



# THE BLANK SIGNS IN TRADITIONAL JAPANESE CULTURE ——semiotics of the void

By Lucy Li

*A graduate student of Sichuan University  
Member of the Institute of  
Semiotics & Media Studies*



How do you consider upon the   
concept that fell on the term 

VOID?

Definition:

- a. A large empty space
- b . Completely lacking sth
- c. Nothing , empty

*Abstract from Oxford advanced dictionary*

Question 







Asia Identity of the void♪



Chinese origins of  
the emptiness♪



alex@bauhaus.com.cn  
The-edges.net



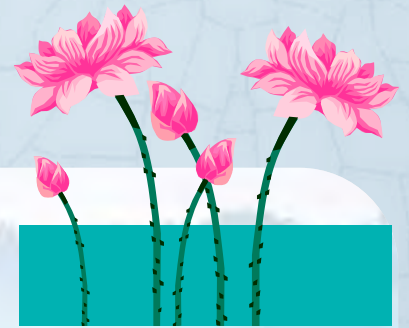
Taoism & The concept of “wu”

無

*A Chinese character means nothing or void*



# Chinese Buddhism & The concept of “kong”



*Poster design of a Chinese character means emptiness*





## Japanese explanations & expanding towards “Zen”



戸上明道  
「円相」



Since Chinese Zen has been transmitted and flourished in Japan, it soon infiltrated into every aspects of life on this land. Finally, it took its unique form of representations into shape within the construction process of cultural unconsciousness.

*A piece of work named “ensou” painted  
by a Japanese Zen master Togami Meyidou*



# Key concepts of Zen

*The window of realization*



悟

satori

無

mu

禪

Zen

空

ku

*The window of mystery*



覺

satori

A pair of windows inside a Zen temple called “genkouan”(源光庵) where located in Kyoto



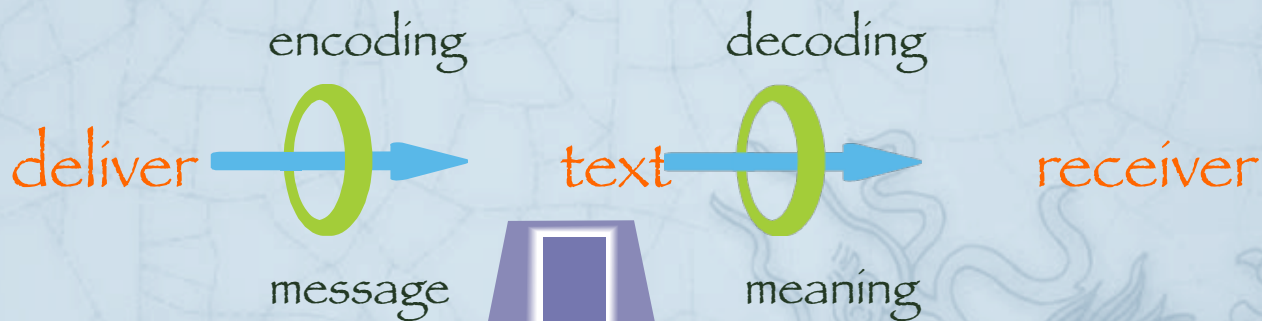
# The Blank Signs



THEORY



The processes of semiosis: 



Signifié (Signifier)

denotation

Signifiant (Signified)

**SIGN**

connotation



# Two kinds of Blank Signs♪



Key notes



## Type A Semiotics's points of view

Different from the operation mode that most of common signs will be employed, "blank signs" act as a sort of specific signs, which used to producing a series of sensible states, such as blankness, silence, absence, or interruption as its represents, and grasp its position by means of concealing those represents that should have appeared on the scenes.

To match the point, the latter one performs better at cutting off a set of successive represents, for the sake to accomplish its signification process.





