

The Austerity in Japanese Spaces

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at austerity present in Japanese culture spaces, such as Japanese gardens, Japanese interior design, which is minimalist, Japanese haiku poems settings, and their connection with Buddhist philosophy. The Japanese do not seem keen on accumulating objects. Instead, they prefer to keep their space minimal. The emptiness in Japanese Buddhist philosophy appears in interior design and garden design. Moreover, the Japanese focus more on their surroundings, for instance on contemplating the seasons and on their awareness of the changing seasons. Buddhist temples allow a large view of the landscape. Meanwhile, the interior design remains minimalist, and it also allows the inhabitant to be surrounded by empty space. The Japanese are not so much focused on accumulating objects during their lifetime as Westerners are. What could be such reasons? Why is their focus on the aesthetics of the surroundings? What could this tell us about Japanese culture that makes it unique?

Keywords: wabi-sabi, meditation, temples, Buddhism, minimalism

Introduction

Spaces in Japanese culture can be seen as open and uncluttered. Whenever we look at photographs on the Facebook pages related to Japanese culture, we can see large amounts of unoccupied spaces in homes, as well as in temples and gardens. Objects are never accumulated as we are used to in Western cultures. When we see illustrations of objects related to the tea ceremony, there is a large amount of empty space all around. In both personal homes and temples, even the furniture is selected to the minimum. Instead, there is a widely open window towards the natural landscape, in order to admire and especially to meditate in front of the specificity of each and every season. One reason for the openness towards nature is the original Japanese religion of Shintoism, according to which there are *kami*, which name spirits found in nature, everywhere around.

The *kami* are considered “an expression of their native racial faith which arose in the mystic days of remote antiquity” (Ono & Woodard, 2011, p. 4). Temples are often situated in forests. According to Ono and Woodard, “The word Shinto” means, “literally, the ‘Kami Way’” (2011, p. 5). If we look at the word itself, Shinto “is composed of two ideographs,” one being read as *shin*, and “which is equated with the indigenous term *kami*,” and “*do*” or “*to*,” two terms which are “equated with the term *michi*, meaning ‘way’” (Ono & Woodard, 2011, p. 2).

Why do the Japanese prefer to focus on the beauty of nature, and to keep opened towards nature, living so close to it, in both temples and personal homes, instead of preferring to concentrate on accumulation of wealth, such as valuable objects of decoration, valuable paintings, for instance, as well as lavish furniture? The answer is believed, by the author of the present paper, to lie, first of all, in the fact that minimalism is one significant and specific value to the members of Japanese culture. The minimalist frame of mind urges anyone to think whether one really needs or cares about certain objects and is made to declutter one’s home. The experience of giving up unnecessary objects or objects that are no longer relevant leads to the person doing this to understand decluttering of the home as the equivalent of decluttering at a psychological level. Decluttering will, thus, result in helping the respective person focus on what matters at present in his/her life. Such an example of practice has been described in the book *Goodbye, Things. On Minimalist Living by Fumio Sasaki* (2017). In this book, readers are told about the experience of understanding someone’s priorities and things that can be set aside, since they are no longer important. What is not a priority anymore or things that we no longer care about, once they are set aside, we can be free to focus on what matters during our present time. Marie Kondo, another author of a popular book about Japanese culture among members of Western culture, believes that decluttering is, “a dramatic reorganization of the home causes correspondingly dramatic changes in lifestyle and perspective. It is life transforming” (2014, p. 8).

The focus on the present is part of the Zen Buddhist mindset and meditation, together with “being present to what is experienced rather than focusing on the need for change” (Edwards, 1997, p. 442). The present becomes part of a minimalist home setting due to the absence of objects from the past and of things that we would never actually use, but gathered at some point in our lives. At the same time, we find with Zen Buddhism focus on the present as a means of not being swallowed up by grief. We may feel sad about aspects which we cannot change, such as not being able to own a certain object or the loss of a dear person. Right from this philosophy we can move towards *wabi-sabi*, meaning accepting the imperfection of things, and not trying to change them.

The objects that are old and a bit broken can still retain their charm. We can also enjoy a simple life, which is corresponding to a simple setting. We do not need to accumulate riches or to pile them up in order to live life meaningfully, and to experience enlightenment. This is what Zen monks suggest to us.

The aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* is said to come from the following situation: the “uncultured lot” in the 16th–18th century wanted to gather lots of material possessions related to the tea ceremony, as we notice in the way the warlords “were competing for the ownership of artefacts necessary to enrich their tea ceremony experiences, such as pottery, paintings and other paraphernalia” (Yazawa, 2018, p. 65). We could go for reference to the story of Hideyoshi, who “created a tea ceremony room in his residence which was made of gold, in an ostentatious show of his power and wealth. His tea ceremony was filled with exquisite porcelain imported from China” (Yazawa, 2018, p. 66). Such an attitude is not supported by Japanese values, as they value minimalism and not the accumulation of material goods or riches. Rikyū, “Hideyoshi’s instructor in the art of the tea ceremony” was disapproving of “Hideyoshi’s ostentatious extravagances.” As a result, Rikyū’s “aesthetic philosophy” of *wabi-sabi* is about “modest circumstances,” in the case of *wabi* (2018, p. 65). This is in tune with the Japanese general aesthetic of simplicity: “Rikyū encouraged his followers to seek quiet satisfaction in less than opulent surroundings, and to find beauty in the modest beauty that shines more in contrast to its seemingly shabby environment” (2018, p. 65). Regarding the other term, “*Sabi* refers to internal quiet and peace. Rikyū proposed that true appreciation of beauty is borne out of the person’s quiet contentment, rather than avarice” (Yazawa, 2018, p. 65).

At the same time, the concept of empty space in Japanese culture can also provide an explanation for having large unoccupied spaces in personal homes and temples. According to the Japanese mindset, empty spaces are all right, and not to be avoided, as is generally the belief in the Western cultures’ mindset. Austerity, in Western cultures, could be mainly associated with deprivation, and removing oneself from the joys of everyday life. Perhaps austerity evokes in the minds of Westerners the atmosphere of loneliness and deprivation, of giving up the worldly joys of life and retreating to a monastery. Empty spaces could be, in turn, for Westerners, associated with lack of comfort, with lack of what they had been used to, with grief, as well as with punishment. When a child misbehaves in Western culture, he/she is being punished by having his/her toys or smartphone taken away from them. They may feel that their room is empty, since what they cared about had been taken away.

Having empty space does not mean not being rich enough, as would be the tendency to believe in Western cultures. In Japanese culture, emptiness is understood differently from Western culture, namely as something desirable, and worth meditating on. It is not a sign of something to be filled, but, instead, a sign of balance, harmony, and relaxation. While Western culture would equate emptiness with lack of material goods, status and, briefly put, poverty, for Japanese culture this is the norm. Emptiness can be understood by examining the concept of *ma*, which “basically means an ‘interval’ between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events” (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 255). This concept can refer to just to “space between,” but also to “time between,” as well as to any “gap” or “opening.” One example of understanding a room in terms of *ma* is the following: “A room is called *ma* [...] as it refers to the empty space between the walls” (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 255). Music can contain “a rest,” which is called *ma* as it refers to “the pause between the notes or sounds.” The empty space, or *ma*, therefore, refers to a “reflection of a Japanese religio-aesthetic paradigm or ‘way of seeing’” (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 255). The Western mindset cannot conceive of a room defined in terms of empty space, generally, but in terms of a space filled with furniture and decorated with various objects. The room can be conceived of as an empty space by the Western culture members only when they see it freshly built, or freshly emptied by the former owner, and at their disposal to decide how to change the wall colours, fill it with furniture, as well as decorate it with their own belongings, such as posters, paintings, lamps, carpets, etc.

We could correlate the Japanese value of empty space with that of the simplicity from *wabi-sabi*, as well as with minimalism. According to Haimés (2020), *ma* is a “Zen Buddhist concept,” which is actually “usually translated as space,” and which, for Westerners, evokes their understanding of Japanese minimalism (p. 2).

The temples in Japan are not overcrowded with riches, or overly decorated with art. In Western culture, churches as places of worship include a very richly decorated space, with icons and golden ornaments. What is more, poetry in Western culture is generally made up of figurative language, which can be regarded as a decorative element as in physical spaces. Meanwhile, in Japanese culture, the example of haiku poems shows appreciation for lack of figurative language, focusing on simplicity and on the visual elements. While Western poems can be quite long usually, haiku poems consist of three lines, and a pattern of 5-7-5 syllables. Contemporary haiku authors can even write it in fewer syllables, especially when it comes to haiku written in the English language. In the case of traditional haiku, as in the famous case of Basho, the setting is located beside a lake: “an old pond/ a frog jumps in/ the sound of water” (Lunberry, 2019, p. 22).

