

Appreciating Emptiness and Reality as One: The Understated Philosophy of the Japanese Zen Garden in Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*

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Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's early works, which focus on the lives of people who come to terms with their past deeds and memories after World War II, have been praised for their spare elegance and tranquillity. Western reviewers find an exotic mood in the novels' emotional restraint and in the aestheticism of ellipsis that deliberately leaves out the vital point.¹ These cultural specificities have often been associated with images of Japanese Zen Buddhism and Zen gardens. For example, in comparison with

“exuberantly descriptive” contemporary European novelists like Zadie Smith and Jonathan Safran Foer, Jennie Rothenberg Gritz writes that “there is something eerily spare about Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction. The sentences are so uncluttered, the emotions so understated, the physical details so sparse that one might be tempted to compare his prose to a Zen garden” (n.p).² However, these ideas are usually based on stereotypical impressions which arise from cultural preconceptions and do not bring us closer to understanding the novels or the content of Zen principles. Zen was brought from China to Japan in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during the Kamakura period as one of the schools of Buddhism. It survived through the radical modernization and Westernization of post-war Japan and it endures in the heart of Japanese people until the present day with the native religion, Shinto.³ One of the most prevalent Zen practices is a selfless deep meditation involving seated contemplation (*zazen*). Through concentration, one defeats hesitation or discursive thoughts and reaches enlightenment by dismissing worldly concerns. The ultimate goal of Zen practice is to realize the ‘emptiness’ of things, since — as Bret W. Davis asserts — “One awakens as one’s ‘true self’, and yet the true self is selfless . . . in the sense of empty of [sic] a determinate and substantial ego” (190).

Zen Buddhism is crucial to Ishiguro’s second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), due to featuring the notion of the ‘floating world’ throughout the text, which is integral to Zen philosophy. In Zen, when one accepts selflessness, “one awakens to the nature of reality,” realizing that things “do not have their being on their own but exist rather as impermanent events” (Davis, 190). This is the original meaning of “floating world (*Ukiyo*)” in Japanese culture, the sorrowful nature of a fleeting life in the present mundane world. *An Artist* illustrates the

quality of this naturally mutable present world by a long meditative narrative of the protagonist, Masuji Ono, who slowly attempts to reconcile his egoistic self, which is full of hesitation, delusions, and doubts, with the incessant shifting of the values of society. Surprisingly, however, no critics (with the exception of John Rothfork), provide an analytical reading of the novel by using Zen philosophy as a critical methodology. Rothfork argues that Ono's teacher Moriyama, frequently called Mori-san, "plays the part of a Zen master" (90) in the novel, by preaching to Ono that "[t]he ground for the existence of things is temporal and as insubstantial as light" (89). While supporting these claims, this essay foregrounds a new perspective which Rothfork leaves out: that the interrelation of emptiness and reality are strongly suggested in the novel as the constituting elements of the floating world. At first, they are simply expressed as opposing values of futility versus practicality that influence Ono's view before the war, during the war, and after the war, and the way in which he sees the society from which he is estranged. Yet, Ono is awakened by degrees to a new meaning of emptiness and reality in the course of his psychological development. As suggested earlier, the notion of emptiness has its origin in Zen thought. It has been a distinctive feature of Japanese people's mentality and is based on their culture: as Shunmyo Masuno, a Japanese Zen monk and a landscape architect, writes, "[i]t is impossible to talk about Japanese gardens or beauty in Japan without mentioning 'empty space'" (15). The relationality of emptiness and reality is a core principle in Zen gardens and the gardens are designed to visually display contrast and balance within a spatial composition. Interestingly, the Japanese gardens depicted in *An Artist* are carefully crafted to express the characters' inner selves and also to suggest their relationship with their social circumstances, as if imitating

the Zen garden principle. Thus, in this study, I will introduce the image and principle of Zen gardens not just as a means of praising Ishiguro's nuanced and elliptical writing style but also as a way of reading through the understated ideas of the novel.

However, it should be stressed that Ono is not just helplessly and nihilistically wandering in the uncertainties of the world. While introducing a Zen perspective, my concern in this study is to highlight Ono's unresigned, self-assertive behaviour which is prominent in his later life, for Ishiguro emphasizes that "there is something dignified about Ono in the end" (Mason, 11). Ono's craving for his dignity prevents him from thoroughly committing himself to the Zen attitude that refuses to possess such an attachment. This approach to life offers an alternative perspective to the Buddhist nihilism which has often been the standard reading of the novel and highlights a new worldview which Ono finally gains.

