*Epiphany and Celebration in Asian Life and Aesthetics**

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Upon reaching the top level of Borobudur in Java, Indonesia, on a cloudless day and only the great central stupa stands before you pointing to a sky that is pure light, you come to some analogical understanding of what "enlightenment" might be. You remember the deep darker alleys you have passed through with an infinite number of reliefs—quite distinct and more sensuous relief which tell the story of Buddhist spiritual ascent to enlightenment—and now this great illumination where physical sensation does not have much to do and there is only this mystic blending of light that is both of the eyes and of the mind. This great religious masterpiece in stone is at once an exquisite theological and an integrated technological statement.

Borobudur is one the greatest cultural and artistic paradoxes of all time—an architectural and engineering masterpiece in stone that expresses the most intangible and spiritual notion of human sublimation, and an artistic conception that has utilized the sovereign law of universal gravitation to keep aloft as if effortlessly the great mass and weight of solid stones. This paradox is both a reality and method in Asian thought and way of doing things. It is a coming together in a most felicitous manner of the visible and the invisible which constitutes traditional reality frame of peoples of Southeast Asia and their neighbors.

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And Asian art seems to be this, at least in a way of seeing: a manifestation of the divine through the sensuous and lush imaginative expression of Asian consciousness that mirrors the riches of tropical life. So it may be said that Southeast Asian Arts are both epiphany and celebration—the body both as maker and medium. For the human body is a maker insofar as it is by the hands of sculptors, architects, engineers, painters, weavers, embroiderers, dyers, puppeteers and carpenters that arts are crafted; and medium in the case of dancers, actors, singers, acrobats, martial artists and shamanic mediums.

To fully appreciate Asian arts, it is not enough to open the senses to the stimuli of color, shape, movement and sound. It is important to understand the beliefs and social world of the Asian artist, especially the traditional beliefs and ideas that have been in place before the West's influence became prevalent.

The World is Visible and Invisible

The great store of mythologies and epical narratives of the Southeast Asian region speak of innumerable great human heroes (visible) and deities (invisible) of very varied characters and functions, and the shamans and gurus who stand as mediators and interpreters between the two worlds. In Hindu and Buddhist lore, the deities and humans pass almost freely in and out of these worlds mainly through incarnations and reincarnations. The stories and traditions concerning their now visible now invisible existence fill oriental scriptures as well as temples with representations of the revered events; and religious customs, traditions and festivals originate from the commemoration of these events and sacred personages. The festivals are the venue and occasion of the great and colorful performing arts of music and dances and glittering parades and pilgrimages in and to sacred places during designated sacred times. The cyclical renewal of the dialogue of the visible and invisible worlds take place in these festivals.

In Thailand and many other parts of the Asian region, there is the ever-present spirit house often crafted in great beauty and elegance and placed near homes or beside huge modern buildings as both homage to and reminder that the visible world stands alongside a powerful and revered invisible world.

To maintain benevolent relations between humans and the invisible world, spirit houses are built to welcome and honor the invisibles as do the *montagnards* of Vietnam, the Thai and most other places in Asia. Even the presence of grottoes and shrines for Christian saints in the Philippines and other places in Asia where there are Catholics are modern forms of spirit houses which serve the same primeval human urge.

The shamanistic traditions of Southeast Asia which transcend all ethnic and national boundaries are rooted in the belief that the visible the invisible, though never really separated, are different worlds anyway, and they need to communicate through special people ordained by their cultures and communities as mediators or go-betweens. They serve as meeting grounds for the two worlds, and through them, messages and petitions mutually reach the two worlds of the visibles and the invisibles.

In Christian Southeast Asia, the great churches are monuments to the belief in an invisible world of God and his angels and his saints—all of whom, though citizens of the invisible world, are the inspiration for the great plethora of sculptures and decorative arts. Their chants, songs and festivals are homages to the invisible world which for its part is always expected to bless the visible world with material abundance and human successes.

In non-figurative art expressions as in Islam, the presence of the invisible world is implied in the avoidance of representation of humans and natural objects deemed forbidden by religious teaching. Even in this is demonstrated not only the belief in the invisible world but also its power to influence arts and other cultural and social expressions such as in food and dress.

