced by us, and yet we cannot take it out into the broad daylight of objective publicity. It is something we feel within ourselves, and yet it is an object about which we can talk, it is an object of mutual communication only among those who have the feeling of it. It is hidden behind the clouds, but not entirely out of sight, for we feel its presence, its secret message being transmitted through the darkness however impenetrable to the intellect. The feeling is all in all. Cloudiness or obscurity or indefinability is indeed characteristic of the feeling. But it would be a great mistake if we took this cloudiness for something experientially valueless or devoid of significance to our daily life. We must remember that Reality or the source of all things is to the human understanding an unknown quantity, but that we can feel it in a most concrete way.⁴

With the same tone the influence of Zen

Buddhism on the concept of *yūgen* in *Nō* is pointed out by David Kaula:

The Zen artist is acutely responsive to both the beauty and the insubstantiality of natural forms. So also the imagery of the *Noh* plays reflects these two essential moods of Zen art: one is technically known as *aware*, the nostalgic sense of the dreamlike vanishing away of the familiar world; the other is called *yūgen*, the sense of the mysterious quiescence beneath all things. The world this imagery evokes is a muted, tranquil world in which nothing remains immutably fixed, a world of mist, rain, and wind, of snow and withering flowers. It is much too fragile and elusive a world to be rationally understood or deliberately controlled. The only effective way to respond to it is to adopt its own coloration, that is, to assume the grey habit and aimless ways of the wandering contemplative hermit.⁵

The term *yūgen* was well established in the field of poetry (*waka*—a classic verse form, and *renga*—linked verses) prior to the time of Zeami, and by then it was popularized to such an extent that it was frequently used in daily living. In the area of *Nō*, however, it was Zeami who applied the term to its full extent and developed the concept until it represented the “supreme form of beauty . . . which is the ultimate goal and the essential element of all aesthetic expression, be it dramatic or lyrical.”⁶ Thus, “*Noh* assiduously sought to express itself through the subtle, as opposed to the obvious, suggestion, as opposed to statement, and restraint, as opposed to freedom. This guiding principle is known by the untranslatable word ‘*yūgen*.’”⁷

When the term is used by Zeami, “it carries the connotation of half-revealed or suggested beauty, at once elusive and meaningful, tinged with wistful sadness. Zeami and his successors applied *yūgen* as a critical yard stick not only to works of art but also to the physical appearance and conduct of an individual. Even an old man should, it is said, be presented like a frowning crag with flowers in its crevices.”⁸ Zeami’s *yūgen*, which is symbolized as “a white bird with a flower in its beak,”⁹ is more fully explained in the following:

Elegance (*yūgen*) may be defined as a courtly and dignified form of beauty. It is not mere grace, but is characterized by gentleness and aristocratic refinement. According to Zeami’s dictum, elegance

in appearance is found in the court nobles and ladies as described in the *Genji Monogatari* (Tale of Genji);¹⁰ in speech it is acquired by learning the language of the nobility; in music it is found in the fluency and smooth movement of song; in dancing it appears when the dancer’s figure and gestures are full of grace; in acting it is attained when the actor performs with taste and refinement whatever he does and whomever he impersonates. Accordingly, in acting an aristocratic role the actor should dress as realistically as possible, but in impersonating a lowly person he should so dress as to merely suggest the role.¹¹

Yūgen, although it is strictly speaking “an untranslatable word,” has been most commonly rendered simply as “elegance,” “grace” or on one occasion as “transcendental phantasm (literally, fathomless sentiment).”¹² Henry W. Wells cites the following as English words relevant to *yūgen*: understatement, intimation, elegance, aristocratic grace, composure, equilibrium, serenity, and quietism.¹³ In this study *yūgen* will be referred to as “the beauty of gentle gracefulness.” We have to be cautious, however, to determine what is meant exactly by the term *yūgen*. Richard N. McKinnon warns us on this point by saying, “He [Zeami] makes bold and free use of these terms [the technical terms in his various writings], and gives them a wide range of connotations, depending upon the context in which they are utilized.”¹⁴ Explaining the nature of this complexity, he continues:

The lack of precision, whether in the elaboration of ideas or the definitions of terms, is not just a reflection of the times. It is, more specifically, a reflection of Zeami himself. The dynamic growth of his idea and the symbolic and metaphysical formulation of his concepts outstrip, at times, the possibilities of logical analysis and demand a sort of Buddhistic “enlightenment” on the part of the reader, who would grasp the “truths” Zeami is attempting to present.¹⁵

The aesthetic concept of *yūgen* is a particular case in point. In the early stage of Zeami’s development he applies the term to the colorful and brilliant quality of performance; on the other hand, his later concept refers to the subtle quality which is described in terms such as *hie* (chill) and *sabi*. The quality of *yūgen* indicated in these terms delineates the nature of the ultimate realm of *yūgen*. It is, in the words of Edward Gordon Craig, the world of “the Invisible

things" ¹⁶ where the "sense of being beyond reality" ¹⁷ permeates.

The original Chinese term *yūgen* meant "to be so mysteriously faint and profound as to be beyond human perception and understanding." ¹⁸ Here the term was employed in expressing an idea found in Taoism and Buddhism. As such it contained a philosophical character from the beginning. It is also pointed out that both terms *yū* and *gen* were originally related to the art of dyeing, meaning black color. But it came to denote darkness, and then profoundness. This profoundness was the fundamental meaning of the term *yūgen*, when it was transmitted to Japan. ¹⁹

The oldest usage of the Japanese *yūgen* appears in a Buddhist literary work, *Isshin-kongō-kaitaiketsu*, written by Dengyō Daishi (767-822).²⁰ In this the idea of *yūgen* showed no change from that of Chinese Buddhism.

