

Female Gaze in Japanese Society: Based on the Clue of Iki Aesthetics

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Abstract: Based on the current situation of Japanese society and traditional Japanese national concepts, this paper uses Iki aesthetics as a clue to explain the one-sided thinking of contemporary Japanese society on traditional Iki aesthetics. It discusses the relationship between this misunderstanding of Iki aesthetics and the female gaze in Japanese society and explains why the Japanese female gaze focuses on women themselves and often presents a complex appearance of self-loathing. The research in this paper is not only conducive to the academic community to fully grasp the essential characteristics of Iki aesthetics; it also helps the academic community to deeply understand the reasons behind the current situation of Japanese female gaze and has certain academic significance and practical value in promoting theoretical research and practical application of Japanese female gaze.

Keywords: Female Gaze; Iki Aesthetics; Misogynistic; Body-shaming.

1. Introduction

The original meaning of "female gaze" is the reversal and response to "male gaze", which is a way of viewing, expressing, and understanding the world from a female perspective. In Japanese society, female gaze is usually not just a gaze and interpretation of the opposite sex, but also reflects and focuses on many thoughts about the beauty and ugliness of women themselves. Based on the traditional Japanese concept of Iki (い き) aesthetics, this article explains why the female gaze in Japanese society focuses on women themselves and presents a complex emotion of "self-loathing", and sorts out its relationship with the traditional Japanese spirit aesthetics. Expected to enrich the research theoretical value of this topic and provide inspiration for practical applications.

2. Literature Review

Laura Mulvey first proposed the concept of "male gaze" in her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film" (1975) [1]. She concluded that traditional movies always put the audience in a masculine visual position, looking at the surroundings through the eyes of men, and women thus become the objectified objects of desire. However, in Japanese society, the female gaze is not a simple gender swap, objectifying and interpreting men, but focusing on women. Chizuko Ueno pointed out in "Misogyny: Hatred of Women in Japan" that women's gaze on themselves is often expressed as self-loathing and complaining about being "born as a woman" [2]. This gaze is closely related to the focus on body aesthetics in traditional Japanese society. For example, Wang Xiangyuan's research in "On the Japanese Body Aesthetics Category 'Iki'" (2013) focuses on the Japanese body aesthetics category, especially the concept of Iki [3]. He mentioned that Iki originated from the brothels and "sex road" of the Edo period, and is an important concept based on body aesthetics. This aesthetic is reflected in the market literature of the Tokugawa period and has been deeply studied in modern times. As a kind of body aesthetics, Iki not only expresses the attraction and

"charm" in the interaction between men and women, but also emphasizes the "Iki ji (い き - じ)" of self-respect, forming a pure love, non-utilitarian, chic and optimistic aesthetic contemplation. However, Shūzō Kuki also expounded the structure of Iki in his book "The Structure of 'Iki'", showing the reason why the beauty of Iki and the shame of sex are often confused and misunderstood, that is, the source of women's shame and disgust when they gaze at themselves.

However, in the existing cases, there are few special studies that have perfected the relationship between "Iki" aesthetics and female gaze. Therefore, this paper associates the aesthetic preference of Japanese "Iki" aesthetics with Japanese nationality and takes Iki aesthetics as a clue. On the one hand, it is hoped that the relationship between female gaze in Japanese society and it can be sorted out in detail. On the other hand, it is expected to enrich and expand the research content of this research field and provide inspiration and practical significance for in-depth understanding of the relationship between Japanese feminism and traditional aesthetic concepts.

3. Female Gaze in Japanese Society

3.1. When Women Gaze at Themselves

Chizuko Ueno wrote in "Misogyny: Hatred of Women in Japan" that "In the gender order of the gender binary system, misogyny is deeply rooted in the core. Under this order, no matter whether male or female, no one can escape the shroud of misogyny. Misogyny permeates this order system, like the gravity of an object, because it is so taken for granted that people are almost unaware of its existence." In Japanese society, women generally accept and internalize the prejudice against women in society and have negative attitudes towards other women or themselves. It is often manifested as excessive attention to women's bodies and behaviors, treating them as aesthetic objects rather than independent individuals. This gaze on women not only appears from the male perspective, but is often internalized by women, forming pressure and standards for self-aesthetics.