The World is Enchanted

In a television talk show, a Chinese lady was asked by a western-minded host to explain how *feng shui* works; and the Chinese lady retorted: “We do not ask for explanations; we only believe it works.” This vignette is typical of most southeast Asian traditional attitude towards the energies and phenomena of the world. Not only because the cultures and civilizations of Asia are ancient and dating to ages before the formalization of rationalizing cultures, but also because the Asian knows that there is no close-ended

frame within which to view the world. The immensity and ineffability of the world makes it not an appropriate topic for closed and framed thinking. Only a mind open to all the possibilities of the world can hope to cope with what the world has to say for itself, or say to the open mind and heart. This is why the attitude of the Asian towards the world is wonderment. To know the world is not to grasp it and contain it in rational definitions and categories. It is to open oneself to its mysterious wonders, reverence its powers, celebrate its variety, and taste its magical delights. Do not ask why they happen. Savor their magic. That is why the world is seen as enchanted. Call it magic, call it cult, call it celebration—that is how the traditional Asian relates to the mysterious world of visibles and invisibles. Explanation and explication is morose and somber; but invocation and becoming possessed by the charm of the world—the charm of its potions, the hypnotic power of its chants and sinewy dances by glittering dancers, the infinite variety of the flavors of its cuisine, the serpentine fluidity of its movements both human and natural, its dark bewitching forests and caverns hallowed by the ages and religion—this is enchantment. It overpowers without defeating, it promises mystery and wonder. Southeast Asia's classical life does not draw a clear line between dream and wakefulness. Its pristine power is enchanting. Even in politics, charm is nearly all—because charm is the mark of those touched by the divine, the invisible magical and enchanting world of playful, if sometimes intriguing, scheming invisibles.

It is this inclination of Asiatics toward the intuitive and non-rational, therefore unpredictable and impossible to deal with prescriptively, that annoys Western rationalism. And this is especially so regarding matters of society, politics and economics. For the rationalist cultures are obsessed with planning and strategies of control. They think of enchantment as a surrender to the uncontrollable. And yet it is the spirit of Asia. When faced with conflict Asia smiles! It is an enchanting way of exorcising the grim spirit of an evil mood.

This, too, is why the people of Asia often accompany their farm work with music and song, and complete a tiresome day in the rice paddies with more music and dance, with laughter and merrymaking and with food that is often with overwhelming taste and flavor of spices, and colored and textured to enchant all the senses! If the West's inclination is linear, the Orient's is a sunburst.

The Visible and the Invisible Worlds are Interrelated

The longest recorded ethno epic in the Philippines, the *Darangen* of the M'ranao, says that the first ruler and ancestor of the M'ranao was *Ndaw Gibon,* descendant of the sun god. The divine origin of peoples illustrated in this myth is repeated in many narratives of the Southeast Asian region. And when ancestors die, they pass into the invisible world where they are believed to continue being interested in the affairs and affections of the visible world they left behind. So both affection and devotion have to be continually expressed and renewed in a plethora of rituals and celebrations.

The celebrations addressed by the visibles to the invisibles are varied: veneration, thanksgiving, petition, propitiation. These four have each their own proper inspirations and ritual and artistic expression. They also have their own appointed sacred times and places and artifactual symbols or icons. The invisible world is powerful.

The cultures in the southeast Asian region (as is also in many parts of the world), the powers that inhabit the invisible world are feared. They have power over life and death, health and fortunes. They have rules and commandments, often expressed in the form of taboos. And when offended, propitiation is required. The invisibles are sometimes presented as creative forces. They hold sway over nature, and often not subject to nature's laws as man knows them. The invisibles are immortal, and require veneration and worship to gain their favors. When humans die, they join the invisible world as *hantu* (as in the Malay world), *anitos* (in the Philippines).

The Visible World must Acknowledge and Relate to the Invisibles

The invisible world is a living world, and it requires intermediaries such as shamans and medicine men and women who are believed to have access and some power over the invisibles. They serve as both oracles of the invisibles and as intercessors of humans. And to please the invisibles rituals and festivals are celebrated with great pomp, ceremony and show of wealth in food, attire and public decorative display. As Ben Wallace says (*Village Life in Insular Southeast Asia,* Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1971),

"Ritual and religion among the Andamanese revolve around a belief that both benevolent and malevolent spirits inhabit the universe. Much of a man's life is then devoted to establishing a compatible relationship with the supernatural world. Disharmony in the universe can lead only to sickness and death." (p. 26) And to establish this compatibility of the visible with the invisible world, festification is undertaken with plenty of ritual. Ritual expression is primarily exhibited in public dancing that accompanies marriage, death, and sickness. (p. 26) In these ceremonies, many myths are recounted, as Wallace has noted especially with the Ifugaos of Luzon in the Philippines. These mythic accounts retell the favors of the gods.

Although the nomenclature of the invisibles is different, the Chinese in Southeast Asia exhibit similar cultural and artistic practices which they have carried over from the mainland indicating the belief in the invisible powers is pan Asian.

There are Secular and
Sacred Spaces and Times

For the people of Southeast Asia, although the whole cosmos is enchanted by the pervasive presence of the invisible forces which are distinct from mere natural forces, there are places and times which are believed to manifest to a greater degree the operative presence of the sacred. This is why there are shrines and temples and sacred places of worship and pilgrimages in the region, and at specified seasons and times.