In literature the earliest use of *yūgen* appeared in *Kokin-wakashū* (or commonly *Kokinshū* [905], the first imperial anthology). Here the concept of *yūgen* is still similar to that of Buddhism with a mystic meaning. The first usage of *yūgen* in a purely aesthetic circumstance is found in *Tadamine Jittei* (or *Waka-tei Jusshū* [945]), a theoretical work on poetic styles by Mibu no Tadamine (fl. ca. 910).²¹

In the case of Tadamine he applies the term *yūgen* only when a poet is capable of showing that his poetic sentiment has reached a state of loftiness and profoundness. It was, however, Fujiwara Shunzei (1114-1204) who conceived *yūgen* for the first time as the highest ideal of poetic expression. Furthermore, it was his aesthetic views on *waka* that marked the beginning of the middle ages in Japanese literature and other arts.

In order to establish the style of *yūgen* as the highest expression in *waka*, Shunzei bases his principle on the idea that *yūgen* is *yojō*. He defines his concept of *yojō* as the feeling which stimulates an image of tranquil loneliness of life revealed by finding the truth of nature. He identifies this feeling of *yojō* as *yūgen* and names it the most profound expression. Therefore, his idea of *yūgen* is a synonym for tranquil loneliness. An important point is that this tranquil

loneliness contains in itself a nuance which is a far more subtle sentiment than the term itself suggests. It is quite possible that *mujōkan* (a belief in the transience of human fate) has caused the change in the concept of *yūgen*. This belief seized the minds of many conscientious people who witnessed an unexpected drastic shift of the ruling power from the aristocrats to the warriors at the beginning of the middle ages. In Shunzei *yūgen* gains a touch of melancholy and comes very close to the beauty of lonely quietude. Shunzei's famous *waka* cited below clarifies this point.

Yū sareba
Nobe no akikaze
Mi ni shimite
Uzura nakunari
Fukakusa no sato.

(As evening falls,
From along the moors the autumn wind
Blows chill into the heart,
And the quails raise their plaintive cry
In the deep grass of secluded Fukakusa.)²²

In contrast to Shunzei's limited concept of *yūgen* it was Kamo no Chōmei (1154-1216) who widened its application. Chōmei considers *yūgen* as an expression which reveals above everything else *yojō*. This *yojō* must contain a hidden, unexpressed, but suggested feeling. In his *Mumyōshō* (or *Mumyō-hishō* [1211-1212] Chōmei explains *yūgen*:

The qualities deemed essential to the style [of *yūgen*] are overtones that do not appear in the words alone and an atmosphere that is not visible in the configuration of the poem. . . . It is like the situation of a beautiful woman who, although she has cause for resentment, does not give vent to her feelings in words, but is only faintly discerned—at night, perhaps—to be in a profoundly distressed condition. The effect of such a discovery is far more painful and pathetic than if she had exhausted her vocabulary with jealous accusations or made a point of wringing out her tear-drenched sleeves to one's face. . . .

. . . It is only when many meanings are compressed into a single word, when the depths of feeling are exhausted yet not expressed, when an unseen world hovers in the atmosphere of the poem, when the mean and common are used to express the elegant, when a poetic conception of rare beauty is developed to the fullest extent in a style of surface simplicity—only then, when the conception is exalted to the highest degree and "the words are too few," will the poem, by expressing

one's feelings in this way, have the power of moving Heaven and Earth within the brief confines of a mere thirty-one syllables, and be capable of softening the hearts of gods and demons.²³

Although Chōmei reveres tranquil loneliness no less than Shunzei, he does not necessarily limit himself to it in his consideration of the subtle nuance of *yōjō*. He is inclined to extend his concept of *yūgen* over everything which can make him feel more keenly in his heart than with his senses.

Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241), Shunzei's son, was a poet who esteemed *yūgen* very highly, with a concept very close to that of Shunzei. That is to say, he admires tranquil loneliness as much as Shunzei, but he inclines more toward the quality of gentleness and ethereal charm.

After Teika's death several treatises on poetics appeared. *Guhishō* and *Sangoki*, which are believed to have been compiled toward the end of the Kamakura period (1192–1333), present discussions on *yūgen* in which considerable differences from Teika's view are apparent.

In *Guhishō* it is said that a poem which evokes a feeling as if you are seeing a gentle, elegant, and incomparably beautiful female figure should be identified as being in the style of *yūgen*.

Sangoki follows the viewpoints of *Guhishō* in explaining *yūgen*. The unique aspect of *Sangoki* is that almost all the poems cited as being in the style of *yūgen* deal with the theme of love. In other words the concept of *yūgen* was enlarged considerably by the quality of graceful beauty. The object of *yūgen* was gradually shifting from the supernatural to the earthly and from the mystic to the human.

This change in the concept of *yūgen* may have been caused by a factor outside the realm of poetics. It was toward the end of the Heian period (794–1192) when the term *yūgen* began to be used frequently as a technical term of criticism in *waka*. About the same time the term became popular in the daily life of the general public. It was originally employed as a term in praise of something beautiful, elegant, and tasteful. Reflecting the taste of the common people at the time, however, the application of the

term was confined to the expression of beauty of gentle elegance and magnificence. The appearance of Shunzei in the world of *waka* resulted in attributing a special meaning to the idea of *yūgen*. Despite this evolution the meaning of the term in the common usage did not change at all from the closing period of Heian through the Kamakura to the Muromachi (1333–1568).²⁴ The deviation of the *yūgen* concept, as it was observed in *Guhishō* and *Sangoki*, from that of Shunzei might be caused by the popularized concept of *yūgen*.