## Some examples about Type A

水墨

White space (留白)

A sort of specific technique that usually used in the painting art of Chinese ink-and-wash “shanshui” paintings. It’s also one of a typical forms that blank signs tends to appeared as a visual blankness in order to concealing meanings. ♪



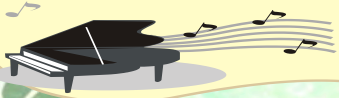
黄公望 (1269~1354) 《富春山居图》

*A famous ink and wash painting painted by huanggongwang, a painter lived in Yuan Dynasty in China.*



# Silence, interruption, and the absence of music float

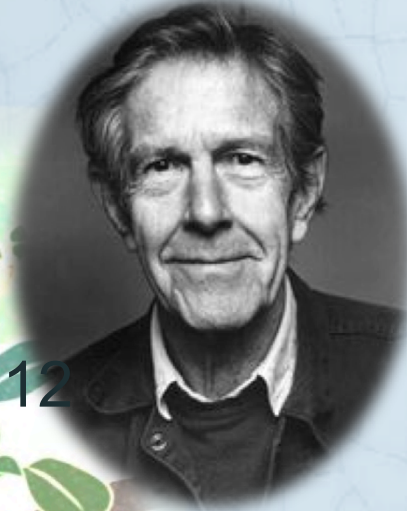
John Cage and his  
legendary 4'33"



John Milton Cage (1912  
~1992)

An American  
composer, music  
theorist, writer, and artist.

A pioneer of  
experimental music,  
electroacoustic music,  
and non-standard use of  
musical instruments. He  
was best known for his  
1952 composition 4'33",



*crotchet rest*



*Le demi-soupir*

However, the content of the  
composition is not just "4 minutes  
and 33 seconds of silence," as is  
sometimes assumed, but rather  
embrace the sounds of the  
environment that heard by the  
audience during performance.