Xu Lei also wrote in "Looking at the Female Culture of Japanese Society from Advertising" that since the 1950s,

female images have been frequently eroticized in Japanese advertisements[4]. Advertisements attract audiences and consumers by highlighting women's physical characteristics and sexual charm. At the same time, in Japan's anime, comics, games and other entertainment industries, female characters are often portrayed as sexualized objects, emphasizing their physical characteristics and sexual attractiveness. This portrayal not only solidifies the image of women as sexual objects, but also deepens the society's stereotypes about women. Women's bodies are seen as objects that should be covered, examined, and controlled. Under the pressure of this society, Japanese women, while appreciating themselves, also develop a sense of shame about their bodies, so that when they think about gender issues from their perspective, the first thing they consider is the examination of their own bodies and self-loathing.

3.2. The Origin of Shame

The pursuit of female beauty in traditional Japanese society has a profound historical and cultural background. The aesthetic standards of the Edo period were influenced by popular culture such as Ukiyo-e and Kabuki, focusing on women's style and posture. The aesthetics of spirit also emerged during this period. For example, a plump figure and a rosy complexion were regarded as symbols of health and beauty. Although aesthetic trends have evolved from elegance and delicacy to style and posture, and then to modern diversity, the Japanese people's pursuit of female beauty remains unchanged. In this social context, Japanese women have a strong sense of concern for their own physical beauty.

However, when contemporary Japanese women look at themselves, they often have misunderstandings and shame about their own body aesthetics. Modern Japanese people are very concerned about the gazes of others, especially abide by social order, have many taboos, and have a strong sense of self-restraint[5]. This sense of self-restraint has evolved into women's excessive interpretation of their own physical beauty today. For example, advertisements convey the message that sexiness is equivalent to attractiveness, causing many women to pay too much attention to their appearance and try to meet these standards through clothing and makeup. In order to achieve the ideal image in advertisements, many women choose to undergo cosmetic surgery, such as breast augmentation, liposuction, and facial fillers, etc., to pursue a sexier appearance through these surgeries, hoping to gain more attention and recognition by changing their bodies, and feel inferior and anxious about the differences between themselves and their ideal images; film and television works often link the success and happiness of female characters with their appearance and sexiness, conveying a misleading value that only through sexy appearance can one gain recognition and success. Behind these social trends is Japan's long-standing misunderstanding of the aesthetics of Iki.

The reason why women feel ashamed when examining themselves, and also the primary reason for misreading the aesthetics of Iki, is due to Japan's long-standing social tradition of "gaman(がまん)". The "gaman" culture is one of the important cultures that runs through Japan's cultural life and behavioral ideology, causing Japanese women to face difficulties and pressure in recognizing the beauty of their own bodies. "gaman" is composed of "I" (われ) to represent self and individual, and "man" (まん) to represent satisfaction, complacency, and complacency. The word "gaman" in modern Japanese refers to turning a blind eye to the

weaknesses of stubborn people with a patient attitude, which means patience, endurance, tolerance, overcoming, forgiveness, and concession. This tradition makes the Japanese generally believe that when the objective environment cannot be changed, the same effect as changing the objective environment can be achieved by changing the subjective self. In this traditional social context, Japanese women often need to be patient and obedient to take on more family responsibilities and social roles [6]. This expectation of gender roles, together with media influence and internalized body standards, makes women more likely to feel shame and disapproval when facing the issue of body aesthetics, because they are required by society to hide their desires and needs to conform to traditional gender norms. Therefore, the female gaze in Japanese society presents many negative developments directed at women themselves.

4. Iki and the Female Gaze

4.1. Misunderstanding of Iki

In "The Structure of 'Iki'", Shūzō Kuki discusses the connotation of Iki and explains this concept through various illustrations and classifications. Iki is not only includes the aesthetic representation of people, but also has a close relationship with the way of color and the way of beauty. This aesthetic concept transcends external appearances and embodies a concept of beauty that is both internal and external. We can use diagrams to understand this traditional aesthetic thought for female body aesthetics:

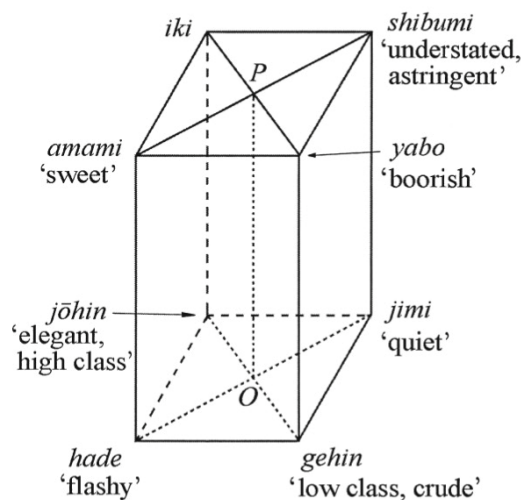


Fig 1. Shūzō Kuki. The structure of detachment: the aesthetic vision of Kuki Shūzō. Hiroshi Nara (2003).32-33