1. Ono's pursuit of the 'Real' and his rejection of 'Emptiness'

Ono is a once-respected, now retired, painter who confidently narrates what he has achieved in his lifetime; yet, his self-protective narrative hints at his gesture of hiding something he has done in the past for which he feels guilty. Ono's aspiration and unyielding spirit as an artist begins to grow from the time of his childhood when he was criticized for valuing art by his father, who was inclined towards business and commercialism. In the early part of his career, Ono produces artworks under the supervision of Seiji Moriyama and he endeavours to capture the sensual and evanescent beauty of the nocturnal world and to express it in traditional Japanese paintings. Ono recounts that his focus in those days was "spending much time exploring the city's 'floating world' — the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the

backdrop for all our paintings” (Ishiguro, 144-45). Notably, Ono’s way of defining the floating world here is not adequate, and may mislead non-Japanese readers into thinking that it is a specific world which the demi-monde and bohemians live in. After seven years of apprenticeship, Ono encounters a man named Chishu Matsuda, who advocates militaristic nationalism. Matsuda changes Ono’s mind immensely and Ono begins to doubt Moriyama’s hedonistic lifestyle and finds that kind of artwork not worth devoting his skill and passion to. One day, Ono determinedly breaks away from Moriyama by saying: “artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world. My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever as an artist of the floating world” (180). Ono’s words here strikingly remind us of the title of the novel, though the larger irony they suggest is left unrevealed.

Ono is persuaded to pursue his career through supporting the nationalistic government with Matsuda, and he passionately produces militaristic and patriotic artworks with direct political messages in the 1930s. Ono believes that collaborating with the nation’s regime connects him to the real social problems; therefore, he finds a meaning for his life in producing the works of political art. He succeeds with the radical change of direction as an artist and gains a high reputation as a result. These days still have a supreme glow in Ono’s life until the time of the narrative in 1948, and the memories still make him triumphant and deeply satisfied.

However, Ono begins to notice that he is now displaced in the social paradigm shift after World War II: his past deeds have turned out to be no longer praise-worthy and his dignified identity is estranged from the

ongoing real world. Due to the arrival of the new reality, Ono retires into emptiness and is left again in the clouds of hesitation. The past events are narrated by “Ono’s biased reconstruction and filtered understanding of them” (Shaffer, 40) and this expresses Ono’s attempts to mask his situation with his unreliable narrative, being unwilling to deny the days in which he devoted himself to political art. Yet, Ono is excessively concerned with the upheaval caused by the collective tension of the younger generation, which accuses the older generation of wartime culpability. In order to support his younger daughter Noriko’s marriage, the aging man knows that he needs to face up to the world with changed values and make a public apology. Hence, he agonizes about being unable to reconcile his self-respect with the condemnation he receives from the eyes of the world.

Alongside Ono’s narrative, the space of gardens features effectively and pervasively in the novel by symbolically implying the characters’ states of mind. The garden, which Ono works on daily, matches his archaic Japanese-style mansion and the reader finds a close relationship between Ono’s concealed emotions and the symbolic display of elements in the private space of his garden. One example of this is the scene in which Noriko quarrels with Ono by saying that his unnecessary cutting of the bamboo and pruning of the shrubs in the garden has made them totally unbalanced. Noriko criticizes her father by saying, “You should have left things as they were” (Ishiguro, 107). Ironically, however, Ono has visited his former student Kuroda’s house that day for her sake, in an attempt to persuade him not to leak any unfavourable things about Ono’s past to the detective so that it won’t effect Noriko’s marriage. Not only does Ono end up being coldly denied a meeting with Kuroda, but he is also condemned for what he had mercilessly done to Kuroda in the past.

Ishiguro insinuates that Ono had secretly reported Kuroda as a government traitor to the imperialist police in wartime and this explains why Kuroda was taken into custody and his paintings burnt. Therefore, the appearance of the garden represents Ono's helplessly confused feelings and the unbalanced gardening reveals his unbalanced position in post-war society. The spoilt garden and Noriko's criticism that her father is not all-knowing ring ironically, for they suggest that Ono's self-esteem as a man of high reputation exists in truth in his imagination inside his narrow world. With regard to the characteristics of Ono's garden, Japanese gardens maintain an abstract and minimalistic condition compared to the flower-filled gardens in Western countries. Generally, people in Japan have a cultural mannerism of projecting their mental state onto the space of the garden. Traditional Japanese gardens are unique in their closed sacredness and are highly meditative and self-reflective places where the viewer's mind can contemplate. Although the space looks simple, reduced and empty, it signifies a microcosm of the viewer's mentality and so the garden scenes are rich with allusions to the characters' contemplative gestures.

