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# *Application of Blank Symbols in Japanese Architecture and Indoor Designs*

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**Abstract:** A symbol is an expression of meaning, while blank symbols express special meanings. By focusing on the application of blank symbols in Japanese architecture and indoor designs, we analyzed the aesthetic principles in Japanese architecture and indoor designs from the perspective of semiotics, such as “Kongji,” “Emptiness,” and “Dying out,” and their minimalist and pure design concepts. Traditional Chinese culture was also further explored, especially the profound influence of the “Chan sect” and the philosophy of “unity of heaven and mankind” on Japanese architecture and designs. This study aims to facilitate the coexistence and mutual appreciation of Chinese and Japanese architectural designs.

**Keywords:** Blank symbols, Japanese culture, architectural designs, indoor designs, traditional Chinese aesthetics

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According to Ernst Cassirer, human beings are “Animal Symbolicum.” It is through the search, creation, and continuous reproduction of specific symbols that human beings “provide a sense of meaning and order” for their own existence and development. In a manner of speaking, without symbols, human beings would have difficulties in self-expression and normal interactions, let alone the continuation and development of human civilization. Therefore, anthropologists and ethnographers around the world have invariably focused on and explored the meaning and value of symbols for communities.

### **Japanese Culture and Symbols**

In Japan, the status of symbols is presented by neon signs and billboards everywhere, the ethereal Zen tea rooms, and “MUJI,” the leader of new trends. Symbols have left traces in every corner of Japanese culture.

After traveling to Japan three times, Roland Barthes wrote *L'Empire des Signes*. This book is a masterpiece that describes and explains traditional Japanese culture from the perspective of semiotics. It has recorded various aspects of Japanese daily life, and Roland Barthes has deeply thought about the theoretical meaning of the symbols with unique significance. According to Roland Barthes, the common essence of Japanese culture is the none being of “Zen.” He does not make conclusions in general terms from the perspective of semiotics or the meaning of Zen but from the life of the Japanese. For instance, from the phenomenon that Japanese verbs can be without any subject, he saw the weakening of subjects. From the way of making and eating Japanese foods, he concluded that there was no center in Japanese cuisine; From the pure accounts of haikus, he saw through the none being of meaning. The meaning referred to therefore belongs to the realm of semiotics: “Meaning is the potential of a sign to be interpreted by another sign, and the interpretation is the realization of meaning” (Zhao, 2013, p. 7). The vacant meaning, and totally no meaning, can be understood as a symbol having no potential to be interpreted or not being needed for interpretation. According to Barthes, the signifier and the signified in Japanese symbols are separated. The signifier is completely detached from the signified and does not even need the signified. Although Barthes’s understanding of Japanese culture is certainly not complete, there is no shortage of blank symbols in the cultural phenomena on which he focused.

### **Blank Symbols and Japanese Architecture and Indoor Designs**

#### **Blank Symbols and the “Qi Field”**

The perception of “Qi Field,” or “Active Place,” is not only the premise used to understand Japanese architecture and indoor designs but also a major means through which to understand blank symbols. As special symbols, blank symbols have become the perceptive carriers of significance,

which can be not substances but the lack of substances, for instance, the blank, the silence, the lack of light, sound, flavor, and facial expression, as well as the refusal of replies (Wei, 2008, p. 70). It can also be a real interval, distance, pause, or interruption. In different fields, blank symbols have various forms and features. Blank symbols can be both static and dynamic. In different contexts, blank symbols empty parts of themselves and integrate into the semiotic system to express meanings together with real symbols, thus realizing better semiotic expressive effects. Real symbols, compared with blank symbols, are those with entities. Blank symbols mean that the objects lack a field, and the contents of symbols depend on people's perceptions like hearing, olfaction, taste, tactile sense, and even the sense of heart, also known as the sixth sense (Yang, 2013, pp. 32–42), and the subjective perceptions of people towards objective things.

