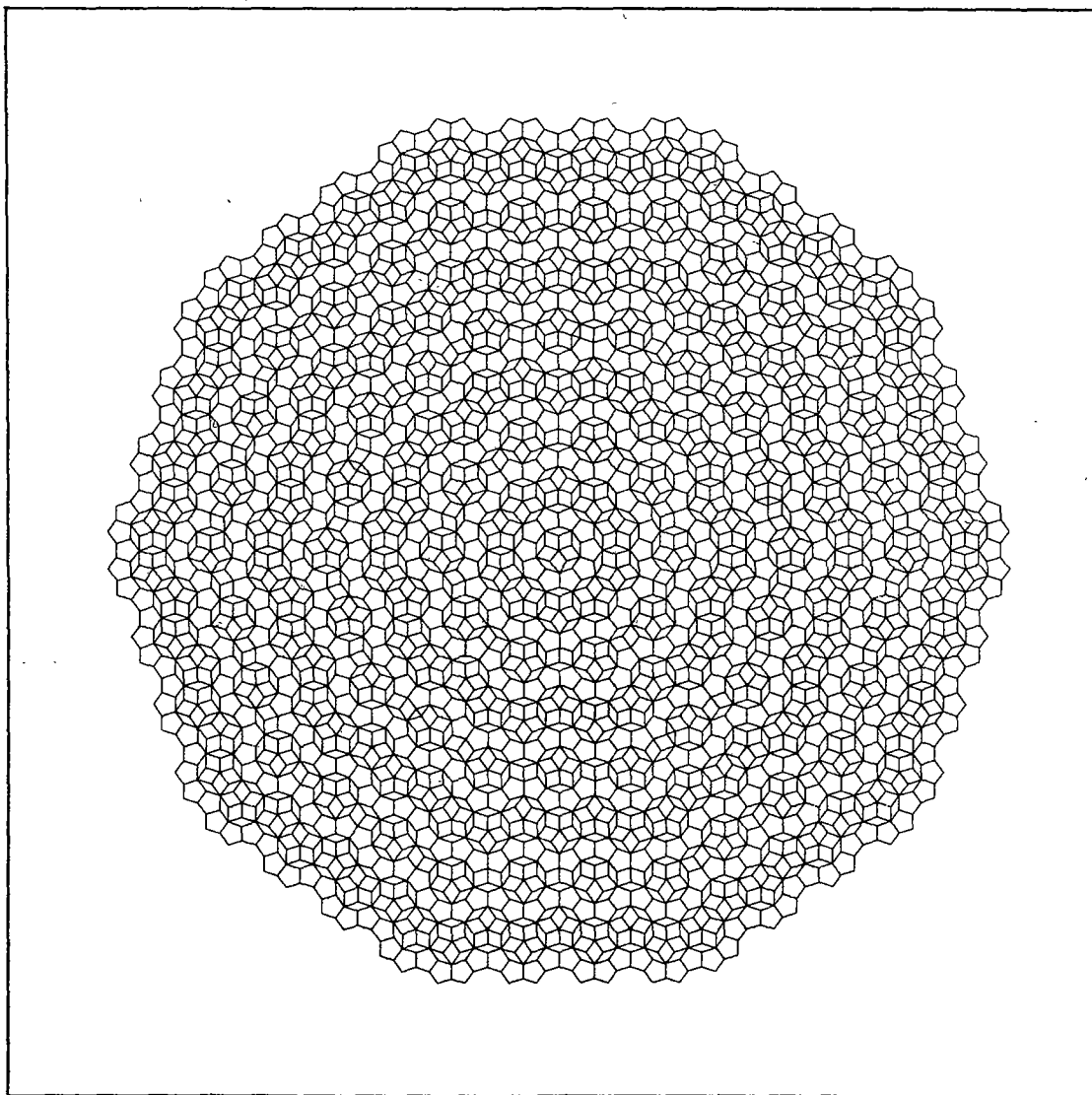


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SYMMETRY IN DANCE AND PERFORMANCE ART