The other example of the garden representing the characters' minds occurs when Shintaro, who used to be Ono's subordinate, comes to see him. Shintaro pleads with his teacher to sign the document to prove that Ono had no influence on him during the China Crisis campaign. Shintaro does this to conceal his support for Japan's imperialistic invasion of China. Unable to hide his anger and loneliness at being abandoned by his last student, Ono asks Shintaro, "[w]hy don't you simply face up to the past?" (103), though ironically, Ono turns his back to Shintaro and gazes out into his garden in a defensive manner. Shintaro responds, "I am a man in the midst of my career. It is all very well to reflect and ponder

when one is in retirement. But as this happens, I live in a busy world . . .” (104). His words sharply denigrate his former teacher, who irresponsibly confines himself in an empty past and does not face up to the changes in the world. Ono narrates, “[i]ndeed, as I watched, a breeze shook a branch of the maple tree, shaking off most of the snow. Only the stone lantern at the back of the garden had a substantial cap of white on it” (104). In this situation, the maple tree represents the way in which Shintaro denied Ono’s past achievements and dismissed him. The lantern, which is still covered with snow, symbolizes that Ono is clinging to his past honour and authority. Indeed, one can draw parallels between the elements in the garden and the contrasting circumstances of the young man and the old man. Again, the state of the garden and Ono’s psychological nuances act in unison and the characters’ speeches suggest that they realize the manner of appreciating Japanese gardens.

2. *Understanding ‘Emptiness’: The features and spirit of Zen gardens in An Artist*

While private gardens in the domestic context are effective as a reflection of one’s inner self, the Zen garden is consummated as a sacred spiritual place where the most serene state of mind is represented in the miniature landscape. It is itself a form of art within Japanese culture that profoundly expresses the Zen spirit and aesthetics. Masuno introduces the theories used in Zen gardens as follows: “[t]hese garden styles each prescribe one or more methods of scenic composition: the use of ‘borrowed views’, reduced scale, and symbolism” he continues “[Symbolism] is utilised to create a greater spiritual awareness of man’s relationship with nature. This was a direct consequence of the meditative elements of Zen Buddhism” (Madej, 54). These distinctive features, mainly used in stone-and-sand dry gardens, represent the dynamism of emptiness and reality in a scenic composition.

Although critics see Moriyama in *An Artist* as an exceptional Zen master, I argue that Matsuda, who was Ono's great friend and a rival through his career, is another key person who teaches the Zen perspective to Ono via repetition of the ideas of emptiness and reality. Notably, most of the scenes in which Matsuda appears are in garden settings and the way he faces the garden space evokes Zen sensibility in an allegorical way. The first encounter of Ono and Matsuda, thirty years ago from the narrative viewpoint of 1948, occurs in the courtyard of Moriyama's decaying villa when Ono was still in his apprenticeship. Since Moriyama believes that the ephemeral events in the pleasurable night time are what an artist should perceive as beauty, the way of life there was closely related to Moriyama's extraordinary aestheticism. One morning, Ono finds Matsuda standing in front of the veranda in a dignified attitude in order to headhunt him from Moriyama's place. Matsuda's dandyish figure and clinical attitude, combined with a vivid image of sunlight just after the rainfall, demolish the empty, cloistered world which Ono has inhabited until then and spray him with a bright new shower of enlightenment. Matsuda insists that his concern is with artists who inhabit "that enclosed little world" and that the society he works for "was concerned to wake up artists and introduce them to the real world" (Ishiguro, 172). Matsuda often teases Ono by saying "[t]here's a certain kind of artist these days, . . . whose greatest talent lies in hiding away from the real world" (171), and he succeeds in taking him out from the empty world of art to the pragmatic world of political and social reform which he firmly believes in. Although Ono opposed Matsuda at the beginning, he is gradually persuaded through being instilled with right-wing political ideals, and as a result, the two start to agree with each other by becoming militaristic thinkers and leading "something like that

New Japan Campaign” (199).

