

Japanese Consciousness of Narrowing from the Perspective of Architecture

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Abstract: One of the characteristics of Japanese culture is the “consciousness of narrowing”. Sei Shonagon once wrote in “The Pillow Book” that “no matter what, small things are exquisite.” The Japanese people's awareness of the beauty of smallness is widespread and is reflected in every aspect, and it can be said that “smallness” exists everywhere in Japan. Japan is a small island country surrounded by the sea on all sides, in such a geographical environment, the Japanese people have developed a “consciousness of narrowing”. This “consciousness of narrowing” has had a profound impact on many aspects of Japanese society, and has led to the formation of a unique Japanese culture. Culturally, the Japanese art of flower arrangement and architecture also pursues subtlety and delicacy in form and structure, and favors a small and exquisite style in its aesthetic sense. Throughout the history of mankind, no matter what era, architecture has always served to protect mankind and avoid danger. Even though the style of architecture has changed with the change of time, the cultural connotation embodied in it is still preserved. Therefore, this thesis analyzes the causes and effects of the “consciousness of narrowing” on Japanese society to further understand the unique culture of the Japanese people. At the same time, by citing representative Japanese buildings and understanding the “consciousness of narrowing” embodied in them, it is hoped that the national character and aesthetic sense of the Japanese people can be further understood, and that Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges can be promoted. At the end of this thesis, we will briefly compare the differences between Japanese traditional culture and Chinese traditional culture represented by “consciousness of narrowing”, hoping to further understand Japanese culture on this basis, and to help promote cultural exchanges between China and Japan.

Keywords: Consciousness of Narrowing; Japanese Garden; Japanese Tea Room; Japanese Traditional House.

1. Introduction

Consciousness of narrowing is a unique culture of Japanese people, which has gradually become a part of their national character. From literary haiku, short stories to bento in daily life, they all have the same characteristic. That is, the goal is to express complex emotions and contents in a concise form. In his book, “Japanese Consciousness of Narrowing,” Korean scholar Li Yuning elaborates on the Japanese's consciousness of narrowing and its specific types. It can be said that the consciousness of narrowing has profoundly influenced the way of thinking and living habits of Japanese people. Architecture, as something indispensable for human survival under the harsh conditions of nature, has also been influenced by the sense of downsizing.

This paper attempts to recognize the consciousness of narrowing in Japanese architecture by focusing on Japanese gardens, Japanese houses, and Japanese tea rooms.

In this manuscript, firstly, the concept of Japanese consciousness of narrowing is introduced. Secondly, the main reasons for the formation of downsizing consciousness and its influence on Japanese society are discussed from the perspectives of natural environment, history and culture. Taking Japanese gardens, houses, and tea rooms as examples, this paper can further understand the Japanese aesthetic consciousness by analyzing the consciousness of narrowing expressed in Japanese architecture such as features and design. By comparing it with traditional Chinese concepts, the nature of the consciousness of narrowing can be deeply recognized.

2. The Concept of Consciousness of Narrowing

2.1. What is the Consciousness of Narrowing?

Consciousness of narrowing is one of the characteristics of Japanese culture, along with shame culture and group consciousness. In literature, it is reflected in the fairy tales of Ichimoku Sensei, haiku, short stories, etc., and in language, in kana, kokuji, acronyms, and gibberish. Culturally, the Japanese art of flower arrangement and architecture also favor a small and delicate style. The consciousness of narrowing is reflected in every aspect.

Then, what exactly is the consciousness of narrowing? In his book, “Japanese Consciousness of Narrowing,” Korean scholar Lee Gounin first proposed the concept of consciousness of narrowing. The so-called “consciousness of narrowing” refers to the cultural characteristic of Japanese people who are always good at shrinking rather than expanding whatever they are doing. That is to say, Japanese people like to reduce big things, make small things beautiful, and express the grand feeling through small things. (Zhang Lan, 2020,4(32):197.)

2.2. Categories of Consciousness of Narrowing

In the book “Japanese Consciousness of Narrowing”, Li Yuning divided consciousness of narrowing into six categories.

2.2.1. Sleeve Box Type

To put it simply, the so-called nested box type refers to the pattern of a large box over a small box, with an even smaller box in the small box. Even if there are more than a dozen boxes, as long as the size in order to put in, can ultimately be

collected in the “one box”. The language is characterized by the repeated use of all grammatical patterns and the repeated use of “的”. The most typical performance in life is that Japanese people love to use the performance of the set of boxes, which can also be called the set of boxes culture.

