

Participation in the FREE THEME open call

Hiding ones's emotions and feelings (Honne) keeps the harmony?

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As soon as I arrived in Japan I have been impressed by the extremely difficulty I experienced in reading people's facial expressions. I eventually discovered a complete different mindset I became fascinated about, another way of approaching life, talking, expressing, living. Japanese society expects people to hide their true feelings and opinions in many circumstances in order to keep the social harmony safe. This situation is described with the fundamental concepts of Honne and Tatemae, that might be translated with "true opinion/honest talking" and "public face." I adopted the concept of hiding as a metaphor of my exploration of Japan by creating connections among different aspects of Japanese culture that were reflecting this idea of hiding and its possible visual translations into real life situations: curtain, shadows, hidden beauties, but also typical ways of saying.

I understood Japan can be described as a conflict-avoiding culture. In Japanese this is explained by the concept of "wa", literally "harmony." Rules, customs and manners tend to avoid conflict. Japanese society indeed expects people to hide their true feelings and opinions in many circumstances in order to keep the harmony safe. Tatemae is the idea that it's often necessary to hide your true opinion in order to ensure social harmony. It is unusual to directly criticize someone in social situations. As a result, the Japanese tend to deliver criticism in roundabout ways and you need to read between the lines to understand what they really think. Indeed in Japan ambiguity (amaina) is largely accepted and practised. This ambiguity makes it possible to avoid clear expressions of one's opinion that could disrupt the harmony between the interlocutors in different aspects of life moments (family, school, company, society). This is the reason why it was so difficult to me reading people's emotions from their faces. Moreover, ambiguity makes it possible to reinforce the sense of belonging by distinguishing, even in linguistic practice, between those who are inside the group I belong (who is "uchi" i.e. inside) and who is not part of that group (who is "soto" i.e. outside).

Coming from a more direct culture, where everything tend to be more clear and outspoken, where there is few place for ambiguity, these aspects were extremely interesting for me, I wanted to know more even if it has been complex to figure out another, alternative approach to life. Therefore for my project I decided to focus on the concept of hiding in a broader sense, without any negative sense or criticism. As Eugen Herrigel makes the Zen monk stating in his "Zen in the art of Archery: " You can not pour more tea into a cup already full"; in the same way it is not possible to introduce Japanese concepts into a mind already full of others, I needed to empty my mind in order to be able to understand and appreciate another culture I had the wonderful possibility to explore.

Hiding an opinion, or just not going straight to the point can lead to ambiguity which is a positive value in Japan. I discovered a famous Japanese proverb stating: (literally translation) Flower that is not talking/ Not saying is a flower (Iwanu ga hana). The english meaning could be referred to "some things are better left unsaid".

A mild lack of expression in the face (Muhyoujyou), but also the typical modesty, reservedness of japanese people (Enryo and Kenson) are strictly connected to the concept of Honne and Tatemae. Japanese people often prefer not to answer instead of disagreeing, as they perceive a "no" as a conflict which would ruin the Harmony.

Therefore Harmony is a very important element of japanese society in many diverse situations and conditions. Harmony means agreeing and being part of a group, following its rules and respect it (family, society, company). But harmony can be translated as well as being able to self control oneself in order to be part of a wider whole. This is connected with the idea of putting a distance to the others, and also to control own's emotions. Many people in Japan wear medical masks; for some of them it is just a sign of cedar allergies or a cold, but many others like to wear them as they provide distance and privacy from others. Following another proverb: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" (Deru kugi wa utareru). The harmony of the group is of vital importance for Japanese society, the group is more important than single individuals. It relies on respect, loyalty to the group, a feeling of solidarity and a sense of shame. Japanese society is strongly hierarchized (Kaisou) and everybody has to follow its rules and people feel a very strong respect for group and society expectations. Japanese culture doesn't celebrate uniqueness. This sense of collectivism is so important and internalized into japanese culture that people naturally follow its rules and hierarchies, including a massive use of uniforms among its people. Salary men are helped by "how to" manuals to teach them how to dress at work.

How much this collectivism aspect can be linked to removing individual peculiarities for the sake of a society commonly shared perspective? Is this meaning to cover, or to hide one's personal attitudes towards a group shared common duty society?

Harmony is also connected to the aesthetics and what is considered beautiful. We can find another example in Ikebana that draws from Japanese aesthetics (Mono No Aware) which can be translated with the "impermanence of things". Japanese people consider beautiful what is simple, not superfluous but also impermanent. Ikebana, as well as Japanese shared values are also tightly tied with Zen principles of simplicity (subtracting the superfluous), making void and austerity.

I think there is also a tight connection between the idea of "hiding" and the concept of shadow and silence. Westerners often relate the concept of shadow with hiding, like covering the light source, covering the truth. Shoji panels furnish Japanese tradition houses, they consist of a sliding panel that is made of translucent paper set in a wooden frame, it separates spaces creating temporary rooms. Shoji screens are not enough transparent to make you see what is happening inside (privacy) but enough to allow shadows to be cast from one room to the other.

According to Japanese aesthetics, a moon covered by clouds is more attractive than the full moon, precisely because it is partially hidden.

Silence (chinmoku) can be seen as a value to avoid contrast and to keep a distance to the other without adding other signs of hostility. And it also a way for Japanese to communicate without words, by "reading the air" (Kuuki Yomenai) and speak heart to heart. "Can't read the air" means being unable to read a situation as Japanese people express way more with body language than words, it becomes necessary then to read between the lines.

Related to silence we can find the concept of emptiness, not just as a space in architecture, but also in calligraphy or traditional poetry (Haiku) empty spaces have the same importance of letters and words suggesting to be able to read within the lines.

A final example can be found in book covers. In Japan books are generally sold within a cover hiding the title for privacy protection.

The consciousness that people do not want other people to know what they are reading is a clear metaphor for Japanese temperament or personality which prefers to conceal the inner aspects of their people.

After understanding a bit better your society, I question myself and Japanese people if it is true that hiding own's honne (real emotions and opinions) will keep the social harmony safe.

In my explorations I found very interesting to see how different cultures perceive in alternative ways what is public and what is private, and, moreover, how they relate this spheres of their lives and the way they communicate their emotions.