The emphasis on mutual distance has also brought constraints for people. According to *Eight Aesthetic Consciousnesses of Japan*, written by Masayuki Kurokawa, *Qi* is generated in China. People unleash a regional space with extension from their inside, which is known as the “*Qi* field” (Yang, 2008, pp. 152–156). This is a subjective feeling which cannot be examined through modern scientific means. However, the “*Qi* field” can also be understood as the field of energy, a human magnetic field, etc. Under different conditions, people emit different types of energy. Moreover, the ancient emperors' energy was usually too mighty to make people look straight at them, and consequently, they backed away (Kurokawa, 2013, p. 107). People's “*Qi* field” affects people-to-people distances. Through perceiving the *Qi* field of a person, we decide how close we should be. To perceive the “*Qi* field” of a person has become a social etiquette for Japanese people, even people worldwide. It is merely that Japanese culture makes Japanese people more sensitive to the “*Qi* field.”

The layout of traditional Japanese villages pays great attention to the application of the “*Qi* field.” The “*Qi* fields” of each house affect each other, which contributes to the layout and development of modern cities. In Western countries, priorities are given to planning public spaces and crisscrossing roads when building a city. Then, houses are built in the blocks formed by the road divisions. This brings benefits like structured houses, the easy location of a street through its serial number, and convenient transportation. However, Japan's houses are built based on caring about each other's feelings. When building homes, each family considers whether they block the light or view of their neighbors and whether they affect others. Consequently, based on the perception of the neighboring houses' “*Qi* fields”, appropriate intervals are left to separate one's own house and yard. These intervals form paths that cause difficulties in finding one's destination in Japan. In New York, skyscrapers are arranged in an orderly manner, while in Tokyo, buildings are closely arranged, like a tremendous village where each house connects to each other to form a harmonious community under the adjustments of the “*Qi* field.”

Symbols are defined as meaningful perceptions. Although the “*Qi* field” must be developed through extreme care, the “*Qi* field” is a symbol without embodiments. It cannot exist without substances and human beings. It is not only a part of substances and human beings but also a

relatively independent “interval,” “distance,” or “emptiness.” Therefore, the “*Qi* field” is also a blank symbol. It easily reminds us of “Zen,” which is a representative style in traditional Chinese aesthetics. The space between humans and substances is filled by the “*Qi* field”, making the empty “intervals” substantial. Just like the concept of “none being” in Buddhism, “none being” is another form of fullness (Kurokawa, 2018, p. 58).

### **Blank Symbols and Japan’s Architectural Designs**

Blank symbols are of vital importance in Japan’s architectural designs. We can take the space of a building as a kind of architectural blank symbol. A building consists of internal and external spaces. The internal ones are called the “absolute blank symbols,” and the external ones are called the “relative blank symbols” (Wei, 2008, p. 71). The internal space has been limited since the beginning of the building’s design, and the feelings and functions it wants to deliver have also been conceived by the architects. Therefore, “absolute blank symbols” are stable. The “relative blank symbols” of architecture are relatively more subjective. It can be the external profile of the building on the skyline or the lights and shadows cast around it by the architectural design.

The “relative blank symbol” is closely connected with the “absolute blank symbol” in traditional Japanese architecture, because traditional Japanese architecture does not deliberately separate indoors and outdoors. The corridors, as a transition space (which means the space between the indoor and outdoor is a buffer space and a physical connection), combine the indoor and the outdoor in a natural manner. The extension of the “relative blank symbols” in traditional Japanese architecture is tremendous, and it is beyond the comparison of the “relative blank symbols” generated by the skyscrapers. When people are indoors, they can look out without being blocked. The corridor, the yard, the afar mountains, and the sky become whole to connect the “*Qi* field” of the architecture with Heaven and Earth. Thus, the generated artistic conception has extended the “relative blank symbol” of the architecture. Therefore, it is continuously pursued that architects create bigger visual spaces and psychological spaces through the limited “absolute blank symbols” and the flexible “relative blank symbols.”

