

## *Moon Through the Gate: Reflecting on Time/Space in Japanese Aesthetics*

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### **Abstract**

Aesthetics and the sense of beauty in Japan occupy a special place and are at the foundation of the Japanese national identity. In Japanese culture, every aspect of daily life can become an aesthetic experience. Objects and rituals have to be both beautiful and functional at the same time. This duet of beauty and functionality is illuminated by the constellation of a number of aesthetic concepts. Concept of MA which is often translated as “space between,” “mindful pause,” or as a “negative space” could also be understood as “active silence” or “presence of absence.” From architecture to literature, painting, calligraphy and culinary arts, MA is ever-present in performing arts, martial arts, and all “meditation in motion” practices. Japanese character for MA is part of such words as world, humankind, space, time, moment, circle of friends and many others. This paper will focus on MA in Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony, in particular, its applications to the contemplative pedagogy, the ways of teaching and learning of this discipline. The research is based on my students’ diaries, which is one of the components of the “Japanese Aesthetics” course taught in a Canadian university. Though Japanese aesthetic concepts are deeply rooted in the country’s cultural fabric, it doesn’t mean that they cannot appeal to the tastes of non-Japanese. Moreover, I argue that they can be successfully applied as a methodology in various disciplines, pedagogy in particular.

Keywords: Japanese Aesthetics, Mindfulness, Contemplative Pedagogy, Culture, Intercultural Studies

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## **Introduction**

Aesthetics play a very important role in Japan. Whether consciously or not, aesthetics in Japan often takes precedence over other cultural elements. Moreover, the Japanese sense of beauty has become the unifying medium of national identity. Though Japanese aesthetic concepts are deeply rooted in the country's cultural fabric, it doesn't mean that they cannot appeal to the tastes of non-Japanese. While study of Japanese Aesthetics deepens our understanding of the country and its cultural context, we are also learning something very powerful and fully applicable to other cultures as well. Rather than being passively consumed, beauty is perceived as a way of living every day, every moment. Things are appreciated not only because they are beautiful but also because they are practical. This junction of beauty and its practical application in everyday life is what makes this approach unique. There is much to learn from this approach and many Japanese traditional aesthetic concepts have flourished outside Japan in the areas of art, craft, design etc. I believe that their application could be a lot wider, and they can successfully contribute to the many new areas such as education, management, organizational design, and many others.

Japanese always say that they live in a very small country. Whether or not it's true, the density of population is very high so there has been a need in creative approach to personal space/time, interaction between people and certain ways of behaviour. Since the houses are situated very close to each other, one must always be mindful of their surroundings. Both physical and aural culture in Japan are very much attuned to an individual being part of a group or several groups rather than being an individual. Under such circumstances, a need for quietude, quiet places resulted in several invisible barriers (some of which are oddly also considered the connectors at the same time), elaborate manners, and specific body language as well. For example, noticeably everyone bows in Japan all the time. Bowing also means that one must leave space between the two in order to be able to bow to each other. Of course, this doesn't apply to a very crowded train during the rush hour, but it teaches composure and ethics in such situation as well.

One of the fundamental concepts of Japanese Aesthetics is the concept of MA.

### **What Is MA?**

The character for MA consists of two elements each one of which is also a separate character. One of them is character for gate and the other one is for moon in an older version of the kanji, or sun in a modern one. It seems that in China the character used the kanji for moon, while when arrived to Japan, it was changed to the sun. The image is of the light streaming through the gate illuminating the space between the posts seems to accentuate the space that allows for the light to enter. Besides being a character for the aesthetic concept, this kanji is also commonly used in Japanese language in such words as "between," close circle, human, humankind, mistake (with the negation or misplacement of ma), foolishness (lack of ma). MA refers to the space between, "empty" space, gap.

The Noh actor, Kunio Komparu, writes that MA: "can be translated into English as space, spacing, interval, gap, blank, room, pause, rest, time, timing, or opening... (It is) a unique conceptual term, one without parallel in other languages" (Komparu, p.70). He says that when the concept initially came from China it only referred to space, but as it evolved in Japan it included time as well. The fact that MA refers to space and to time makes it unique.

However, there is the third meaning of the term which is “space/time” where the space and time merge into one experience of the moment in space.

Japanese architect Arata Isozaki says: “Space could not be perceived independently of the elements of time, and time was not abstracted as a regulated, homogeneous flow, but rather was believed to exist only in relation to movements or space... Thus, space was perceived as identical with the events or phenomena occurring in it; that is, space was recognized only in its relation to time...” (Isozaki, 13).

Because in Japan listening and observing is valued much more than voicing one’s opinion, MA as a form of behaviour and conduct contributes to harmony between people – the most important foundation of the Japanese society.