However, when Ono visits Matsuda’s house in 1948, he finds that time has changed his friend greatly: Matsuda now realizes that the war has brought immense sacrifice and he lives in isolation, suffering from illness. Ono notices the utopian quality of Matsuda’s garden and listening to the sound of the pond, he remarks, “I can tell just listening to it that we’re out of the city” (92). Matsuda replies, “I hardly remember what the city sounds like. This has been the extent of my world for the past few years. This house and this garden” (92). Although he used to overestimate himself, Matsuda’s modest words confess that he did not have enough foresight to see the consequences of his beliefs: that the New Japan Campaign’s contribution to society was merely marginal. Ishiguro states in an interview that the main concern of this novel is the characters’ “parochial perspective” that fails “to see beyond [their] own environment and to stand outside the actual values of [their] time” (Mason, 9). Ishiguro’s comment can be related to the affinity which he creates between his characters’ “parochial vision” and the enclosed garden, in contrast to the large expanse far away from their territory. The two old men reunite and renew their friendship, and it is just before Matsuda’s death that they look back at their lives in the garden of Matsuda’s house in both a nostalgic and a cheerful mood. Ono says:

‘But then I for one never saw things too clearly. A narrow artist’s perspective, as you say. Why, even now, I find it hard to think of the world extending much beyond this city.’

‘These days,’ Matsuda said, ‘I find it hard to think of the world extending much beyond my garden. So perhaps you’re the one with the wider perspective now, Ono’ (199).

With his self-mocking remarks, Matsuda likens the realm of the garden again to the narrowness of his vision and laughs at himself, because, living in seclusion in the now empty world, he is much the same as Ono, whom he mocked in the early days.

Here, their words reveal that there is a change in Matsuda's and Ono's recognition of the notion of emptiness. In their younger days, emptiness was no more than a futile notion for them, not worth devoting themselves to, and thus Ono has been obsessed with escaping from its idleness and pursuing reality instead. It tormented him to admit that all of his past achievements turned into a useless effort and that he has wasted his time, and accordingly, Ono's self-defensive narrative contradicts the real world. However, by realizing the narrowness of his perspective, Ono's recognition has dramatically changed and he now accepts the idea of identifying his view and himself with emptiness. Regarding the aim of deep meditation in Zen practice — namely to achieve a selfless state — emptiness in Zen is ultimately a representation of no-self. Robert Moore explains that in the Mahayana school of Buddhism in India, “the notion of no-self” extends “to *all* phenomena with the conception of ‘emptiness’: not only is the self an illusion, so is *every* discrete phenomenon, and therefore, there are no real objects to become attached to in the first place and there is no real self to do the grasping” (704) and so the enlightenment in Zen means the realization of the true nature of emptiness. Through the course of his life, Ono's recognition of emptiness manifests a transition from a hateful notion of futility to a conceptual space where he condenses his mind and devotes himself to meditation.

Significantly, although the old men apparently stand together in the same situation now, their points of view on life are different from each other. A family event separated their perspectives since Matsuda did not

have a child. Noriko's marriage meeting with the Saito family does not let Ono hide from reality for good: it is an opportunity for him to finally escape from his hesitation by announcing that his past propagandistic works deserve condemnation. At this point in the novel, the time has come for Ono to face up to his task of trying to secure his daughter's happiness. On the day of the marriage meeting, Ono becomes wildly obsessed with fear of the offended gaze of the Saito family and believes that they are going to persecute him. Since his nerves can no longer endure the situation, he finally admits his defeat by saying that all of his past contributions to society were a mistake. Ono's act at the marriage meeting provides him with a chance to bring an end to his long hesitation and face up to the past.

Similar to the relationship of the enclosed emptiness and the outer reality that constructs the character's viewpoint, the Zen garden does not just display the finitude of its space, but represents an infinite expanse at the same time. The garden with borrowed scenery (*Shakkeishiki teien*) does not conclude with its partitioned private space, and the interrelation between the exterior and interior of the garden signifies a confrontation of two heterogeneous, contradictory qualities. For example, the garden of Entsū-ji temple demonstrates a style which borrows and incorporates the surrounding grand landscape into the composition of a garden (fig. 1). The beauty of external nature, such as distant mountains or rivers, contrasts against the artificial beauty of the interior garden. In most gardens with borrowed views, a wall or a hedge is built between the two spaces. Allen Weiss writes:

These walls are the imperfect, irregular elevation or background against which appear the perfect forms of the garden in its projection, the chaotic ground of the sublime intuition. Yet the walls do not function as pure

enclosures, like the frames of Western paintings or the alleys of formal gardens, . . . [It is] a middle ground that articulates the foreground of the garden and the background of the environs (125).

