

KANSAI GAIDAI UNIVERSITY

Perception of Space: Exploring Japanese Emptiness and Western Minimalism through Isamu Kurita's Discourse

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 関西外国語大学・関西外国語大学短期大学部 公開日: 2024-10-11 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): Spatial consciousness, Emptiness, Minimalism, Japanese culture, Cross-cultural perceptions 作成者: Kim-Lee, Seong A. メールアドレス: 所属: 関西外国語大学
URL	https://doi.org/10.18956/0002000259

Perception of Space: Exploring Japanese Emptiness and Western Minimalism through Isamu Kurita's Discourse

Seong A. Kim-Lee

Abstract

This article delves into the understanding of spatial consciousness in Japanese and Western cultures, particularly exploring the contrasting perceptions of emptiness and minimalism. Drawing from historical, cultural, and architectural paradigms, this research examines the roots of the concept of “emptiness” in Japanese culture, emphasizing its unique subjective perspective that intertwines architecture with the natural environment. Through a comparative study involving Japanese and international students, this investigation uncovers substantial disparities in spatial consciousness, shedding light on the divergent interpretations of emptiness and minimalism. The survey results vividly highlight the distinct cultural perspectives, with Japanese students associating emptiness with brightness and perceiving spaces as “ma” or “in-between,” in contrast to international students associating emptiness with darkness and often interpreting minimalism through a lens of architectural structure and brightness. The study underscores the profound influence of cultural backgrounds on the interpretation of design elements and spatial perception, offering valuable insights for architects, designers, and scholars in creating designs that resonate across diverse cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Spatial consciousness, Emptiness, Minimalism, Japanese culture, Cross-cultural perceptions

1. Introduction

Comparing visual aspects, the apparent simplicity of designs in Japan and the West may initially seem similar. However, there is a contrast in the philosophical origins and implications of simplicity in these distinct cultural contexts. The Japanese approach to design often yields outcomes that extend beyond mere appearances (Nendo 2014: 12). Japanese simplicity is frequently equated with minimalism in Western literature, as seen in works like Pawson (1998), yet the Japanese tend to differentiate simplicity by embracing the concept of emptiness ingrained in their culture (Hara 2007). Japanese individuals have developed a unique perception of space based on their views of nature. Thus, this research delves into the

captivating notions of Japanese and Western spatial consciousness, focusing on the divergent interpretations of simplicity in space. The central exploration is based on the discourse by Isamu Kurita, which delves into the etymology of emptiness (空) and suggests that, in Japanese perception, the sky is viewed through a hollow within four-sided walls, embodying an ephemeral spatial concept (Kurita 1964: 166). Thus, whether that perception continues in the present, needs to be explored.

Drawing upon Kurita's discourse, this study suggests using Japanese paintings and architecture as visual supports for comparison with Western design. This study unravels the complexities of Japanese spatial consciousness and its deviation from Western perspectives through an interdisciplinary approach encompassing historical, cultural, contemporary architectural paradigms, and a comparative analysis involving Japanese and international students. By highlighting the distinct perceptions of emptiness and minimalism, this research not only underscores the disparities in interpretations, but also emphasizes the profound influence of cultural backgrounds on these differing perspectives within the fields of architecture and design.

2. Emptiness in Space

The etymology of emptiness (空) was expounded by Isamu Kurita in the context of Japanese space: While the Chinese character denotes emptiness in both China and Japan, it uniquely symbolizes the sky in Japan (Kurita 1964: 166). However in Japan, as the letter consists of two words, "hollow (穴)" and "fabricating or structure (工)," in Japanese perception, the sky is perceived by peering through a hollow (穴) within a space enclosed by four-sided walls (工) (fig. 1). Kurita's analysis suggests that the space delineated by these walls embodies an ephemeral spatial concept, characteristic of Japanese understanding. This Japanese spatial concept is subjective and extends beyond the confinements within built structures. Man-made constructions are considered transient and intimately interconnected with their natural surroundings.