The poet who was the last to cherish the mystic inclination of *yūgen* was Shōtetsu (1381–1459), a Zen monk. He found his poetic ideal in *Shin-Kokin-wakashū* (or *Shin-Kokinshū* [1205], the eight imperial anthology) and regarded Teika with almost religious respect. His *yūgen* was conceived as an infinitely rich feeling of implied subtle nuance of grace in ethereal beauty.

In his *Shōtetsu-monogatari* (1448–1450), he presents his own simile referring to *yūgen*: "Could it be possible to explain the style of *yūgen* as the feeling you obtain by seeing four or five finely dressed court ladies who are viewing cherry blossoms blooming in full at the courtyard of the South Wing?"²⁵ This picturesque sight is truly elegant and rich with the image of graceful beauty. Interestingly it is this very sentiment of *yūgen* that Zeami discusses in his *Nōsakusho* (a treatise on writing *Nō* plays [1423]). This fact indicates that Zeami's *yūgen* in *Nō* is close to what Shōtetsu considers *yūgen* and that Zeami seems to esteem highly *Nō* which contains the quality of Shōtetsu's *yūgen*. The fact that both of them were active about the same time in the Muromachi period could be one of the reasons for their closeness of interpretation.

Even though it is true that Shōtetsu's simile quoted above shows a part of his concept of *yūgen*, we should not accept his picturesque description in its literal sense. Judging from the context, what Shōtetsu really calls *yūgen* is not an exposed, easily detected, and realistic beauty, but the one hidden behind something. His ideal of *yūgen* is the graceful beauty which is implied by the nuance of a subtle yet profound expression. In this sense Shōtetsu is a succes-

sor of that mystical inclination of *yūgen*, but his use of a colorful simile indicates his knowledge of a new concept of *yūgen* as well. This contradicting aspect of Shōtetsu may explain that the conventional stand he takes is by and large on the verge of being buried under a more human idea of *yūgen* which was gaining increasing strength.

The concept of *yūgen* received a considerable change as it was applied to the art of *renga*, which obtained its popularity over *waka* in the Muromachi period. In the area of *renga* two poets are worthy of our attention. The first is Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–1388), who is regarded as the originator of this art.

Yoshimoto's *yūgen* is based on the sentiment of gentleness. In Yoshimoto this sentiment becomes to a great extent the matter of appealing to the senses, while in *waka* a subtle implication of sentiment expressed with an emotional tone is emphasized. The idea of *yūgen* in common usage, such as *yūgen* in appearance and *yūgen* of figure, may have affected this shift of meaning. Yoshimoto's *yūgen*, then, can be accepted as the gentle, delicate, and refined beauty, i.e., the beauty of elegance. The fact that the medium for his poetic expression was the newly risen art, *renga*, may have a great deal to do with the characteristics of youthfulness and sweetness detected in his *yūgen*. It is quite clear that the sentiment of peaceful placidity and tranquil loneliness, which are the characteristics of *yūgen* in *waka*, has completely disappeared in Yoshimoto's *yūgen*.

Another interesting point in Yoshimoto is that he warns against the excessive attachment to *yūgen*. He believes that too much concern over the idea of *yūgen* makes the scope of the poem confined, and that overusing the words with the sentiment of *yūgen* results in a loss of vitality. A warning of this kind appears also in Zeami's treatises. He points out that a performer who in his early period of training is too eager to perfect his style within his limited scale will lose the possibility of making a great improvement in the future.²⁶ Zeami also refers to the fact that misunderstanding *yūgen* as the frail beauty leads to the loss of the force in one's art.²⁷ Yoshimoto's unique trend of fre-

quently applying the term, *yūgen*, to new areas which have been excluded in the art of *waka* is also found in Zeami who expands the use of the term to all phases of Nō. In this sense Yoshimoto can be called a forerunner of Zeami. The common nature of the youthful freshness which is observed in transferring the traditional idea of beauty to a new medium of art with a successful result is shared by both Yoshimoto and Zeami.²⁸

Shinkei (1406–1475), a Zen monk, is the other poet who must be considered in discussing *yūgen* of *renga*. He learned *waka* from Shōtetsu, but he also studied *renga* until he reached a unique stage of his own. His concept of *yūgen* is based on the refined beauty which can be appreciated only by the heart. He advises paying attention to inconspicuous objects such as white, single-petalled plum blossoms blooming among bamboos, or the moon revealed through the gaps of the clouds. He is not interested in admiring magnificent, full, red, double-petalled plum blossoms which induce the same effect as viewing the full moon of August.²⁹ The nature of his beauty is pure and inclines toward the sentiment of undisturbed lonely quietude. At its best, his beauty enters into the realm of freezing coldness or chilling loneliness. He says "there is nothing more attractive than ice."³⁰ And he goes on praising the beauty of thin ice over rice ponds in the early morning, of icicles forming at the tip of eaves covered with the bark of Japanese cypress, and of dew frosted on the withered trees and grasses in the fields.