Importantly, this barrier does not serve as pure obstacle or definitive limit but has a profound meaning in Zen gardens. Taro Okamoto, an acclaimed Japanese artist, emphatically states that the wall of borrowed view gardens reinforces a dynamic, dialectical juxtaposition of emptiness and reality with a great artistic quality: “[t]he medium creates a discontinuity between the garden and the scenery, though at the same time they interact organically beyond the obstacle” (191; my translation).⁴ Okamoto continues:

It does not simply maintain a continuous or a unitary balance but expresses a technique which combines nature and the artificial elements together and simultaneously keeps them in an opposed condition. This is exactly the contrast of reality and emptiness. An intense tension stretches between the spaces, which works beyond mere discontinuity (191; my translation).⁵

The confrontation of emptiness and reality one sees in Zen gardens is analogous to Ono’s vision which draws a line between the two confronting worlds. Before Noriko’s marriage meeting, Ono has been making an alternative judgement on emptiness and reality. He was always destined to make choices between the two: the barrier he built between the two worlds made him stay in his comfort zone, and he shut out what was going on in the real world. After he has overcome his past at the marriage meeting, however, Ono has stopped turning his back to the current world of the young generation. His recognition of emptiness and reality has changed: the emptiness is no longer an exclusive space that hides him

from reality, though it coexists and dynamically interacts with the real world beyond the barrier. Ono forgives himself for living in an empty world, and furthermore, he invites the real world into his viewpoint, in contrast with the gesture of Matsuda, who gives up seeing the vast space beyond his garden.

**3. The philosophy of dry gardens: The simultaneity of ‘Emptiness’ and ‘Reality’
predominating over space**

After Noriko has married, Ono visits the apartment which she lives in with her husband, though he cannot help but express his uncomfortableness about her modern living space. The newly-built apartment blocks are “unimaginable and constrictive” (Ishiguro, 156) to Ono who, by contrast, lives in an old extravagant mansion. This uncomfortable feeling arises from the doubts which are still rising in Ono’s mind about the too hasty state of Japan after the surrender, which sweeps away the old customs and senior employees from the companies by blindly following the way of the Americans. The features of Noriko’s too convenient and practical apartment seem to Ono to symbolize the rapidly Americanizing and modernizing Japan. However, at the dinner table in the apartment, he is told by Noriko’s husband Taro Saito that he has nothing to worry about concerning the future which Japan is approaching. Taro tells his father-in-law that the future is filled with bright prospects and there is no need to doubt its validity. This leads the readers to anticipate the repetition of history by reminding them of young Ono and Matsuda, who likewise used to blindly believe in progress. Timothy Wright points out that the same discourse is used repeatedly throughout the novel: “the new Ono equally fails to recognize how embedded he is in a historical context, the extent to which his actions, and the actions of all those around him, are still complicit in structures

of power” (78). This is partly true when seeing Ono’s life from a larger historical point of view. However, the novel does not hint at the possibility that Ono is destined to become a victim of history or the social system once again, since he does not get involved in the mainstream society and chooses to stay in his self-contained world. As if expressing his resolution, Ono chats with his grandson Ichiro that night:

‘Is Oji staying the night?’

‘No, Oji’s going to his own house soon.’

‘Why can’t Oji stay here too?’

‘There’s not enough room here, Ichiro. Oji has a large house all to himself, remember’ (188).

The place which Ono returns to alone is a grandiose Japanese-style house, slowly recovering from war damage, and his garden is also an empty world, as before.

The scenic composition of emptiness and reality applies not just to gardens but also to the images of ruined buildings which recur throughout the novel. From the earlier discussions, one should remember Moriyama’s villa and Ono’s mansion as ruins; moreover, they include the changed townscape of the entertainment district which Ono frequently visited in the old days. In 1913 when Ono was new to the city, the district used to consist of dilapidated small factories and warehouses. The area had temporarily flourished before the war with bars and restaurants, and then became a ruin once again due to being destroyed in the war. The district had thus experienced the same successive phases as Ono, from emptiness to fullness and falling into emptiness again after the war (Furukawa, 46). Although it now displays the atmosphere of a graveyard,

the space invokes Ono's memories at a bar named Migi-Hidari where he used to spend the most glorious nights of his life. It is a place where he received a passionate celebration from his pupils and colleagues, after being presented with the Shigeta Foundation Award in 1938, which he recalls as the highest honour for a militaristic artist in those days. Looking at the last scene of the story set in 1950, the vacant lots of the pleasure district have been reconstructed and completely changed into new office buildings. The bar, Migi-Hidari, has been reborn as the front yard of several offices. Brian Shaffer writes that "the little that remains of the old pleasure district amid the new development resembles, like Ono himself, a refugee from a former world, 'looking oddly incongruous in its new setting'" (47). Yet, Ono selflessly immerses himself in the space, although it does not fit into the busy world of today. Ono refers to a bench in the midst of the space which he sometimes comes to sit on and where he would "[remain] for a while, observing the activity around [him]" (Ishiguro, 205). He narrates:

For whose benefit it has been placed there, I do not know, for I have never seen any of these busy people ever stopping to relax on it. But it is my fancy that the bench occupies a spot very close to where our old table in the Migi-Hidari would have been situated, and I have taken at times to sitting on it (205).

