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The Eastern Echo of the Thinking of Being: A Study of Zao Wou-Ki's Painting from the Perspectives of Heidegger and Taoism

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Bottom-up Nationality: The Development of Contemporary Japanese Art

Gao Ling

Abstract

This study employs a range of research methods, including cross-cultural comparative analysis and an in-depth examination of art historical developments, to explore the distinctive features of modern and contemporary Japanese art from multiple perspectives, such as history and reality, ethnicity and state, art and culture, as well as institutional structures and mechanisms. It argues that the evolution of Japanese art in the modern and contemporary periods offers valuable insights and lessons for artistic development, both in China and globally, particularly in how artists independently and consciously pursued a sense of nationality within their creative and theoretical practices. Through detailed analysis and comparison of the interpretation, representation, and pursuit of nationality and its artistic value—with a special focus on presenting original perspectives on the influential Mono-ha movement that emerged in postwar Japan—this paper emphasizes the fundamental unity between the national character of art and its universal human significance.

Key Words

Nationality, openness and liberty, bottom-up, contemporary transformation of tradition

Invited by the Japan Foundation—Japan’s sole national-level cultural institution—I conducted a research visit in Japan from February 1 to May 31, 2025. During this period, I engaged in extensive and varied discussions with experts, scholars, art institutions, and higher education establishments in the Japanese art world, gaining a multifaceted perspective on contemporary Japanese art. These interactions enabled me to draw comparative insights with the current state of contemporary Chinese art, both conceptually and theoretically. A series of reflective essays structured around seven thematic angles was published in the “Journal of Japanese Art Research” column on Artron.net, China’s largest professional art website. This article now delves deeper into one of the most salient issues emerging from that research—the quest for and promotion of national identity in contemporary art and its value attributes—in hopes of stimulating further academic discussion.

1. The Historical Origins of Geoculture and National Identity

Since both Japan and China are situated within the geographical sphere of Asia—specifically East Asia—it is almost inevitable for any Chinese scholar visiting Japan to reflect on the similarities and differences between Japanese and Chinese art. In the modern era, China’s contact with civilizations and cultures beyond Asia began nearly three decades earlier than Japan’s. China was forcibly opened through the Opium War in 1840, whereas Japan’s formal engagement with Western powers such as Europe and the United States commenced in 1868. This distinction between passive and active opening is profoundly significant and worthy of comparative reflection. Faced with similar pressure from Western naval forces, why did Japan choose to open proactively, while China was compelled through military defeat? In fact, China’s active and self-directed



Figure 1. A view of the Musashino Art University campus.

opening did not genuinely begin until 1978, launched selectively and in a manner suited to its national conditions. Herein lies a major difference between the two nations: Japan's opening was top-down, starting from 1868, whereas China's own top-down opening began in 1978, marking a delay of 110 years. To be sure, during this period, China did undertake initiatives such as the Westernization Movement and a short-lived Hundred Days' Reform. However, the Westernization Movement focused primarily on importing Western industrial and scientific technology—summed up in the phrase “learning from the foreigners to counter the foreigners.” Students were sent abroad to study industry, technology, and shipbuilding in Europe and the United States. Yet, there was no systematic, government-led effort to thoroughly examine or adopt Western institutions and culture. In other words, China's intermittent learning from the outside world over the past century amounted to technical and economic modernization under the Qing Dynasty, not institutional reform. By contrast, Japan's Meiji Restoration represen-

ted a genuine top-down transformation. Merely considering the symbolic act of Emperor Meiji cutting his traditional topknot, wearing Western tailcoats, and drinking Western wine, it becomes clear how powerfully such actions inspired emulation throughout society.