Shinkei's concept of *yūgen* may have been influenced by his personal experience in a troubled time. He survived the Ōnin Rebellion (1467–1477), witnessed the ruthless destruction of the capital, and lived through the great distress of that time. In Shinkei's idea of beauty, we can observe the projection of a belief in the transience of human fate (*mujiōkan*), of moral righteousness, and of the purity which can be described as the chilling beauty of refinement.

In the art of *waka* an implied subtle feeling, *yojō*, is considered as an important characteristic in the early concept of *yūgen*. *Yūgen*, however, eventually comes to mean

simply the beauty of gentle gracefulness. It is at this stage of transition that Zeami chooses the term *yūgen* to make it represent the highest ideal of Nō. In his *Kakyō* (a comprehensive work on his artistic ideals, stage techniques, and training [1424]), Zeami presents his definition of *yūgen* as "the true style of *yūgen* is being simply beautiful and gentle."³¹ Here all we note is the sentiment of gentle and graceful beauty. The supersensitive idea of an implied subtle feeling is no longer included and the principle of hiding the beauty of gentle gracefulness behind the veil of implication is no longer considered essential. What Zeami's definition suggests is far more human than Shōtetsu, Shinkei, et al. Zeami quotes one of Shunzei's poems, regarding it as the best expression of the sentiment of *yūgen*:

Mataya min
Katano no mino no
Sakura gari
Hana no yuki chiru
Haru no akebono.³²

(I see again
In the field of Katano
Cherry trees a-blossom.
The snowflake flowers dance down
At the dawn of spring.)³³

In this poem we see a great difference in the concept of *yūgen* between the time of Zeami and of the others when poetic phrases such as *aki no yūgure* (the autumn dusk) and *nobe no akikaze* (the autumn wind blowing across the field) are accepted as the images most closely related to the concept of *yūgen*.

"To be *yūgen*," says Zeami, "is considered as the ultimate stage of attainment in all diverse areas of arts. Especially in our art the *yūgen* style is our primary concern."³⁴ In this he was clearly influenced by the poetical theories at that time. His plays and treatises contain many quotations and references to poetry and other literary works from the past. It is doubtful, however, that Zeami derived his concept of *yūgen* only from these sources.

Shizuo Kobayashi suggests that Zeami's concept of *yūgen* was formulated rather inductively from the daily usages of the term³⁵ which Shōtetsu approximated, whereas Yoshimoto used the term in a sense identical with the popular meaning. Zeami's logic of

defining the *yūgen* concept, which is presented in detail in his *kakyō*,³⁶ is quite practical in such points as finding the ideal mode of *yūgen* in the figures, manners, and movements of the aristocrats and applying the concept to all the elements of Nō. Kobayashi notes the originality of Zeami's approach and presumes that if his concept of *yūgen* had been strictly influenced by the poetics, his method of organizing the discussion would have clearly shown his indebtedness to the poetics.³⁷ Zeami's *yūgen* then is mostly a unique and original application of the common concept of *yūgen* at the time to the art of Nō.

Despite the fact that Zeami always strove to attain a higher level of the art, he never forgot to entertain his common audience. His adoption of the ideal of *yūgen*, which was originated in the realm of *waka*, the aristocratic culture of the Heian period, may appear to contradict his concern over his lowly admirers. But the soundness of his *yūgen* concept and its vital relationship to the populace are eloquently indicated because his concept of *yūgen* was quite similar to that of the daily usages of the term: to be *yūgen* was then the ultimate stage of attainment in all diverse areas of the arts.³⁸

The significance of *yūgen* in Japanese medieval culture is unquestionably great, and the point of view that *yūgen* represents the dominant mode of expression in the arts is understandable; however, it is questionable whether *yūgen* is the one basic mode maintained throughout the period. Minoru Noshio finds the beauty of the medieval mode in the concept of *sabi* and points out that *sabi* was called *yūgen* in the process of its formation.³⁹

It is important to note that the concept of *sabi* was developed in opposition to that of classical beauty. This negative, anti-classical quality was found not only in the area of culture but also more fundamentally in politics, economics, and even in the course of everyday life. It all started when Minamoto Yoritomo (1147–1199, the initiator of the Shōgunate—the military dictatorship; his regime was founded in Kamakura, a city in present-day Kanagawa Prefecture) gained power and established his policy of denying everything developed by the aristo-

crats in Kyoto, the capital of the court government. His failure in supplying a new culture independent from Kyoto resulted shortly in the merger of cultures between the warrior and the aristocrat. In addition to this conflict between Kyoto and Kamakura, or between the aristocrats and the warriors, the culture of the Sung (960-1279) and the Yüan (1280-1368) Dynasties, newly imported from China along with Zen Buddhism, exerted great influence over various phases of Japanese arts, causing new conflicts between the traditional culture and that of foreign origin, thus intensifying the degree of confusion in the early middle ages.

One of the remarkable aspects of the middle ages is that these conflicting forces were assimilated by a small group of political leaders and artistic geniuses, so that the opposing factors contributed as a single unified power in creating a higher culture. In political, social, and economic phases, this unification resulted in the feudal system under the firm control of military dictators; in the cultural phase, the result was the unique beauty of *sabi* which is still admired in present-day Japan.

The conflicting factors which formulate the beauty of *sabi* seem to be embodied in its nature. What Japanese admire as the quality of *sabi* is often expressed in such terms as a restrained taste, a sober pattern, or the appearance of tarnished silver. Beauty of this kind is not eye-catching, but it is not just calm or subdued. It is always supported by the quality of richness, refinement, or fine detailed workmanship. It is beauty of a suggestive quality. Structurally the concept of *sabi* consists of two conflicting factors, each of which opposes the other and yet the effect of this contrast heightens both and in its entirety produces the unified beauty, *sabi*. It must be noted that *sabi* is not merely a matter of harmony. It is the harmony attained through unification of two conflicting factors.

