

A Comment: The Excessive Half in the Aesthetic Figurations of “Cut,” “Imperfection” and “Emptiness” in Japan

ŌHASHI Ryōsuke

University of Cologne

1.

The range of the subjects discussed in this conference is so wide, that I cannot comment to the whole presentations, but at any rate a commentator is supposedly not required of such a comment. Therefore, I will first of all present a short paper which could be regarded as a small by-product or a further thought to the detailed presentations. Afterwards I would like to mention some questions and discussions made during this conference.

You will easily remark, that the title of my comment quotes the key-notions of the four presentations at this conference: The “cut” was treated in the presentation of Mr. Marra: Hermeneutics of Emplacement: On Places, Cuts, and Promises. The “imperfection” was a key-word in the lecture of Ms. Hladik: “Aesthetics of Imperfection.” The third notion, “emptiness,” is the subject of Mr. Sevilla who reflected on the “Ethics of Emptiness East and West.” The notions of “cut,” “imperfection” and “emptiness” remind us of all the three fields mentioned by Mr. Inaga for the scheme of our session: “Philosophia, Ethica and Aesthetica.” In the following it should be shown at first how they are visualized in the figuration of the Japanese architecture on which Mr. Kaputu and Mr. Speidel gave their lectures. The presentation of Mr. Kaputu was entitled: “Beyond the East and the West: An African View of Japanese Aesthetics,” and Mr. Speidel talked on: “Bruno

Taut and Japanese Traditional Architecture in the Face of Its Modernization.”

Let me start by looking at the floor plan of a typical Japanese living room, a four-and-a-half mat room (Fig. 1). I would like to pay attention to the structure of this room and make it a guiding “thread” for my comment, to which the presentations could be related.

The Chinese word for the mat, *jō* 畳, indicates the size of an adult man *jō* 丈 who is lying on the ground (Fig. 2). The Japanese word for the mat, *tatami* 畳, comes from the verb “tatamu,” to fold. Through folding the space-unit of a tatami,

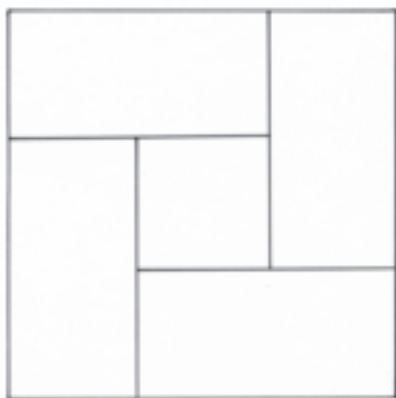


Fig. 1 Four-and-a-half-mat room

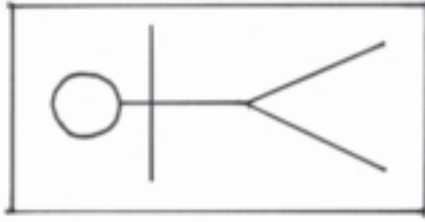


Fig. 2 A mat as the size of an adult man

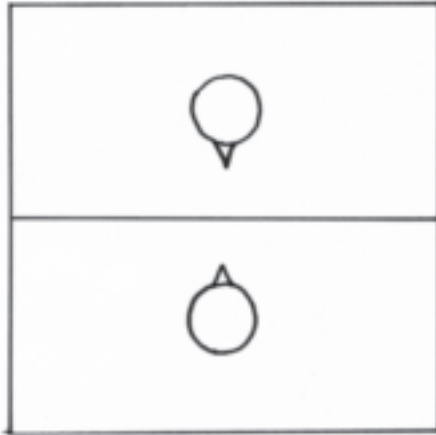


Fig. 3 Two-mat-room with two persons

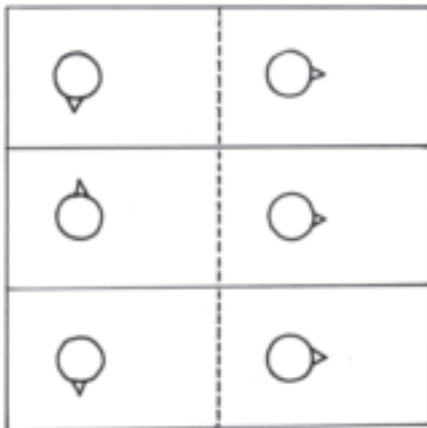


Fig. 4 The three-mat-room with three persons

that is, by the number of tatami-mats, the size of a room is determined. We distinguish the “three-mat room,” the “six-mat room,” the “twelve-mat room,” etc.