**“THE PROPER” AND “THE REVERSED”:
RIGHT-HANDED DYNAMISM
IN THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY AND NOH**

Etsuko Kato

Doctoral student (b. Urawa, Japan, 1965).
Field of interest Cultural semiotics; linguistics/non-linguistic communication in ceremonies.
Address Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto,
100 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1, Canada.
E-mail. ekato@epas.utoronto.ca



Abstract: *While the Western performing arts have developed in symmetrical performing space, i.e. on rectangular or circular stages, two of the typical Japanese performing arts, tea ceremony and noh, are performed in asymmetrical space. Tea rooms and noh stages both require special layout of objects and performers. There asymmetrical, right-hand-open and left-hand-closed structure constitutes, however, a symmetry on the higher level in that it has its own balance or harmony. This "dynamic symmetry" in the tea rooms and on the noh stages creates both visual dynamism in the performance space and clockwise dynamism in the movements of the performers.*

0.

Hearing the word “performing art”, many Westerners may think of scenes in which some kind of performers, e.g. actors, dancers, or a piano player, are performing on the stage which is rectangular or circular. In either case, the stage which performers are on may possibly be a type of symmetrical space. In symmetrical space, distinction between right and left is made simply for the sake of convenience. There is no rule, for example, that prohibits an actor, who stood on the right side of the stage yesterday, from standing on the left side today. In this sense, in symmetrical space, right and left are interchangeable.

Two of the typical Japanese performing arts, tea ceremony and *noh*, however, are performed in asymmetrical space being ruled by the right-and-left orientation; in this case right and left are *not* interchangeable, because each has its own value.

In this paper I would like to discuss how the performances of these two arts and the asymmetric structures of their performing space are influenced by each other in unseparable ways. Here I would especially like to point out that the performing space both for tea ceremony and for *noh* have, so to speak, “right-hand principle”, i.e. a principle which gives a privilege to the right hand of the performers over their left hand. I would also like to maintain that this principle is so essential to these two arts that only the structures of performing space which can hold this principle have survived among several possibilities in the history.

1.

Both the tea ceremony and *noh* are the performing arts which were gradually established throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. It was the age of *samurai* warriors, and these two arts were enthusiastically learned and patronized by them. Since then, these two arts seem to have been enjoying their privileged status as typical Japanese arts as long as 400 years.

The tea ceremony is the art of making and drinking tea through elegantly formulated procedures both of the host and the guests. The guests appreciate hospitality of the host, enjoying not only good tea or beautiful utensils, but also the elegant manner of the host who makes tea in front of them. Therefore the host is, so to speak, the main performer and the guests are his audience. However, the elegant and harmonious manner of the guests are also indispensable to a successful tea ceremony, so we can say that the guests are supporting performers for the host at the same time.

Performance of the tea ceremony takes place not on the stage but in the tearoom, which has a special layout for the purpose of the ceremony. In Figure 1,¹ enclosed with a frame, five basic layouts of tearooms are shown. Each of them has limited number of *tatami* mats, a sunken hearth, and an alcove. And you may notice that they are not laid out symmetrically: the sunken hearths are not dug in the center of the room, nor are the alcoves laid out in the center of the side walls. Even in the square tearoom, its layout is not symmetrical, to be exact.