This high level of beauty which was attained by Bashō in his art of *haikai* (a short verse form, commonly called *haiku*) could not have been developed without the work of his predecessors. Nishio recognizes the earliest attempt at employing conflicting elements to heighten the total effect in

Yoshida Kenkō's *Tsurezure-gusa*.⁴⁰ Before the time of Kenkō *mujōkan* meant to lament over the transience of human fate and to despair over the mutability of life. Kenkō, however, admitting and accepting man's lot, says it is foolish to lament change, and points out that those who wish to live without it do not realize the law of life. When man realizes this law, he becomes capable of seeing nature and people with new eyes, and of appreciating with deeper feeling the nature of inconsistency. He elevated the old idea of *mujōkan* by resolving the conflict between the transient and the immutable. This enlightened *mujōkan* provided the premise on which Kannami and Zeami established a new structure of the *yūgen* concept employing the conflicting factors of abundance and nothingness to create a unified harmony in the beauty of *yūgen*.

The significance of their contribution in developing the Yamato *sarugaku*, a form of mere country entertainment, into the refined Nō theater is that they controlled the confused situation and unified in their art the urban with the rural, the aristocratic with the popular, and the traditional with the new. "This unification was the fusion of chant and dance with mimicry," writes Nishio, "the harmony of dance and mimicry, which appeal to the eye, with chant and dialogue, which entertain the ear, and the unification of visible and audible skills with the soul which bridges the gaps between such external skills."⁴¹ This fusion of diverse elements into a unified expression and the use of contrast as a means of heightening the artistic effect were the sources of the successful development of the Nō theater and the end for which Kannami and Zeami strove. In order to attain this end they employed the concept of *yūgen* as a vehicle.

It is believed that *yūgen* has become the term signifying clearly a style in literature and art since the time of Shunzei. The idea of *yūgen* at that time was understood as an overtone and its style was employed to imply nostalgia, remembrance, or admiration for things already lost. Most of the poets active at that time were fallen aristocrats, who had been driven out of the positions which they occupied prior to the great change of the ruling power, and who were barely keeping

their place as the successors of the previous culture. Therefore, their remembrance and admiration tended naturally to be directed to the sentiment of gentle gracefulness and the beauty of refinement. Even if these feelings were accompanied by sorrow and loneliness for the lost and missing, it is clear that they inclined toward the beauty of ethereal gracefulness.

The downfall of the aristocrats was caused by the rising warrior class and this change-over marked the beginning of the middle ages. Regionally speaking, this shift meant brave but crude warriors of eastern Japan taking over the power of Kyoto, represented by the court and its sophisticated culture. In contrast with the aristocrats in Kyoto, the warriors were originally the lords of rural regions who had very strong and close ties to the populace. They were, in other words, the representatives of the plebeian. Yoritomo and his warriors settled in Kamakura, away from Kyoto, to avoid the influence of the detestably soft culture of the aristocrats. Later in 1336 when the power shifted to Takauji (1305-1358), the first Shōgun of Ashikaga and also a warrior of eastern Japan, he moved the center of politics back to Kyoto from Kamakura. This move was a direct cause for inducing the fusion of the culture of the warrior and that of the aristocrat.⁴² It was natural that a new phase of culture was brought out by the active involvement of the warriors of the east whose potential as leaders, if uncultivated, was forceful and free from the binding past.

Thus, a new culture, which could be called truly the warriors', came to blossom in the Muromachi period. The central idea of its beauty was rooted in nothing except the concept of *yūgen* maintained since Shunzei; however, when this term was employed by Kannami and Zeami in the early part of the Muromachi period, the structure of the concept of *yūgen* became different from that of *waka* and *renga*. The concept of *yūgen* in Nō no longer contained the beauty of placidity or spiritual gracefulness merely implied with the subtle nuance. It is true that the costumes used on the stage retain the ancient beauty of elegance and magnificence, but it is not the beauty of elegance and magnificence for the sake of itself. Be-

hind this outwardly displayed beauty there is an indispensable quality of directness and frugality which is an element of negative supplement to complete the beauty of *yūgen*.

Kannami and Zeami call this negative supplement *mu* (nothingness; literally, not to have or none) and consider the beauty of elegance and magnificence *yū* (abundance; literally, to have). In their *yūgen* this abundance, the outward beauty, cannot be complete without its negative supplement of nothingness. As a means of expressing this nothingness, which is the factor denying the quality of abundance, they employ Nō performers who are the medium of expression in this art. They except the quality of nothingness to be found in their manner of wearing the costumes and in their stage movements. They seek to keep their minds as well as bodies extremely frugal and direct yet expressive in their training, and even in their daily life, so that whatever they wear, whatever they say, and whatever they do, everything about their living will be aimed at attaining nothingness.

What Kannami and Zeami call *yūgen* is in essence no other than the exquisite harmony created by unifying the contrast between the elegance and magnificence of the aristocrats in the Heian period and the straightforward, practical, healthy, and forceful quality of the warriors who are the representatives of the rural plebeian. In other words the beauty of abundance, which is aristocratic and urban, is counterbalanced by a quality of nothingness, which is warrior-like and rural, so that the total effect will be the beauty of double structure, something which is elevated to its height by means of unifying the contrast.