2.2.2. Fan Type

The folding fan is developed from the doughnut fan. Although the fan was introduced to Japan from China and Korea, it was Japan that invented the folding fan. Other countries did not think of folding and reducing it. Only the Japanese thought of this because of the unique cultural structure of Japan and the resulting consciousness of narrowing. The Japanese sense of shrinking, as seen in the shape of the fan, expresses a concrete way of recognizing things by moving them around and clutching them in one's own hands. (Li, 1984) It is also based on this consciousness that the Japanese created the world's most space-saving sliding door, the world's first folding umbrella, and the transistor, which opened up the world market for Japanese goods.

2.2.3. The Bride-like Toy Paper Figures

This model is to reduce the reality of things, and imitation made of models. The best example of Japanese shrinkage is the bride-like toy paper figure. In the production process, people omit its arms and legs, leaving only a round head and a straight body, making it simple and concise. Therefore, we can understand from the bride-like toy paper figures Japanese people want to pursue the pure and simple beauty of the psychology.

2.2.4. Foldable Lunch Box Type

Japanese box lunch culture is also widely known. The so-called bento refers to the food squeezed into a small box, so that food shrinks, easy to carry. From this explanation, it is easy to realize that this is a typical representative of Japanese people's sense of shrinking. Shrinking” here means ‘filling’. There are many examples of this type of “shrinking” consciousness not only in the field of food, but also in everyday life. The Japanese micro-camera and micro-computer are well known for their use of this sense of “stuffing”. Japanese people are also good at utilizing this sense of “filling in” various cultures into their own culture, taking the best of them to form a more inclusive and excellent culture.

2.2.5. Noh-Shin Type

Nengmyeon is the Japanese sense of shrinking from the perspective of time, and Li Yuning calls this mode the aesthetics of shortening action. (Zhang Lin, 2001, (90):239.) The posture of Noh drama simplifies a lot of complex actions into one instantaneous action, while the mask coalesces the emotions of joy, anger, sadness and happiness into one expression, the middle expression (Li Yuning, 1984), and the Japanese believe that only with this kind of face, a wide variety of expressions can appear. The Japanese people believe that only this kind of face can produce a variety of expressions. The Japanese people's constant smile seems to be a good example of this. From these two aspects, we can see the Japanese people's sense of narrowing down.

2.2.6. Emblems

The Japanese often condense the world in a broad sense, the vague history and the group world into a form, and turn it into a visual thing. The main purpose is to visualize, concretize and simplify the abstract. This is where the Japanese sense of reduction comes into play. Family crests,

company emblems, etc. are even more symbolic of a reputation. In Japan, business cards are indispensable for socializing with others. It can be said that getting to know someone starts with reading their business card. This habit also stems from the Japanese tradition of emphasizing badges.

3. Causes and Effects of Consciousness of Narrowing

3.1. Causes of Formation

The natural environment is an important factor influencing the formation of culture. People are influenced by the environment and will form habits and character that adapt to the environment. The natural geography and climate will be different in different regions, which will lead to the differences in people's character and life style. And, human beings must rely on nature to survive and adapt to local conditions. Therefore, natural causes must be taken into account. Japan is an island nation with a small land area. Unlike China, which has a vast landmass, Japan is surrounded by the sea and is relatively closed geographically, and three-quarters of the country is covered with forested mountainous terrain, so natural resources are scarce. In addition, Japan is located in the Pacific Rim Volcanic Seismic Belt, which is prone to natural disasters and has a serious existential crisis. In order to cope with this crisis, the Japanese people can only make a living by utilizing the limited resources around them and trying to maximize the value of the resources in every possible way, thus gradually developing a unique sense of downsizing. In other words, the formation of Japanese people's consciousness of narrowing is closely related to the natural geographical environment, and it belongs to a kind of self-protection instinctive consciousness. (Zhang Lan, 2020,4(32): 198.) The topographic features of mountainous terrain without large plains also lead to the fact that Japanese rivers are very short and easy to form rapids. In general, most of the natural landscapes in Japan are small-scale. The geography of Japan has exposed the Japanese to only small-scale landscapes. (Zhou, Fang, 2020,33(08):153.)