Sacred places are generally constituted in at least two ways: *hierophany* and *consecration.*

Sacred hierophanic places are believed to be sites of the manifestation of divine beings, or places where sacred events are believed to have taken place such as sites of divine apparition or places where humans received signal favors such as cures or special enlightenment. Such sacred sites are usually also pilgrimage destinations for the faithful, and in the course of time shrines and temples get built—in some cases monasteries are built in them for permanent devotion and maintenance of the holy places—thus generating elaborate rituals and customary traditions. These sacred places today are venues of colorful festive rituals and

ceremonies replete with every kind of extraordinary sartorial elegance and arts, religious ritual ornaments and paraphernalia in the form of superb significative architecture, paintings and sculptures. In these sacred places, monks and nuns develop excellent religious literature and works of scholarship, and create a plethora of liturgical music. This is why it can be said that religion in Asia is a great mother, nurse, and preserver of the arts. This is true of major religions in Asia such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and even Islam despite its explicit aversion and prohibitions of representational religious imaging.

Places made sacred by consecration are not associated with manifestations of historically established theophanies. They are made sacred by a deliberate human consecration though an act of ritual setting apart and the performance of dedicatory rites. The sacred character of such places is man made. This is the case of shrines, temples and churches which, upon completion, are solemnly blessed and dedicated to the honor and remembrance of a sacred being or personage. This is also the case of burial sites of religious heroes or saints. Essential to these sacred consecrated sites is the presence of significant markers or monuments; and in many instances the existence of a shrine, temple or church which indicates to the devotees the place where visits, pilgrimages and prayers are centered. In this case, as in the hierophanic sites, the devotion of the faithful eventually builds superb artistic expressions in the form of great architecture, sculpture and paintings whose content and style are determined by the religious beliefs and sentiments of the faithful who sustain them.

Sacred space is usually accompanied by sacred time which designates the times and seasons for the holding of special festive rites of worship or commemoration. It is these times and seasons which indicate to the devotees when to go on pilgrimage. It is also at such times that special favors are believed to be obtained from or granted by the sacred or divine beings honored in the sacred places. It is usual that on the occasion of such pilgrimages, there would be special dress codes and prescribed devotional physical activities and gestures—sometimes in the form of dances or liturgical body language.

In the practical order of things, the calendar of sacred time corresponds to the time line schedules of feasts and festivals all over the Asian region. In certain traditional societies, sacred time may also be determined by the agricultural calendar which determines the seasons of planting and harvesting. On such occasions, certain rituals officiated by community shamans, sometimes accompanied by festive chants, dances, and display of religious symbols such as banners and yellow flags (as they used to do in Lanao for the *Tonongs,* the spirit cousins of the M'ranao of pre-Islamic times). During the planting rituals, prayers for the healthy growth of plants is raised to the spirits; and in the harvest rites, thanksgiving for the abundance of crops. In some instances, there are rites of appeasement of angry spirits for real or imagined transgressions of the people.

This section cannot be closed without adverting to "secular space and time." These are sometimes also called "profane." But since the word profane has the added meaning of the "unholy," the term secular is used here. It refers to places and times or seasons which are not specifically dedicated to sacred activities. It does not suggest being "unholy" or "anti holy." They are the ordinary space and time which humans can devote to their daily occupations and concerns without fear of offending the gods or transgressing sacred rules and norms of attitude and behavior. Thus, for Muslims, the month of Ramadan is sacred time; but days outside such specific time can be dedicated to human occupations and concerns.

Sacred Time is Cyclical

Many Asian peoples think of time not as linear but cyclical. It generally takes the form of the yearly cycle, although the notion of year varies because of the coexistence of the Lunar and Gregorian calendars today in the countries of Southeast Asia. However, regardless of which calendar is followed, the schedule of the festive rites and activities of Asian peoples is cyclical. They describe a pattern of never-ending recurrence which, to some extent, reflect the religious notions of certain southeast Asians regarding reincarnation and metempsychosis or the cycle of birth and rebirth in the beliefs of such religions as Buddhism.

The cyclicity of the events fixes in the calendar year the schedule of the festifications such that in most traditional societies, the calendar is already fixed in the minds of the people; but in the case of cultures that adhere to the lunar calendar, there is need for explicit guidance from knowledgeable leaders. Thus, Muslims have to watch for the new moon for the days of Ramadan to start. Those who keep the Chinese festivals, the lunar calendar also holds sway; and for iconographic symbolization of the years, the Chinese have the added feature of identifying the animal (e.g. Ram, Ox, Tiger, etc.) symbol of each year and therefore to be commemorated in each new year.

Sacred Space is Both Geographical and Iconic

Because much of Southeast Asian religious art consists of sculptures representing sacred or divine personages, sacred space does not get limited to geographic locations but also includes sacred images and icons which when relocated retain their sacral character and in fact occasion the consecration of its new setting. Thus, a famed Buddha image when relocated for whatever reason makes sacred its new site and becomes a new occasion for religious rites and pilgrimages.