This negative factor in *yūgen* is the basis for the concept of *sabi* and is an instance of the application of a doctrine of Zen Buddhism to the art of Nō. *Yūgen* of this type belongs to the character of the warriors; hence, we can recognize the participation of the rural element in conceiving this quality in *yūgen*. This fact means that for the first time in the history of Japanese culture we find the warriors in the rural area, in addition to the aristocrats in Kyoto, participating in the making of the cultural mode.

In the Nō theater the beauty of elegance and magnificence as the quality of abundance is matched with the contrasting quality of nothingness, but when the idea of this contrast is passed on to Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506) who represents the art of *sumie* (a picture painted with India ink) and to Sen no Rikyū (1520–1591) who is the originator of the tea cult, the structure of the concept is reversed.

The monochrome technique found in *sumie* by Sesshū and others denies the use of color, which is the quality of abundance, and instead relies on India ink to create paintings which depict nature with superb depth. Despite the restriction on their material, which stands for the quality of nothingness, the effect attained is richly endowed with the beauty of nature. The restriction here has turned into an advantage to express the subtle nuances of the painting.

Similarly this analysis can be applied to Rikyū. In his practice of the tea cult Rikyū advocates the quality of nothingness or poverty by denying the use of expensive items. The tea house, its surrounding garden, the tea utensils, the clothes, the food, et al., everything used in the cult of tea is kept simple and inexpensive. The idea is to feel the universe in a little tearoom and to enjoy the feeling of abundance amidst the poverty. Hence, as a contrast to the structure of *yūgen* in Nō, the quality of nothingness appears primary and its opposing quality of abundance supplements the former. By employing the contrast, abundance is to be more keenly felt and the beauty which Rikyū calls *wabi* (the sentiment of calm solitude) gains in depth. We find here a new idea of beauty and a new type of style which indicate the exchange of the urban and the rural, the aristocratic and the popular.

The concept of *wabi* is further advanced by Bashō in his *haikai* and developed into *sabi* which is considered to be the peak of the aesthetic concept in the middle ages. The art of *haikai* is the latest genre of the three classic poetry forms, i.e., *waka*, *renga*, and *haikai*. If we call *waka* the poetry of tears whose theme is to sing about *aware* (the feeling of being touched) of the fallen aristocrats at the end of the Heian period, we can name *renga* the poetry of laughter

which is, for the rising warriors, a means of expressing the emotion of their living.

The art of *renga* which is derived from *waka* branches out into two schools: the *renga* of the *waka* lineage and the *haikai-renga*. In spite of the fact that the former was the mainstream of *renga*, it did not survive the latter, because of its excessive inclination toward unrealistic poetic images with subtle nuance. Meanwhile *haikai-renga* steadily increased its popularity in the rural areas by catching the interest of the public with its realistic, worldly, instinctive, and sensible characters. It is this *haikai-renga* that Bashō perfected and which is still practiced today.

Bashō's *sabi* succeeds Rikyū's *wabi* in that his *haikai* expresses the beauty found in the straightforward and plain nature of the Kamakura warriors. It denies the beauty of elegance and magnificence adored by the ancient aristocrats of the Heian period. Bashō so esteemed this type of beauty that he considered it superior to that of the aristocrats.

Because Bashō's *haikai* succeeded Rikyū's *wabi*, Bashō attained a stage of freedom in *sabi* where he could admire abundance without marring the beauty of nothingness. Although Rikyū had to expel the expensive items from his tea cult in order to admire abundance in poverty, Bashō did not hesitate to use some terms which are associated with the quality of abundance. He still could express his profound admiration for nothingness.

Nishio illustrates this point by quoting two of Bashō's *haiku*.

Kimbyō no
Matsu no furusa yo
Fuyu gomori.

(Winter seclusion;
On the gold screen,
The pine-tree ages.)

Ran no ka ya
Chō no tsubasa ni
Takimono su.

(The butterfly is perfuming
Its wings, in the scent
Of the orchid.)⁴⁸

Terms such as *kimbyō* (the gold screen) and *ran no ka* (the scent of the orchid) are related to the element of abundance. But

they present an intriguing contrast to the element of nothingness contained in the phrases, *matsu no furusa* (the pine tree painted long ago) and *chō no tsubasa* (the wings of a butterfly). In spite of the images of abundance Bashō succeeds in retaining the overall effect of nothingness. The element of abundance is used as a colorful portion to stimulate the supreme sentiment of *sabi*. Without the presence of this portion these poems could not have obtained the profundity of *sabi* which is successfully produced in them. This is the stage of Bashō's attainment and his realm of freedom where he can make abundance into nothingness and nothingness into abundance, as he wishes. Bashō has reached the stage of freedom where he can choose an appropriate structure of contrast for expressing the highest beauty of harmony and unification, *sabi*. In other words, this is the stage which indicates that the conceptual structure of *sabi* is far advanced and perfected beyond the reach of *wabi*.

The extremely significant contribution of Zen Buddhism needs to be pointed out in regard to the structure of the *sabi* concept. Its influence on *sabi* is observed in bringing about the negative factor and in forming the ultimate nothingness as the result of elevating the contrast between abundance and nothingness. In order to understand the idea of *sabi* fully, it should be viewed as an experience of Zen. But this is a subject for another study. The relationship of Zen to the warriors, and its influence on the religious life of the public and on the world of literature and arts illustrate clearly the significance of Zen in Japanese medieval culture.