In addition to topographical reasons, climatic factors also have a considerable impact on the creation of a sense of downsizing. The main type of climate in Japan is monsoon type climate, with abundant changes in the four seasons. Under the influence of monsoon, Japanese people are extremely sensitive to the changes of seasons, and their sensitivity to things is also very strong, which also affects the aesthetic consciousness of Japanese people to a certain extent. It is precisely because of this sensitivity that the Japanese are very good at discovering the subtle beauty in life, as well as forming the character of Japanese people who like to pursue delicate things.

In addition to natural factors, socio-historical factors have also deeply influenced the formation of the sense of narrowing.

Since Japan is an island country surrounded by sea, it is difficult to communicate with other countries. Before the Meiji Restoration, Japan practiced the “closed-door” policy, and the society was basically closed. In contrast, Japan was hardly invaded or ruled from outside. Under this stable and calm social environment, a unique Japanese culture grew up. For the Japanese people who were born and raised in the island country, they prefer the silence and small space. They prefer small, quiet spaces, where they can see the end of the road, and where they can “touch” and feel safe. This makes

them prefer small things.

On the other hand, Japanese people live in a relatively stable culture, so they attach great importance to interpersonal relationships, and their daily exchanges are all very euphemistic and ambiguous. Therefore, in this cultural background, also cultivated the Japanese people are good at standing in the position of the other side of the thinking and sensitive insight, to achieve the "heart to heart". Moreover, this kind of ambiguity is not a perfunctory way of communicating with the other party. In this small area of Japan, communication does not need to be complete and direct; on the contrary, it is very important to use ambiguous, euphemistic, and abbreviated words to express infinite richness of content. This is an important reason for the formation of the consciousness of narrowing.

Secondly, since the Yayoi period, Japan has had agriculture based on rice cultivation, and rice production has also had a great influence on the formation of Japanese people's consciousness of narrowing. The farming society was very closed, and people's range of activities and horizons were very narrow. Moreover, in order to have a good harvest, farmers had to cultivate rice carefully, and it was also necessary to carry out optimal farming operations according to the seasons. All of this further contributed to the sensitivity of the Japanese people, which is also related to the formation of a consciousness of narrowing.

3.2. Impact on Japanese Society

Consciousness of narrowing had a great impact on Japan's science, technology and economy. Japan was the second largest country in the world which grew rapidly in a short period of time after the war. The influence of the consciousness of narrowing also led to the manufacture of high-quality goods in Japan. A typical example of this is the transistor. The transistor is an American invention, but it is a representative of Japan. It was not the United States that made the transistor grow and expand its market, but Japanese companies led by Sony. Sony's advertising slogan is: "While miniaturization and high performance will surely create new fun and convenience - this is the Sony spirit." It is clear from Sony's tagline that the Sony Spirit advocates that everything can be downsized. It can be said that it was because of the cultural tradition of downsizing that the seeds of the transistor flourished in Japan. In turn, it greatly contributed to the development of micro-technology in Japan, and with the advantages of miniaturization and high performance, Japan, which lacked resources, was able to catch up with Europe and the United States in the field of household electrical appliances and occupy a place in the world market. There is no doubt that the sense of downsizing has an indispensable role to play in the field of science and technology. And the development of science and technology is for the post-war Japanese economic recovery provides a solid technical support.

Japan is a big country that grew up rapidly after World War II. The shrinking culture is believed to have played a major role in this process. First of all, the consciousness of narrowing has profoundly influenced the Japanese business model. Mr. Inouye of Sony said, "I have absolutely no desire to grow our company into a big business. There is not a single advantage to expanding the company. There are advantages to being small. For example, it is possible to be keenly aware of changes. It won't work if it gets bigger." In other words, Sony prefers to concentrate on a single point, not spreading

out its strengths, and investing its human and financial resources geared toward major themes, as opposed to a large corporation. On the one hand, this is because the bigger the company, the more abstract it becomes, and the more difficult it is for people to get in touch with each other, which is difficult for the insecure Japanese to accept. On the other hand, Japanese people with a consciousness of narrowing have a character of attention to detail, concentration, and seriousness, and prefer to be the first in a field than to develop in many ways. Throughout the development of Japanese companies, sticking to one's own business has become one of the secrets of Japanese companies' longevity. As the saying goes, "Choose a business, and you'll spend your whole life in it". In the course of Japan's economic growth, the excellent entrepreneurial spirit of clarifying one's own position and direction and focusing on one's own business has been influenced by the culture of downsizing.