Reflecting on why Japan transitioned from isolation to openness over 150 years ago, it is evident that China's earlier Opium War served as a cautionary tale for Japan. The Opium War of 1840, which concluded with the Treaty of Nanking—including war reparations, the cession of Hong Kong Island to Britain, and the opening of treaty ports—delivered a stark message of national humiliation that the Japanese observed keenly. By the time of the Black Ship Incident in 1853, when U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry arrived with four warships in Tokyo Bay demanding entry, the late Tokugawa shogunate was thrown into intense debate over whether to allow the Americans ashore. Like China, Japan had long adhered to a policy of isolation. Yet, after deliberation, the conclusion was clear: if the vast Qing Empire could not defeat the West, neither



Figure 2. A teaching session in the Film program at Musashino Art University.

could Japan. Thus, they chose to engage. Two traits stand out in the Japanese response worth noting. First, the Japanese demonstrated greater adaptability than the Chinese—a quality rooted in geographical and historical conditions. As an island nation with limited arable land, scarce resources, and frequent natural disasters, Japan has long cultivated a strong sense of crisis, which in turn fostered pragmatic flexibility. Second, the Japanese exhibited remarkable persistence and consistency in both ideology and action—an ability to uphold principles while adapting to change. Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,¹ introduced to Chinese readers after the reform and opening-up, became one of the earliest works to illuminate Japanese ways of life and thought. The chrysanthemum, symbolizing imperial culture, reflects elegance, order, and collective obedience; the sword embodies the samurai spirit—martial valor, loyalty, and aggression. Japanese culture navigates between these dualities: embracing both militarism and aesthetics, tradition and innovation. Seemingly contradictory values coexist in harmony. What the Japanese choose to preserve—such as historical and cultural elements originating from mainland China—they often maintain with greater purity and endurance than we do. Yet at the same time, they remain highly adaptable.

As is widely recognized, much of Japan's cultural heritage historically originated from the Chinese mainland—a fact acknowledged by the vast majority of Japanese scholars. Yet, the Japanese have demonstrated a greater capacity for adaptability than we have. This raises questions: Does this mean the Japanese do not carry the same heavy burden of ideology, values, and historical culture that we do? Is such a burden ultimately beneficial or detrimental? If Japanese culture can be historically regarded as having long been an offshoot of Chinese culture, it has nevertheless undergone significant transformation over time—evolving into something derived, extended, and mutated. Looking at it today, if Chinese culture is the trunk of the tree, then Japanese culture may be seen as a branch. This analogy invites further reflection: Does the trunk—the core culture—have something to learn from the branches? And if so, what might those lessons be?

Indeed, China's history is fundamentally a history of multicultural interactions. Take, for example, the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty and the Manchu-led Qing Dynasty—both were established by non-Han peoples. In this sense, Chinese history has always been shaped by multiethnic exchange, integration, and, undoubtedly, conflict—a continuous process of blending and convergence. Yet, even today, we often tend to view

ourselves and the world around us through a rigid, unchanging framework of historical and ethnic identity. Of course, asserting and consistently emphasizing such a premise serves certain ideological legitimacies. But should this narrative evolve with the times? As an island nation, Japan acknowledges the profound and lasting influence of Chinese culture, yet it does not recognize it as its sole or root origin. Research suggests that the



Figure 3. The stone pillar at Tofukuji, Kyoto, which caught my attention, is confirmed by Japanese critics and curators to have inspired the work of Nobuo Sekine.

Japanese people are not descended from a single ethnic group; rather, their ancestry likely includes elements from Mongol, Eskimo, and Pacific Islander populations, such as Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian peoples. This stands in contrast to the Huaxia lineage—largely considered to have emerged from the Central Plains of the Yellow River Valley—which was relatively homogeneous in its early stages. This multi-origin background helps explain the diverse roots of Japan's national identity. It is also partly why, following the Meiji Restoration—amid nationwide opening and expansionist ambitions—Japan mobilized its propaganda apparatus to promote the idea of a unified and superior Yamato race.

2. The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Japanese Art Production

The Japanese possess their own distinct logic in approaching culture and history—one that differs so profoundly from traditional Chinese perspectives that nearly all senior intellectuals, scholars, and artists we encounter never exhibit a blindly worshipful attitude toward the West in their discourse. Instead, they consistently emphasize the pursuit of their own unique modes of artistic expression. Yet what truly constitutes Japan's own native art? There is no clear answer, as seen in the interpretation by renowned art critic Chiba Shigeo in his influential monograph *Japanese Art Is Not Yet Created*² Nevertheless, he explicitly and repeatedly stresses that modern and contemporary Japanese art cannot simply replicate the creative paths of Western

artists—it must strive with all its might to discover an art rooted in Japan's own national spirit. Although Chiba specifically discusses internationally acclaimed contemporary artists such as Tadashi Kawamata, Yayoi Kusama, and Atsuko Tanaka in his work, he maintains that Japanese art has not yet fully realized its own distinct artistic character and identity. This reflects a deep-seated ethos of self-criticism. In fact, among Japanese artists and theorists born in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, there exists a deeply ingrained belief that Japan must forge its own path and pursue artistic features and cultural values truly representative of its own identity.