Moreover, placement of the participants and utensils in the room, which is strictly rule-governed, seems as if it aimed to break symmetry, as we see in Figure 2.²

¹ The original form of this figure is on p. 192 of *Kadokawa sado dai-jiten* [Kadokawa Great Encyclopedia of Tea Ceremony], Vol. 2 of 2 vols (Tokyo: Kadokawa-shoten, 1989), to which I added alterations for the purpose of the present discussion

² The original form of this figure is on p. 170 of Iguchi Kaisen, *Sado nyumon* [A Guide to Tea Ceremony] (Tokyo: Shakai-shisoshu, 1969), to which I added alterations for the purpose of the present discussion

The same trait can be seen on the stage of *noh*. *Noh* is a kind of musical art in which actors, wearing masks and gorgeous costumes, dance in a slow and elegant manner while they or the chorus are singing and the band is playing music. Figure 3³ shows the layout of the *noh* theater, and Figure 4⁴ shows the placement of performers on the stage. We can see neither of them are symmetrical.

Such asymmetric structures of tearooms and the *noh* stage can be considered as the embodiments of unique preference of the Japanese for asymmetry. Indeed, the preference for asymmetry is generally seen in Japanese art and architecture, such as flower arrangement, landscape gardening, or structures of castles and temples (two of the examples are shown in Figure 5⁵).

To be exact, however, what the Japanese prefer is not asymmetry. Asymmetry means total lack of symmetry, i.e. lack of balance or harmony as a whole. Japanese architecture or works of art which are seemingly asymmetric do have balance or harmony as a whole, which is recognized when we shift our attention incessantly from point to point upon the work and, at the same time, integrate the parts into one image in our mind. It is certain that the Japanese often avoid fixing “the center” when they make artistic objects, so that the viewers’ attention may not be settled on it. They deliberately avoid so-called symmetry in order to create more dynamic, another kind of balance. This is a higher level of symmetry which can be called “dynamic symmetry” (in this term, the word “symmetry” is used in a broader meaning which is rather synonymous with “balance” or “harmony”).⁶

In the cases of the tearoom and the *noh* stage, however, there is another characteristic they share besides such “dynamic symmetry”; and this second characteristic should not be overlooked when we remember that they are kinds of performing space. It is that both in the tearoom and the *noh* stage, the main performers have open, bigger space on their right side when they are performing, while they have rather closed, smaller space on their left side. For example, in the tea ceremony, when the host, i.e. the main performer, comes into the room and makes tea, his left side is always closed with the wall, while on his right side he has open space where the guests are sitting.

And in the *noh* theater, too, when the actors are on the cloister or on the main stage, they have smaller space closed with the wall, the band or the chorus on their left side, while their right side is open space where the audience is.

³ The original form of this figure is on p. 139 of Masuda Shozo, *Noh no dezain* [Design of Noh] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1976), to which I added alterations for the purpose of the present discussion

⁴ The original form of this figure is on p. 126 of Konparu Kunio, *Noh eno shotai* [Invitation to Noh] (Kyoto: Tankosha, 1980), to which I added alterations for the purpose of the present discussion

⁵ Ibid, pp. 34, 35.

⁶ The definition above of asymmetry, and the idea to consider the seeming asymmetry of Japanese works of arts as a higher level of symmetry, are attributed to Nagy (personal communication), the term “dynamic symmetry” given to this kind of symmetry is found on p. 34 of Konparu (1980).