### **MA in Arts**

Traditional Japanese Noh theatre is an epitome of MA in arts. While there are musicians and actors on stage, it is the moments of no-action that are considered the most captivating and most enjoyable. Actions before and after the interval (MA) are linked by the unwavering inner strength of an actor who can perform/not perform so called “no-action,” which becomes the centre of the performance. This ‘negative space’ has power to hold the attention of the audience without providing any descriptive content. It reflects the Buddhist concept of “no-mind,” which is the basis of creativity. Empty moments are precisely the gates through which the art of Noh shines.

Despite pursuing a very different aesthetics and challenging refinement and understatement so valued in Japanese culture, Butoh – a form of Japanese dance/movement theatre that started in the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century – keeps the ideals of MA and almost brings it forward as a key element of the whole dance-movement.

Another traditional art form in which the idea of MA plays a very important part is poetry. So different from the Western poetic tradition, Japanese poems, especially haiku, rely on a pause to deliver an image or a series of images “suspending” them in emptiness. While the images in haiku are always coherent, the language often seems grammatically interrupted, creating gaps. It often results in directly experienced immediacy.

In architecture and garden design MA is represented by many architectural elements, such as the space between the posts, *ranma* that allows the breeze to flow through, *engawa* situated between the room and the garden. Garden itself includes a lot of space seemingly not filled, no matter how small the garden. It is because that space is also an important component rather than simply a pause in the landscape. One specific architectural form worth mentioning is a *kekkaï*, or a boundary marker. The word is curiously written with the characters to connect and world. Rather than a separator, this boundary is a connector to a different world, different experience. *Kekkai* can be moved, set in a different place or removed all together and is an expression of transience, change, unfixed setting and space. In *kekkaï* and its use we see the reflection of the impermanence, a fluid concept of space that goes beyond boundaries. It is a very Buddhist idea. However, MA also has connections with Shinto. Both open space and a notion of temporary come to mind. The nature of *kami* is to arrive, stay for a while and then depart. *Kami* need to arrive into space that is uncluttered, empty. Shinto ritual is in fact a process of waiting for the arrival of *kami*, receiving the presence of *kami*, and seeing the *kami* off. MA becomes essential in encountering *kami*.

Besides “serving” as a connector for different elements MA has an aesthetic value of its own and is appreciated not only as part of something else but also as it is, by itself.

### **MA as a Form of Mindfulness**

Seeing MA as a living concept and even turning it into a way of living, a method of creating space, staying in the void, appreciating a pause may be one of the ways mindfulness could help us today. Over the past two decades, interest in the contemplative practices of world wisdom traditions has been steadily blossoming in the West. Though partially rooted in world religions, such practices as mindfulness, meditation, and awareness are being used as secular, pan-spiritual forms of activity. They are rather connected to the fact that we are all humans rather than to the fact that we all belong to different cultural, religious and language backgrounds. Contemplation can be seen as a spiritual experience; however, it is not constrained by it and can have an entirely secular tone. So rather than separate us, contemplative practices bring people of different backgrounds to understanding their similarities and offer connecting bridges to our collective mind. There is vast amount of evidence that contemplative practices help to alleviate stress and increase productivity, self-respect, confidence and overall wellbeing. That’s why executives in many fields and disciplines recognize the potential of contemplative practice for their employees, and thus for the success of their businesses. Duerr points out that contemplative practices have an even greater potential. “At a time when there is widespread inability to respond effectively to situations that seem overwhelmingly large and complex, a cadre of leaders is conducting an inquiry – often inspired by the insights gained from their own meditative practice – into how more sustainable forms of change might evolve out of environments where contemplative awareness is nurtured” (Duerr, 2004).

MA can be applied to so many different fields such as space creation, workspace/time organizing, to pedagogy, to industry.

Even when there is no or little space, MA can still be created or imagined, and this imaginary MA will already help immensely. Taking aesthetics outside their “crystal palace” and mindfully employing beauty in your everyday life expands the use of aesthetics and can significantly improve our modern lives.

### **Conclusions**

The concept of MA is and important part of Japanese culture, Japanese aesthetics and its applications need to be further explored both in historic and modern perspectives. Presence of MA is evident in so many Japanese arts, Japanese ethics, and patterns of behaviour. However, MA is not only part of the past, but also a very powerful tool to help us improve our lives today.

Creation of multipurpose spaces, using in-between spaces, such as corridors, for stops or stopping places, could be useful “speed bumps” for our ever-speedy daily lives. MA can be applied to the studies of identity, orientation, intercultural studies, problem solving, conflict resolution, pedagogy and so many other areas of life. Ironically, during the recent pandemic we were forced to explore MA on daily basis both physically and virtually. MA is an experience, an experience of “moving through”. As time and space in Japan are correlated, mutually responsive, concept of MA is naturally understood in the Japanese cultural context,

however, we can successfully apply it to the needs of today and allow the moonlight shine through our gate.

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