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Mono-no-aware aesthetics in Japanese art texts (Draft 3)

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Abstract

The concept of mono-no-aware aesthetics was first introduced by the Japanese literary scholar Motoori Norinaga in his commentary book げんじものがたりたまのおぐし . As the first of the three central Japanese aesthetic ideas, Mono no aware has profoundly influenced the expression of Japanese artistic texts. In this paper, we will look at several Japanese fiction and film texts to explore the emotional pursuits and philosophies of life expressed by the authors and felt by the readers and the cultural connotations behind them.

1. The Birth and Connotation of the Mono no aware

The history of aesthetic categories – their elucidation, disappearance, and survival – is complex. For example, the notion of the "sublime" was first formulated by Longinus around the year zero and derived from his interest in Epicurean philosophy. Another famous aesthetic category is linked to China and Japan, the concept of "mono no aware."

The concept of "mono no aware" was first introduced in the commentary book "げんじものがたりたまのおぐし" of The Tale of Genji by a Japanese national scholar Motoori Norinaga of the Edo period, expressed as a distinctive expression style in plots or descriptions (Norinaga, 1979). Regarding the connotation of Mono no aware, in Motoori Norinaga's earlier book, "紫文要領," he mentions that the essence of "mono no aware" is "perceiving the emotion of things": "everything in the world, what you see, what you hear, and what you touch, all of them are hidden in your heart, and then you ponder them in your heart and taste them and perceive the emotions."(Motoori Norinaga, 1763)

In order to study "mono no aware," we need to understand the concept of "perceiving the emotion of things." This concept can be divided into three parts: "perceiving," "things," and "emotions" to analyze Mono no aware further. (Japan is heavily influenced by Chinese culture, and the words are the same. The phrase can be divided into three kanji, each with its meaning: perception, object, and lamentation. This may not be reflected in English, so they are explained here); these three domains are independent of each other but interrelated.

The first is "perceiving," which is a kind of perception of "things," as mentioned by Motoori Norinaga. This is echoed in his "Genji Monogatari Tamakushoku," where he mentions "the ability to understand the emotions of others," which reflects the connotation of "perceiving." "Perceiving" here is similar to "empathy," but it differs from "empathy." "perceiving" highlights the projection of emotion onto a "thing," and then another object perceives the emotion contained in the "thing" and thus knows the original emotion. The other object perceives the emotion contained in the object and thus knows the original emotion projected onto the object. Although, in most cases, "perceiving" plays the same role as "empathy" in terms of results, in some cases, people's own emotions can also influence the process of "perceiving." For example, some people may feel happy about the beautiful autumn scenery because they hear the chirping of autumn insects, while others may feel sad about the passage of time.

The second is "things," or objects. The description of "things" in "紫文要領" is "everything in the world, what the eye sees, what the ear hears, and what the body touches." (Motoori Norinaga, 1763) As mentioned above, "things" should be some medium that can carry emotions; the emotions can come from the person who sees the things or the objects themselves.

Finally, about "emotions." It is the core expression of Mono no aware. Literally, "emotions" here means "mourning" or "lamentation," which has the meaning of "sadness" in Japanese and Chinese, but emotions in "mono no aware" means much more than sadness, which is why I translated it as "emotion." The "mono no aware" aesthetics emphasizes the sadness caused by the death of things and the other emotions brought by things. For example, the happiness caused by the blooming of cherry blossoms is also a manifestation of "mono no aware." Therefore, "mono no aware" should not be limited to the "passing" of things, but all forms of things can give rise to the aesthetic consideration of "mono no aware"; "mono no aware" should not be limited to sadness either; emotions can be varied. At this point, the last part of the process mentioned above is completed: the emotion is projected onto the "things," and people "perceive" it and thus "lament" it. The "lament" here embodies "mono no

aware."
Thus, "perceiving," "things," and "emotion" form a closed loop, and the connotation of the aesthetic concept of "mono no aware" arises. Then we can explore the passionate pursuit, philosophy of life, and the cultural connotation behind the author's and the reader's feelings expressed through mourning in art texts.