The English measure of length in “feet” means originally the stride of a human being. It comes from the lifestyle of those whose fundamental posture is to stand and to walk. People can enter a house without taking off their shoes. Similarly, the tatami-mat is derived from a lifestyle in which people sit on a mat in a room. They take off their shoes by entering a room, and they lay out beddings on the mat for sleeping.

The place for the encounter of people has various special elements corresponding to their respective lifestyle. In the Japanese tea-ceremony room, for instance, that has evolved within a culture of sitting, the following motto is most relevant: “Any encounter takes place only once in the whole life.” The structure of the room must be suitable for this encounter. The two-mat room would be too narrow (Fig. 3). In a tea-ceremony textbook, it is written that sitting too close to each other, knee to knee, is not good. A three-mat room is also inappropriate (Fig. 4), because all persons on the mats must either turn in a parallel direction without being face to face, or only two can sit face to face, whereby the third person must be excluded. Only if a “half” mat is introduced, a middle space between the meeting persons is formed as the appropriate “in-between” (Fig. 5). This is the four-and-a-half-mat room.

The meaning of this “half” is the focus of my presentation, so that I concentrate my reflection on this part. At first let me quote the following famous haiku poem of Matsuo Bashō:

Aki chikaki kokoro no yoru ya yojōhan
 秋近き ころの寄るや 四畳半
 (Autumn is near—close friends meet in four-and-

a-half room)

Bashō made this haiku as one evening he and his three friends held a meeting for renga, the chain-poem. One poet makes the first half of a waka-poem in 5–7–5 syllables, that is to be succeeded by the second poet who makes the latter half of waka in 7–7 syllables. The third makes a new first half in 5–7–5 syllables, and so on. The chain-poems can thus be endlessly continued, if necessary, even through the whole night. In this chain-poem meeting, a poetic and fluid communication movement occurs among the four sitting poets, and this movement corresponds to the fluidity structure of the four-and-a-half-mat room. (Fig. 6)

The “half-” tatami-mat in the middle is the “emptiness” in the movement like the absolutely quiet eye of a typhoon, whose storm can destroy even houses and trees. Without this center no movement of the chain-poem happens. The whole movement is “embedded” in it. This empty middle reflects itself also on the relation of discontinuous continuity between the poets who are independent on the one hand, but, on the other hand, united in their spirit to create together the chain-poems (Fig. 7). This in-between among them exists also between two parts of a chain-poem, the 5–7–5 syllable part and the 7–7 syllable part. The more impressive the discontinuous continuity of this in-between is, the more poetic a chain-poem on the whole. The “half-mat” in the middle is so far a visual figuration of the limitless and invisible emptiness.

We can recollect the concept of Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) concerning the human-being, *nin-gen* 人間. The former half of the word, *nin* 人, alone could mean the human-being. The latter half, *gen* 間, means the world, but also the in-between. The *nin-gen* means therefore originally the world of human beings, but today it is also understood as the concept of the “human-being” itself. Watsuji got the idea for his “ethics as the science of nin-gen” from the etymology of this word. We can take the “half-mat” in the