In some cases, the icon and the sacred space are one and the same. This is the case of certain sites in the Asian region, including India, where great stone outcrops have been carved as tableaux of sacred events and deities which, in their colossal sizes are both sites and monuments all in one.

Communication Between the Visible and the Invisibles

The otherness of the invisibles is to be properly acknowledged in the form of the special form of ritual communication. Gestures are stylized ritualizations. Words are uttered in poetic or musical form. It is usual that special significative garb or vestments are worn by the officiating shaman, and not infrequently even by the ordinary participants or suppliants. Pilgrims and suppliants often make it a point to come in prescribed costumes. And this is true for both traditional religionists of Asia as well as the faithful of

later immigration such as Islam and Christianity. Gifts and offering are also to be given special distinction in the form of prescribed colors and shapes. Accompanying the colors which signify religious themes are other sensuous effects which accompany sacred offerings such as the perfume of burning incense and the feast of lights in the form of lighted candles, lanterns and other lamps.

Celebration is the Proper Way to Reverence
Sacred Space and Sacred Time

In many parts of Asia, personal acts of reverence to deities and other sacred objects and places is to orient oneself, especially when walking in sacred precincts, in such a way that one's right side faces toward the sacred object or place. Thus, touring sites such as the Borobudur, on entering the temple, one turns left so that one's right faces toward the center of the temple where the Buddha is enthroned. The same is true in temples of Hinduism—the right faces toward the sacred center.

And when worshipping or touring shrines and temples, should one decide to sit, one's feet should never point or be oriented toward the sacred objects or center of the holy place, as for example in Bangkok's shrine of the Emerald Buddha. It is disrespectful to have one's toes point toward the image of the Buddha whether the act is intentional or not. So when one sits in the temple, the toes must be oriented away from the center.

In Catholic houses of worship, to signify reverence for the holy place, a symbol of spiritual purification upon entering is in the form of dipping one's fingers into the holy water font and making the sign of the cross over one's body with the water. Muslims remove footwear and wash their feet before entering the mosque.

But the greatest expression of reverence to the holy places is celebration.

Celebration to honor the sacred place usually consists of recalling the historical or narrative bases of the sacredness of the place such as its association with events in connection with a deity or sacred personage. Then there are the rituals of prayer, chants, offering of gifts, sounding of bells and other musical instruments, and often with a religious procession, parade or ritual dancing in colorful costumes and other aesthetic effects

such as great masks and elaborate headdresses. On such occasions large crowds of people, many of whom are pilgrims and devotees, participate to make the place and events even more festive. It is at such time of celebration that humans and gods encounter in joyous communication and mutual blessing. Devotees expect personal blessings from the deities on such occasions.

Sacred Time and Space are Created by Special Events and Encounters Between the Visibles and the Invisibles

Human religious sensibility says that places and objects which come in contact with the holy or divine become themselves holy or in some way divine. This is why universally, places of apparition are regarded sacred. Objects which belonged to or touched great heroes or holy persons become relics venerated for their physical association with the holy or the great. In Buddhism, for example, a piece of the holy tooth, or footprints of the holy feet are regarded with utmost reverence. And among Christians, relics of the Cross on which Christ was crucified are revered. Among Muslims, grave sites of famous imams and Muslim saints are held with reverence—sometimes to the point of conflicting claims by communities of devotees for possession of the real grave as in Sulu and Tawi Tawi regarding the grave of a pioneer Muslim missionary.

Life Has Its Origins in the Invisible and is to be Received with Gratitude. Its Growth is Marked by Sacred Time and Ritual

Life is regarded by Asian peoples as the greatest of the gifts from the gods, and it is received with the greatest gratitude. And gratitude is understood as a heightened joy in view of favors received. That joy of receiving, says the oriental mind, must be manifested openly and expressively in color and sound and vigorous movements and gestures. It may even require exhibitions of great strength as if to celebrate life by showing what life can do—please and thank the invisible authors of life. In doing so, as in Thailand, the sacred world receives and witnesses the celebration through the eyes of the king. Think of the royal boats and rhythmic

movements of oarsmen rowing down the royal river in celebration of life and royalty.

This is why birthdays are celebrated—thanksgiving for life. New life promises an auspicious future because it is children who will grow up and venerate the older generation when they finally pass into the invisible world. And this is especially true of peoples who share the Chinese belief and custom of veneration of the ancestors. In this case, male offspring are especially valued for both perpetuating the family's name and for officiating at the rites of veneration of deceased ancestors.

The celebration and thanksgiving for life includes festive food, colorful attire, merrymaking in music and dance, and sometimes with the performance of petitionary ritual prayers for the future good fortune of the celebrant. Birthday celebrations, one could say, are expressions of hope for and in the good disposition of the invisibles toward human life. And on such occasions, as in all important occasions for Asians, artistic expressions are expected to strengthen and sweeten the relationships of deities and humans.