4. A Consciousness of Narrowing in Japanese Architecture

4.1. Consciousness of Narrowing in Gardens

Architecture, as an important part of social life, naturally reflects the Japanese people's sense of downsizing. First of all, we will analyze the consciousness of narrowing in the garden.

Yasunari Kawabata described in his book "I in Beautiful Japan" that "Japanese gardens symbolize the beauty of nature. In contrast to Western gardens, most of which are neatly manicured, Japanese gardens are unevenly constructed and tend to give the impression of being very large. Of course, this unevenness is due to the delicate and subtle sensibility of the Japanese that keeps the balance." (Yasunari Kawabata, 2015)

Japanese methods of building gardens are complex, interesting, and detailed. Among the many methods, it is well known that downscaling is a famous Japanese means of creating gardens. The reduced landscape of Japanese gardens is focused on combining natural and humanistic landscapes to form a landscape. The purpose of miniature landscape is to reproduce the small universe in people's side, and to include it in the small garden. (Hu Changlong, 1995(01):59.) In addition, according to the book "Sakutei ji" in the Heian period of Japan, Japanese gardens were mostly compressed into one-third of the actual landscape to create a small nature. The Japanese did not only compress the actual scene, but condensed all the essence of the actual scene in the garden, which can be called "a small garden with a big world". (Li Yi, 2001(01):76.) From this, we can understand that it is the Japanese people's heart to manipulate the world by shrinking it, and the Japanese people like to build a garden by shrinking the nature. Compared with European gardens, which emphasize the unity of the overall pattern, Japanese gardens emphasize the clever handling of details.

There are three types of Japanese gardens: Ikebana gardens, tea gardens, and Kusansui gardens. Among them, the birth of the Kusansui garden can be said to have epoch-making significance in the history of Japanese gardens. The so-called "Kusansui Garden" has no mountains or water, but uses rocks and white sand as the main body, with the white sand representing water and the rocks representing mountains. Based on this method of creation, the scene of the undulating waves of the great sea is presented in the garden even though there are no mountains and rivers. The shape, line width and line depth of the sand pattern can be used to represent various seas and rivers with the shadow of light. Also, an invisible

waterfall can be represented by a stone slab. This is the extreme of condensation. In other words, the Kusansui Garden expresses an infinite landscape in a limited small space. The infinite landscape is compressed, condensed, and expressed in extreme simplification and abstraction. And this expression in the Kusansui Garden is also the expression of the consciousness of shrinkage, i.e. - the expression of majesty in smallness. In addition to Kusansui, other Japanese gardens also utilize the means of downsizing to a greater or lesser extent.

No matter how big the garden is, daimyo gardens, kusansui, open spaces, etc., are “shrunk nature,” and the basic method of gardening is the shrinking technique. The technique of downsizing is applicable to both bonsai that downsize large trees and withered landscapes that downsize nature. (Ren Fang, 2011:9.) And this gardening method not only saves the space occupied by the real landscape, but also reduces the cost and increases the artistic atmosphere, which plays an important role in bringing out the charm of the courtyard.

4.2. A Sense of Downsizing in Housing

What is a Japanese house like as a place of daily living? Tatami mats, sliding doors, and niches (床の間とこのま) are some of the things that come to mind when you think about this. Some people call Japanese houses “rabbit huts”. Of course, there are many different types of houses in both China and Japan, and it is difficult to describe them simply, so we will only introduce the most representative houses here.

The Japanese have a “narrow home, wide heart” view of housing. The tatami mat is a basic unit of measurement for Japanese housing space. It can be said that the Japanese sense of living space is determined by the shape of the tatami mats, which are unique to Japan. Therefore, a typical feature of Japanese houses is that they are centered around tatami mats. Traditionally, there are no beds or chairs in Japanese rooms. At night, they would sleep on the tatami mats, and during the day, they would put away their bedding and eat and move around on the tatami mats. Tatami mats make efficient use of space, and are very much in keeping with the small size of Japanese living spaces. Because of their small size, Japanese tatami-mat rooms provide a more intimate atmosphere than Chinese rooms. While Westerners seek stability in vast spaces, Japanese find tranquility in narrow spaces. The construction of a tea room with four and a half tatami mats and the deliberate crowding of many people into a narrow space is a way of enjoying joy that no other people in the world can experience. The narrowness of the space makes people feel solid, and it is precisely because they are in a space as narrow as a matchbox that they are able to understand the vastness of the universe. (Liu Jing, 2013(07):23.) This Japanese mentality of enjoying narrow space is undoubtedly influenced by the consciousness of narrowing.