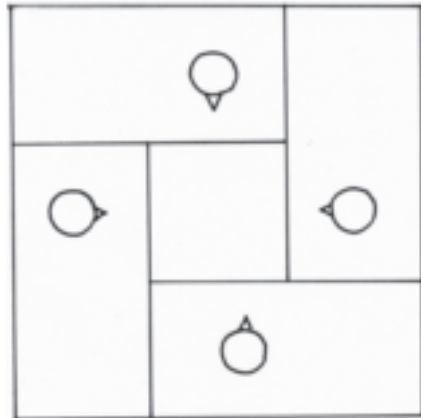


Fig. 5 Four-and-a-half-mat-room with 4 persons

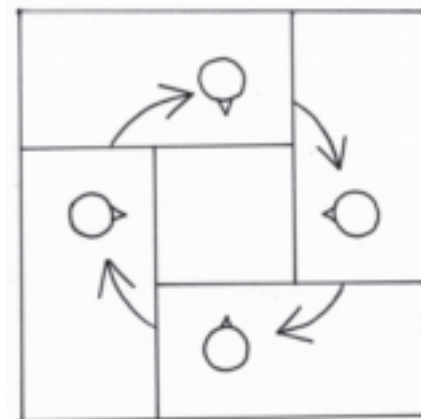


Fig. 6: The fluidity structure for the four-and-a-half-mat room

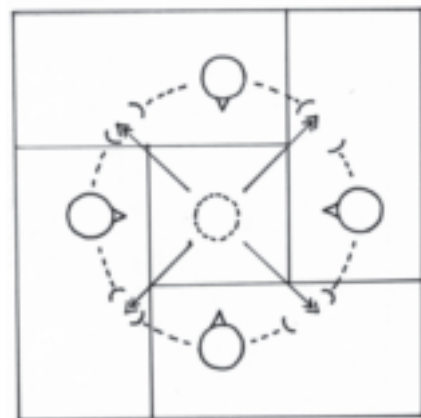


Fig. 7 The “in-between” between the poets in the four-and-a-half mat room

four-and-a-half room for a visual figuration of the in-between of *nin-gen* or the visualized emptiness as a principle of ethics. We can also point out that Kuki Shūzō regarded in his work *Iki no kōzō* the “centrifugal-centripetal” movement the four-and-a-half tea-ceremony produces. He found in this room a spatial structure that fits to the strained concentration and emanation of the spirituality of a tea-ceremony, while he himself preferred the entertainment sensitivity of a tea-house (*chaya*) room which expresses *iki* in his sense.

2.

From the view-point of the “half” expressed in the four-and-a-half mat room, I would like to mention some discussions in this conference. After the talk of Mr. Sevilla on Ethics of Emptiness East and West, Mr. Hamashita asked him how the “dignity” of a person should be understood, if the person is conceived as being “emptiness”. As Mr. Sevilla seemed to be perplexed a little, I would like to propose some hints. The first hint is the most probable origin of Mr. Hamashita’s question. A fundamental starting point of the question about the dignity of the person is unquestionably the Kantian ethics. Kant regarded that a person has to be respected. This desk, this room, this lamp are convenient and should be valued, but they are not to be “respected.” They are practical mediums for the sake of our life, but not life itself, not the final purpose. A person is the existence, for the sake of which other purposes or things exist. The person is therefore, according to Kant, the “kingdom of the purposes.” As such a kingdom a person prescribes to itself the “duty,” that is unconditionally valid. The person as such a “subject” of duty has a dignity, and is therefore respected. If one can summarize the Kantian thought of dignity of a person as above, the second hint follows. We could namely think deliberately about that the person as a “subject” of the duty rule is always embedded somewhere, never existing alone in itself. This is not the question Kant asked, but from the standpoint of the ethics of emptiness it could be asked. A subject is embedded in a climatic, social, historical etc. environment. Where is, or which is the ultimate place in which the human subject is embedded? Could emptiness be the last one and if, in what sense?

In the existentialistic field Mr. Kaputu posed also an important question to Mr. Sevilla. If namely the human being is the emptiness, does the limitedness of him still exist, or is the problem of limitedness ignored? The question and answer of Mr. Kaputu and Mr. Sevilla could be further developed. The human being is surely mortal, as Mr. Kaputu stresses, and is confronted steadily with death as the ultimate limit of its being. What about the death of a person who is conceived as emptiness? I would like to propose again a hint that could help Mr. Sevilla to confront this question. The emptiness in the sense of Mr. Sevilla should not be a mere vacuum. It is visualized as the half-mat part in the middle. Remember the four-and-a-half-mat tea-ceremony room and the motto I gave earlier: “Any encounter takes place only once in the whole life.” The host and the guest(s) in the four-and-a-half-mat tea room enjoy this unique encounter being aware that their encounter happens only once in their life. Human beings as *nin-gen* build such a community of mortal beings, and the *gen*, the in-between, belongs to his being. The human-being is mortal, but also *gen* which is empty. Couldn’t this be considered as hint for the ethics of emptiness? The room in which the human beings

are sitting has a half-mat in the middle. No one sits on it, and therefore it remains empty. The in-between between the host and the guest(s) as well as their own being correspond to this emptiness.

3.

The excessive half as the figurative expression of the emptiness can be found not only in the floor plan, but also in another element of the tea-ceremony room. The tea cup, for example, is never symmetrical. Not because its form is incomplete and only by halves symmetrical, but because it breaks through the regular form of symmetry. This irregularity is not a lack of regularity, but a breakthrough. The perfection of regularity is broken. The irregularity of the form of the tea cup is, if it succeeds in expressing an artistic beauty, an “excessive half.”

