

Ma: The Realm of Mystery in Sugiura Kohei's 'Asian Grammar of Design'

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Abstract. Since returning from a teaching trip in West Germany in 1967, and from an exploration across the Southern part of Asia, designer Sugiura Kohei has advocated an 'Asian grammar of design' as a new model for his graphic design work. It is notable that Sugiura has widely employed *ma*, a Japanese concept of spiritual aesthetics, as the backbone of his Asian grammar of design. To find out more about his aesthetics, I conducted an interview with him in his Tokyo office on 22nd October 2008. This paper discusses how Sugiura perceives *ma*, and how it is applied to 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques' (1984), one of his remarkable poster designs. This paper sheds light on what Sugiura identified as the 'Realm of mystery' in his work, and how it informs his creativity.

Keywords: Sugiura Kohei, *ch'i*, Japanese aesthetics, poster production, Japanese Postmodern posters, creativity, analysis of design.

A design work should be regarded as a thangka, or mandala, in which the audience can enter the realm of mystery, or ch'i, through experiencing the manifestations of ma, such as vividness, liveliness, spirituality, and the union of form and spirit. Ma is the beauty revealed by the divine. Without ma, a design can become static, emotionless, and thus, unappealing to the audience (Sugiura 2008).

1 Ma: the Emerging Aesthetics in Japanese Design

Ma (間) is probably the most notable concept that has been used by prominent architects, design practitioners and scholars in promoting Japanese national and cultural identity. It is also used to balance the profound influence of Western aesthetics on Japanese architecture and design. From a Western audience's perspective, Japanese Post-modern posters appear to be a product of elegant emotion and poetic expression, in which ambiguity and mystery are key features. The original meanings of *ma* have differed greatly throughout the times, emerging as a new addition in current Japanese aesthetic categories.

Since the publication of the article '*Ma: The Japanese Sense of 'Place' in Old and New Architecture and Planning*', by Architect Günter Nitschke in 1966, the *ma* concept has stimulated a good deal of discussion among design theorists and practitioners inside and outside Japan. As I note below, papers and articles on *ma* have been written by Japanese and Western academics, depicting *ma* as a contemporary mysterious philosophy of Japan. In the area of Post-modern poster design, Nagai Kazumasa and Sugiura Kohei have theorized *ma* to a notable level.

From the available literature and interviews with five prominent Japanese Postmodern poster designers in Tokyo in October and November 2008, I argue that meanings of the *ma* concept and how *ma* functions have been largely derived from individual understanding and interpretations, rather than from critical research findings. In the current theories of the *ma* concept, many of them are intertwined with prominent religious philosophies in Japan.

To a large extent, *ma* characteristics are quite complex, and related to ambiguity and mystery in a number of ways; such as having multivalent meanings, being considered as emotional spaces (Kemmochi Takehiko 1982, in Pilgrim 1986, 260), the 'world between' (Kurokawa Kisho 1979, in Pilgrim 1986, 267), 'beyond space and time' (Sugiura 2008), and the void in which *kami* enters into and occupies (Matsuoka Seigow 1979, 56). When pushed by my repeated questions, Sugiura used *ch'i* to expound his thoughts on *ma*. Thus, it is necessary to briefly discuss the *ch'i* concept in its original context, before discussing Sugiura's thoughts on *ma*.

Ch'i (氣) (Japanese: *ki/ke*) is a Chinese metaphysical concept, which has been a vital element in many aspects of Chinese culture, such as philosophy, cosmology, health practices, martial arts, architecture, science, town planning, magic, and arts (Page 1988, 11). It is the cosmic spirit that vitalizes and pervades all things, and even regarded as sexual energy (Legeza 1975, 13-14). In painting and calligraphy, *ch'i* exists in the spontaneity of the brush strokes, and in the non-hesitation of the artist's mind (Lin 1967, 64). In essence, *ch'i* has multivalent

meanings, ranging from secular to spiritual matters, such as spirit, vital breath, and cosmic energy. All things in life depend on it to stay alive and function. As such, it is an ambiguous concept not only for a Western audience, but also for a reader of Chinese philosophy. Despite that, being more aware of this concept can help researchers to briefly perceive the concept of *ma*. The reason the *ch'i* concept is connected to *ma* is that it supplies a sufficient theoretical framework in which Japanese design theorists can expound on *ma*. The emerging of the *ma* concept in the postwar era signifies the fact that Japanese national and cultural identities are in the making.