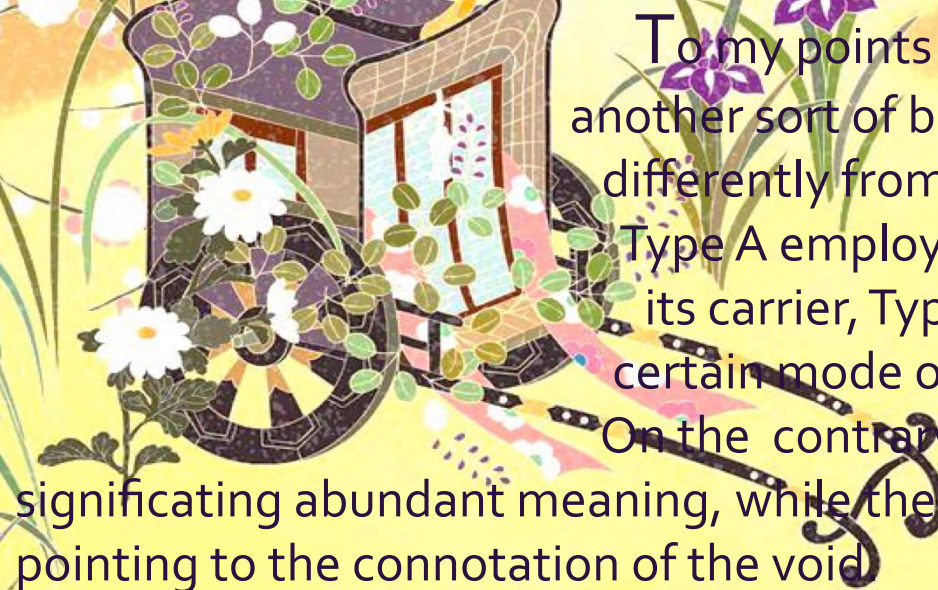




## Type B My personal deduction

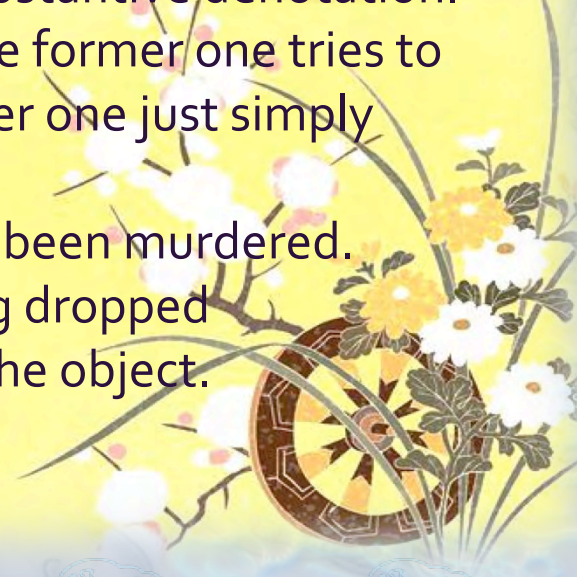


Key notes



To my points of view, there should be another sort of blank signs which operate differently from the presumed one. As Type A employed a “blank” signifier as its carrier, Type B prefers to apply a certain mode of substantive denotation. On the contrary, the former one tries to signifying abundant meaning, while the latter one just simply pointing to the connotation of the void.

Actually, to some extent, the signified has been murdered. At the end of the process of semiosis, meaning dropped to emptiness, while the sign attempts to skip the object. Finally, referring back to itself.

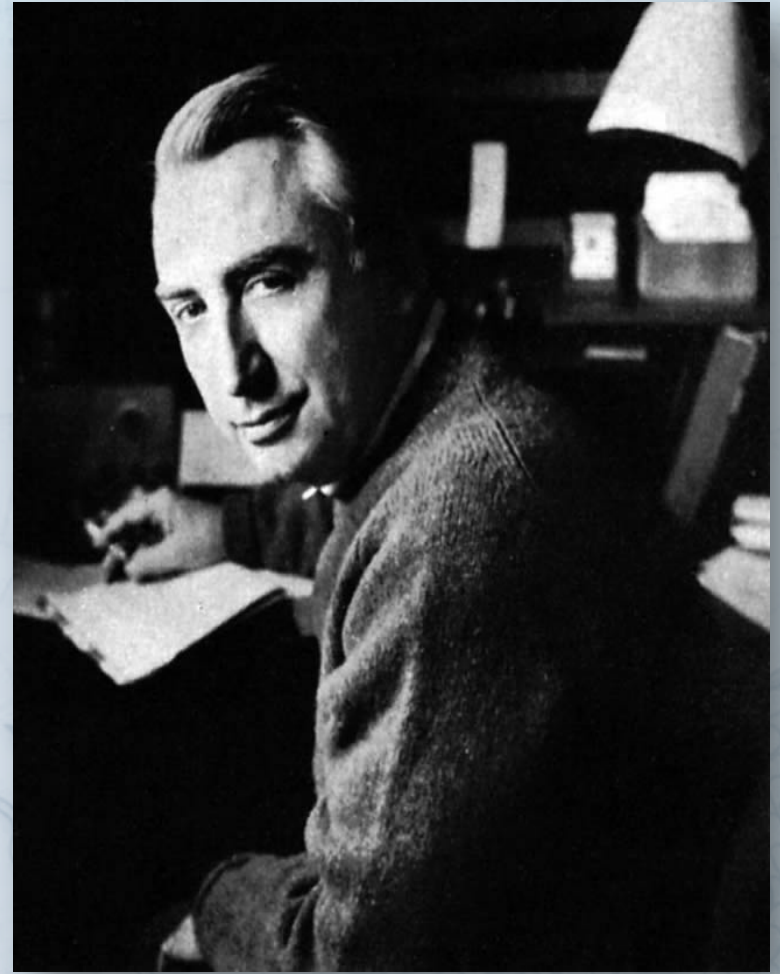




## Roland Barthes and his *Empire of Signs*

Roland Barthes was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. His ideas explored a diverse range of fields, and he also made a lots of contributions to influence the development of schools of theory including structuralism, semiotics, social theory, anthropology and post-structuralism.

The *Empire of Signs* was written after Barthes' visit to Japan in the late 1950s. From 1966 to 1968, he was traveling around Japan as one of the members of French culture ambassador during that time. To Barthes's perspective, Japan is a symbol of empty center and void. In his place, meaning was exempted, decentered, and even lost.