Although no one who works in the busy world pays any attention to the bench, it is a special seat in Ono's empty world, and seems to be prepared for him. Ono enjoys the luxury of sitting on the bench at the very last moment of the novel. Silvia Tellini argues that "[t]he place where Ono used to spend pleasurable hours has now become an empty field, a passage alley, where new life struggles to be born; while he observes the trees from a bench, he understands they are not there for

contemplation [by busy people]" (9). Ono notices the three young businessmen who spring out from a glass office building across the road and they apparently overlap with the three boys in the blueprint which Ono had once drawn in his militaristic propaganda poster, who are ready to fight for the country. Ono is simply awestruck by the young men full of optimistic energy, and their innocence revives the good old days in him. Watching from the bench, Ono entrusts the bright future of Japan to the three lively businessmen with dazzling white shirts and cheerful laughs, and there is no more doubt in him, as in the young men. Tellini writes that observing the new generation "at a distance, their cheerful talk takes him back to the crowd that he used to meet at the Migi-Hidari in the past, and a thought suddenly comes to him: that that place had been the bridge between two contradictory worlds all along" (9). Considering that Ono satisfactorily retires to his empty world and the businessmen live in the ongoing reality, he and the young men are occupying different worlds, even though they exist in the same place. The opposing notions of emptiness and reality overlap and are condensed in the same space.

Again, the structure of Ono's vision coincides with the principle of Zen gardens: a dry garden most clearly represents the notion of simultaneity in Zen. It presents the concept of emptiness and reality differently from the garden with borrowed scenery. The dry garden, which is famous at, for example, Ryoan-ji temple and Daisen-in in Daitokuji-temple, represents broad hills by arranging rocks and carpeting the ground with white gravel and sand in the form of streams (fig. 2). The highly abstract appearance of those gardens possesses an impressive aura and moves our poetic sentiments more than those that are actually filled with water. By emptying one's self through the process of meditation, one achieves a particular sensibility of hearing the murmur of a dry brook or the roaring

sounds of a dry cataract over the rock surface of the garden. The prevailing emptiness in the garden arouses an infinite expansion of our ontological viewpoint and calls us to see things beyond absence and to listen to sounds beyond silence. Seeing existence through nothingness thus reflects an idea of Zen concerning stillness being one with movement. Soetsu Yanagi writes about the philosophy of emptiness in a dry garden as follows: “[t]here is no wordy explanation. There must be the ‘speech without words’ of Zen. . . . In its placidity there must be movement; it lives in that no-man’s land where eloquence and silence are one. Without both it dies” (114). As Yanagi implies, in terms of Zen, the sets of binary notions are not easily reducible to the idea of dualism. While Zen rejects binary notions as a means of judging the world in an either/or situation, it persuades us to accept the dynamism of simultaneity. Reginald Horace Blyth defines Zen philosophy as ultimately an “at-the-same-time-ness” (10) and “the resolution of two intellectually incompatible facts” (211). He expresses the absoluteness that is attained by a state of selflessness as follows: “[t]he Zen view, and the right one, is that beauty exists when and only when I am the picture. Though the picture is a bad one, or even a black canvas, there is still Zen, if and when I am the canvas, but beauty arises when the canvas has already suffered a sea-change, a universe-change” (16), which explains the attitude of appreciating emptiness and reality as one. Returning to the novel, the readers find Ono going through a Zen experience of appreciating the reality inside emptiness, as if he is facing the dry garden. Seating himself on the bench, Ono sees through the glorious and flourishing reality surrounding him: passionate speeches of patriotism, fervent applause from colleagues, and the sound of clattering tea utensils and Japanese wooden clogs (*geta*) which are not around anymore. Every time he sits on the bench, losing himself and concentrating on the space

and time, the people's voices of eulogy in the old times might be audible to him, now and forever. Sitting there connected with the space, he senses the blankness and fullness of life as one.