Celebration Requires
Heightened Consciousness

The workaday world and existence is humdrum and routinary, and to Asians this is the human world–often dreary and in many instances boring. But the celebration of life and its connections with the sacral world demands ritual and heightened consciousness which in turn requires heightened and special expression in vibrant sound, color, movement, and abundance of food and drink and other goods of nature and life. It is the analogue of gifts wrapped not in ordinary wrappers but in elegant and colorful packaging so that the outward elegance proportionally signifies the value of the within. There must be a feast for the senses to signify the feast of the spirit.

To produce the heightened consciousness—some would call it "altered consciousness"—some officiating shaman imbide alcoholic beverage, or some mild ethno narcotic. This is believed to facilitate the passage of consciousness from the ordinary to the heightened.

In other instances, there is no narcotic aid to trance, but ritual frenzied dancing which gradually produces a near-hypnotic trance under which condition the Shaman is believed to become open to the free play of the spirits in the invisible world, thereby making the shaman an oracle through whom spirits speak or communicate to humans. In this trance state, shamans become not only mediums to the spirit world but are also prophets and soothsayers of their communities.

If the shaman is tranced during a sacrificial offering to the spirits, it is through her/him that humans learn whether the offerings of food, drinks and other goods are acceptable or not. If acceptable, the gifts are carried into the places of offering to the deities—such as rivers or sacred groves. But if unacceptable, the shaman instructs the humans regarding what else to add or how to make the offerings pleasing to the gods.

In certain instances, the spirits make their presence in the medium manifest by speaking in various voices which signify that the spirits speaking are more than one. The medium may be a woman, but voices of male spirits are heard—gruff and angry if displeased, and gentle and gracious if pleased. And when the medium or shaman comes out of this trance, she/he may have no recollection of what happened or what had been said.

The heightened consciousness may express itself in riddle-like language or poetic language that requires interpretation for the ordinary persons participating. It is in the spirit of heightened consciousness, or the intent to take part in the altering of consciousness that even ordinary folk may indulge in ethno narcotic stupor more or less mildly, more or less consciously. In many celebratory occasions in some parts of the Asian region, total abstinence from alcoholic beverages during festifications is regarded as abnormal. Singing and chanting one's utterances are also forms of heightened expression of consciousness. Poetic jousts and ritual chanting of verbal interchanges are performed. The artistic form is value-added to indicate that what is being said is extra-ordinary and to be taken seriously, unless the tone of the performance clearly indicates a playful tone in which case the stylized artistic expression is offered for its entertainment value.

The Way to Express Heightened Sense of Life Is Through Art

The religious and celebratory festifications in the Asian region are both venue and mother of Asian arts. Festification is venue because there is probably no artistic expression that cannot fit into one or all of the festivals and *fiestas* of Asian nations. But it is mother of the arts because many of the artistic expressions are inherent in the rituals and one may say some rituals are inherent in the arts themselves. It is impossible to imagine monastic chants are independent of their music, for it is in their hypnotic quality that they serve moods of meditation. It is also impossible to imagine a shaman working herself into a dancing trance without dancing.

But there are other reasons why ritual and celebration nurture the arts. It is festifications that attract large congregations of devotees; and these become the magnet for the exhibit of artworks and artistic performance whether it be a dance, a song, a processional float, a ceremonial arch, or a piece of giant sculpture or painting, or a puppet show or theatrical spectacle which not only honors the occasion but exhibits for public admiration the artistic dexterity of local artists. It is deep in the nature of artists to exhibit their works, and it cannot be the least of considerations when artists try to outdo one another in the excellence, and even colossality, of their works as one can plainly see in the great giant sculptures of Asia. It is at this point they pass from mere parochial expressions of faith to achievements of humankind—as the UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Treasures attest to.