'We place the eight words for taste at the eight vertexes. The terms placed at the vertexes of the top or bottom squares and connected by diagonal lines represent the tastes that oppose each other. There is no absolute a priori pairing of particular tastes. The vertexes of the top and bottom squares where the side planes intersect (Iki and shibumi, for instance), the vertexes on the side surface that can be connected by a diagonal line (Iki and hade, for instance), the vertexes connected by the line formed by two side planes (Iki and jōhin, for instance), and the vertexes opposite each other on the rectangular prism (Iki and gehin, for instance) all represent some kind of opposition. In other words, each of the vertexes can stand in opposition to another vertex in some way. In the square on the bottom or at the top, the vertexes that oppose each other diagonally stand out most in the degree of

opposition. As the principle for that opposition, we considered two properties—an opposition to the self and an opposition to the other—in each of the domains of the public. The opposition embodied in the former was based on value judgment, where the opposing elements revealed a contrast between positive and negative values. The opposition to the other was irrelevant to value judgment and it could be either active or inactive. In the rectangular prism, two rectangles represent the opposition of values that relates to the self and the value-neutral opposition that relates to the other. To obtain these rectangles, we quadrisection the rectangular prism vertically along the two sets of diagonal lines formed by connecting the vertexes of the top and bottom squares. That is, the rectangle with *jōhin*, *Iki*, *yabo*, and *gehin* as its vertexes represents the oppositions that relate to the self, and the rectangle with *hade*, *amami*, *shibumi*, and *jimi* as its vertexes represents the oppositions that relate to the other. [7].'

In the aesthetics of *Iki*, the evaluation of female beauty is not flat, but three-dimensional and complex. According to Shūzō Kuki, there is a systematic connection between different aesthetic tastes. When women look at themselves, they often think about gains and losses from two aspects: the social-related, universal human side, and the side related to the special social circle of the opposite sex. The latter is often linked to the male gaze due to the intervention of the opposite sex; but the former is more inclined to the social and female self-judgment and self-identification part. This universal social judgment has derived two judgment systems when women think and examine themselves: what is valuable to themselves is called the best, and what is not; what is worthless to others is called gorgeous (positive), and what is not is simple (negative). Shūzō Kuki explored the structure and connotation of *Iki*. The "Passionate" and "enlightened" in *Iki* aesthetics emphasize the pure beauty of the inner and outer and emphasize its non-utilitarianism and the pursuit of pure beauty. However, it is worth noting that in the aesthetic judgment related to the special social circle of the opposite sex, from the perspective of the judge, women who are valuable to them are called *Iki*, and those who are not are called rustic. However, since this judgment of beauty comes from the opposite sex to a certain extent, it is easy for women to blur the line between their own judgment and the judgment of the opposite sex, so that when examining themselves, they pay more attention to the secular and other people's eyes, which affects the appreciation of their own beauty and produces inferiority and inconsistency.

In Japanese society, the misunderstanding of *Iki* is first reflected in its overly flattening and single aesthetic preference. Traditionally, Japanese women are expected to show gentleness, obedience and humility, and many women are encouraged to show a weak and petite image. For example, fair skin has always been regarded as a symbol of beauty in Japan. Many Japanese women use whitening products to keep their skin white. Many of the beauty products published on *Idk* (the most subscribed beauty magazine in Japan) are whitening products. Secondly, it is reflected in the misuse of *Iki* aesthetics in many situations. For example, the excessive eroticization of women. The beauty in *Iki* aesthetics is essentially different from the simple eroticism of objectifying women. Kuki Shuzo believes that "the posture after bathing can also be regarded as a posture of spirit. The woman after bathing can remind people of her naked body not long ago, but at the same time, the woman in front of her casually wears a simple *yukata*, and at this time, the "charming state" and its

form are fully manifested." This "charming state" belongs to the category of *Iki*, but it is different from the erotic and vulgar body beauty. It is a deeper level of *Iki* and "superior" beauty: it satisfies the appreciation of the beauty of women's bodies by others, women and oneself at the same time. As Shūzō Kuki wrote, "Putting the hair back and then pulling it up, this is the appearance of 'water hair'. Even if you go somewhere else, you can tell that it is a woman from Tatsumi just by the hairstyle. Breaking the normal balance and making the hairstyle slightly loose shows the 'charming state' of the duality of welcoming the opposite sex, but the degree of looseness is very subtle, and it also implies its own 'purity'. The reason why 'slightly messy bun' and 'hanging down the sideburns' can show *Iki* is also for the same reason."