Pillars, as one of the most important structures in traditional Japanese architecture, are the essence of the entire architecture. Japanese buildings adopt frame structures and mainly use wooden materials. There are few partitions inside; even the space for windows is reserved. The most important structure in the interior is the pillars. Over the long-term application, pillars came to acquire their symbolic meaning of representing the pillar of one’s mind. Traditional Japanese architecture has the same symbolic features as trees. Through making analogies between architecture and trees, the pillars are like trunks, and the roof is like the canopy. The blank symbols of trees are the space under the tree and its shade. Trees can block the wind and rain and provide shields for animals to avoid raptors. Human beings and animals naturally regard the tremendous tree shades as shields bringing safety. Although traditional Japanese architecture is open in space and weak in sealing, the space made by pillars and the roof can still provide mental soothing for people.

### Blank Symbols and Japan's Indoor Space and Decorations

The Chan sect, as a unique and special sect in Chinese Buddhism, is closely connected with traditional Chinese culture. The culture of the Chan sect includes the tea ceremony, calligraphy, painting, music, and so on. After the prosperous Tang Dynasty, in the Southern Song Dynasty, monks going east to Japan brought the culture of the Chan sect and many literary innovative inspirations to Japan. The Chan monks in the Southern Song Dynasty were able to share their appreciation for the masterpieces of renowned poets and essayists of the Tang and Song dynasties as well as Chan paintings. These cultural thoughts have left a deep and profound influence on Japan's indoor designs and decorations. They even formed an independent school.

The screen is an important furniture item in Japan's indoor decoration. It is usually used to block one's sight, partition space, and be a background. The paintings on and functions of screens have presented Japan's traditional aesthetics and their application of blank symbols. The folding screens are made of two, four, six, eight, or even ten articulated wooden frames with the same vertical base and specifications. Screens with six facets are mostly seen in Japan, and they are usually in pairs. Folded screens were often used by feudal nobilities and samurai families. In history, they were made for specific functions or occasions. For instance, black-and-white screens with turtle and crane paintings are used for occasions of delivering babies. It behooves Japanese people to use screens with golden frames in ceremonies. Moreover, screens with calligraphy are applied to Buddhist sacrifices (Dai, 2007, p. 52). Screens' blank symbols include the penetrating light and shade, the vibe and the "Qi field," and the blank spaces in the paintings. They can reflect one's inner mentalities, thus bringing about the needed emotions for a certain occasion. Traditional Japanese buildings lack walls inside. However, as the symbolic substitutions of walls, screens are more flexible, transparent, and of high artistic value. Wind God and Thunder God is a screen painting created by Tawaraya Sōtatsu. The Wind God and Thunder God are on two separate screens with a tremendous blank space between them. Although a blank space in a painting is a two-dimensional blank symbol, it provides the effect of space between other features and is a common function of blank symbols in indoor designs. Due to the conjunction of the two Gods' sights, this blank space is full of tension, making people imagine the scenes behind the screen. It has the same function as China's door gods and stone lions, which are used to guard homes. They can eliminate disasters and drive away ghosts with their serious images and stares.

Both architecture and flats emphasize the use of blank spaces. The flat leaves a blank space to serve the vibe of the scene, while the architecture leaves a blank space to serve the functions of the space and the transmittance of thoughts. Sometimes, the creators of symbols deliberately hide some parts to engage readers in the mutual creation of symbolic meanings. Chinese landscape paintings have strongly proved that "none being" is better at shaping imagination than "being." According to Dandang, a famous landscape painter in the Ming Dynasty, "Samadhi lies in the blank space, and the bigger world is born in the blank" (Li, 2009, p. 15). The "blank space" is one of the "blank symbols."

The blank space, as the essence, gives appreciators access to fill it based on their own understandings, thus making the entire scene more rhythmic and beautiful in its vibe. In Japan, creators hope to find the common part between them and the appreciators through the blank space, which is also a behavior for the good of others. The blank space and flats conform to identical principles. With limited indoor space in Japan, designers usually put emphasis on the needs and feelings of residents. They not only make the blank realize functions of space but also create a uniform special vibe and a wider mental space through the limited indoor space.