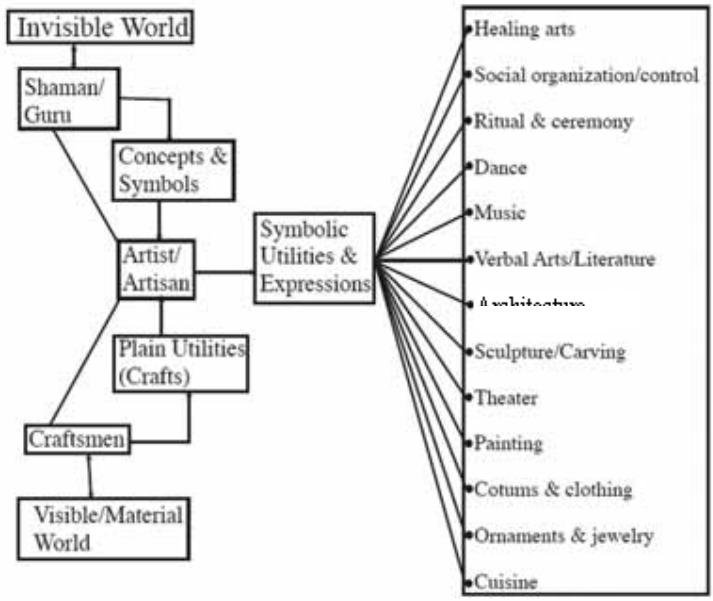
It is to be noted that in the Asian region where religious consciousness cannot be separated from daily life, art and life cannot be separated either without doing violence to the integrity of culture. So, while in other cultures, it may be easy to separate the aesthetic concerns of artists, in the Asian region, there is a profound integration between the visible and the invisible, the concepts and ideas of the invisible world of thought and the sacred, and the technological and empirical world of nature and engineers. Thus, the Asian artist is a synthesis of shamanic knowledge and

engineering technology. This is how to understand the integral aesthetics of great Asian temples and shrines—engineered in megalithic boulders and shaped into the forms of ideal thought and religious doctrine. One can begin by meditating on the great stone temples of the Borobudur in Central Java. The sculptural genius that carved those great stones was wedded to an engineering know-how that erected massive stones without mortar to keep them together but the great law of gravity that pulls down all things which, in this case, has been worked such that it is the same natural law that keeps those great sculpted stones aloft and in place as if defying the laws of gravity itself. And this is repeated in so many other structural wonders of the Asian region. In a way, too, it is the magic of the rice terraces of Ifugao in the Philippines which do what is naturally impossible—keep water on steep mountain slopes.

In the following chart (see next page) we illustrate this integration of shamanic ideas with engineering genius which combine in the Asian artists to produce the artistic expressions and artworks.

The arts of Asia include the whole gamut from cuisine to healing arts. They are the products of the artists and artisans of the region who derive their inspiration and skill of execution from two foundational sources—corresponding to the Asian cosmology of a universe of the visible and the invisible, which are the worlds of shamans and gurus on the one hand, and of the engineers and craftsmen on the other. By his religious and metaphysical heritage from the shamanic world, and by his technological skills with stone and paints and chisel, and other tools, he/she crafts the arts of Asia. The result is what one sees all over the region from the grandeur of megalithic structures to the exotic taste of food made for the gods of ritual who share their bounty with human always and in every feast.

Conceptual Overview of the Genesis
of Oriental Culture and Arts



Death is a Transit from the Visible World; But It Does not Sever Bonds with the Visible

In the Asian mind, death is not an end but a way station, a transit event that leads to entry into another world—an essentially superior world where not everything nor everyone may be perfect, but where there is certainly more power which in many instances shows in personal attributes and attitudes. This other world is believed to hold power over life, death, health, destiny and fortune. It has rules and commandments which humans must keep. It is feared because when offended, it punishes. But such punishments can be made lighter or cancelled when proper propitiation is done. It is creative and holds sway over the moods and behavior of nature.

The inhabitants of the invisible world are generally immortal and not subject to the laws of nature as humankind knows them. The proper attitude towards this other world is veneration and worship. At death one joins this sacred world, and one somehow acquires the characteristics of this

mysterious and powerfully enchanted world. As Christians of Asia say it, at death “life is changed, not taken away.” It is rising to a higher order of being.

The Asian region has innumerable rituals for the departed; and some of the most elaborate ceremonies are for the honor of the dead. The useful and practical activities of daily life are too bare to be proper ways of signifying the respect and veneration of the departed. Nothing less than the dynamism and splendor of the visual and performing arts is worthy of the dead as we have already indicated elsewhere in this essay.

Positivistic scholars claim that the ceremonies for the dead are really ways of politely disposing off of the remains of the dead so that, it is claimed, as soon as members of the bereaved family and community have come to terms with the fact of death, they must dispose off the remains, as it were, in a junk yard. And while this may be the impression of cultural outsiders, this is really not how Asians perceive death and the dead. For even long after burial or even cremation has taken place, the veneration and ritual acts of communion and communication with the dead continue. The most elaborate of these are festifications which take place in burial grounds and cemeteries, or in homes of the living kinsmen and friends. And sometimes these are accompanied by extravagant public displays and processions. Even modern day funeral processions using motorized vehicles to carry the mortal remains of the dead as well as the mourners in motorized caravans are not only reminiscent but continuation of traditions in which elephants and animal-drawn carts were used. Today there are beribboned wreaths of natural and artificial flowers which add splendor to funeral processions. The technology may have changed, but the spirit and tradition has not. The chants of monks are now more limited, but the elegant music from compact discs and digitized music keep tradition alive and well. Hired mourners are still there in diminished numbers, but there is now a much wider range of choices for mournful—sometimes operatic-music.