For instance, Chieo Senzaki (1953-), whom I have had the opportunity to engage with, is an important artist associated with the Post-Mono-ha movement. Now seventy-two years old, he studied abroad, spent extended periods on international residencies, and later returned to Japan, where he has since been involved both in teaching and artistic creation. These Japanese artists differ markedly from many of their Chinese contemporaries. It is rare to encounter Chinese contemporary artists who—whether in public discourse, artistic exploration, or their own writings—explicitly emphasize the pursuit of a distinctly Chinese artistic identity. This divergence between the two nations in their approach to artistic expression is not only intriguing but also merits deeper scholarly attention. Following World War II, art education in Japan shifted away from its earlier nationalist-militarist orientation. Although the Ministry of Education exists, Japan—as a capitalist society—operates largely through market mechanisms. Beyond respect for national symbols, the state imposes few mandatory policies or directives on



Figure 4. This type of stone pillar inspired Nobuo Sekine, an artist of the Mono-ha movement.

art and cultural education. In practice, art education in Japan, much like in the United States, is guided by principles of academic and creative freedom. Aside from upholding basic public order and social morality, no top-down mandates dictate what should or should not be taught. It is precisely this environment that has contributed to the remarkable openness seen in Japanese art since the postwar period.

What exactly is the distinct artistic identity emphasized by the Japanese art world? To address this highly complex question, it may be helpful to first consider the situation in China; comparison might bring some clarity. Around the year 2000, approximately two decades after China's reform and opening-up, Chinese scholars began proposing concepts such as "Chineseness" or "Chineseness in an Indigenous Mode," inspired by Western academic discourse. These ideas attracted considerable attention and sparked discussion within Chinese intellectual and academic circles. In contrast, the Japanese cultural and intellectual world has never deliberately formulated a concept of "Japaneseness." Yet, nearly all Japanese artists and theorists consistently express a desire to pursue a form of contemporary art or modern aesthetics infused with their own national characteristics. Although Japan—having opened to the world a century earlier than China—has not exhibited the same sense of urgency as Chinese scholars have over the past two decades in constructing core conceptual frameworks for contemporary discourse, its post-war art has, in fact, achieved far greater international influence and contribution than Chinese art thus far. Moreover, it has served as a significant source of inspiration for China's art community. For instance, movements such as Mono-ha and Post-Mono-ha have now become major references and subjects of reflection for many Chinese artists.

Japan has not deliberately coined a term equivalent to Japaneseness. Yet, in recent years, on the occasion of major international exhibitions, it has drawn upon a word originally given by the nineteenth-century French collector and critic Philippe Burty—one laden with strong exoticist connotations—to signify what it now aspires to achieve: Japonisme, often translated as "Japanism," "Japanese taste," or "Japanese style." Rather than inventing new terminology, Japan has appropriated an existing one, infusing it with renewed meaning within a contemporary context—an approach I find deeply postmodern. Japonism has been familiar to Western audiences for over a century, making the creation of a new term unnecessary. Appropriation here acts as transformation and reinvention—defamiliarizing the familiar in the present moment. Those who understand,

understand. This is a mark of cultural wisdom: old bottles filled with new wine. Isn't this a method worth learning from?

After World War II, the top-down system that once compelled the Japanese people to pursue a distinct cultural identity was largely dismantled and weakened. In today's highly commercialized and market-driven environment, over the past eighty years Japan's intellectual, artistic, and cultural circles have increasingly emphasized the importance of their native culture—but this time, from the bottom up, expressed more through individual and spontaneous initiatives rather than state mandate. It is worth recalling that Japan's ethnic origins and cultural nourishment have always been pluralistic. Historically, national unity was maintained through the indigenous Shinto belief in Amaterasu—the sun goddess—and the assertion that the emperor is her descendant. Yet in present-day Tokyo, streets are filled with bustling crowds of people from all over the world. In such an environment, one encounters a mixed, diverse, and richly layered landscape: Chinese characters here, katakana there, hiragana elsewhere, and English words everywhere. Amid this visible multiplicity, the Japanese have nonetheless developed a stronger sense of their own cultural persistence—and undeniably, they continue to generate influential and widely accepted cultural products that resonate globally.