2. Mono-no-aware aesthetics in Japanese art texts

The "mono no aware" embodied in Japanese literary texts is highly linked to loss and inner struggle. In many works, the "mono no aware" concept seems to have a deeper meaning. In such a context, the meaning of the "mono no aware" concept is also layered, as I will explain below.
The concept of "mono no aware" first appears in the commentary of *The Tale of Genji*. It is based on the passage of time and the passing of the good things of the past. With the change of time, death is an inevitable thing that comes with family fate, and history continues to move forward. The passing of one person after another continues throughout the decades of change. The forty-second chapter, "Kumogakure," is a perfect embodiment of these kinds of things are not what they used to be: the Genji grandson, who is portrayed in so many pages, does not even have an exact time of death, as if in the changing times, everyone's death is light and airy in the end. The concept of "mono no aware" embodied in such a contrast gives the whole story a blue color and adds aesthetic value, and makes us realize that the death of each person is not different in the context of the passage of time, but their passing together build the beauty of the past pomp and circumstance. (Murasaki Shikibu, 1001-1008)
If the concept is first legible in *The Tale of Genji*, it enters a range of later Japanese works. For example, the "mono no aware," embodied in the family's fate, is also reflected in the film "Ran": the family collapses, and the former king is uprooted. In the end, the blind piper plays a sad tune as if mourning the loss of the kingdom. It is as if he remembers the king, as if he is lamenting the loss of the domain, and as if he is mourning such an unpredictable life as a floating cloud. (Akira Kurosawa, 1985)
Likewise, the concept of "mono no aware" is reflected in literary texts on a personal level. In Mishima's novel *Kinkaku-ji*, Kinkaku-ji is beautiful but disordered. The protagonist loves Kinkaku-ji, but this beauty makes him tremble, and the distortion between reality and imagination makes him crazy. The Temple of the Golden Pavilion is burned down and is now glorified in eternity. The concept of "mono no aware" is also reflected here. With the devastation of the Kinkaku-ji (thing), the master is relieved of his inner struggle (emotion). Also, he reflects on the paranoid side of Japanese culture for the pursuit of beauty. (Yukio Mishima, 1956)
Similarly, in the novel *No Longer Human*, the concept of "mono no aware" is reflected in the limitations of death and life. For the hero, death seems to be the way to salvation in a desperate life, and death can redeem him. Here the concept of "mono no aware" seems to play a different role for the individual. (Osamu Dazai, 1948)
In some works, the concept of "mono no aware" is embodied in both the times and the individuals. In the film "Tokyo Story," death can reveal emotional ties and help people see through them. The plot is further advanced by the death of Tomi Hirayama, which embodies the mono-no-aware aesthetic. Almost everyone is integrated into the city's fast-paced life in the chaotic era, and parents are gradually left behind. The industrialization of Tokyo is evident in Ozu's depiction of a town full of smokestacks and tall buildings. It is full of noise, which is a direct consequence of the invasion of commercial popular culture: it manifests as an abstraction of meaning, symbolizing the repetition of industrial rhythms and a numb aesthetic state. This Tokyo is no longer a tranquil, slow-paced oriental aesthetic but a cosmopolitan city with almost the same appearance and substance, no longer distinguishable from New York or London, Tokyo is merely a geographical identifier. The plot is further advanced by the death of Tomi Hirayama, a symbol of the old life that brought the broken families back together. However, after the mourning, the people who should return to their fast-paced lives will return and continue to grow insensitive in the fast-moving society. It can be said that the concept of "mono no aware" is further embodied: it depicts the death of individuals from a personal perspective, showing the family ties and changes of the times, making the whole film a blue color. Nevertheless, the director also left the warmth. There will be parents around their beliefs silently accompanying their parents' existence. This may be the director's heart for good hope. At this point, the concept of "mono no aware" reflects the individual differences between the two generations and the differences of the times. (Yasujirō Ozu, 1953)

3. "Mono no aware" and Japanese cultural connotation

The connection between the "mourning of things" and Japanese art texts discussed above can also be further used to analyze Japanese culture. おおにし よしのり mentions in "Mono no aware" that "Mono no aware is a personal, indifferent, complete acceptance of the impermanence of life and the inevitability of destiny, a keen tolerance and awareness of all things." This seems to tell people that Mono no aware is the world's tolerance. However, after reading several documents and representative works, the author is trying to say that "mono no aware" is a kind of tolerance sought only after experiencing inner entanglement in culture. We should

not equate Mono no aware with tolerance, but rather the correct logic is that when we begin to understand Mono no aware, we can - as in the case of "perceiving emotions of things" mentioned above -begin to observe the world, to know and understand things. Only after we understand the world and experience the inner struggle and pain of accepting a new worldview and comparing different cultures can we embrace the world, as the book suggests. So the focus on Mono's no awareness should be on the inner struggle to understand and accept the world and how to get out of it.