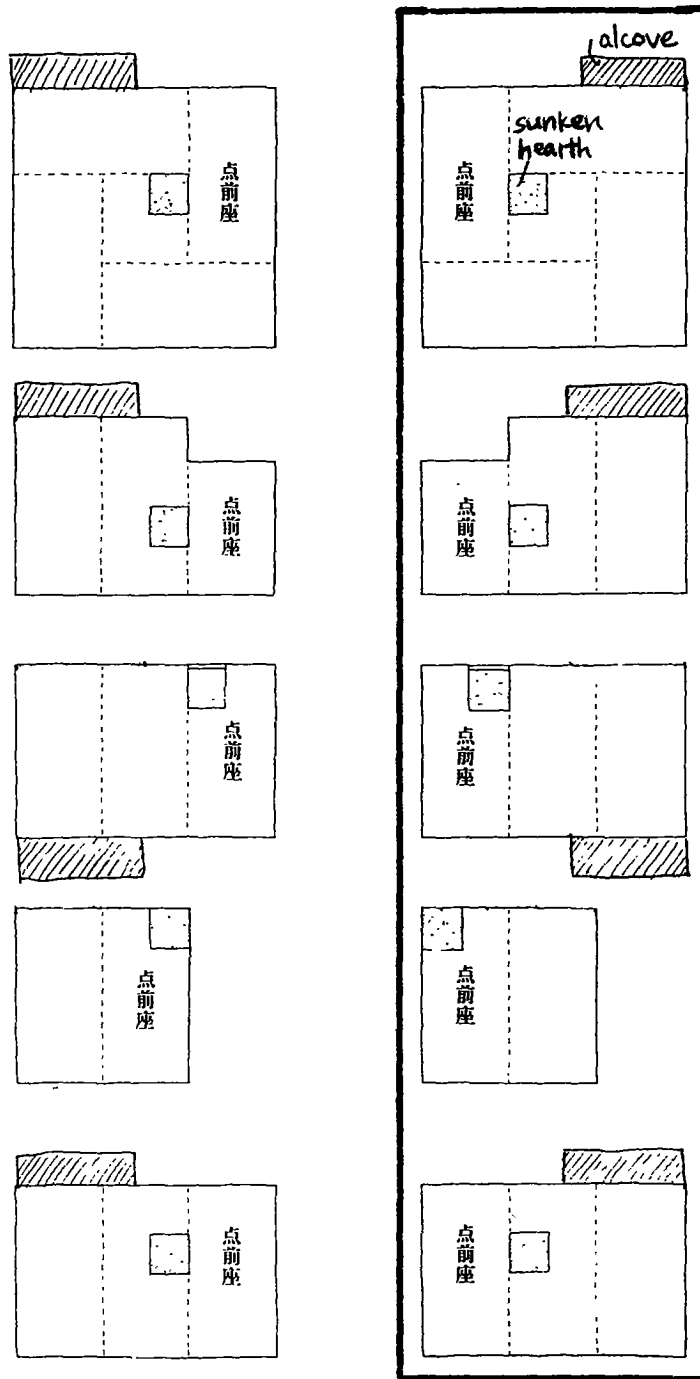


Figure 1:
Basic Layouts of
Tearooms

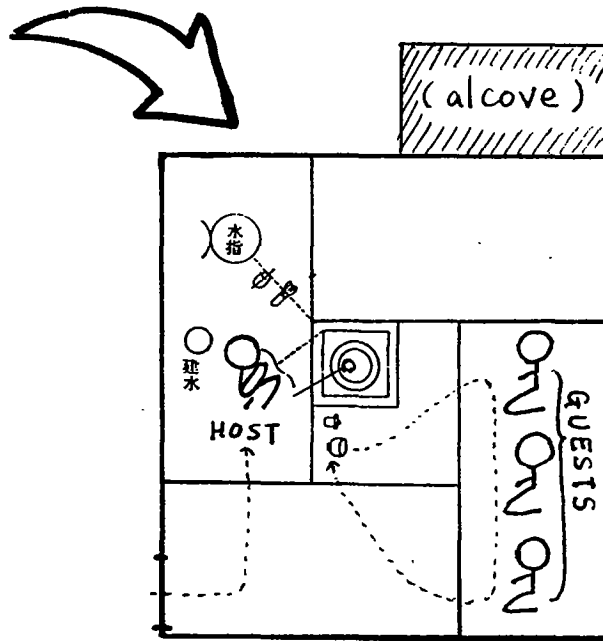


Figure 2: Placement of Utensils and Participants in a Tearoom

Is there any positive motivation for this “right-hand-open (and left-hand-closed)” structure of tearooms and the *noh* stage?

2.