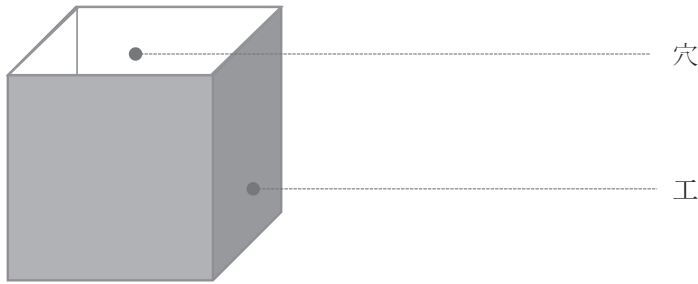


Figure 1. Visualization of Kurita's discussion on the traditional Japanese perception of emptiness (空)
Source: Illustration by author

This perception is clearly represented in old Japanese painting style known as Yamato-e. In ancient times, Japanese painters skillfully utilized the unique *fukinuki-yatai* technique to portray houses without roofs, providing viewers with a window into a three-dimensional space (fig. 2). The term “fukinuki-yatai” translates to “blown-off roof,” and refers to a visual approach in which the interior of a building is revealed by either removing or partly lifting the roof, allowing an inside view. In Yamato-e, the viewer is positioned outside the space. Like Kurita's discourse, Japanese paintings indicate the unique spatial perception of emptiness (空). This technique allowed the portrayal of scenes within buildings showing various activities and daily lives. Consequently, the Japanese envisioned interior spaces as relatively small and often depicted from an aerial perspective. Their perception of space was holistic, subjective, and seamlessly integrated with the natural surroundings outside the building.

In contrast, in Western art the one-point vanishing perspective was habitually used. Western paintings portray space from a human-centric perspective. Artists position the viewer's perspective within the structure, where the perspective vanishes to a single point that guides the main subject or figure. For example, in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, the main subject of the painting is placed at the center, with the rest of the scene converging towards this central point (fig. 3). The Western approach was objective, concentrating on the subject and its immediate surroundings, whereas the Japanese perspective remained subjective, emphasizing integration with the broader environment. These distinct perspectives showcased in the paintings distinctly mirror the varied spatial perceptions of Japan and the West. In Western paintings, the dualistic concept of people and architectural

space is reflected in the relationship between the viewers and space. In Japanese paintings, the ternary concept of nature is reflected in the interplay between space, viewers, and their surroundings. In Western perception, space is seen as existing autonomously, separate from its surroundings (Lee 2009). However, Eastern perspectives, dating back to ancient times, view space as imbued with vital surrounding energy (Lee 2009).



Figure 2. Tosa Mitsunori, Scenes from The Tale of Genji, Early 17th century
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

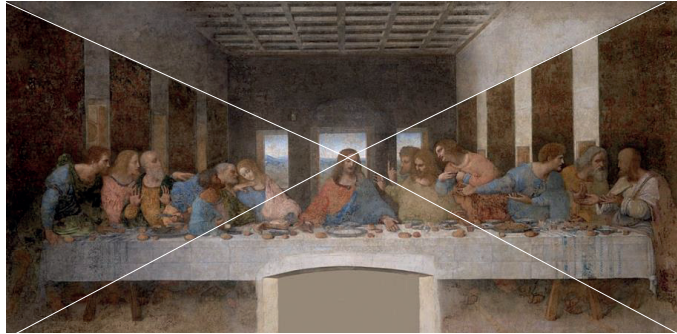


Figure 3. One point vanishing perspective, Leonard Da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, c.1495–1498. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy.

This unique spatial perception persists in contemporary Japanese architectural design. A case in point is Tadao Ando, a Japanese architect renowned for employing a distinctive Japanese spatial concept of emptiness. Ando utilizes concrete structures as frames that accentuate and integrate with the natural surroundings, encompassing elements such as wind, sunlight, water, and the sky. An exemplary feature of his designs is the incorporation of spiral stairs, creating a contemplative space that offers views of the sky as individuals ascend. Ando notably emphasizes, “The aspect of emptiness is also very important. In Japan, we learned to create a cosmos out of nothing” (Ando 2014: 47). The staircases within structures such as the Chichu Museum in Naoshima and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Kobe aptly showcase how traditional spatial concepts seamlessly persist within contemporary architecture (fig. 4 and 5). These architectural creations are intricately connected to Kurita’s discourse on emptiness, emphasizing the extension of space into the surrounding environment.

It seems that the new generation of young Japanese architects continues to embrace the concept of emptiness in their innovative designs. For example, Sou Fujimoto’s House N



Figure 4. Tadao Ando, *Chichu Museum of Art*, 2004, Naoshima, Kagawa Prefecture, Japan.