3. Characteristics of Contemporary Japanese Art and Culture

To identify or understand the distinctive features of contemporary Japanese culture, one must look beyond its diverse cultural origins, as previously mentioned, and consider its remarkable inclusivity and capacity for integration. Two decades ago, the Korean actor PSY enjoyed immense popularity in Japan. In Tokyo's Bunkyo Ward, adjacent to the Tokyo Dome—the city's premier venue for cultural and sporting events—the influence of South Korea's current top star, G-Dragon, is virtually ubiquitous among Japanese youth. Whenever he performs in Japan, young people turn out in massive numbers, filling the streets around the Tokyo Dome with a festival-like atmosphere. Thus, it would be an oversimplification to label the Japanese as either exclusionary or excessively foreign-influenced. Rather, they demonstrate a clear sense of what they truly want and appreciate.

Therefore, to understand the Japanese view of culture, one must avoid simplistic, mechanical, or sweeping generalizations. If they were truly blindly



Figure 5. The Artizon Museum, formerly known as the Bridgestone Museum of Art.

worshipful of foreign cultures to the point of compromising national dignity—as some might claim in the case of American influence—why would the same hold true for their embrace of Korean culture? In today’s globalized era, what truly matters is embracing openness and inclusiveness, allowing individuals to make conscious and voluntary choices. This does not inherently equate to a loss of national identity or dignity. Morality resides in the hearts of people; patriotism and the appreciation of one’s own cultural heritage are not merely about superficial gestures or symbolic acts, but rather about clear and autonomous choice. It is only through such genuine, self-determined engagement that cultural identity can endure and distinct characteristics can truly emerge.

Another distinctive feature of Japanese culture is its clarity and definiteness. Take, for example, the Japanese wearing of a kimono—it is by no means a superficial performance or a mere formality, but rather a choice that comes from genuine cultural identification. The kimono, in its contemporary usage, follows established styles that clearly indicate the wearer’s age or social role. When Westerners visit Japan, they can often distinguish these variations and fairly easily learn which type is worn on which occasion and how to wear it appropriately. As a result, foreigners can grasp the sartorial genealogy of Japanese traditional attire. By contrast, although some Chinese people today also wear Tang-style or Hanfu clothing, there is no clearly defined or consistently recognized system of styles. Due to historical disruptions and continual changes across dynasties, the tradition of Chinese dress has experienced fragmentation, making its lineage ambiguous and difficult to systematize. What’s more, many modern vendors, motivated by profit, produce so-called ancient-style garments that often appear improvised and historically incoherent. Promotion and interpretation come from multiple conflicting sources, resulting in public confusion and a lack of a coherent, meaningful cultural vision.

Another characteristic of contemporary Japanese culture is its remarkable capacity for absorption. Why is it that many traditional patterns, motifs, and symbolic designs that have been lost, fragmented, or scattered in China are not only well-preserved in Japan but often even further developed? The answer lies in Japan’s long and diligent history of learning from China, most notably through multiple official missions of envoys known as *Kentōshi*, sent during the Tang Dynasty. This learning was systematic, organized, and profoundly thorough. Moreover, as previously mentioned, Japan’s diverse ethnic origins have endowed its culture with a strong innate tendency to absorb external influences, and not

only from China. Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan began actively learning from and engaging with not only Europe and America, but also India and Southeast Asia through trade, research, and cultural exchange. In fact, over a century ago, the Japanese were already traveling across the oceans to explore the world. While China is a major civilization with a long, continuous, and self-sustaining cultural history, this very legacy has also, in a sense, become a heavy burden—like an elder overly confident in his own ways. We carry the weight of tradition yet lack a dynamic, innovative, and adaptive mechanism for absorbing new influences. As a result, we often appear less vibrant and struggle with innovation and transformation.