When we try to answer this question, we cannot neglect one historical fact that both in the cases of the tearoom and *noh* theater, there once were (and, in the case of tearooms, still are) layouts whose structures were just the reverse, or the mirror images, of the ones we usually have today. In Figure 1, beside the five usual, basic layouts enclosed with a frame which we have already seen, another five layouts which are just mirror images of them are shown. The former layouts, and the performances in these tearooms, are considered to be “proper” and called as such. Meanwhile, the reverse of them and the performances in such tearooms are called “the reversed”. And in the “reversed” performances, not only the placement of the participants and the utensils in the room but also the movement of the participants are just like mirror images of the “proper” ones.

In order to compare “the proper” with “the reversed”, a special performance called “the mirror image performance” is instructive. This is one of the rare, special performances, and its aim is to entertain the guests with synchronized movement of two hosts who makes tea face to face. In this performance we can see both the “proper” and the “reversed” performances at the same time, though usually we cannot see them in such a form.

The “proper” performer has his guests on his right side, and the “reversed” host has his guests on his left side meanwhile. In this performance they do not use the sunken hearth, but share a portable hearth which is placed between them. The performances of the two hosts are almost completely reversed each other like mirror-images, and so are the placement of tea utensils they use.

Interestingly enough, once in the earlier stage of establishment of tea ceremony in the 16th century, the “reversed” performance we call today was considered to be “proper”. Sen(-no) Rikyu, a great tea master and the finisher of the tea ceremony in this century who is now often called “the Tea Saint”, had, for example, the reversed (as we call today) tearoom at his own house; the other people were divided into two groups, some preferring the reversed, as Rikyu, and the others preferring the proper.

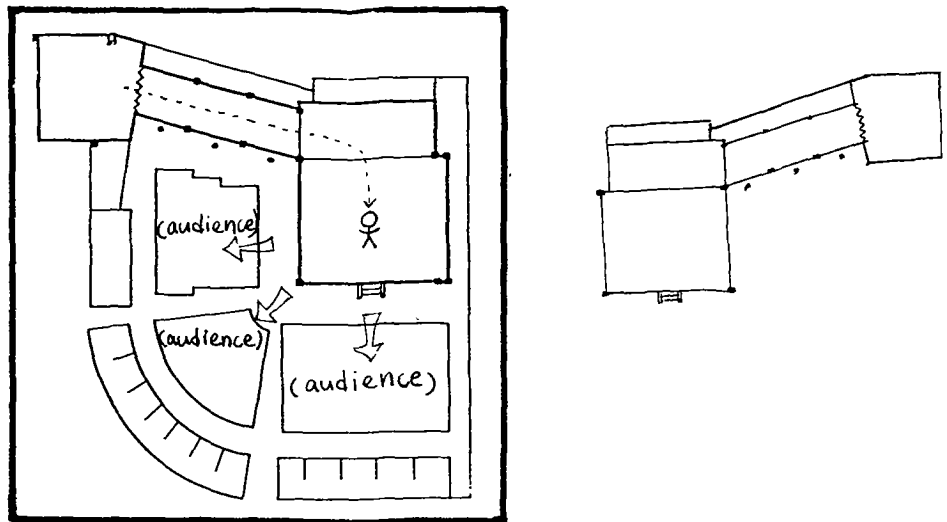


Figure 3: Layouts of Noh Stages

However, by the early 17th century, the one which was called “the reversed” had overwhelmed “the proper”, and the former had come to be considered as “proper” as it is today.⁷

In the case of *noh* stage, too, there once was the “reversed” layout. The “reversed” stage had the cloister on the left side of the main stage (see the figure beside the framed one in Figure 3), and the two mirror-imaged layouts coexisted for some time.⁸