Figure 5. Tadao Ando, *Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art*, 2002, Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan.

(2008) epitomizes this philosophy by blurring the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, layering open structures in both ceilings and walls. Fujimoto stated, “Architecture is not a single space but exists through the relationships between spaces, the relationships between spaces and their surroundings. Architecture is the ‘aida’ (間), which connects something and something else.” (Fujimoto 2010: 11) Ryue Nishizawa’s Teshima Art Museum (2010) features large oval openings in the ceiling, allowing natural light to create a serene atmosphere. Although its form does not adhere to traditional building structures, one might not immediately associate his building with traditional aesthetics. However, it clearly shows a relation to traditional architecture of emptiness through its open space and connection to natural surroundings. Junya Ishigami’s semi-outdoor design for the Plaza of Kanagawa Institute of Technology (2020) further exemplifies this trend. The space offers a multifunctional, semi-outdoor space with many rectangular openings of different sizes in the ceiling that integrates the idea of “emptiness.” It offers a relaxing area for students, seamlessly integrating functionality with tranquility. These examples illustrate that the integration of traditional concepts is a common practice among contemporary Japanese architects, not limited to Ando.

While Japanese emptiness symbolizes the idea of infinite possibilities being filled (Hara 2014: 14), Western modernism distills unnecessary elements and decorations, focusing on efficiency and functions. As the modern era dawned, and with the advent of efficient machine-based production processes accessible to ordinary people, simplicity emerged as a fundamental pursuit for designers. Consequently, modernism progressed towards an extreme, overlooking its original intention initiated by Bauhaus designers, and “led straight to a dead end” (Gropius 1968: 79). In contrast to postmodernism, which attempted to overcome the limitations of modernism in an opposite direction, the emergence of minimalism stemmed from Western rationalism. This movement aimed to reduce or condense “every component, every detail, and every junction to the essentials” (Pawson 1996: 7). This rational reductionist approach is evident when comparing the minimalist architecture by John Pawson with its original structure (fig. 6 and 7). Therefore, when two contemporary architects design spaces under the norm of simplicity, the differences in perception become apparent.



Figure 6. *St. Moritz Church*, Augsburg, Germany.



Figure 7. John Pawson, *St. Moritz Church*, 2008-2013, Augsburg, Germany.

3. Survey

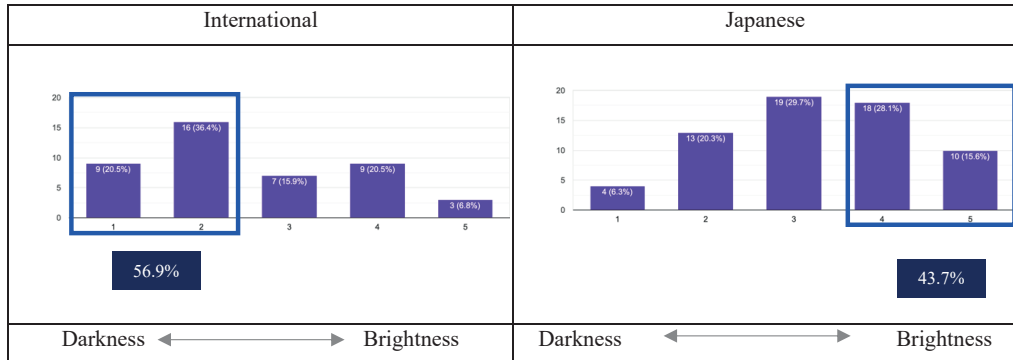
The survey aimed to investigate whether this cultural difference in spatial perspective persists in contemporary times and was conducted among diverse ethnic groups, international and Japanese. A total of 108 students, comprising 44 international and 64 Japanese students enrolled in the Asian Studies Program at Kansai Gaidai University in the spring of 2023, participated in this survey. Among the international students, 44 had been in Japan for less than a year, primarily hailing from the United States and eleven other nations, including Australia, Britain, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Taiwan, and Vietnam. The Japanese group primarily consisted of students born and raised in Japan. Notably, the survey was administered before the students learned about the perceptions of simplicity in Western and Japanese designs, ensuring an unbiased and accurate measurement of differences.

