



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Background: Yūgen

Yūgen : Aesthetic Characteristics

The two characters that comprise the word *yūgen* (幽玄) refer to that which resists being clearly discerned. More specifically, the first character, *yū* (幽) refers to “shadowy-ness” and “dimness,” while the second character *gen* (玄) refers to “darkness” and “blackness.”

ŌNISHI Yoshinori argues that the concept of *yūgen* appears in four different kinds of literature: (1) Zen and Chinese Daoist writings, (2) Chinese poetry, (3) *Waka* (Chinese-style poetry in Japan), and (4) treatises on poetry and Nō plays (Ōnishi 9). In the case of Daoist and Zen literature, the concept takes on a broad “metaphysical”⁽⁷⁾ coloring, while the poetic conception of *yūgen* is a more straightforwardly descriptive. And then, in the critical treatises on *Waka* and Nō, *yūgen* begins to be used in more “theoretical” manner in order to justify aesthetic judgments and as a normative concept⁽⁸⁾ for reflecting upon and evaluating aesthetic works.

Aside from its literary currency, *yūgen* also became closely associated with *sumi-e* inkwash painting. (See <http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=11842> and http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/highlight_search?acc=1954.4&page=1&CollectionID=6&Keyword=ink for examples of *sumi-e*.) The visual and literary images typically used to convey the quality of *yūgen* consisted of things like huts being encroached upon by dusk, the enveloping of mountains by mist, the obscuring of the moon by clouds, the fading of people into the shadows, etc. Other perceptible qualities closely associated with these images include colorlessness, vagueness, stark simplicity, silence, and stillness, while the felt qualities include elegance, subtlety, grace, loneliness, tranquility, and a deep sense of pathos.

Yūgen : Philosophical Significance

Tendai Buddhism exercised a profound influence on the concept of *yūgen*.⁽⁹⁾ This influence can be analyzed into two basic strands. The first strand concerns the Tendai practice of *shikan* (止観 “tranquility-contemplation”) meditation, while the second strand returns to the basic Buddhist focus on *mujō* (無常 “impermanence”).

The Tendai practice of *shikan* meditation becomes the lens through which the *yūgen* quality of things comes to be apprehended, according to William LAFLEUR in *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). In the end, *shikan* meditation, practiced for the realization of three truths (the phenomenal (假 *ke*), the void (空 *kū*), and the middle (中 *chū*)), forms the attitudinal posture through which *yūgen* is actualized. LaFleur argues that the Tendai truths emphasizing interdependency of all things functioned as an affirmation of the “indeterminacy of meaning.” As

such, this insight produced a dramatic increase in the depth of meaning and meanings (*fukasa* 深さ) to be written and found in the arts.