4. 'Remaining' forever as an artist of the floating world

However a sense of self-assertiveness, which is intensified in Ono's narrative in the later part of the novel, gives readers an impression of incongruity with the Zen view he has gained. After he has carried out his duty at Noriko's marriage meeting, Ono returns to a self-praising narrative, claiming that "there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one's life" (Ishiguro, 124-25) and reassures himself that he is an impressive character. He thus regains his self-esteem by believing that he has accomplished the honourable deed of admitting his failure, and he feels himself ennobled by regarding himself again as a man of integrity. Ono's strong desire for life is contrasted with the self-negating gesture of the influential people who committed suicide in order to apologize for their responsibility in the wartime. It is also contrasted with the attitude of Matsuda, who had become rather nihilistic due to his physical feebleness. Accordingly, while Ono's view is enlightened by the detachedness of Zen, his narrative still reveals an attachment to his pride. One reason for this is that he is just an artist, not a trained Zen monk; the other is that it is a lesson Moriyama has taught him in the past that gradually echoes in Ono's life. When Ono was working under Moriyama, he met Moriyama's old friend, an elderly man named Gisaburo. Gisaburo often visited a pleasure house with Moriyama to enjoy drinking and entertainment with women. Their undisciplined way of living makes the young, aspiring painter concerned about consuming

his life for no practical purpose. While Ono rejects their pleasure-seeking lifestyle as wasteful, Moriyama backs up his friend and teaches Ono that although Gisaburo is seemingly an unfortunate man who has lost all of his fame and talents, he still demonstrates the feats he used to perform in the old and brilliant days and immerses himself in the pleasure of the night.

Those women [of the pleasure district] would tell him all the things he [Gisaburo] wanted to hear, and for the night anyway, he'd be able to believe them. Once the morning came, of course, he was too intelligent a man to go on believing such things. But Gisaburo didn't value those nights any the less for that. . . . What people call the floating world, Ono, was a world Gisaburo knew how to value (149-50).

According to Moriyama, a man of the floating world does not mean a man who just fancifully escapes into a world of pleasure as Ono has been presuming, but a man with a faith who immerses himself in a specific world in which he finds reality. It was too rash for young Ono to judge that the world Gisaburo valued as an amusing pastime for a sad, old man. Rather, it is a world which he can concentrate on wholeheartedly, no matter how meaningless it is from an objective point of view.

Indeed, the way of living which Moriyama promotes involves a desire for attachment and does not entirely reflect the idea of utter detachment in Zen. Although he urges Ono to embrace the fluctuating nature of the world, he suggests that his pupil should appreciate the glory of his life itself without doubt. Like Ono, Moriyama recounts that he had a doubt and a sense of guilt about immersing himself deeply in the beauty of the nocturnal world when he was younger. He remarks, "I suspect the reason I couldn't celebrate the floating world was that I couldn't bring myself to believe in its worth. . . . It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when

one doubts its very validity” (150). Hence, his doubts appeared in his paintings and he has been producing works which “are all fatally flawed” (149) by trivial concerns. Regardless of Ono, who does not show understanding of Moriyama, Moriyama self-reflexively repeats the idea that one can perceive the reality of things on the first occasion when one empties one’s mind and is selflessly incorporated with it. It might be a meaningless thing when seen from the point of view of others who deny its worth, or even by oneself when one cannot believe in its validity. Nonetheless, it gains weight and value only when one comes to appreciate it as it is — and then it exposes itself as a reality. For Moriyama and Gisaburo, it is a world in which they capture sensual beauty, whereas for Ono and Matsuda, it is a world in which they devoted themselves to the country during the wartime. Therefore, the notion of a man of the floating world does not just refer to the lives of Moriyama and Gisaburo, which Ono has despised, but becomes a living lesson to himself in an ironical way. Mark Tiedemann suggests that Ono’s situation parallels that of Gisaburo: “[a]s Ono sits on the bench in the end it is [as] if he is Gisaburo, the morning after a night in the pleasure district, shorn of his hangover, realizing that though the illusory night of his glory is gone, there was still value in it” (83). From his masters, Ono learned to embrace his life itself without doubt or hesitation, and he further enlarged this attitude in his self-assertive narrative as a way to survive the unfortunate situation of a catastrophic society. Appreciating the beauty of the world to which he has devoted the best time in his life, he now lives as an artist of the floating world.