2 *Ma*: the *ch'i* in Sugiura's 'Asian Grammar of Design'

In Sugiura's view, characteristics and values of *ma* can be found in Asian visual references and essence. Returning from West Germany in 1967 after spending three years teaching architecture and visual art at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, West Germany, Sugiura became more aware of the way the Western world approaches design as being too rigid, impersonal, and temporal. Since then, he had explored the Himalayan regions, and the Southern part of Asia. That exploration widened his view on the richness of Asian culture as a whole. Returning to Japan, Sugiura has advocated 'Asian grammar of design', as a new model for his work (Sugiura 2008).

Sugiura's intellectual influences are very diverse, which include the spirituality and wisdom of the Himalayan region; such as India, Tibet, Bhutan, Japanese belief and religions like Animism, Shinto, and Japanese Buddhism. In answering questions about religious aesthetics in his work, and so, how they related to Buddhist aesthetic ideals, Sugiura carefully responds:

Shinto, Buddhism and Animism all existed in my childhood. For that reason, I have never deeply contemplated about the differences between them. I would like to understand them as they are; just like wrapping various things together with furoshiki (a wrapping cloth) without theorizing It - because the theorization involves unnecessary separation and classification. In my mind, everything is merged together as a single entity (Sugiura 2008).

Sugiura also states that Japanese spirituality and a Japanese designer's point of view cannot be separated - they are interwoven (Sugiura 2008). Despite the

inconsistency in recognizing intellectual influences of Buddhism on his creativity, Sugiura's insight into Buddhism is profound. Based on the Buddhist concept of 'no Self', he indicates that in reality there was no such Japanese own cultural identity. According to the teaching of *Kegon Kyō (Avamtasaka Sutra)*, everything is interrelated, and nothing can exist by itself. Sugiura (2008) points out that the world's modern society was established by Western civilisation and one of its key concepts is 'I', an indication of personal possession:

If I draw a picture with a pencil, I regard it my picture. If I give a lecture, it is considered my lecture. Everything belongs to 'I', 'my', and 'mine'. Human tendency and priority is to claim ownership on each of their footsteps. After I had lived in Europe, I started to feel that the Asian people totally extinguish the 'I'. For example, we hardly know the creators of beautiful Buddhist paintings and sculptures, regardless of Tibetan, Japanese or any other cultures. While Western people believe the 'self' does everything, we, the people in the East understand 'self' only exist to the extent of one single hair. It is what I meant in the remark that you have quoted.

Still based on the teaching of the *Kegon Kyō*, Sugiura (2008) exemplifies that each individual exists like a mirror. Thus, when he and I have a conversation in his design studio, it is as if his mirror and mine are facing each other, and that he is reflecting my entire self, and I am reflecting his entire self. Sugiura relates that phenomenon as the Indra's net. As indicated in the sutra, Indra – a Hindu and Buddhist deity - has many jewels hung in the net in his palace. Together, they reflect like a mirror ball, and each jewel's surface reflects all other jewels in the net. Sugiura (2008) goes on:

Once we discover ourselves as nothing or as a piece of hair, we will find ourselves in everything. Because I have learned and absorbed Buddhist teaching, I noticed such truth when I travelled to various Asian countries and saw how people lived. I found they all tried to live quietly without asserting themselves - I felt it is because Buddhist teaching flourishes naturally within them (Sugiura 2008).

The above signifies a philosophy of totality in Sugiura's aesthetics developed in his 'Asian grammar of design' works. He strongly believes that Asian art

and culture should be more vivid, as there is plenty of lively sunshine, strong laughter and strong sadness in them. Sugiura states, "Thus, I prefer to bring in some animated sense or vivid *ch'i*. This is a bit different from others" (Sugiura 2008). With that view, Sugiura often combines vibrant iconographies and cultural references from across Asia in his works. Therefore, simplicity in Zen aesthetics in particular, although long considered as one of the major Japanese aesthetics - are not included in his grammar of design.

It is important to point out that the term 'Buddhism' has not been used consistently in some academic discourses, as numerous Buddhist sects have coexisted in Japan since the sixth century. Thus, although Sugiura hardly admits any tangible benefit that Buddhist aesthetics could provide for his creativity, I am convinced that it is Shingon aesthetics and references - particularly with the concept of mandala, and its cosmology - have deeply inspired his creations. The 'Realm of mystery', or *ch'i* - 'through the vividness, liveliness, spirituality, and the unity of essence and form' - which he highly appreciates are derived from, or related to, Shingon aesthetics and philosophy. Further, Sugiura's philosophy of totality reflects a profound influence of Buddhist philosophy, specifically with the teaching of the *Kegon Kyō*. To examine how Sugiura combines iconographies and aesthetics of Shingon, Hinduism, and Taoism, I now discuss one of his remarkable designs in more detail.