Tea rooms have a transcendental position in Japanese culture, just like temples. Under the impact of modern architectural trends, tea rooms still maintain the most traditional aesthetics. It represents the essence of Japanese indoor style: plainness and openness. The essence of tea rooms is the “beauty of dying out” and the “beauty of emptiness” of Zen. Therefore, the forms of tea rooms usually conform to minimalist principles. The decorations are often wood, straws, hemp, and other natural materials. This way of expressing the signified through reducing the signifier reminds us of the Japanese brand MUJI, which empties the signifier of symbols to alleviate people’s visual fatigue, thus highlighting the contents of the signified. There are few indoor decorations in tea rooms, which maintain the integrity of the space and enable people to directly see the original appearance of a building. It presents the precise application of blank symbols in Japan’s indoor designs to deliver the essence of tea rooms through the immediate feeling of the space itself instead of applying excessive decorations. Pillars are used to position spaces in Japanese architecture. There is no division of functions inside the building, and screens and Pinus sylvestris-made gates, not physical architectural structures, are used as indoor partitions. With its unique openness, the indoor “absolute blank symbols” and outdoor “relative blank symbols” are interconnected. Through the method of “borrowing scenery,” the “relative blank symbols” are largely extended outwards, making the indoor and outdoor spaces integral. Together, they present the philosophy of the coexistence of humans and nature, which echoes the Chinese thought of the “unity of heaven and mankind.”

## **The Connection Between Chinese and Japanese Cultural Symbols**

### **The Connection Between Japanese Architecture and Chinese Architecture**

The application of the “*Qi* field” and “Zen” in traditional Japanese architecture is deeply affected by traditional Chinese culture. Modern Chinese and Japanese cultural symbols are interconnected in their development, and Chinese aesthetics has greatly influenced Japanese aesthetics. The connection between China and Japan’s cultural symbols can be easily identified regarding architecture. According to the *Jōgū shōtoku hōō teisetsu*, written in 538 AD, and the *History of Japanese Characters (Ribon Shuji)* written in 522 AD, at that time, Buddhism was introduced from China to Japan, bringing deep and profound influence to Japan’s culture and arts (Ma, 2004, pp. 86–89). With the propagation of Buddhism and Chinese culture, many forms of Chinese architecture have been adopted by Japan,

among which Horyu-ji Kondou in Nara-ken, Higashiyama Ward in Kyoto, and Kenchoji in Kamakura are typical cases. During this period, some Japan-related documents also recorded the historical facts that Chen Heqing and his brother of the Song Dynasty directly participated in the technical guidance for the reconstruction of the south gate of Tōdai-ji (Ohta, 1984). Chang'an city, the ancient capital of China, has been taken as the paradigm for the construction of the Japanese capital, which is proved by the construction of ancient Japanese cities imitating Chinese cities.

As a result, China and Japan are interconnected in terms of the application of symbols. When planning important architecture, the central axis is also applied in Japan. Blank symbols, which are not architecture, like wider spaces or squares, will be used to highlight the importance of architecture. In terms of the blank symbols that extend the horizontal plane, Chinese architectural symbols like cornices, Dougong, double eaves, back corridors, gallery frames, and so on are used in Japanese architecture, which is influenced by Chinese architecture. When it turns to the vertical blank symbols, people often choose to build towers or build architecture on a mountaintop. Of course, when there are no other buildings or shields, complete flats can also make buildings look grand.

When setting the indoor blank symbols, they are left at the center of the building, both in China and Japan. Furniture is usually displayed against the walls in China and Japan. Through this, adequate and consistent space can be left for meeting guests, activities, dinners, etc. The area used per capita in most residential buildings is small. Therefore, this kind of indoor decoration was adopted, which is also related to the common aesthetics in East Asia. Both Chinese and Japanese architecture are good at using transition space, which used to be called by Japanese master architecture Nishi Kazuo as the implicit symbols. Moreover, its forms of expression in architectural space are flexible and varied (Xu, 2019, pp. 21-23, 25). Screen walls, porches, corridors, Kare San Sui, and so on are embodied expressions of this kind of symbol. Through the sinuous moving line, the guidance of eyesight, and elegant decorations, the space has gained more vitality. This design method of “combing the virtual and the real” has increased the cultural deposits and the sense of mystery for architecture.