This explains why aesthetic concepts such as "mono no aware" emerged in Japan and are unique to Japan: firstly, it is about geography: Japan is surrounded by the sea and has been isolated from civilizations outside of Japan for a long time, secondly, it is about history: Japan has a much longer history than Western civilizations. These two factors have made Japan's traditional culture deep-rooted, and Japan's indigenous civilization emerged independently and developed over a long period. Third, cultural contradictions: Japan has experienced many cultural contradictions, including but not limited to the shocks brought to Japan by the Western civilization powers in the modern era (most typically the Perry Expedition) and the war with China that followed. Fourth, Japan has experienced many cultural interactions: in ancient times, Japan sent envoys to the Tang Dynasty to learn about Chinese culture, and after being shocked by the Great Powers, Japan began to westernize, and so on. In such a context, the above-mentioned tangled feelings emerged in the minds of Japanese people, who had to struggle with whether to learn other people's culture and preserve their traditional culture. The importance of Mono no aware in Japanese people's minds is further enhanced: Mono no aware, as mentioned above, describes the nature of inner struggle and tolerance after coming out of the inner struggle. Unsurprisingly, such a concept is valued by the Japanese, who are so rich in inner entanglement.

Such cultural concepts heavily influence the style of Japanese artwork, and the works mentioned in this article represent the styles I have compiled for this topic. For example, in *Kinkaku-ji* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist is confronted with his inner struggle for the unpossessed beauty of the Kinkaku-ji, and at the end, he chooses to burn it down as a relief for his torn emotions; in "The Tale of Genji," "Tokyo Story," and "No Longer Human," the protagonists are confronted with their inner struggle for the fate of their characters, which seems to be uncontrollable under the changes of the times, and they have different attitudes toward this struggle, etc.

In Ruth Benedict's "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword." Japan is a civilization where the chrysanthemum and the samurai sword are juxtaposed, a civilization where softness and strength are juxtaposed, and a contradictory civilization. At this point, the inner contradictions and conflicts that cause tangles and struggles seem corroborated in texts outside Japanese literature.

"Mono no aware" seems to be always present in Japanese culture, and the embodiment of "mono no aware" in this regard can be transmitted from the artistic text to the connotation of Japanese culture. The characters in the novel the Japanese culture in the world convey the torn emotion of accepting new things. (Ruth Benedict, 1946)

The embodiment of "mono no aware" in Japanese culture has been present throughout the millennium, along with Japanese art texts. A typical example is the Meiji Restoration, which can stimulate our thinking. Faced with the product of Western technology, and Japanese culture, the Japanese people were caught up in the inner turmoil of accepting something new. The process of transformation was inevitably painful, and the concept of "mono no aware" is thus reflected: the Japanese culture chose to understand and accept the new era (Western technology and politics) in the face of this internal struggle; after constantly striving to overcome this internal pain, it achieved tolerance & inclusiveness: Japan was fully westernized and learned from Western culture, and thus emerged from its inner pain and rapidly developed its national strength.

4. Conclusion

Thus, in the end, we are able to analyze the role and status of Mono Further, no aware in light of its origin and meaning, the connection between Mono no Aware and Japanese art texts, and the connection between Mono no Aware and Japanese culture.

In the field of Japanese aesthetics, Mono no aware has always existed. As mentioned above, it is the expression of transcending worldliness after experiencing struggles - people's inner struggles seem to be particularly common in the Japanese environment - so it can be a source of energy for the reader: Literature can present the concept of Mono no aware to the reader, help the reader feel mono no aware, and confirm the existence of Mono no aware (for example, in the chapter "Kumogakure" in Tale of Genji, the reader realizes after reading the chapter that the words describing the death of the main character cannot be found directly. The emptiness created in the reader's mind by this nebulous description corresponds to the sense of helplessness of the family changes in that era. This is probably the feeling of the first person who summed it up as "mono no aware.") Thus, after understanding Mono's no aware, the reader has the energy to face his inner struggle. At the same time, the "mono no aware" embodied in literature can also be the writer's spiritual release. Writers also have inner struggles - perhaps authors are more sensitive to the tangled inner feelings arising from cultural differences, cultural changes, and

cultural loss - and possibly writing about them helps them to release these inner struggles (I think one of the most typical books is Rashomon by Ryunosuke Akutagawa), the author's characters sometimes reflect the author himself as a way to express his struggles (for example, the beauty sought by the protagonist in "Kinkakuji" reflects Yukio Mishima's innermost desires).

Therefore, a large part of the meaning of the existence of Mono no Aware is to serve as a hope and a goal for people to persist in facing their inner struggles in such a complex culture.

Moreover, as discussed above, such a struggle has existed throughout the millennia. This explains why Mono no Aware is still being used, analyzed, and used as one of the most critical elements in Japanese aesthetics.

Reference

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