3 Attributes of *ma*, or *ch'i* in Sugiura's 'Asian Grammar of Design'

Sugiura creates 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques' (English: 'Tradition and new techniques') poster for an exhibition of the work of 12 Japanese poster designers held in Paris in 1984 (Fig 1). I identify three major elements that constitute the artistry and spirituality of Sugiura's poster. They are mandala, iconographies, and composition. Sugiura places mandala as a central theme of poster in both form and spirit. The silhouette of *Dainichi Nyorai* (大日如来; *Mahāvairocana*) - which contains a *Diamond Mandala* within - is itself a mandala painting. His choice of *Dainichi Nyorai* theme, and gravure-printing technique on aluminum foil paper creates an unexpected effect of technology and spirituality.

As I discuss below, interpreting from Sugiura's remark that initiated this paper, Sugiura cultivates *ma* or *ch'i* through the use of vibrant colours, abundant use of Asian religious iconographies and cosmologies, mandala themes and compositions, unfamiliar inscriptions, and the 'invisible noise'. The 'realm of mystery' is achieved when he combines Hindu,

Buddhist, and Taoist iconographies in a thoughtful way. To create a sense of calmness, Sugiura uses a symmetrical arrangement. The following discussion focuses on *ma* attributes.

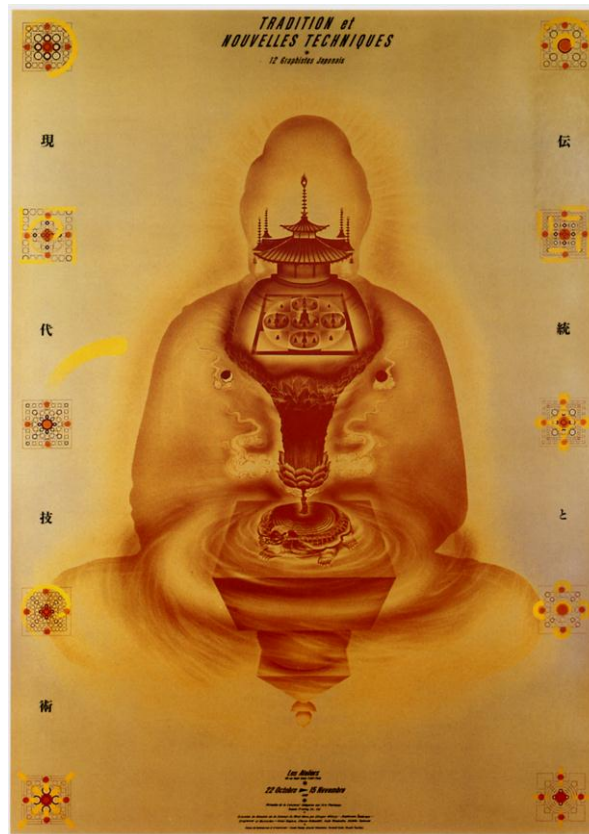


Fig. 1. Exhibition poster for 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques: 12 Graphistes Japonais' at Les Ateliers in 1984 (Kamekura 1990, 9)

Vibrant colours:

Sugiura often applies the Taoist 'five-colour' principle, which includes green, red, yellow, white, and black/blue, and often he blends strong warm colours with a touch of black, blue, green, and white for a contrasting yet complementary effect. The role of vibrant colours in Eastern art is significant as according to Legeza (1975), they directly reflect the consciousness of yin-yang realm of representation, and the profound inclination of Taoist magic artists in creating a unique art to interact with the spirits (23-24). Further, since spirits move in all five directions, a suitable colour or combination of colours in the form of paper charms and talisman is needed to control them. For example, yellow represents the Centre, blue the East, red the South, white the West, and black the North (27). Even though Sugiura's poster was not printed accordingly to the 'five-color' principle, its

gravure-printing technique on aluminium foil paper creates a strong impression for the eye.

Abundant Asian religious iconographies and cosmologies

To maximize the visual impact, Sugiura often applies Asian religious iconographies and cosmologies in his work. In his 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques' poster, he applies mandala themes and iconographies of Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, such as sun-and-moon, clouds, *Mount Meru*, *Dainichi Nyorai*, *gorintō* ('Stupa of the Five Circles'), 'two-storey pagoda', mandala diagram, and lotus. Among them, *Mount Meru* is widely used in the art of Buddhism and Hinduism, which symbolizes the center of the universe.

