

Kintsugi 金継ぎ Golden Mending*

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Preserve Marks

Japanese value the marks on objects left by ageing. They believe that everything has its story and we should work hard to preserve it instead of removing

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it. In Japanese mending, when something is broken (usually ceramic wares), you repair it but do not repair it to its original (while the modern mending technique would try to remove every marks). To emphasise that it is broken before, the mender would leave the marks of the crack on the surface of the wares. Indeed, it is a highly skilled technique and a mender is a very special kind of artist in Japan. Besides, there is an artistic technique derived from the traditional mending, which is called “kintsugi (金継ぎ)”. “Kin” is “gold” and “tsugi” means “joining”. It is an art of fixing broken pottery with lacquer resin and powdered gold. This fixing technique keeps the cracks on a pottery purposely. A ‘good’ piece should be functional and at the same time all the marks are kept. “Kintsugi” can be a way to personalise objects you own as it no longer looks the same. In addition, Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi (2011) pointed out that a cheap mass produced tea bowl can increase its value by “kintsugi”! While fixing things can create another form of beauty, we should learn a lesson from the Japanese, and this would help to solve the problem

of wastefulness in consumer culture.

“Perfect” and “Imperfect”

When I research the keyword “perfect” in Google, I often find information and images about plastic surgery. Human face and body (or objects) in golden ratio has become classic example of beauty in our culture. The modern definition of “perfect” has been used to describe things that are spotless. People are trying to achieve this “perfect” state by artificial methods and the result is the invention of plastic surgery and the beauty industry. However, the word “perfect” is originally derived from Latin word – “perfectus”. It came from “perficio” which means “to finish”, “to bring to an end”. For something that is “perfect” does not mean that it is free from any blemish, it is something that is “finished”. Therefore, I cannot totally agree with Sartwell (2006: 113) and other writers who refer wabi-sabi as aesthetic which appreciate the “imperfect”. Even a piece of rock at the roadside is “perfect” as it is “completed”, by God in religious perspective.

Ma 間

“Ma (間)” is usually translated as “gap”, “negative space”, “pause” in English, but the meaning of “ma” is much more complex than these. “Ma” is a very common “kanji” (Chinese character) used both in Japanese and Chinese culture. However, “ma” in Japanese culture has developed into a much deeper spiritual concept. It has become an ideology in Japanese language and practice. It is the way of life of the Japanese. Professor Xu Pin (2005: 38) said, ‘If... “shibusu” is the aesthetic interest and value in Japan, then “ma” would be the standard, the way, and the attitude of living of the Japanese. Its impact on Japanese culture and even on economy is heavier than other cultural concepts [...]’ “Ma” in Chinese culture emphasises the “boundary” and “separation” but in Japanese culture emphasises the “relation”. “Relation” in “ma” is an expression of interrelation of human relation. In Japanese culture, people believe that the gap between people needs to be filled up with some sort of physical object. This is where their gifting cul-

ture comes from. Gifting is not only the exchange of objects but a symbol denoting the media of human relationship and interaction. Interaction should weigh more than the object itself. However, many people nowadays put their focus on the value of the object instead of the regards of the giver.

Separation and No-Separation

Japanese emphasise on “relation” can also be seen in traditional home architecture. In the modern concept, we always emphasise the “privacy”. We have separate rooms for each family member and each owner of the room has a special lock for his room. In comparison, many Japanese home nowadays are still using sliding paper screen to separate the rooms. Marcel Theroux (2009) in the video, In search of wabi sabi, was surprised by the “no privacy” when he was lodging in a Japanese family’s home. Because of the weak separation of the sliding paper screen, every sound could be heard. He needed to speak in a low voice when he was recording himself at night.

Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi (2011) also mentioned in his talk about the sliding paper screen. While everything can be heard next door, when you hear something you should not hear, you pretend that you do not hear; when you see something you should not see, you pretend that you do not see. This is the Japanese way of life, or their practice of “politeness”. The “separation” which is “without separation”... I would say that it is another daily aesthetics in Japan. In western culture, this kind of concept is very unusual and it even could be thought as a paradox. In both Japanese and Chinese culture, we have the term – “aimai”. “Aimai (曖昧)” means “ambiguous”. It can link two opposite concepts together. To describe: it is neither black nor white, but grey. It is neither good nor bad, but in between. It is neither positive nor negative, but both. Negative is not considered as “bad”, it is just an opposite of positive. Let’s look at the sliding paper screen again: Tanizaki Junichiro mentioned in his book – In praise of shadows – ‘...the texture of Chinese paper and Japanese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth of calm and repose [...] Western

paper turns away the lights, while our paper seems to take it in, to envelop it gently, like the soft surface of a first snowfall.’ (Tanizaki, 2001: 17-18) In western culture, we use curtains to block the light out. In contrast, traditional Japanese houses love to use paper screen which gives a soft touch of light. Instead of rejecting the light totally, they choose to “accept it” and “live with it”. This concept of no-separation reminds us that everything in the world is interrelated. No one is living in a bubble.

Mono no Aware 物の哀れ and *Kawaii* 可愛い

“Mono” means objects or things, while “Aware” means sadness or empathy. Thus, “mono no aware” means “pathos of things” or “empathy towards things.” While looking at fallen leaves may arouse a feeling of sadness for a life passing away, seeing changing seasons may make us think of the impermanence of the nature. “Mono no aware” reminds us that everything in the world is impermanent and we need to value it. *Kawaii* is a relatively new aesthetic

term compare to other aesthetic terms. It generally means “cute” nowadays. It means compactness, adorable, lovable as well. But why I want to introduce it is because of its origin. Kawaii is derived from the term, “kawaisou” (可哀想), which means “pitiful”. It again links back to “mono no aware”. Japanese always have a sadness feeling on lovable things. However, “sadness” and “empathy” is not always a bad thing in Japanese concept. It sometimes alerts you of or raises your awareness to the surrounding world or the nature.

Impermanence **A Common Feature in Zen Bigaku**

The Zen philosophy always emphasises the impermanence and uncontrollability of nature. For example the famous term, “ichi-go ichi-e (一期一会)”, which is always used in tea ceremony and Japanese martial art (such as Kendo 剣道, Kyudo 弓道 etc.), also hinted this. “Ichi-go” means “a lifetime” and “ichi-e” means “a meeting” (either between human

and human, or human and object). Thus, “ichi-go ichi-e” has the meaning of “for this time only”. It reminds us that we should cherish every meeting with any human or object.

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