This is one of the oldest haiku poems written by a haiku master, in 1686, and which is constantly being cited, in various versions, due to the different translations into English from Japanese. What is visible in the poem above is that the setting is very simple, just as the language used. The action of the poem sounds, for the reader uninstructed in haiku, like an everyday life scene, of not much importance. However, if we look closer at it, we notice how what is going on is pictured by the reader by being recomposed from various images mentioned. First of all, in line 1, we have the setting, which is “an old pond,” thus, a setting of extreme simplicity, and which evokes lack of agglomeration, a free, empty space lying ahead. Minimalism is suggested further by the second line, with a frog that “jumps in.” Next, in line 3, the detail that matters is only “the sound of water,” and not an extremely detailed description of the way the frog jumps in the lake and moves. Minimalism can be understood as the lack of overcrowded details, which do not matter. The scene looks a bit sketchy, yet by all means it is enough to suggest all the sounds, movements, and sense of sight that are relevant to the scene. Other descriptions of the surroundings of the lake, vegetation, clouds, sun, stones, were not considered necessary for the reader putting together the scene.

A Japanese garden contains an empty space in the form of sand made into the shape of water waves. In this case, the sand symbolizes water. The purpose of these gardens is to make the person walking through them and watching them to meditate. Gardens made of sand and stone are associated with Zen monasteries. These gardens are left natural, allowing withered plants to stay. They are not artificially decorated. Among the austere elements of the setting we can find stones, which symbolize mountains. The gardens in Japan appear similar to the setting evoked in Basho’s famous frog poem, with a lake which is then made to have waves, as it is inferred from hearing “the sound of water” after the “frog jumps in” (Lunberry, 2019, p. 22). Moreover, the Japanese Zen garden is considered to help the person walking in and meditating to feel close to the spirits of nature in Shintoism belief, *kami*.

Space is a reflection of a way of understanding life, and of living it personally, and this mindset is mirrored in the way interiors are looking like in Japanese culture, as well as in the way they present the natural space in their poems. A Western culture member would focus on comparing nature to various riches, for instance the yellow leaves of autumn to gold, a precious metal, for example. The Japanese haiku poem by the master Basho seems to present reality in a blunt way, without anything more than describing a fact that anyone can notice while walking by a lake. At the same time, the scene is created after careful observation and pruning it of all unnecessary details. In spite of this haiku poem sounding so natural and simple, the scene has been carefully composed to look this way.

It is a reflection of Zen Buddhist philosophy, minimalism, *wabi-sabi* (as the pond is old, and that could evoke the image of a worn-out object, which still has its charm), and of showing how a poem may not contain the usual figurative language, with personification of nature, metaphors, abstract notions, and other features to which Western readers have been used in their poetry.

We could divide space in relation to Japanese culture members' understanding from the point of view of interior spaces, present in personal homes, temples, or palaces, and exterior spaces, which relate to the setting where a shrine can be found, as well as to the way gardens are built. Moreover, we have the settings created in poetry specific to the Japanese language, which is predominantly visual. The impact with the space that is created in these poems is striking.

The present paper interprets these simple, minimalist spaces, which are also leaving room or empty spaces for the viewer, as austere spaces. This is because, unlike the Western mindset, the Japanese mindset does not value an accumulation of objects. The paper will go through existing research on the Japanese mindset in order to understand it better. Simplicity, minimalism, and the empty space could be relevant, to some extent, to Western culture members, understood from drawing a parallel with the saying that "less is more," when speaking about beauty, elegance and good taste. Up to a point, therefore, the two cultures may not be that different, and they could reach a common ground for understanding. This could help explain the appeal of the Japanese culture to Western culture members, and their adoption of the minimalist lifestyle described by books such as those of Fumio Sasaki and Marie Kondo. At the same time, another common ground for understanding the positive aspect of empty spaces could be Westerners' belief that, at some point, in any relationship, someone needs his/ her personal space. This is similar to the idea of empty space, in the sense that they need to have some privacy, and to be alone with their own thoughts, and not always surrounded by other people. Another idea that could unite the two cultures' mindset, Asian and Western, could be the search for spirituality as opposed to materialism. However, the understanding of space, based on the way empty space is generally understood in the two cultures is different. This is, because, from anyone's intuitive observation, the space in Western culture is perceived as a background, especially when other elements are present, including persons. However, in Japanese culture, the space can be the focus of a photograph or of a painting, just as much as the human figures present there. Nature can be regarded as larger than the human beings, if we take into consideration the paintings from ancient China, whose style was then passed on for further development and interpretation in a way specific to their culture by the Japanese.