4.2. Between *Iki* Aesthetics and Female Gaze

The female gaze in contemporary Japanese society often internalizes too much of the external society's aesthetic standards and expectations for women. This internalization often leads to women's harsh evaluation of themselves, and even the formation of "self-loathing" emotions. For example, the social aesthetic standards that women are exposed to since childhood are often shaped by the media, advertising and popular culture. These social trends focusing on the beauty of women's bodies are closely related to Japanese *Iki* aesthetics. The long-standing *Iki* aesthetics has subtly influenced Japan's social atmosphere, resulting in Japanese society showing a strong focus on and admiration for the beauty of women's bodies. This also fundamentally leads to the Japanese female gaze focusing on many explanations and interpretations of women's own body aesthetics. However, in the aesthetics of contemporary society, some aesthetic standards often emphasize characteristics such as thinness, fair skin, youth, and weakness, which makes women dissatisfied with their appearance. Due to the unreality and singularity of these standards, as well as the lack and misunderstanding of the concept of *Iki* aesthetics in inheritance, many women become extremely harsh in self-evaluation, thinking that they are not beautiful enough or thin enough, thus generating self-loathing emotions.

At the same time, due to the stereotypes and labeling of women in Japanese society, the aesthetics of women's physical beauty, which should be diverse, has been flattened. The eroticization and body shame of women in their gaze often come from the confusion of "superior (self-beauty)" and "gorgeous (others' evaluation of their own beauty)" in the aesthetics of *Iki*. Women care too much about the erotic scrutiny of others (by men) on themselves, so much so that they ignore the part of their physical beauty that pleases themselves. The real *Iki* aesthetics emphasizes the combination of inner cultivation and outer elegance, and attaches importance to the expression and uniqueness of personality. It is not only reflected in the promotion of simplicity and natural beauty, but also in women's self-confidence and independent spirit. When women gaze at themselves, the criteria for judging their own beauty should be diverse and *Iki*: beauty is not only pleasing in appearance, but also in temperament and inner cultivation. At the same time, show your own style, rather than just pursuing a single standard of beauty, return to nature, promote healthy beauty, and reduce excessive modification. Pay more attention to self-worth and inner strength, and reduce the self-loathing emotions generated when gazing at yourself.

The relationship between the aesthetics of *Iki* and the gaze

of Japanese women is complex and profound. When Japanese women gaze at themselves, they tend to focus on their own physical beauty. The logic behind this is derived from Japan's long-standing social tradition of focusing on and advocating female beauty. The complete aesthetics of Iki can not only enrich the connotation of Japan's contemporary flat female body aesthetics, but also provide women with a more comprehensive and healthier concept of beauty. By combining the concept of ideologies of ideologies, women can pay more attention to inner cultivation and personality development while pursuing external beauty, thereby achieving true beauty and self-confidence.

5. Conclusion

The female gaze in Japanese society focuses on women themselves and presents a complex emotion of "self-loathing", which is the result of the internalized social aesthetic standards and many misunderstandings of traditional Iki aesthetics. The root of this female gaze is women's pursuit of Iki. However, both the traditional arrogance in Japanese society and the deviation in the understanding of Iki have affected the self-cognition and mental health of Japanese women, and distorted the deep connotation of traditional aesthetics. To improve this situation, it is necessary for all sectors of society to work together, including the media, education, and family, to re-examine and inherit the true connotation of traditional Iki aesthetics, understand Iki aesthetics, and advocate diversified and healthy aesthetic standards to help women establish a positive self-image and self-esteem, and get rid of the negative inertial thinking of self-loathing.

Associating the traditional Japanese Iki aesthetics with the uniqueness of the female gaze in Japanese society can help the academic community to understand the profound influence of national traditional aesthetics more deeply, and its expression in the female gender group. In addition, through

this study, it can promote the academic community to think more deeply about the correlation between the misunderstanding of Iki aesthetics in Japanese society and the performance of the female gaze. Finally, from the perspective of the practical value of the research, this study can better play the role of understanding the practical application of the aesthetics of Iki, which helps to combine theoretical research with reality, further deepen the comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics of Iki, and help women understand the uniqueness of their own beauty on the premise of accepting their own appearance and other characteristics, and become women with true beauty of and Iki.

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