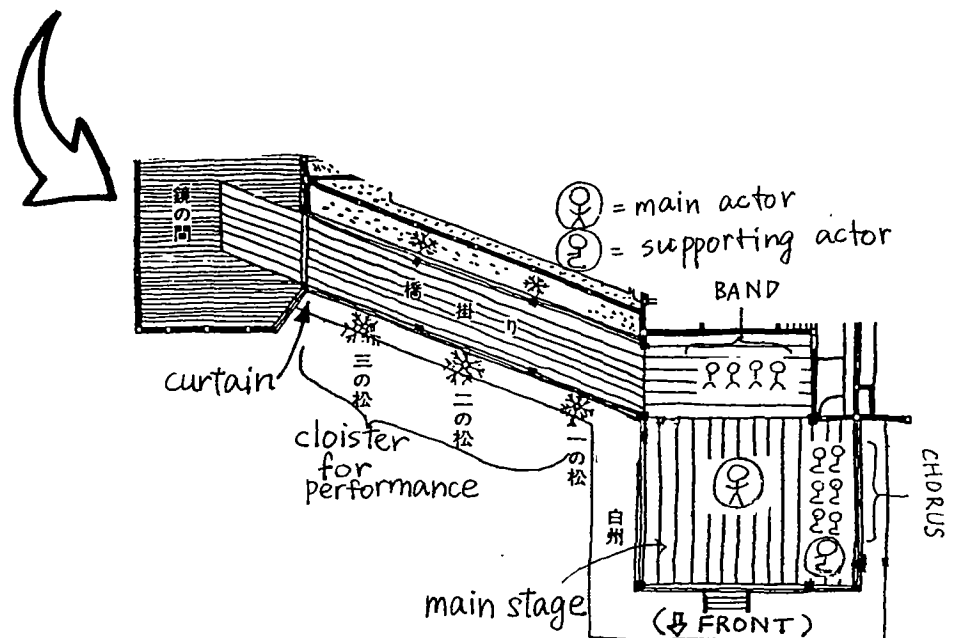


Figure 4: Placement of Participants on a *Noh* Stage

⁷ The description above, about the history of tearooms, is based on *Rikyu dai-jiten* [Great Encyclopedia of Rikyu], Kyoto: Tankosha, 1989, p. 350, see also on p. 289 of *Kadokawa sado dai-jiten*, Vol. 1.

⁸ Cf. Konparu (1980), pp. 120-122. According to Konparu, there even were the *noh* stages with their cloister backward, which were temporarily set up on the occasion of large-scale performances.

Nowadays we do not usually see “reversed” *noh* stages; and the “reversed” tearooms are rare, though they have not completely disappeared and the “reversed” performance still has its own value as a rare performance. The possible reason of this “natural selection” of the “proper” layouts may be not very complicated one; that most people in history have been right-handed, and what we call “the proper” tearooms and *noh* stage are favorable to right-handed performers both aesthetically and practically.

The “proper”, right-hand-open layouts allow the main performers to show the right side of their bodies, which is the side of their dominant hand, to their audience. This is effective for the beauty of the performance, because the dominant hand is likely to hold implements, i.e. beautiful utensils of the tea ceremony or stage properties of *noh*. In the case of the tea ceremony, the “proper” layouts are practical as well, because if the right hand of the host is close to the guests, it is easier for him to serve tea, or to offer utensils to the guests so that they can take a closer view of them.

In the case of the “reversed” performance, the host uses his left hand to offer the tea cup to the guests, simply because this is the hand which is closer to them; but this is likely to be an awkward movement because it is not his dominant hand. But if he uses his dominant hand, i.e. the right hand (and actually he does so when he offers some of the main utensils to the guests for their closer view of them), this movement is also likely to be awkward because it is the further hand from the guests. In any case, whether he uses the right hand or the left hand, the “reversed” performance of the host will be more awkward than the “proper” one.⁹

3.

As we have seen so far, two of the typical Japanese performing arts have developed and preserved their right-hand-principled performing space for more than 400 years. And as already discussed, such structure of performing space is ultimately based upon Japanese special preference for dynamic symmetry.