For the Japanese, humans can always be seen as below the natural setting, and below the empty space. The empty space can be regarded as merging with the viewer, at some point, through meditation, and through the relationship with nature and *kami* present in Shintoism.

Literature Review

Going through previous research for the present paper should start with the relationship between human beings and their environment. One reason is because the architecture "is deeply influenced by the environment" (Yagi, 1982, p. 6). With respect to Japan, we should mention that the four seasons are not clear-cut, and the usual ones are completed by "a short rainy season in early summer and typhoons in early fall." Japanese homes are built "to ameliorate the discomfort of rain and humidity," which can appear during "the rainy season, summer, and typhoon season." These seasons "are hot and muggy." The Japanese believe that their homes can be built on the principle that "the human body can bear the discomfort of the only remaining season that poses a problem, winter" (Yagi, 1982, pp. 6–7). While the ideas on which empty spaces are founded can be philosophical or religious, they also have a practical foundation for the Japanese, explainable by the way the houses can provide comfort for the human body according to the seasons.

Another reason why the environment should be considered for research on the topic of space is that humans are constantly working to changing their environment. According to Baciú (2013) this is a usual feature of human nature: we can understand "humans as creators of both their environment and of their own values" (p. 14). Human beings could be regarded as being able to both adapt to the environment, as well as to make changes to it in such a way so as to feel more comfortable.

The relationship between human beings and their surroundings have been the topic of a field of psychology: "Environmental psychology examines transactions between individuals and their built and natural environments" (Gifford, 2014, p. 541). Research in this domain is needed, since we always interact with one environment or another: "Every aspect of human existence occurs in one environment or another, and the transactions with and within them have important consequences both for people and their natural and built worlds" (Gifford, 2014, p. 541).

We could go as far as to claim that having contact with another culture means having contact with an entirely different environment. As tourists, or as travelers due to various purposes (business, studying) we can have a first contact with the different environment by noticing what is around us, from the way the city, town or village looks like,

the way shops are situated, the way parks and public gardens are more or less present, the way we are surrounded by very modern or old, historical buildings on various streets. The way homes are built can be seen as ways of possible psychological influence on the person living or staying there temporarily.

Crowding, for instance, from the point of view of environmental psychology, is not regarded as beneficial. In fact, it is considered a "stressor." Research has indicated that "residential crowding" could be related to "poorer cognitive achievement in children" (Wells et al., 2016, p. 66). Moreover, "people who live in denser residences handle stress less well," which means that, in situations such as that of "giving a speech to an audience," these persons would "show elevated cardiovascular reactivity" (Wells et al., 2016, p. 66). Being exposed to a crowded environment on an everyday life basis "appears to create elevated chronic stress" (Wells et al., 2016, p. 66).

We may conclude from these findings that the benefits of the minimalist approach can be checked through a universal psychological reaction to crowded environments (which could include both lots of objects and lots of other people). The topic of the present paper could be related to the topic very relevant today, that of stress, anxiety and need to relax in a busy world, and which is constantly under discussion: "The importance of free time and calm spaces has been frequently emphasised in recent times, often against the backdrop of anxiety that the world is 'speeding up'; that is, becoming busier and more digitally controlled" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 1).

Getting into an unfamiliar environment could lead to the experience of culture shock. This experience occurs in stages (Pedersen, 1994), ranging from feeling very much adapted in a very short time, or even right away, to the new environment, of a different country and culture, and feeling that we are resonating with its values, lifestyle and mindset, to the point where we can become unable to function as expected in the new environment, to no longer enjoy exploring the different culture, until we reach the final point where we understand and accept the differences between our own culture and the new culture we have been immersed in.

We could consider the studies done on the topic of identity and place, and consider them from a different perspective in the case of space in Japanese culture. The Zen Buddhist philosophy and Shintoism could be considered to make the Japanese understanding of space an aspect that is specific to and symbolic of the larger, geographical space of the Japanese culture. Ross and colleagues (2003) consider places as able to "embody social symbols" (p. 210). To begin with, "places represent personal memories" (Ross et al., 2003, p. 210).