The beginning of medieval Japan was marked, as mentioned above, by the rise of the warrior class. One of the significant contributions of this class was its support of the new Buddhism. Nishio refers to this changing aspect of Buddhism as follows:

In contrast to the sects of the previous era which have established the rank system of priests, have built enormous and gorgeous temples, have equipped themselves solemnly with paintings, sculptures and music, and have been the religion of aristocrats, these new ones should be called the religion of the populace, in view of their having

no rank system, preaching on the street, engaging in literary work in a cottage, and being the object of faith among the warriors and the public. Furthermore, the Buddhism of the previous era was that of enterprise, of prayer, of learning and of fine arts; whereas, the new Buddhism is that of faith and of living. In this sense this transition could be called a reformation in the history of Japanese Buddhism.⁴⁴

Because Kyoto and its vicinity were the strongholds of the old Buddhism, these new sects found the center of their propagation in eastern Japan. In addition, the easily approachable nature of the new sects appealed more strongly to the naive easterners who owned no traditional culture and lived in an uncivilized part of the country.

Among these new schools the Zen sect attracted particular attention. Its close relationship to the warrior and its extensive influence on medieval culture were not mere coincidence. Suzuki points out some reasons for this closeness of Zen to the warrior:

Zen has sustained them [the warriors] in two ways, morally and philosophically. Morally, because Zen is a religion which teaches us not to look backward once the course is decided upon; philosophically, because it treats life and death indifferently. This not turning backward ultimately comes from the philosophical conviction; but, being a religion of the will, Zen appeals to the samurai spirit morally rather than philosophically. From the philosophical point of view, Zen upholds intuition against intellection, for intuition is the more direct way of reaching the Truth. Therefore, morally and philosophically, there is in Zen a great deal of attraction for the military classes. The military mind, being—and this is one of the essential qualities of the fighter—comparatively simple and not at all addicted to philosophizing finds a congenial spirit in Zen.⁴⁵

The Zen sect firmly established itself in Kamakura under the patronage of the Hōjō regime (1219–1333) whose character was in accord with the best tradition of the eastern warriors. Zen became their spiritual guide and exercised its influence from the thirteenth century through the Ashikaga (1338–1573) and even into the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). When the governing body inclined so much to Zen, it is not difficult to understand that the rest of the country followed the leaders.

In addition to this aspect, it should be pointed out that Zen, being the religion of the populace, became the means of forming

a new concept of beauty which was the aggregation of the creative energy of rural culture and of the masses. Zen provided the ethics and the philosophy for the necessary lift in creating the high quality of medieval culture. As Arthur Waley points out, "It was in the language of Zen that poetry and painting were discussed; and it was in a style tinged with Zen that Seami wrote of his own art."⁴⁶ The influence of Zen is clearly indicated in Zeami's *yūgen*, Rikyū's *wabi*, and Bashō's *sabi*.

The fact that medieval literature and arts perfected the concept of *sabi*, which can be called the mode of the middle ages, distinguishes this period from the ancient period and the modern age. The concept of *sabi* was originally realized in denying the decadent idea of *yūgen* inherited from the ancient *waka*. In the formation of this negative factor we recognize the rising force of the plebeian and the rural confronting and assimilating the aristocratic and the urban in order to form a new artistic style in which a harmonious unification of the contrasting elements is expressed. This supreme achievement in medieval culture could not have been accomplished without the enthusiastic promotion of the warrior class, which became the representative of the populace, nor without Zen Buddhism, which became the vehicle for the culture of the warrior as well as for the poets and artists in conceiving and expressing their aesthetic ideals.

The medieval beauty which is embodied in *sabi* is not just the ideal beauty of the middle ages. Its vibrant force is still very much alive and its beauty is now considered to represent the traditional beauty of Japan. Today the concept of *sabi* is jealously guarded and respectfully practiced in the world of the Nō theater, *sumie*, tea cult, flower arrangement, and *haikai*. Every one of these arts was either formed in the Muramachi period or developed from an art originating in this period. Since Zeami's concept of *yūgen* was the basis for developing the beauty of *sabi*, the historical significance of *yūgen* in medieval culture and of the concept of *yūgen* which Zeami strove for and successfully conceived can be appreciated.

¹ Junzō Karaki, "Yūgen to Iūkoto," *Yuya, Gendai Yōkyoku Zenshū*, XII, ed. A. Maruoka (Tokyo, 1961), p. 16.

² Yuichiro Kojiro, *Forms in Japan*, trans. Kenneth Yasuda (Honolulu, 1965), p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York, 1959), pp. 220-21.

⁵ David Kaula, "On Noh Drama," *The Tulane Drama Review* 5 (Sept., 1960): 69-70.

⁶ Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *Japanese Noh Drama*, vol. I (Tokyo, 1955), pp. xi-xii.

⁷ Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, *The Noh Drama* (Tokyo, 1937), p. 8.

⁸ Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, p. xii.

⁹ Asaji Nose, *Zeami Jūrokubushū Hyōshaku*, vol. I (Tokyo, 1962), p. 478 (*Shikadōsho*). (Hereafter referred to as *ZJH*.)

¹⁰ *Genji Monogatari* is also known as the *Tale of Genji*, a story depicting court life. Written by Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 978-ca. 1016) in the early eleventh century, it consists of fifty-four volumes. It is described as "an anticipation of the modern psychological novel and one of the world's truly great books" by Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry* (Stanford, 1961), p. 157. The work is one of Zeami's favorite sources for his Nō composition.

¹¹ Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, *Japanese Noh Drama*, vol. III (Tokyo, 1960), pp. ix-x.