A distinctive feature of contemporary Japanese cultural identity is that its emphasis lies not on nationality, but on cultural essence itself—that is, the universality of culture. In other words, the national character of culture is rooted first and foremost in its common humanity. It is widely known that Japan has historically valued collective consciousness. However, a significant shift has occurred since the post-war period: collective consciousness and cultural identity are no longer viewed as exclusive or proprietary to one’s own nation. This is a remarkable development. During my interview with Masanobu Ito, director of a museum in Nerima, Tokyo—who previously worked long-term at the Japan Foundation and was involved in the selection and operation of the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, as well as the organization of the Yokohama Triennale—he noted that accomplished artists in Japan often seek to express a uniquely Japanese sensibility and cultural value. Yet, he emphasized, such artists are not necessarily Japanese nationals. This perspective is quite provocative and marks a clear difference from common attitudes in China. Take, for example, Chiharu Shiota, who is highly prominent in the international art scene. Though based in Berlin for over two decades, she recently represented Japan at the Venice Biennale. I pressed Masanobu Ito: “What if Shiota were not Japanese, given her long residence in Germany? Would she still be chosen to represent Japan?” This brought to mind Huang Yongping, who was of Chinese descent but held French citizenship and represented France at the French Pavilion. Had he not been a French citizen, it’s unclear whether he could have represented France. I went further, asking: “If Chiharu Shiota weren’t a Japanese national, could she still represent Japan?” Masanobu Ito replied, “We do not focus on nationality. If an artist’s work embodies qualities of Japanese culture, we would have no hesitation in inviting them to represent the Japan Pavilion.” This response—

valuing cultural expression over national identity—genuinely impressed me. By contrast, in China, a rather narrow nationalism often surfaces in public discourse around culture and sports—for instance, the ongoing debates over freestyle skier Eileen Gu’s nationality. Yet, regardless of the controversy, she won gold medals for China in events where the country had no previous success. In short, contemporary Japan’s cultural values and identity are not tied to nationality—or even, potentially, to ethnicity. This open cultural attitude is closely linked to Japan’s 150-year history of openness and international engagement. This helps explain why nearly all Japanese art professionals consciously identify with their homeland—wherever they may be. Those who are free to come and go often cherish their country most deeply, precisely because Japan and its global counterparts are collectively pursuing a culture of shared humanity. When people are freely and consciously engaged in the same universal endeavor, does physical location really matter? Perhaps it even strengthens one’s emotional ties to home while abroad. Cultural subjectivity is not defined by geographical borders—but by the common ground of human experience.

4. Schools and International Contributions of Contemporary Japanese Art

It is precisely due to Japan’s long-standing cultural openness that it has been able to contribute internationally recognized art movements to the contemporary global art scene since the post-war period, such as Gutai, Mono-ha, and Post-Mono-ha. As an art critic active since the late 1980s, I have witnessed the emergence of Chinese contemporary art phenomena like Political Pop and Cynical Realism in the 1990s. However, these are better described as trends or artistic currents rather than coherent art movements. When it comes to the international influence or reception of contemporary Chinese culture and art, it has yet to be academically recognized as a distinct artistic school with a methodological framework. A review of foreign-language publications reveals almost no methodological study of Chinese contemporary art over the past forty years by non-Chinese scholars. The few existing works in foreign languages on this subject are predominantly written by a limited number of Chinese scholars residing abroad. For instance, works such as those by Anya L. at The Ohio State University focus primarily on the history of modern Chinese art, covering the period from the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China era up until the 1970s, not the contemporary methodological discourse.

Therefore, the understanding of Chinese art from the past four decades within international academic circles remains quite limited. Movements such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism are often perceived as phenomenon-specific trends tied to a particular historical period rather than independent artistic innovations. From a Western perspective, the visual and conceptual language of these movements is seen as derivative—rooted in Western or American Pop Art traditions—relying on appropriation and parody, strategies already familiar within global contemporary art. As a result, China has not yet produced a widely recognized artistic language or methodological framework over the past forty years that is viewed as fundamentally original or influential on a theoretical level. Japan, by contrast, has achieved precisely this. Mono-ha stands as a clear example—a movement acknowledged for its conceptual depth and distinctive contribution to global art discourse.