This is due to the fact that we can always associate a certain incident in our lives to a certain place. Therefore, "The memory of interactions in the place invest [sic] the place with personal significance" (Ross et al., 2003, p. 210). Second, places can also "reflect and represent social memories," or "shared histories" (Ross et al., 2003, p. 210).

The empty and minimalist spaces specific to Japanese cultures can thus be considered to be part of the "social memories" and of the "shared histories" of the members of this culture. According to Verhetsel and colleagues (2013), emptiness is correlated with sobriety in Japanese culture as far as the domain of architecture is concerned: "A point of reference for this ideal," that of sobriety, "is the Japanese architectural tradition of quietness, sobriety and harmony of mind, spirit and nature" (p. 30).

Judging from the point of view of "culture identity manifestations," which offer the following categories of "carriers of identity for a culture": "(a) symbols, (b) heroes, (c) rituals, practices and traditions, (d) values" (Baciu, 2013, p. 32), we could claim that the empty spaces are found in various symbols of Japanese culture, such as personal homes interior design, temple interior design, garden arrangements, haiku poems, and paintings. According to Eastgate (2018), one example of empty space in painting is from "the late 16th century," when "An early modern artist who depicted Ma through art was Hasegawa Tōhaku," in his painting "Shōrin-zu byōbu' ('Pine Trees')" (para. 7). The painting consists of two screens, where "it is the empty space between the shadowy pine trees that creates the landscape in the mind of the viewer" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 7). An example of using the symbol of the empty space is the practice of using silence during conversations. Pauses are frequent and considered part of minimizing "tension," while "a Western listener might find" such moments of silence "uncomfortable" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 4). The example of the practice of conversation with silent moments comes from their belief that it is "important to create and maintain spaces of Ma, in order to minimise tension and favour contemplation" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 4).

The symbols presented above are part of the empty space and minimalism as promoted by Zen Buddhist religion and philosophy.

Materials and Methods

This section will look into the philosophical understanding of the concept of emptiness. It can help us understand better the way an empty space can be significant and substantial in cultural products such as paintings, poems, gardens, and interior house design. Examining the traditions coming from the origins of Buddhism and the contact of Indian and Chinese traditions with Japanese culture can help us develop an understanding

of the way Japanese culture members understand the empty space. The next step is to understand why the Japanese do not have, in their mindset, the wish to collect many material possessions and prefer to keep their rooms in a minimalist style.

Previous research done in the domain of Japanese culture's understanding of architecture and gardens, especially, mentions that by grasping the way of thinking of the Japanese, we can better understand the ideas behind their cultural products. According to the previous research done by Gropius and Tange (1960 as cited in Antariksa, 2001), "we can understand the architecture of nations and period only as we win an inside knowledge of their way of thinking and their philosophy" (p. 75). Engel's research on Zen philosophy is also mentioned, as it has "influenced all phases of Japanese life more profoundly than has any of the other sects" (1964 as cited in Antariksa, 2001, p. 75). What is more, it "was closely associated not only with the arts, social institutions, but also, particularly, with architecture and landscaping" (Engel, 1964 as cited in Antariksa, 2001, p. 75).

Antariksa (2001) mentions how Buddhism originated in India (p. 75). Buddhism referred to practicing meditation in a cross-legged position, and achieving the experience of enlightenment, after going through a state of trance. The enlightenment meant "a state of cosmic consciousness as far above the mental plane of ordinary mortals as the level of human consciousness is raised above" (Antariksa, 2001, p. 75). Emptiness as a concept comes from Buddhism. What is more, "Emptiness in the translation of the Sanskrit word *sunyata*, which means 'everything is no-substantial'" (Antariksa, 2001, p. 77). The positive side of emptiness is highlighted: "Sunyata is an Emptiness so full of potentiality that all emerges from it, all is reabsorbed in it. In Emptiness, forms are born" (Antariksa, 2001, p. 77). It is like a moment of revelation. To illustrate the idea of the significance of the empty space in Japanese culture, we could have in view the following use of the word that stands for both emptiness and the sky in their language: "The Japanese word for emptiness is *ku*, which also means 'sky'" (Antariksa, 2001, p. 77). The empty space has been understood as what lies between heaven and earth, like a pillar. It is, thus, an "intermediate world," called "Midspace" (Antariksa, 2001, p. 77). According to legend, "At first the worlds (Heaven and Earth) were together; and when they parted asunder the space which between (antar) them became that Midspace" (Snodgrass, 1985 as cited in Antariksa, 2001, p. 78).