For dead grandees, it is a must to parade the dead and the funeral procession through main thoroughfares. Governments are obliged to allow suspension of traffic rules for their sake. And police marshalling adds to the tribute to the departed–often as escorts; and not only for deceased officials.

There are numerous documents and artifactual and archeological evidence of the belief that, though somehow changed, life continues in the

invisible world so that the dead who have been accustomed to the services and comforts of servants and slaves in their earthly life bring along with them their servants and slaves who get buried along with their masters. Even wives and concubines are sometimes buried with their dead husbands and masters. And the annual cycles are filled with memorial days.

Probably from Chinese influence, the dead are not merely to be remembered and venerated. They should also be periodically given their share of the good things they have left behind—including the profits from the wealth they left behind with their descendants. Cars, houses and other forms of wealth must be shared with them. Even money has to be transported to them ritually. Thus miniature models of cars and houses, along with token money are burned so that the smoke of the burning "transports" the share of the dead into their invisible world to bring them contentment and peace. And the living, for their part, can expect the blessings from the invisible world—from their ancestors—in the form of growth in the fortunes of their livelihoods and businesses.

The continuing relations between the living and the dead are maintained by continual communication through rites and symbols. Colors speak.

The Bonds with the Dead must be Remembered and Renewed Periodically

At the southern end of the Island of Luzon in the Bicolano region of the Philippines there is a nearly perfect volcanic cone called Mt. Mayon. Mythology says that this lovely mountain was raised mysteriously to mark the exact spot where the two star-crossed lovers *Panganoron* and his beautiful lady love *Magayon* fell dead by the arrow of the jealous suitor *Makusog*. This mountain, in the people's mind, is a burial mound, a monument to immortal love, a shrine to the mysterious workings of the invisible world—or at the very least a projective symbol of a deep conviction that life and love somehow cannot die and must live both in the memory of the living and in the reality of the afterlife.

Mayon is a natural version of such grand monuments to life and sublime love such as the one that built the Taj Mahal of India and the great

imperial burial grounds of the Ming rulers of China, or the vast archeological wonder discovered in Xian in central China. Even megalithic masterpieces such as Borobudur in central Java can be regarded as memorial and shrine of the spirit of the Buddha. Asia is full of these sacred places marked by gigantic natural landmarks, or great human artifacts such as lesser but ubiquitous mounds which mark the hollowed ground in which lie the mortal remains of those whose essential being have passed on to the great invisible realm of deities and the dead.

In Christian cemeteries, there are the crosses and cross-marked mausoleums of greatly varied grandeur and architectural quality. For Muslims, there are those exquisitely carved grave markers of limestone or wood, sometimes of marble or granite, indicating where a departed woman or man lie buried waiting for the raising of the dead back to life by Allah's decree. This is the Asian sensibility: the human person is a sacred being. His mortal remains consecrate the ground where it lies, or the earth with which his ashes have mingled. The remains of the dead make sacred space.

And sacred spaces are to be revered always. In many places, real estate developers and city planners have routinely desecrated burial grounds in their crash materialism. But if temples, shrines and cemeteries still dot the geography of Asia, it is because burial grounds are the earthly link between the visible and the invisible worlds. And it is here in these sacred grounds where sacred time is regularly renewed and celebrations and colorful, artistic ceremonies take place.

There was a time a few decades ago in the Philippines when a grand pragmatic and needed hydroelectric project in the Chico Valley of Northern Philippines had to be given up. Locals were willing to die in defense of the burial grounds in which their ancestors' bones lay in peace.

Although migration and faster and broader geographic mobility has greatly weakened the role of sacred space in the relations of the living with the dead in many societies today, the greater number of peoples in traditional communities have remained in place. This has made it possible to retain and maintain bonds with sacred space such as temples, shrines and burial grounds. It has led even to increased mobility of sacred objects such as portraits, sculptures, and other personal symbols of the dead such as soul tablets. In this manner, new sacred spaces have been reconstituted far

from their places of origin. In many instances, family ancestral altars have taken the place of original burial grounds, and symbols and portraits take the place of the absent mortal remains. This is why the original traditions and sensibilities of Asia have not only remained in place, but also have spread far and wide into continents and countries such as those of North America and Europe. In these places, Asians have imported and often reconstituted their ancient traditional relations with the ancestors and community. And this is bolstered by the Asian practice of living close together creating Asian towns within the old and new towns and cities into which they have relocated.

The phenomenon of Asian aesthetics translating into western technology like the film in the form of Asian martial arts, costumes, customs, and notions of dramatic action indicate how effective the Asianization of the world has advanced in the field of culture and civilization. Many things Asian are distinguished by the paradox of durability and marvelous flexibility and grace. This is why Asian civilizations last for millennia showing marvelous blending of permanence and adaptive flexibility.