In a sense, 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques' should be regarded as a *thangka* - a type of Tibetan Buddhist sacred imagery painted on cloth. *Thangka's* theme often contains the image of Buddha(s) or Buddhist deities. In that way, it is similar to the essence of a *Shinto mandala*, which are endowed with spiritual power and virtue (Yamasaki 1988, 123). Sugiura (2008) relates his work with *thangkas*, which are conveyed with *ma*, or *ch'i*, the spiritual energy.

Mandala themes and compositions

This attribute is often one of major features in Sugiura's design. In *Shingon Buddhism*, Buddhist practitioners make use of mandala to visualize the eternal truth and assist them in entering the 'Realm of mystery'. As stated by Yamasaki (1998), the *Kongōkai* (*Diamond mandala*) symbolizes the wisdom, while the *Taizōkai* (*Womb World mandala*) embodies 'the totality of all that exists' (149). Further, images in *Shingon mandalas* are used to emphasize Buddhist deities, Bodhisattvas, principal Buddhas and their sacred lands, which are considered as the visual aid in their realization process.

Unfamiliar language inscriptions

As a typographer and iconographer, Sugiura discovers certain aesthetic values that *Kanji* characters can offer to his work. Historically, they originated from China, and constructed directly on an ancient writing called 'oracle bone', which emerged in the *Shang* dynasty (1523-1028 BC). Being used mainly as a divination tool, the oracle bone script was endowed with mysticism. Thus, *Kanji* characters inherit some mystical qualities from the original script. The unusual combination between *Kanji* and French inscriptions in the poster generates a sense of diversity and mystique. Notably, *Kanji* inscription is arranged in vertical order while French is arranged in horizontal. Even though the literal meaning of seven *Kanji* words is ordinary ('Tradition and' - 'new techniques'), which,

positioned in two columns reading from right to left and top down, suggests a poetic effect and unconventional feel to Western viewers.

'Invisible noises'

With a wide range of religious influences from across Asia, Sugiura's cultural aesthetics and iconographic vocabularies are rich and diverse. In responding to my question what in particular has inspired him most in designing, and how he can capture their invisible spirit or *ch'i*, Sugiura responds:

I always want to appeal for, and absorb, the wisdom and knowledge of many people who lived before me into my body. I would like to deeply study and digest what they did and what they meant. Then, I would like to apply that to my work in the best possible and most considerable way. Further, I would like to capture the importance of the images' surroundings, which spread outside of the frame like many small dust or flying insects, and include them to my design. Such surroundings are sometimes called the 'invisible noises' and I would like to bring them into my design (Sugiura 2008).

The 'invisible noises' are manifest in the way Sugiura superimposes some movement lines on the mandala diagrams, which are positioned along the two sides of the poster. The 'invisible noises' radiate from, and circulate around, the five red dots, which represent for the five Buddhas in *Shingon Buddhism*. In doing that, Sugiura is able to create a sense of animation out of something static.

4 Conclusion

I have identified how the *ma* concept has emerged to inform the creative vision and new aesthetics in Sugiura's work. It has been transformed from a temporal 'time-space' to an abstract concept, and has some close connections with Japanese religious thoughts. Metaphysically, it is through Sugiura's thoughts and practice that *ma* is interpreted as 'the mystical beauty revealed by the divine' (Sugiura 2008).

Ma has been implicitly used for personal development. Sugiura has expounded *ma* or *ch'i* to elevate his work to a spiritual sphere, which in the end, distinguishing his work from that of his contemporaries. In a sense, Sugiura's elaboration on the *ma* concept has magnified what has already been known as mystery and ambiguity in his work. The 'Asian grammar of design' demonstrates a philosophy of totality, which reflects a profound influence of the

teaching of the *Kegon Kyō*. Through this philosophy, Sugiura uses the vivid *ch'i* or *ma* to inspire the essence of his design aesthetics and dynamism. His creativity is thus enhanced beyond the boundaries of traditions and a designer's individual repertoire. Through the use of vibrant colours, Asian iconographies and cosmologies, mandala themes and compositions, unfamiliar inscriptions, and the 'invisible noise' in his poster titled 'Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques', Sugiura does not only pay homage to *Shingon* art tradition, *ma* is an essential component of his creativity to transcend this tradition to a new dimension imbued with spiritual aesthetics and dynamism. To fully appreciate Sugiura's poster viewers have to wonder not what his Asian grammar means but how they mean.

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