Comparing the visual perception and aesthetic evaluation of natural landscapes in Russia and Japan

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Japan and Russia have deeply rooted cultural traditions regarding natural landscape appreciation, share a common border, and have areas with similar natural environments. They differ, however, in cultural, historical, and economic aspects. The purpose of this study was to reveal the similarities and differences between Russian and Japanese respondents regarding the visual and emotional evaluation of landscapes based on ethno-cultural and regional differences. We asked respondents at universities in Russia (Moscow, Irkutsk, and Kamchatka) and Japan (Hokkaido, Chiba, and Miyazaki) to group and rate 70 color landscape images. Unlike theoretical concepts that explain landscape preferences within an evolutionary framework or according to individual and cultural differences, we found that these factors interact in more complicated ways. Cultural traditions and features of the natural environment that were familiar to respondents influenced their visual perception and aesthetic evaluation of landscape. Russian respondents seemed more emotional while Japanese respondents tended to be more restrained in their assessments. However, there was a rather strong correlation between their estimates of landscape attractiveness, which might confirm the existence of universal human concepts of landscape aesthetics. The most attractive for both Russian and Japanese respondents were waterfalls, mountains, and lakes; but the least attractive were waterless plains. At the same time, we found cross-cultural and regional differences in assessing seacoasts, rivers, forests, and swampy plains. There was practically no correlation between Russian and Japanese respondents in their appreciation of exotic/familiar landscapes. For the Russian respondents, the most exotic landscapes were also the most attractive, although we did not observe such a tendency for the Japanese respondents. All the Russian and Japanese respondents appreciated certain familiar landscapes that were symbols of native nature as very attractive. Unlike "geoscientific" landscape classifications, in the visual and emotional grouping of landscapes by respondents the most important feature appeared to be the presence/absence of water and the type of water basin (river, lake, and sea); for Russian respondents (especially for Moscow respondents), topography was also important, while the Japanese respondents mostly used visual and seasonal characteristics in their classifications. All Japanese respondents assessed the attractiveness and exoticism of landscapes almost identically, while there were some differences among Russian respondents from different regions.

Keywords: visual landscape classification, aesthetic evaluation, attractive landscape, exotic landscape, traditional landscape appreciation, influence of natural environment