The photos for the survey were chosen from examples of Western minimalist architecture of John Pawson, as well as Japanese emptiness architecture of Tadao Ando. The images were selected to provide visual representations of contrasting architectural styles and concepts. In particular, the photos aimed to show how natural sunlight was encapsulated within these spaces, as discussed in Kurita's discourse. By including images that demonstrate the interplay between lightness and darkness within minimalist and emptiness architectures. These carefully curated photographs were instrumental in prompting the participants to consider the nuanced aspects of minimalism and emptiness, ultimately enriching the survey's findings regarding cultural perceptions of spaces.

Question 1: When you think of emptiness (空), what image comes to your mind?

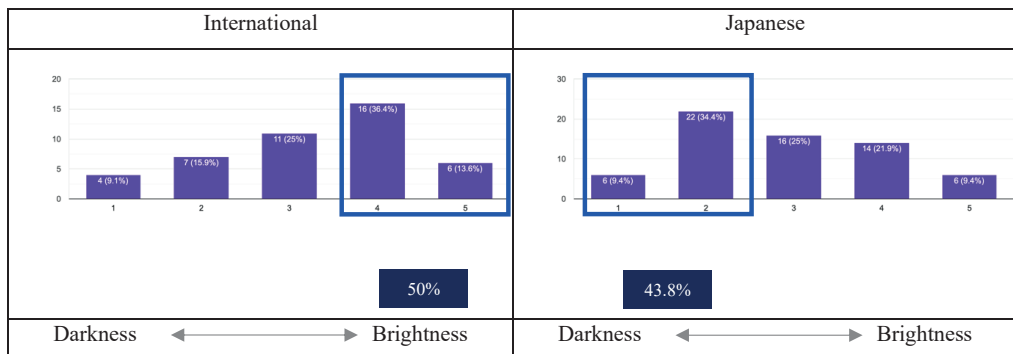
In this context, the results of the two groups distinctly present opposing perspectives. The international group primarily associated emptiness with darkness, whereas the Japanese students indicated a stronger association with brightness. Specifically, based on a five-point linear scale, only 26.6 percent of Japanese students linked emptiness to darkness, whereas 43.7 percent associated emptiness with brightness. It is important to note that the largest number of Japanese respondents selected 3 on the scale, rather than 5. This tendency to choose a middle option might reflect a cultural preference for avoiding extremes, a common trait in Japanese society aimed at maintaining harmony and balance (Wang et. al., 2008). More than half of the international students linked emptiness to darkness. These findings

complement with Hara’s discourse regarding how Japanese emptiness is closely connected to white, symbolizing empty space in the Japanese concept of “*kuhaku* (空白),” which combines emptiness (空) and white (白) (Hara 2007: 50). Moreover, the results show that emptiness is related to bright images, as Kurita noted, which can be viewed outside a roofless space.

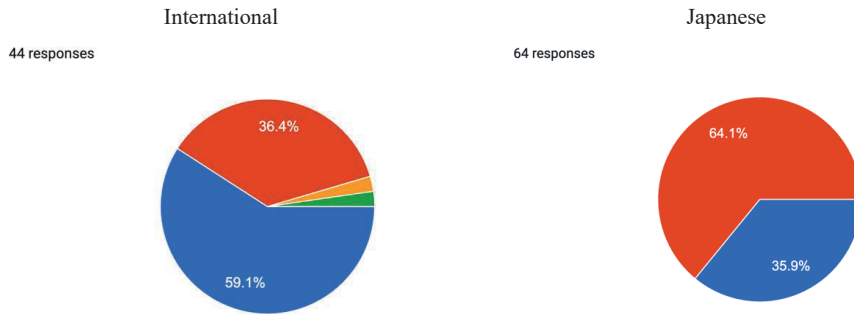


Question 2: When you think of minimalism what image comes to your mind?

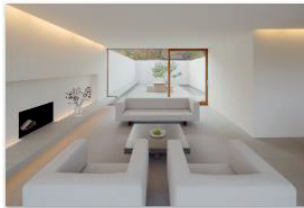
The international students tended to associate minimalism more with brightness. In contrast, the Japanese students were more inclined to associate minimalism with darkness. Consequently, when prompted to select an image representing minimalism in the question 3, more than half of the international students chose bright interiors. Conversely, the Japanese group selected darker images to symbolize minimalism. This result can be linked to contemporary Japanese architects, such as Kenta Eto and Katsuhiko Endo, who create minimalist architectural buildings characterized by all-black volumes. The outcomes of image selection in the subsequent question align directly with earlier findings related to the conceptualization of minimalism.