The preference for pillars is not only unique in Japan. Many Chinese ethnic groups, including the Yi, Dai, and Bai ethnic groups, have been worshipping the central pillars for a long time. During the nomadic period of the Diqiang ethnic group, the central pillar was the most vital supporting structure in the whole tent, which drew the attention of the Diqiang ethnic group. The Yi people regard pillars as the major house supporter. They should be located at the center of a house. From the election to the erection of the pillars, everything should be taken seriously and done after several sacrifices (Yang, 2008, p. 70). The central pillar and the fiery pit in Yi people's homes have become the center for activities and faith. The “Ancestors' tube,” which is used for memorizing ancestors, is set around the central pillar. Therefore, the central pillar represents respect for ancestors and gods.

As times changed, Japan was greatly affected on many levels by Chinese civilization until the Meiji Restoration. It is a member of the Chinese civilization circle (Yabuuchi, 1982, p. 14). After the Meiji Restoration, Japan started to learn from Western culture in all respects. Its architectural forms shifted from wooden structures at the beginning to the reinforced concrete style of modern buildings.



For a long time, Sino-Japanese exchange in architectural culture was significantly reduced. China was no longer the focus from whom Japan learned. However, the architectural form was relatively consistent, and Japan attached considerable importance to tradition. Therefore, the preserved old buildings still had an influence on the design of new buildings.

### **The Connection Between Japanese Aesthetics and Chinese Aesthetics**

Traditional Chinese aesthetics, with its principal part being Confucianist aesthetics, which is supported by the integrity of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These three major thoughts integrate with and complement each other (Zhang, 2009, pp. 95-101). Traditional Chinese aesthetics is closely connected with people's inner cultivation and moral temperament. Confucius said, "It is virtuous manners which constitute the excellence of a neighborhood." Mencius used to say, "Moral fulfillment is beauty itself." Moreover, Xunzi said, "Without richness and typicality, art cannot be said to be beautiful." Their words prove that Confucianist aesthetics focuses on "the beauty of character" so as to think about people themselves when appreciating natural views. The introduction of these people-oriented aesthetic concepts to Japan is reflected in the fact that the Japanese care about people's feelings and respect people's subjective initiative in aesthetics. However, in terms of Taoist beauty, "Loud is its sound, but never word it said; A semblance great, the shadow of a shade; Thy greatest art still stupid seem." This method of being natural and taking no action tallies blank symbols of art. After being introduced to Japan, the Chan sect, a branch of Buddhism, integrated with the Japanese local Shinto and formed a new religious theory. With its influence, a unique ideological system of art and aesthetics was born.

Zen in Japan's art design emphasizes the aesthetic experience of *Kongji*. "The momentary feeling is captured, and it is so sad and bleak. It likes devastation instead of life, and it regards death as beauty. Its delicate gardens. In a word, it is the so-called 'Mono No Aware'" (Li, 1999, p. 391) that has highlighted the aesthetic features of Zen. In China's Chan sect, *Kongji* has infinite possibilities, while in Japan's Zen, *Kongji*'s destination is emptiness (Huang, 2015, p. 28). However, it is exactly under the influence of Zen that the unique garden layout, *Kare San Sui*, was born. For *Kare San Sui*, only several or several sets of stones and some soft fine sand are used to symbolically make waves, villas, forests, and Buddha poses. Although people are facing garden scenery made up of inorganic substances, they feel like they are surrounded by wild views or feel Zen that everything is alive. The lack of traditional gardening elements such as plants, soil, and ponds can achieve the effect that traditional garden landscapes cannot, which is largely attributed to the blank symbols contained in *Kare San Sui*.

Restraints and introversion are the national virtues shared by China and Japan, so there are many similar implicit expressions and symbol transmissions. This way of symbol transmission is not unsatisfactory but just right to some extent. For instance, the sinuous space on the porch, the semi-blockage of the sight through screens, the blank space in paintings, and the not overflowing tea are different from Western people's hospitality and directness. They are not only the long-term deposits of

history and culture but also the creator of the calm and restrained personality of the Eastern nations.