The empty space could be regarded in connection with the practice of meditation's stage of Enlightenment through trance. It is part of a spiritual practice, since "The void in Buddhist sense is not concept arrived at by rational thought, but an expression of an incommunicable individual experience, accessible to a person practicing meditation" (Nitschke, 1988 as cited in Antariksa, 2011, p. 77).

Zen Buddhist religion and philosophy, however, was not the only system of beliefs to influence the Japanese culture members' understanding of space. There is an inter-connection of interaction among spaces, objects and people: "Japanese conceptions of space are influenced by Shinto, a spiritual tradition that places almost as much importance on the spaces and relationships between objects and people as it does on the objects themselves" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 3). The strong connection shows the following: "that all things are made up of not only themselves, but also the space and relations that they affect" (Eastgate, 2018, para. 3).

The Zen Buddhist and Shintoist religions and philosophies form the mindset of the Japanese people. If we understand their way of seeing the empty space, as compared to other ways of seeing it, such as the ones specific to Western culture, we can reach an understanding of various practices in their culture. We can minimize or even avoid the experience of culture shock, given the differences in thinking and behaviour. Once we are aware, for instance, that silence does not mean discomfort and a negative impression of the interlocutor on us, we can communicate more efficiently and feel more at ease in a different world. Through information, we can minimize or reduce culture shock, since we can make an unfamiliar culture look more and more familiar to us. As a definition of culture shock, we could consider the following one: "Contact with culturally unfamiliar people and places can be unsettling, and the term 'culture shock' is frequently used to describe how people react to novel or unaccustomed situations" (Bochner, 2003, p. 1). Any culture is learned. We are not born with its values and frame of mind. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that we can also learn another culture. We shall always be tempted to draw comparisons with the first learned culture, into which we were born, since, as adults, any new knowledge is compared and introduced having as a foundation what we have already learnt until then. However, it is not impossible, with a bit of effort, to "learn how to unlearn" (Baciu, 2013, p. 45) and start anew, benefitting from the experience offered by the features of a different culture.

Results

Contact with other cultures is a given in our contemporary world, just as it had been inevitable throughout the course of history. Even if Japan has a period when it was closed to the Western world, this was just a temporary situation.

We tend to look for comfort by searching for the "familiar surroundings," such as those places "where we grew up." Gradually, those people around us "tend to be similar to ourselves, in the sense of having comparable ethnic backgrounds, matching beliefs, shared values, and speak the same language or at least a dialect variant of it" (Bochner, 2003, p. 3).

This is the description of “culturally homogeneous space” (Bochner, 2003, p. 3). However, we do tend to break this pattern of familiarity at times, and then it is best to be prepared by keeping informed, in order to have empathy for other ways of thinking and for other values.

The understanding offered by the present paper of the way in which empty spaces can be significant, positive, and searched for in a culture, while in another culture they can be regarded as meaningless, can help raise awareness about the different ways of viewing and understanding various aspects in life, in our surrounding everyday reality and in the course of history of a culture. In order to understand cultural differences, we can focus on a cultural product and analyse the way it relates to the wider mindset, religious or philosophical beliefs of a culture. The example of the empty space is a means of getting the opportunity to go through the history of the root of the values and ways of thinking of the members of Japanese culture.

The empty space offers the opportunity for meditation and relaxation. While this topic is a relevant one today, a familiar one and a frequently discussed one, we cannot directly understand how an empty space can make us feel comfortable, as members of Western culture. We tend to invest various objects, such as furniture, jewelry, toys, books, clothes, with meanings of affection, since we associate them with persons dear to us that have given them to us. Meanwhile, Buddhism teaches us that we need to accept the transience of everything in life, we need to accept that life is suffering and that we can lose someone we care about at any time. The Western culture members’ mindset appears to rely on material possessions for support, and associate them with memories, while the Japanese focus not on material possessions and on what is ephemeral, but on an empty space. This empty space will always exist, just as the sky with which it shared the term in the Japanese language will. It is a space of spirituality, and an instance of moment of enlightenment, as it cannot be achieved by means of using judgement and reason.