Question 3: Which space represents minimal design?



● Option 1



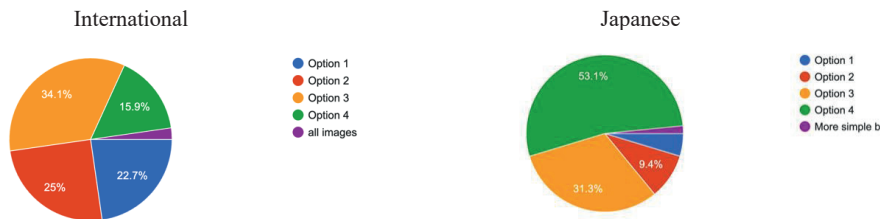
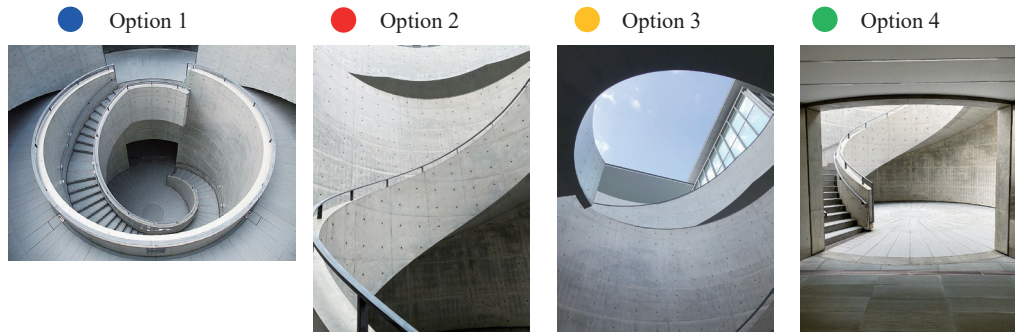
● Option 2



Question 4: Which image represents the concept of emptiness (空)?


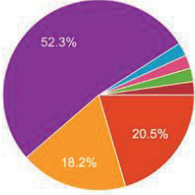
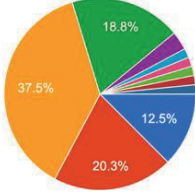

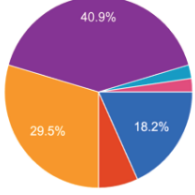
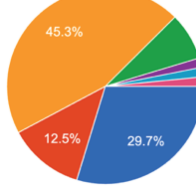
To discern diverse cultural perspectives, a survey was conducted with international and Japanese students to compare their distinct viewpoints. The survey encompassed images illustrating different vantage points of the same staircase in the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, designed by Ando to explore how individuals perceive space. The results from the international group indicated that they tended to not recognize the differences between the four photos because the photographs were of the same place. They tended to perceive the causes are in the objects, and in this question, as the same space was suggested, they tended to perceive those the same. From the Western “objective” perspective, a space without people or things, can be perceived as empty. Notably, one student mentioned that all the images were connected to emptiness. In contrast, the Japanese students’ responses were notably related to images featuring sunlight and perspectives transitioning from the darker side to the lighter side. This aligns with Kurita’s discourse on the etymology of emptiness. It also suggests the image of Shuowen script, with its representation of emptiness, strongly reflects the image of cave. Interestingly, option 1 and 2 were selected by over 84 percent of

Japanese students, which correlates with the etymology of emptiness. This concept seems to be deeply rooted in Japanese perception.



Question 5: When you see the space suggested, what image comes to your mind?

This question was designed to compare the students' observations of Japanese emptiness and Western minimalist architecture. The Church of Light by Ando was suggested to represent Japanese emptiness architecture, highlighting elements of emptiness and the interplay of light and shadow. In contrast, the St. Moritz Church in Augsburg, Germany, by John Pawson, was presented to showcase Western minimalism characterized by reduced decoration and elements based on classical structure. Also, along with the terms related to traditional Japanese space, the options include "structure" related to Western architecture. The Japanese began to use the term *kenchiku*, based on English term "architecture" from the introduction of Western buildings, which were characterized by the reliance on masses of bricks and stones.