Artistic conception is another major constituent of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which expresses the aesthetic realm of the harmonious integration of conception and environment, emotion and scenery, and intelligence and substances of artistic images. Chinese literary, calligraphy, and painting works focus on creating the vibe in artistic expression, which, in terms of artistic techniques, is manifested as simplifying and summarizing the most representative features. It makes the works of art more symbolic and allows blank symbols to be more directly reflected in the picture. The landscape paintings in China's Tang and Song dynasties have had a great influence on Japanese literati paintings and modern "Japanese paintings." When the Tang landscape paintings were introduced to Japan, they were almost blindly imitated. Later, after brush and ink landscape paintings became mainstream in the Song Dynasty, they also brought changes to Japan. In Japan, brush and ink paintings that discarded colors happened to be considered a painting method that represented the colorless realm, and it was the realm that Zen longed for (Lin, 2009, p. 35). The brush and ink paintings introduced to Japan along with the Chan sect in the Song and Yuan dynasties started to be imitated. The Zen monks were the first to do so. They applied methods of fewer strokes and became excellent painters. Therefore, the "subtraction" from paintings was the artistic realm pursued by both China and Japan. Subtracting colors and strokes reserves enough blank symbols, which is not only an artistic technique but also a state of mind. When expressing aesthetics in Japan, they do not express everything but drive others' imaginations. It is the hidden part that allows the viewers to engage in co-creation with the expressing party. In semiotics, the completion of the symbol delivery represents the exit of the sender. However, in the process of decoding this form of symbol, the sender intentionally increases the degree of freedom of the receiver's decoding, making the decoding process more important than the result. This is also reflected in modern Japanese architecture, most of which uses fair-faced concrete and is of simple appearance and with fewer decorations. Its interior decoration is mainly plain and elegant, with a preference for natural materials, which is consistent with the concept of the Chinese Chan sect. The subtraction of architecture and decoration is also a manifestation of "blank symbols."

Japan pursues a harmonious coexistence with nature in terms of aesthetics. On the one hand, the limited natural resources and frequent geological disasters make people revere nature. On the other hand, the effects of Chinese thinking, like "unity of heaven and mankind," make Japan try its best to explore ways of coexistence with nature (Tang, 2015, pp. 129–131). Among them, "plain" means the pursuit of simplicity, modesty, nature and the elimination of artificial traces. The original texture of materials should be exposed, and the innocence without any distracting thoughts should be emphasized. It is advised to return to the simplest and unpretentious beauty of nature and maintain a humble heart when facing nature. This design philosophy is backed by worship and respect for nature. During the cultural exchanges between China and Japan, Japan has also absorbed the culture of auspiciousness. Pines, cypresses, turtles, and cranes are embodiments of life's extension and better health. The pine, bamboo, wintersweet, and orchid represent perseverance and nobility. These images



frequently appear in Japanese artworks.

### Conclusion

The blank symbol represents minimalism, elegance, sharing, and space. The blank symbols occupy an important position in Japanese culture, architecture, and interior design. People intentionally use them to construct the indoors, buildings, streets, and even cities and the whole society. The “*Qi* field” has become synonymous with blank symbols in Japan, especially in architectural blank symbols. The “*Qi* field” is the essence of the entire building and determines the style and tone of the building. In terms of the indoors, the blank symbol blurs the boundaries between two-dimensional space and three-dimensional space and connects their designs. In fact, this is influenced by the blank space and artistic conception of traditional Chinese aesthetics. In a word, China’s thinking of “unity between Heaven and mankind” and her design philosophy have subtle and ubiquitous effects on Japan. On the other hand, Japanese culture and the integration and application of Western culture also have something for us to learn from. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly states that “We will deepen exchanges and mutual learning with other civilizations and better present Chinese culture to the world” (Xi, 2022, p. 46). Only through the maintenance of the unique and common beauty can Chinese culture transform through the creation and development through innovation, thus demonstrating her lasting and powerful cultural charm.

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