Discussion

We may have the tendency to accumulate wealth, in order to surround ourselves, psychologically, with something to hang on to, to ease our anxieties. Gathering material goods could be seen, in some cases, as a sign of compensation for no longer having a loved person around, or for not receiving enough affection, or for any other experience of missing or losing something. This could be an explanation related to the appeal of materialism, and to accumulating wealth. Natural disasters and wars may, however, make us realize that nothing is forever, and we could grow more and more aware of the transience of life.

The early days of the United States of America saw the emergence of individualism, through the freedom to allow anyone build his/ her own life from zero, and to have the possibility of becoming rich. This is a tendency towards materialist philosophy, and on practical thinking. Indeed, we do need our basic conditions for survival, and only afterwards we can focus on other needs, intellectual, artistic and spiritual included.

The world today oscillates between spirituality, represented by minimalist spaces, visible in the physical world in the domain of architecture and design, and between display of riches, and maximalism: "Emptiness in a contemporary interior design is often sought by architects and designers in order to achieve order, frugality and purity as a counterpoint to the stressful, busy and noisy outside world" (Verhetsel et al., 2013, p. 30)

Therefore, we can find in studying the Japanese culture mindset of austerity in spaces answers to today's dilemmas related to dealing with the best approach to the universal question of life here and life in the afterworld dilemma, as well as to the dilemma of what matters most in life, and how we should approach life in order to feel happy, or to feel that our lifestyle is meaningful.

For the Western culture members, the emptiness, or the empty space could be frightening, as they are used to being told that there is an afterlife, that beyond this world is a better one. The Paradise has been imagined in lavish ways. Thinking about an empty space could spark suggestions of something negative and undesirable, as well as scary. The belief that there is a world beyond this one can help many Western culture members go on, and hope for the best.

The empty space and the lavish Paradise can be regarded as two different ways of dealing with the ephemerality of life here in our world. On the one hand, we are taught by Buddhism to live grounded in the here and now, while for Christian religions we need to prepare for the afterlife and consider all our deeds.

We are at all times situated in certain spaces and we cannot ignore their significance on our state of mind. We can feel impressed by our surroundings, when we visit different styles of homes and gardens than those we are used to. Western culture members can feel impressed by the Japanese paintings with empty spaces, as well as by their understanding of interior design with empty space. Cultures can exchange their products when coming into contact, and adapt different styles to suit their needs.

Conclusion

Judging from the analysis of the concept of emptiness and the empty space, we can notice how two cultures can attach an entirely different, even opposite, meaning to a similar idea. The spaces can seem austere to a Western culture member, compared to what they are used to. It can seem austere in a Western culture which is focused on entertainment. It is also an example of differences in the ways two largely different cultures relate to space. Comparing the understanding of empty space in Western and Japanese cultures, we can notice how different cultures' members can feel differently about a given element of reality due to the way they have been taught to perceive it. The Japanese have been taught to value the empty space and invest in creating such spaces in their interior design and in the sand and rock gardens, as well as in paintings, while the Westerners have been taught to fill in such spaces.

At the same time, the Japanese have a closer relationship with their surroundings, meaning that it is a more spiritual experience. In the case of Westerners, it is a purely decorative experience, coming from aesthetics, wishing to try a new style of design, or from the idea of practicality, of using a certain space for certain activities. Meanwhile, the Japanese culture members use their surrounding spaces indoors to maintain their connections with nature, for instance by using painted slide-door screens with elements from nature, such as cherry blossoms or cranes. The very strong connection between the Japanese and the passage of seasons is seen by their constant awareness of the natural elements that surround them, marking a certain season that is, currently, there. Just as Westerners have the habit of placing the date in the calendar to mark certain events, the Japanese mark these in their paintings and poems by mentioning an element in nature that is specific to one season or another. Here we notice the profound connection between humans and nature in Japanese culture, a feature which is not so pronounced in Western cultures. Western culture members are more attached to indoors surroundings. Eventually, they do take walks, but only when they have time and when the weather is enjoyable. They can shut the windows towards what is going on outside in nature if they do not like it. They also tend to judge nature by analogy with their own feelings, as we can notice in the personification in their poetry. We also hear about depression due to absence of light, especially during the long winters and especially in Northern countries, where the sky is dark a long part of the year. Westerners also express their feelings of hating the cold or much too rainy weather. In the Japanese haiku poems we never encounter such expressed emotions. The characters in the painting or the poetic persona in haiku poems find something positive in the landscape, and feel connected with the season at any time.

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