The sensitivity for this excessive half characterizes Japanese culture. To give another example, the oldest Buddhist temple in Japan, Hōryūji in Nara, dating back to the seventh century, shows a particular asymmetric disposition in its plan, for which no precedent is found in China. The main hall in the East, named Golden Pavilion, and the tower in the West occupy respectively one half of the inner court, but neither of these two parts remains a mere half. For, the tower is in itself one world, as well as the Golden Pavillion, so that each part of the compound represents the whole in the sense of one layer of the Buddhist universe. The inner court at the temple therefore contains two different layers of one Buddhist universe. Thus, the two buildings of this temple express variously an “excessive half.” As the Buddhist temple has been imported to Japan from China, it has been modified from the very beginning according to the Japanese sense for this element. Precisely because of this element, Hōryūji temple remains not a mere reproduction of Chinese temple, but one of the oldest architectural expression for the sensitiveness of the Japanese for the element of the “half.”

Another example is the Japanese garden. As is often pointed out, the Japanese garden has no symmetrical form like the French garden with its geometric and symmetrical form. It is also not the same as the English garden where a natural landscape is transferred and reproduced. The Japanese garden is rather an artificial beauty which looks natural, as long as it is a product of an extremely refined technique of gardening. The garden is never “by halves” artificial or natural. But the artificial technique must transgress its completeness, to enter the naturalness. In a higher sense: The garden must express the naturalness not by reproduction of the natural landscape, but by negating the naturalness in a naïve sense. The “ikebana” for example shows the naïve naturalness of flowers through “cutting” their natural life. The finest technique is required to enable this “cut.”

For those who understand Japanese language, I give some further examples that suggest the sensitiveness for the excessive half. The word *ki* 奇 means “strange” “bizarre” “singular” “grotesque” “curious.” But it is also used for something excellent. The word *kikei* 奇景 for example means a wonderful landscape. The house in the style of *sukiya* 数寄屋, the house of *ki*, is a typical Japanese architecture style with specifically aesthetic taste.

The word *kyō* 狂 means mad, abnormal. But when it is combined with the word “wind” (風), a new word is made: *fūkyō* 風狂. The poet Bashō described his ideal way of life with this word, because he tried to get out of the normal citizen life and to live as a traveler. He regarded “a journey” as his “residence.”

The word *ran* or *midare* 乱 means not a mere disorder, but often a kind of aesthetic chaos. *Midaregami* 乱れ髪 for example means unkempt, uncombed hair of a woman, but it suggests also her recent love affair and has an erotic implication. As the film director A. Kurosawa entitled his film with the word *ran*, everyone knew that the disorder of the warring state period in Japan must be the theme, but expected at the same time, that something in the movie can be depicted as an art work.

Hidari or *sa* 左 means left. In the European value system of ideas, the “left” is always inferior, and the “right” is right, correct, or orthodox. But in Japan “*sadaijin* 左大臣, the minister on the left,” is a higher rank than the minister on the right hand.

A misunderstanding should be avoided. The expressions above were not combined from the beginning with the Buddhist thoughts of “emptiness”. They show only the sensitivity of the Japanese for the excessive half. Buddhist concepts like emptiness gave them deeper sense, and artists tried to deepen their sensitiveness with the help of Buddhist concepts. On the contrary, Buddhism has been accepted and digested by this sensitiveness. The asymmetric composition of the Hōryū-temple is an example of this process. As a further result the so-called Japanese Buddhism was born in the 12th and 13th century. The aesthetics of the excessive half emerged after the Japanese Buddhism took root in the life-world in Japan.

Another misunderstanding should also be avoided. I never maintain that the aesthetic sensitiveness for the excessive half cannot be found in Japanese culture. Though I think of course that this sensitiveness has been developed and refined itself especially in Japan, I believe that every culture has a sense for the “half,” in various forms. A poem of Baudelaire, which I am very fond of, is one example.¹ With this remark I would like to conclude my comment. Thank you for your attention.

1 L'étranger

- Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique, dis?
ton père, ta mère, ta soeur ou ton frère?
- Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère.
- Tes amis?
- Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu' à ce jour inconnu.
- Ta patrie?
- J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située.
- La beauté ?
-Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.
- L'or?
- Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.
- Eh! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?
- J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent... là-bas... là-bas..., les merveilleux nuages!
(Petits poèmes en prose «Le Spleen de Paris»)