¹² Toyochirō Nogami, *Zeami and His Theories on Noh*, trans. Rōzō Matsumoto (Tokyo, 1955), p. 15.

¹³ Henry W. Wells, *The Classical Drama of the Orient* (New York, 1965), p. 264.

¹⁴ Richard N. McKinnon, "Zeami on the Nō: A Study of 15th Century Japanese Dramatic Criticism." Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1951, p. 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁶ Edward Gordon Craig, "The Artists of the Theatre of the Future," *The Mask*, 1 (May-June, 1908): 68.

¹⁷ John Balance [Craig], "A Note on Masks," *The Mask*, 1 (March, 1908): 10.

¹⁸ Asaji Nose, *Yūgen-ron* (Tokyo, 1944), p. 1.

¹⁹ Jin'ichi Konishi, *Nōgakuron Kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1961), p. 95.

²⁰ Nose, *Yūgen-ron*, p. 28; Oscar Benl, "Buddhism and the Poetic Ideal of Yugen in Japanese Medieval Literature," *The Way* 3 (March, 1951): 1.

²¹ Nose, *Yūgen-ron*, pp. 40-41.

²² Brower and Miner, *Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 17. Donald Keene's translation reads as follows: Evening has come;/ The autumn wind from the fields/ Cuts into the flesh/ And the quails are calling now/ In Fukakusa Village. Donald Keene, *Nō: The Classical Theatre of Japan* (Tokyo, 1966), p. 28.

²³ Brower and Miner, p. 269; Sen'ichi Hisamatsu and Minoru Nishio (anno.), *Karonshū Nōgakuronshū*, in *Nippon Koten Bungaku Taikei* 65 (Tokyo, 1961): 87-88.

²⁴ Shizuo Kobayashi, *Zeami* (Tokyo, 1958), p. 89.

²⁵ Hisamatsu and Nishio, *Karonshū Nōgakuronshū*, p. 233.

²⁸ Nose, *Yūgen-ron*, p. 148; *Kadensho*, *ZJH*, 1: 13; *Yūgaku Shūdō Fūken*, *ZJH* 1: 512; Seami, "Seami Jūroku Bushū: Seami's Sixteen Treatises," trans. Michitaro Shidehara and Wilfred Whitehouse, *Monumenta Nipponica* 4 (July, 1941): 212.

²⁷ Nose, *Yūgen-ron*; *Kadensho*, *ZJH* 1: 112, 191; Seami, p. 236, and 5 (Dec., 1942): 199.

²⁸ Konishi suggests the strong influence of *renga* on Zeami's concept of *yūgen*. Konishi, pp. 96-102.

²⁹ Nose, *Yūgen-ron*, p. 164.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³¹ *Kakyō*, *ZJH* 1: 358.

³² *Goongyoku-jōjō*, *ZJH* 2: 152; *Goon*, *ZJH* 2: 215; *Ongyoku Goi*, in Kazuma Kawase, *Tōchū Zeami Nijūsanbushū* (Tokyo, 1945), p. 83.

³³ Makoto Ueda translates the same poem as follows: Snowy petals scatter/ At the cherry-blossom hunting/ On the field of Katano./ Shall I ever see again/ Such a beautiful spring dawn? Makoto Ueda, *The Old Pine Tree and Other Noh Plays* (Lincoln, 1962), p. xii; also Zeami, *Bashō*, *Yeats, Pound: A Study in Japanese and English Poetics* (Hague, 1965), p. 20.

³⁴ *Kakyō*, *ZJH* 1: 358.

³⁵ Kobayashi, p. 90.

³⁶ For the entire section on *yūgen*, "The Matter of Entering into the Realm of *Yūgen*," see my "An Analysis and Interpretation of Zeami's Concept of *Yūgen*." Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1967, pp. 132-35. See also Ryusaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York, 1958), pp. 288-91, and Tsu-

noda and Keene, "On Attaining the Stage of *Yūgen*," *An Anthology of Japanese Literature: From the Earliest Era to the Mid-nineteenth Century*, Evergreen E-216, ed. D. Keene (New York, 1960), pp. 260-62.

³⁷ Kobayashi, p. 93.

³⁸ Hajime Gotō, *Nō no Keisei to Zeami: Chūsei Bunka no Shūhen* (Tokyo, 1966), p. 231.

³⁹ Minoru Nishio, *Chūseiteki na Mono to sono Tenkai* (Tokyo, 1961), p. 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24. Yoshida Kenkō (1283-1350), a Buddhist monk, wrote a collection of essays, *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness), probably between 1330 and 1331. It is one of the major classic works.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴² Gotō, pp. 154-55.

⁴³ Nishio, pp. 379-80. The translated *haiku* are quoted from: R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* 4 (Tokyo, 1952): xxxiii, 321. The second line of the first *haiku*, "Matsu no furusa yo," reads as "Matsu no furubi ya" in Nishio's quotation (cf. p. 379). Here I have followed the version cited by Taizō Ebara and Shūson Katō in *Bashō Kōza 2 Hokku-hen* 2nd ed. rev. Tokyo, 1956): pp. 419, 422. Blyth quotes "Kaori sasu" as the third line of the second *haiku* (cf. p. xxxiii), but both Nishio (cf. p. 380) and Ebara and Katō, 1: 330, 399, cite "Takimono su."

⁴⁴ Nishio, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Suzuki, p. 61.

⁴⁶ Arthur Waley, *The Nō Plays of Japan*, Evergreen E-62 (New York, 1957), p. 59.