In Asia, time is not a mere dimension of action or a fluid venue for life. It is inherently a part of vitality and has something to do with the very fabric—the warp and woof—of life. The phases of the moon have something to do with it. The tides of rivers and oceans enchant it; and the signs in the stars and the animal symbols of units of time, such as years, shape the personalities of people. These preternatural forces make human life tensed up in a dynamic polarity of Fate and Freedom—of the great vision of life's highway which, though the destinations are fixed by Destiny, humans are entirely free to choose the style of the journey. The Year of the Tiger, or the Monkey may mark you, but most of the choices are yours to make; though you must not forget *karma.* And the cycles are both challenges and opportunities to make choices. Thus the cycles of time—of sacred time in Asia.

The great frame of Sacred Time is the Lunar Year. For the West, the changing phases of the lunar face mean inconstancy. For the Asiatic, the changes of the moon are sacred messages indicating the moods of the divine. They indicate propitious times for the rites of propitiation, petition, and thanksgiving.

The lunar new year—widely celebrated by Asians—is the great gateway to a new period of challenges and opportunities. It is greeted with extravagant festification and celebrated with ritual dances, songs, fireworks, legends, superabundant ceremonial and festival food. Food must be colorful and tasty beyond the ordinary. Festal attire and costume must be full of glitter and the colors of the sacred and the regal. Yellow and gold, red and all the imperial hues of purple and blue glittering with bejewelled adornments and glistening with the sheen or hue of silk playing in the wind or shaken by nimble dancers. Asian celebration of the coming and going of time can surfeit the senses of the unaccustomed. But the surfeit is an investment in shamanic trances and devotees' ecstasies not unusual in Asian celebrations of the relations of the Visible World with the Invisible, of the human and the divine.

Where the West values restraint, the Asian has profusion knowing that life is much, much more than the short reach of human hands and the ken of human vision. For the Asian, the celebration of life is a celebration of the infinite.

But in the visible world the limitless is found in the eternal cycles and recurrences of seasons. Thus the annual cycles of celebrations and endless renewals which make time even seem eternal. In places where the signs of the changing seasons are distinct as in the temperate parts of Asia, Spring welcomes the New Year with rice cakes and fireworks to drive away the demons of misfortune. And the Fall is marked with the cakes made from the harvests of Summer. And with a bit of mythology, the mooncake festival is celebrated, and the "forgotten dead" remembered and honored with food and bright lanterns.

Among Muslims, the recurrence of the birth day of the Prophet Muhammad, the annual Hadj to Mecca with its rituals of soul-cleansing, rejection of the devil, and the worship of Allah, and then the long fast of Ramadan and the festification of *Hariraya puasa* after the fast mark the ever returning cycle of time.

For Christians the year is divided into the Advent weeks of waiting for the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas time—then the long Christmas season, especially in Christian Philippines. Then follows in the first half of tropical Summer the cycle of commemoration of Christ's passion and death and Resurrection. Then Pentecost and the Advent again! Each season with its own mood and color, and food preferences. Add to that the countless

numbers of village and town fiestas which happen daily somewhere in the landscapes and seascapes of Asia.

For traditional societies, the year is divided by the seasons of planting and harvesting. They are accompanied by propitiatory and magical rites for procuring bountiful crops, as well as sumptuous festivals to celebrate bountiful harvests and the abundant life that such prosperities promise. All taken, it is a celebration of life—including life after life. For which reason shamans and mediums are often employed to call the departed to be present and partake of the festivals of plenty and to continue their blessings upon their descendants who are still in the visible world.

The Sacred Persons with Powers that Straddle the Two Worlds

A final consideration in the appreciation of things Asian are the shaman, mediums, magicians and charmers of traditional Asian societies; and there are the monks and nuns, the priests, the royal incarnations of deities and lamas, buddhas, the imams and mullahs of organized religions in and of Asia. These need consideration here, not primarily for their religious significance (which is altogether another important topic) but for their primary role in setting the content and norms of Asian creeds, codes and cults. These women and men in Asian societies are the human component of the trinity with sacred space and sacred time. They are the visibles which are embodiments of the invisibles. They are sacred persons, and as such they are keepers of what may be called the Asian Lore—the ground of Asian beliefs, customs, tastes and styles of life. They straddle the two worlds, as bridge between the visible and invisible worlds. They mediate the negotiations with and from both worlds.

Because fortunes and misfortunes are believed affected by the knowledge of these cultural specialists, they wield a very significant power over tastes and world outlook of Asians. Even the colors of textiles in costume and fashion can be the result of shamanly intervention; and so are the colors of interior decoration, and the orientation of rooms and offices, the position of furniture and the locations of doors and exits—the *Feng Shui* expert will tell you. So it can be said that these sacred persons sway our Asian spirits and direct our sensibilities and perceptions of the true, the good and the beautiful from matters of conscience to health, to fashion and art itself.