	International	Japanese
	 <p>Nothingness(無) 0% Emptiness (空) 20.5% In-between(間) 18.2% Structure(築) 52.3%</p>	 <p>Nothingness(無) 12.5% Emptiness (空) 20.3% In-between(間) 37.5% Structure(築) 18.8%</p>
	 <p>Nothingness(無) 18.2% Emptiness (空) 6.8% In-between(間) 29.5% Structure(築) 40.9%</p>	 <p>Nothingness(無) 29.7% Emptiness (空) 12.5% In-between(間) 45.3% Structure(築) 1.6%</p>

The survey results indicate notable disparities between the international and Japanese students' perceptions of space. The statistics show that while international students predominantly associated both spaces with "structure," Japanese students perceived space as "in-between." International students struggled to relate the images to concepts of nothingness, emptiness, or in-between because of the lack of a cultural context for perceiving space in such terms. Conversely, over 57.8 percent of the Japanese students linked the space to either emptiness or in-between. The same number of Japanese students associated Pawson's church with either emptiness or an in-between concept akin to Ando's church. However, regardless of whether the space represented interval images, the international students perceived it as an enclosed structure rather than an in-between or empty space.

These survey results undeniably illustrate the prevalence of the spatial concept of “kukan (空間)” in the Japanese mindset. It is evident that the Japanese students tended to perceive space as “ma,” while the international students tended to perceive space as “structure.”

4. Conclusion

In summary, this study shows that while there is no discernible difference between minimalist space and the concept of emptiness as perceived by individuals, a clear disparity exists in spatial perception between Westerners and the Japanese, as outlined in Kurita’s discourse within the context of modern understanding. It is evident that traditional spatial perceptions are deeply ingrained in Japanese culture.

Emptiness carries a negative connotation for many international students, associated with darkness and negativity, whereas Japanese students view it more positively, linking it with brightness and optimism. Similarly, minimalism elicits different interpretations, with international students perceiving it as rational and bright, while Japanese students associate it with darkness. Furthermore, the notion of space is approached differently by the two groups, with international students focusing on structural aspects and Japanese students perceiving space as “in-between,” rooted in the concept of “kukan.” These cultural nuances profoundly influence individuals’ interpretations of architectural concepts and highlight the importance of recognizing and understanding such differences in design.

This investigation substantiates the fundamental divergence between cultural perspectives, particularly concerning the nuanced concepts of emptiness and minimalism. It underscores the subjective nature of the Japanese spatial concept, contrasted with Western perceptions emphasizing rational reductionism. The correlation between Japanese cultural heritage and the perception of spaces as “kukan” elucidates a unique spatial consciousness deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

Due to this difference in perception, Japanese design is interpreted differently in the West, often viewed as minimalism based on rationalism, and in Japan, it is perceived as emptiness rooted in traditional thinking. As the boundaries between cultures continue to blur, understanding cultural nuances becomes increasingly crucial for fostering designs that transcend cultural barriers and resonate universally. This exploration reinforces the pivotal role of cultural backgrounds in shaping design perceptions, enriching our understanding of design philosophy.

Reference

- Ando, Tadao (2014). Mathias Frick (Director), *Tadao Ando: From Emptiness to Infinity*. [DVD] Credo Film.
- Gropius, Walter (1968). *Apollo in the Democracy: the cultural obligation of the architect*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hara, Kenya (2007). *White*. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers.
- Hara, Kenya (2014). "The Origins of Japanese Design," in Rossella Menegazzo and Stefania Piotti, *WA: The Essence of Japanese Design*. Phaidon Press.
- Fujimoto, Sou (2010). *Kenchikuga Umarerutoki*. Tokyo: Okokusha.
- Kurita, Isamu (1964). *Dentō no Gyakusetsu: Nihonbito Kūkan*. Tokyo: Shichiyōsha.
- Lee, Jeong-Ook (2009). *East and West: Episode 2. Westerners want to see, Easterners want to be*. Presented by EBS; presented by Korea Educational Broadcast System, [DVD] Film Ideas: Wheeling, IL.
- Nendo. (2014). *Hidden-Unveiling Japanese Design*. Tokyo: ADP Company.
- Pawson, John (1996). *Minimum*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Wang, R., B. Hempton, J.P. Dugan and S.R. Komives (2008). "Cultural Differences: Why Do Asians Avoid Extreme Responses?" *Survey Practice*. 1(3). pp.1-7.

(Seong A. Kim-Lee 外国語学部准教授)