⁹ The reason why most Japanese people have been right-handed is another question, and I do not go into this subject in the present discussion to avoid lengthiness. The prevailing tendency to prefer right-handedness among almost all the cultures has been pointed out and studied, e.g., in the works as below: Hertz, Robert. “The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand. a Study in Religious Polarity” in *Death and the Right Hand* Trans. by Rodney and Claudia Needham The Free Press, 1960; Wile, Ira S. *Handedness Right and Left*. Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Company, 1934; Needham, Rodney ed. *Right and Left Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification*. The University of Chicago Press, 1973. These enterprises to explain seemingly “natural” superiority of the right hand from the viewpoint of “cultural” enforcement are interesting and significant themselves, and one may be tempted to explain the survival of the right-handed performance of the tea ceremony from the viewpoint of prevailing “right-is-good-and-left-is-bad” belief. But I do not adopt this strategy directly to analyze Japanese culture, especially tea ceremony, for it is strongly influenced by Chinese *yin-yang*, which does not necessarily give a negative role to the left, considering right and left are just complementary, or alternative (cf Granet in Needham ed. (1973)). Therefore, at least at the moment, I attribute Japanese right-handedness (and the dominance of the right-handed performances in tea ceremony and *noh* as its results) simply to physiological or anatomical reasons.

Lastly, at the conclusion of this discussion, I would like to point out the connection between right-hand-principled structures of performing space and the “clockwise” movements of the performers. It can be observed that the structures of the performing space of tea ceremony and *noh*, which are favorable to right-handed performers, causes, as a result, clockwise dynamism in the performers’ movement as a whole.

Interestingly enough, the English word “right-handed” means not only “using the right hand as a dominant hand”, but also “clockwise”. Today, when we enjoy the performances in the tearoom or the *noh* theater, we will perceive clockwise dynamism in the movements of the performers.

In the tea room, for example, we see that the host enters the tearoom, sits down and makes tea, offers the cup to the guests who are sitting on his right side; then the guests pass the cup from the main guest to the last guest, i.e. from right to left, as they drink tea from it; and then the guests give it back to the host. You will see all these movements draw a clockwise circle as a whole.

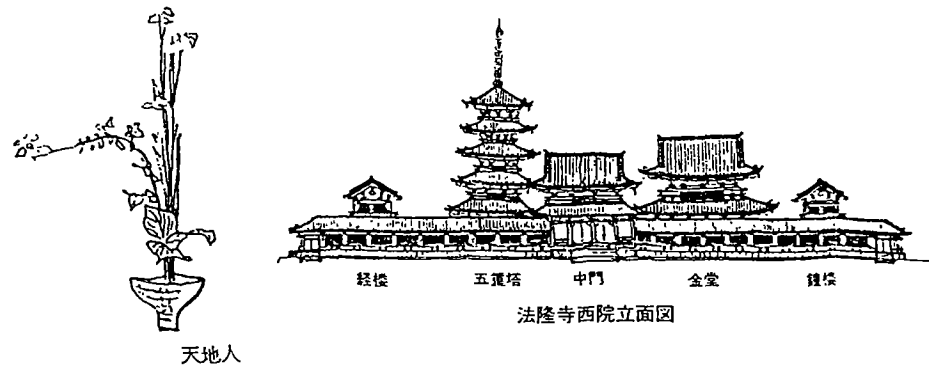


Figure 5: Dynamic Symmetry in Japanese Art

Or in the performance of *noh*, every time an actor appears at the edge of the cloister, comes up to the main stage, turns to the right at the corner of it and steps forward to face the audience seated in front, the audience will perceive a clockwise movement of energy which comes from the stage toward the open space where they are seated. Or they might even feel this energy keeping on drawing a clockwise circle all over the theater.

Thus, in each case of the tea ceremony and *noh*, both the performing space and the performers, or the performers and the audience, or the movement and the placement of the participants and the things, are involved in an overwhelming, "right-handed" dynamism in a double meaning .