4.3. Consciousness of Narrowing in the Tea Room

The tea ceremony culture also embodies the consciousness of narrowing. From the utensils of the tea ceremony to the wakizashi and the etiquette, everything reflects the consciousness of narrowing. As a place to enjoy tea, the Japanese tea room is of course also one of the embodiments of the consciousness of narrowing.

The earliest tea rooms in Japan appeared in the Muromachi period, and were initially used as places to hold tea tastings. In the past, tea tasting sessions were held in a large space,

which was noisy and not ceremonial; however, the eighth shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa, built the “Toninzai” in Higashiyama, Kyoto, to reduce and close the original open and irregular space, creating a stable indoor space for the formation of the tea ceremony. (Yang Shiyue, 2008(01):153.) The present tea room is the reduced tea room. The small size and simple structure are the typical characteristics of Japanese tea. The mother entrance of the tea room is a small door, 65 centimeters high and only 60 centimeters wide. Much smaller than the size of an ordinary door. Guests bend down to get in. This shrunken door is a boundary. Generally tea rooms are very small, with only four and a half mats in an ordinary tea room. Some tea rooms are reduced to two and a half mats, and even more reduced to one and a half mats, known as “Little Grass Anne”. All things in the tea room to meet the feeling of simplicity, can be narrowed down as much as possible, can be as simple as possible simple. Japanese teahouses originally respected the feeling of nature, and the essence of nature was reproduced in the teahouse to create a smaller version of nature. (Ren Mingxu, 2020:12.) Moreover, the small tea room has since become the authentic tea room because it embodies more simplicity and silence than the large tea room. Most Japanese people also preferred small tea rooms. In addition, the pursuit of the tea room is to allow people to find the beauty of the tea ceremony utensils and tea ceremony rituals with their own subtle attention in a minimalist environment.

Secondly, due to the influence of the consciousness of narrowing, in the Japanese concept, nature is the most pristine and pure, and simplicity is the essence of nature, and superfluous things should not be shown. In addition, the Japanese tend to reduce the size of things by “omitting” and “cutting”. Therefore, the Japanese are good at simplifying things, and even the vase for flower arrangement in the tea room has only one flower. It is easy to see the sense of reduction in every aspect of the tea room.

5. Conclusion

Japanese people reveal the aesthetic ideology of “small is beautiful” in every aspect of their lives. It is because of this traditional aesthetic sense that they have been able to create compact products that are very popular in the international market. It can be said that this aesthetic sense of the rapid development of the Japanese economy has played a great role; on the other hand, it also cultivated the Japanese people's delicate, meticulous character, forming a unique national spirit.

Compared with China, which belongs to the same Asian continent, the aesthetic sense of the two is very different. China is a vast country with many mountains and rivers. The so-called “one side of the water and soil to raise people”, different natural environments have shaped a very different sense of aesthetics. In the traditional Chinese concept, majestic and spectacular has always been synonymous with beauty. But I think the Japanese consciousness of narrowing can also bring us inspiration. The Japanese are good at learning other cultures, and even better at condensing foreign cultures in continuous imitation, taking the essence and removing the dregs for continuous innovation and transcendence. Moreover, they pay more attention to explore the inner small but core things of the object, seize the key points and then simplify them to grasp the essence. Similarly, these are very useful for the innovative development of traditional culture. That is to say, on the basis of retaining the core of excellent culture, they absorb the world's excellent

culture and promote the progress and development of traditional culture.

Japanese people's consciousness of narrowing plays an indispensable role in all aspects of life, and profoundly influences the development of Japan's economy, society, culture and so on. However, there are two sides to everything, and the same applies to the consciousness of narrowing, which will not be explained in detail here. This thesis draws on a number of sources in the hope of furthering the understanding of consciousness of narrowing and promoting cultural exchanges with Japan.

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