The most significant academic insight from my four-month research stay in Japan was the on-the-ground discovery and understanding of the creative origins of the Mono-ha movement. What did the Japanese and Koreans—specifically Lee Ufan, the theoretical pillar of Mono-ha—draw upon to conceive and establish this artistic perspective? The emergence of Mono-ha was certainly not without context, yet existing literature offers little detailed discussion or description. While exploring Tōfuku-ji, a renowned temple in Kyoto celebrated for its embodiment of Japanese aesthetics, I unexpectedly came across a dedicated area within the temple grounds containing numerous stouts, rounded stone pillars—resembling hitching posts—half-buried in the earth, with the surrounding ground arranged in gravel patterns evoking yin-yang symbolism. It occurred to me that similar stone formations are present in many other Japanese temples. I began to sense a potential connection between these ancient ritual stone arrangements and Nobuo Sekine’s seminal work *Phase—Mother Earth*. Indeed, if one were to extract such a stone pillar from the ground and place it beside the resulting cavity, would that not essentially recreate Sekine’s artwork? The main difference lies in the scale and proportion: Sekine’s piece is more massive and monolithic, while the temple stones are relatively slender. From a postmodern perspective, Sekine’s approach can be seen as an act of appropriation. By slightly adapting and recontextualizing elements from Japan’s traditional stone pillar forms, he infused them with new conceptual meaning. I personally verified this observation with Toshio Shimizu, a respected curator, and Miwa Kusana, a younger colleague in curation, both of whom affirmed the interpretation. What we

see, then, is that the contributions of Japanese artists to the contemporary art world are deeply rooted in tradition. They possess a profound understanding of their own cultural heritage and consistently draw from it for inspiration, elements, and breakthroughs. Yet, their conceptual and executional approach remains more flexible, open, and relaxed compared to many Chinese artists—unconstrained by pre-existing artistic frameworks. Artists like Nobuo Sekine demonstrate a remarkable ability to seemingly effortlessly transform traditional culture into contemporary expression. This lightness, however, is built upon deep cultural reflection and artistic accumulation. In balancing historical depth with the capacity to step back and reexamine their tradition from a broader perspective, Japanese artists benefit from a more holistic cultural environment and professional training than their Chinese counterparts.

For instance, when first encountering Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*—a urinal presented as art—most people might dismiss it as mere absurdity. But if you are an artist, you cannot simply write off Duchamp's act of appropriation as frivolous. If you still regard it as a provocation without substance, you likely remain outside the mainstream discourse—an artist in the traditional sense, not a contemporary one. Why are figures like Nobuo Sekine and Lee Ufan considered significant? It's because, upon drawing inspiration from elements such as the stone pillars at Tōfuku-ji, they didn't merely imitate—they transformed. What might appear as a sudden creative impulse was, in fact, supported by years of accumulated insight and cultural literacy. To make their artistic propositions intellectually compelling, they consistently sought theoretical grounding. Lee Ufan, for example, engaged in continuous writing, speaking, and explaining his ideas across various platforms—convincing others through persistent discourse. The more they refined their thinking, the more coherent their methodology became. This process mirrors academic research: sometimes, after long periods of reflection, a moment of clarity arrives—a breakthrough where everything clicks into place, and the logic grows increasingly persuasive. It was through such rigorous and reflective practice that artists like Sekine extracted from Japan's everyday and religious traditions a visual and conceptual methodology capable of communicating a renewed way of seeing the world.

The reason why Mono-ha is recognized as a distinct school lies in its methodological nature. It is not limited to a specific system or ideology; rather, it contributes to the entire genealogy of human art and enriches global artistic creation. Its influence is profound precisely because it offers inspiration to artists across the world.

Art on a global scale does not imply a single uniform style. Rather, it should embody distinctive characteristics while also benefiting the creative practices of others—it is, by nature, meant to be shared. If we look further back in history, we find that Japan's modern contribution to world art originated with Ukiyo-e. Just as Ukiyo-e once profoundly influenced Western artists such as the Impressionists, Mono-ha continue this tradition of offering the world a unique yet universally resonant visual and philosophical language.