Before Matsuda’s death, Ono and Matsuda reassure each other that they are mutual witnesses who can praise each other’s efforts and the way they have fought with courage. After overcoming his friend’s death,

Ono realizes his passion for life once more: he claims, full of pride, that “the likes of him and me, we have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in the best of faith” (Ishiguro, 201-02) and that there is no reason to die in the condition of having lost one’s confidence. Perhaps, in the future, the time will come when the young businessmen in the final scene find that their endeavor has become worthless and condemned by the world. Yet, no matter what cataclysm should occur, the novel conveys an aestheticism of being absorbed into a moment of “real satisfaction” that one “at least acted on what [one] believed and did [one’s] utmost” (204). Ono’s self-affirmation about his life does not let him choose death or fall into nihilistic defeatism but guides him to forgive himself, for he has lived the earlier days in the best of faith. It recalls the following words of Moriyama:

‘But I’ve long since lost all such doubts, Ono,’ he [Moriyama] continued.
 ‘When I am an old man, when I look back over my life and see I have devoted it to the task of capturing the unique beauty of the world, I believe I will be well satisfied. And no man will make me believe I’ve wasted my time’ (150-51).

Although Ono has continued to oppose his teacher, he was actually living out the most important lesson which Moriyama has taught him: he lives with a strong satisfaction at having exerted himself in the past, in all sincerity, even though he experiences an ultimate downfall. Ono smiles in satisfaction from the special seat of his empty world, watching the brightness of the real world: he now deserves to remain forever as an artist of the floating world.

Conclusion

This study has reassessed traditional perspectives found in earlier

studies and reviews that metaphorically relate Ishiguro's novels to Japanese Zen Buddhism by clarifying their relation to the concrete contexts of Zen gardens and their philosophical meanings. Earlier studies overlooked Ishiguro's techniques of creating spaces that tellingly evoke Zen philosophy: the correlation of emptiness and reality which is fundamental to understanding the floating world. By examining the content of the novel through the dynamic pattern of emptiness and reality, my analysis has pointed to the way in which these notions acquire religious and philosophical meanings in the course of the characters' lives in accordance with their discovery of the concepts of Zen.

It seems to be an irony embedded in the text that critics who are unfamiliar with Zen ideas express their doubts about the texture of the floating world displayed in the novel, describing it as slippery and unreliable. "[N]ever one place, nothing to lose, the floating world betrays its narrator, and it everywhere betrays 'us'" (1072), Rebecca Walkowitz critiques. On the contrary, Moriyama's teaching — that Ono should selflessly appreciate things without doubt — conquers Ono's fear of being betrayed by the unstable social values and arbitrary historical consciousness of the public. Moreover, it provides him with a place to live in the current world that eventually leads him to take a different path from the suicidal characters in Ishiguro's fiction. What Ishiguro has actually depicted is not Buddha's teachings of complete self-renunciation, but a man who does not follow these ideas in the end, still having the earthly joy of feeling pride in one's self.

Things do not always display their fixed nature in the floating world. Nonetheless, the characterization of Ono and the philosophy of his life indicate that to accept one's emptiness does not imply a pessimistic negation of self but unfolds as a generative relationship of the small

individual with the vastness of the ever-changing world.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Bruce King (207). Rebecca Walkowitz (1053-4) and Ayaka Nakajima (51, 54-5) juxtapose various quotations from Western reviews at the time when *An Artist* was first published, which exaggeratingly romanticize the Japaneseness in Ishiguro's writing style.
2. Leslie Forbes also writes, "his books are Zen gardens with no flowery metaphors, no wild, untamed weeds threatening — or allowed — to overrun the plot (n.p)."
3. Zen philosophy "has been influential in shaping Japanese art and culture" (Cali, 9) through history, not only in gardens but also in the art of the tea ceremony, temples and garden architecture, sculpture, calligraphy, and paintings. Since we can learn Zen through appreciating such Zen-inspired artworks, the principle has been familiar to modern people and has been passed down for centuries.
4. The original text is as follows: 「庭と遠景とのあいだに一つの断絶的な空間をおいた、しかもそれを乗り越えて有機的に対応し、構成されている」 (Okamoto, 191).
5. The original text continues as follows: 「それは庭つづきの一元的な均衡をたもつのではなく、自然と反自然的要素とを対立のまま結合する技術です。それこそ、まえにふれた虚と実の対比、いわば無を媒介とし、断絶を前提とした高次な緊張なのです」

(Okamoto, 191).

FIGURES



Figure. 1. A garden with borrowed scenery, at Entsū-ji Temple, located in Kyoto, Japan (“Karesansui garden,” 79).



Figure. 2. A dry garden at Daitokuji-temple, Daisen-in, located in Kyoto, Japan ("Karesansui garden," 48).

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