From the analysis of Mono-ha's origins and creative approaches, it becomes evident that while standards for evaluating art vary widely, the most challenging—and essential—questions revolve around just a few core issues: the national character, the state-driven narrative, and the universal humanity of art. Among these, I believe universality—the “humanity of art”—holds the broadest significance. After four months of research in Japan, I have come to recognize that although Japan lacks the complex historical legacy of continental nations, it possesses certain qualities that feel particularly valuable or distinctive within today's postmodern global culture. Examples include Japan's aesthetic pursuits of purity, simplicity, and extreme refinement—concepts such as wabi-sabi, mono no aware, and yūgen, as well as artistic methodologies like those of Gutai, Mono-ha, and Post-Mono-ha. These are both historical and contemporary contributions of Japanese culture that offer learning opportunities for people across the world. In contrast, over the past four decades, China has not yet produced an artistic movement or aesthetic language with genuine global influence. Instead, during the twenty-seven years following the founding of the People's Republic, a top-down approach imposed the “Three Prominences” doctrine in artistic creation, forming aesthetic standards such as “Red, Bright, and Shining” and “Tall, Grand, and Complete.” Although these carried strong period-specific and political notations—exemplified in works like the Model Operas—they became defining features of their era. Red, Bright, and Shining and Tall, Grand, and Complete functioned in China much like mono no aware, wabi-sabi, and yūgen did in Japan: as aesthetic categories and standards. The crucial difference, however, lies in their level of conceptual depth. Concepts such as yūgen, wabi-sabi, and mono no aware engage directly with human psychology and universal emotions, endowing them with artistic universality. Their influence extends globally, affecting fields from architecture to garden and interior design. In contrast, Red, Bright, and Shining and Tall, Grand, and Complete served primarily as visualizations of political ideology—an extreme form of political rhetoric



Figure 7. At the talk for the Tokyo Shanghai exhibition.

with little connection to shared human experience. As a result, they remain confined to a specific historical context within China and have not been widely adopted as universal artistic categories internationally.

Another crucial factor behind Mono-ha's emergence as a globally significant art movement lies in the external social environment and conditions that enabled its development. The rise and evolution of Mono-ha were the result of free choice—more specifically, choices made autonomously within a market economy and an open society. Within Japan's highly market-driven cultural ecosystem, the arts operate within a professional domain supported by a mature art market, genuine public interest, and institutional patronage. Foundations, art institutions, and private supporters often fund early-stage artistic exploration, enabling experimental artists to sustain their practice. Those who sponsor exhibitions may also benefit from tax deductions, creating a system where backers receive compensatory incentives in other areas, which in turn encourages long-term support for artistic endeavors that may not yield immediate

commercial returns. This environment—similar to that found in Europe and the United States—allows artistic creation to remain, first and foremost, a personal and autonomous pursuit. In contrast, when artistic production is shaped by top-down governmental guidance, selective funding, and ideological intervention, it gradually leads to an artificial cultural direction. Art created under such conditions often serves extra-artistic purposes, compromising its spontaneity and autonomy. When artistic expression is instrumentalized for political or functional goals, it loses its universal human dimension. In such an environment, it becomes difficult for truly influential artistic movements or works with global resonance to emerge.

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Editor: Wang Jing

ENDNOTES

1. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, trans. Sun Zhimin, Ma Xiaohe, and Zhu Lisheng (Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1987), 3.
2. Chiba Shigeo, *Japanese Art Is Not Yet Created*, trans. Fan Zhongming (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2014), 71.

自下而上的民族性——日本當代藝術生成發展

高嶺

摘要：本文通過跨文化橫向比較和藝術史縱向梳理等多種研究方法，從歷史和現實、民族與國家、藝術與文化、體制與機制等多個維度，指出日本現當代藝術發展對於中國乃至世界當代藝術具有啟發和借鑒的突出特質，是藝術家自發自覺並且自主地尋找創作和理論研究中的民族性。在民族性及其藝術價值的理解、描述和探尋上進行了深入的分析 and 比較，尤其是結合對日本戰後出現並且影響深遠的物派藝術提出全新見解的表述，強調了藝術的民族特性與藝術的人類性的統一性。

關鍵詞：民族性；開放與自由；自下而上；傳統的當代轉換