*Roland Barthes*  
(1915-1980)



# The embodiments of Blank Signs in traditional Japanese culture



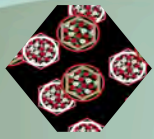
**A.** Rituals,  
etiquettes, celebrations, and  
behavioral manners ♪



Bowing







# The Tea ceremony

*The form is empty, keeps a better still.*

— Roland Barthes

An art of flower arrangement called "ikebana" (生け花)

*A space of silence*



茶禅一味  
一期一会





The folding space performed  
by the fan



Those utensils for daily use  
acts as a blank sign

A folding fan can also be used as a symbol of boundary to alert the  
existence of distance between both sides of the communicators.



From Chinese round fan  
to Japanese folding fan





## The cabinet of meaning wrapped up by Japanese case and package

To some extent, the contents inside a package or case is less more important than the form outside. What actually grasp the key points, is the process of packaging that the carrier of meaning would like to employ.



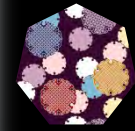

The gift is alone



Japanese style's of package  
in the name of "furoshiki"  
(風呂敷)



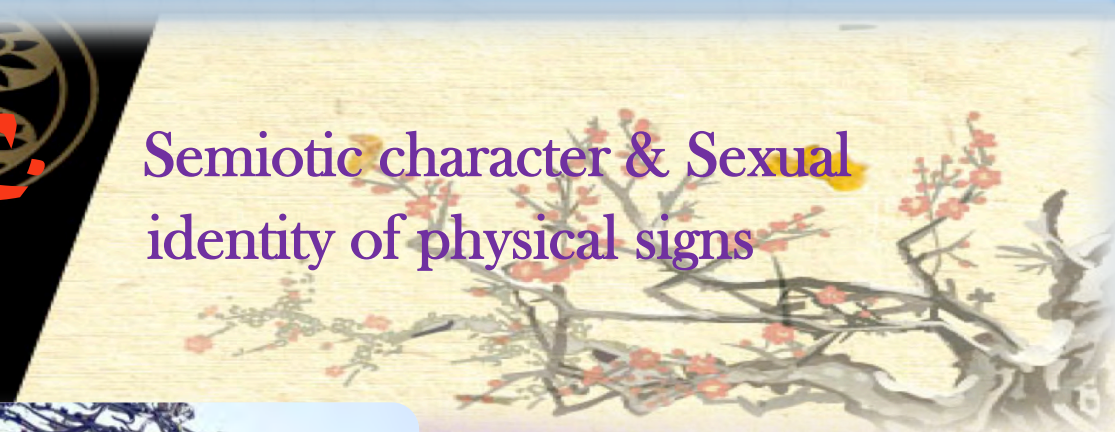




## Semiotic character & Sexual identity of physical signs



*A female character of Peking opera acted by men actors called “huadan”(花)*



No matter in the performance of Peking opera or kabuki, the female role which acted by men actors is nothing but a semiotic character. Since the femininity played on the stage does never comes from a individual woman. Rather than, a product of collective symbol.



*A certain female role which played by men actors only called “onnagata” (女形) in traditional Japanese opera “kabuki”(歌舞伎)*





# Japanese Dolls and the mask applied in the nou drama (能楽)



The mask of noumen(能面) brings no facial expression at all, yet it can generate any emotions that will be required by the plot belong with the drama.







## D. The transformation of meaning space in traditional Japanese architecture

The space inside a traditional Japanese style of room may always floating with usage. Furthermore, it can be re-positioned or arranged by the aid of boundary symbols such as a folding screen(襖) or a set of “tatami” plates. Indeed, the room itself, is a combination of meaning.



*Traditional Japanese style of room named  
“washitsu” (和室)*





“Karesansui”(枯山水) is quite an important skill of gardening art, that has applied in traditional Japanese gardens. It's not only simply elucidated the theory of Zen, but also concentrated a vision of cosmos within such limited given spaces.



Japanese gardens and its empty space that contribute in concealing the meanings





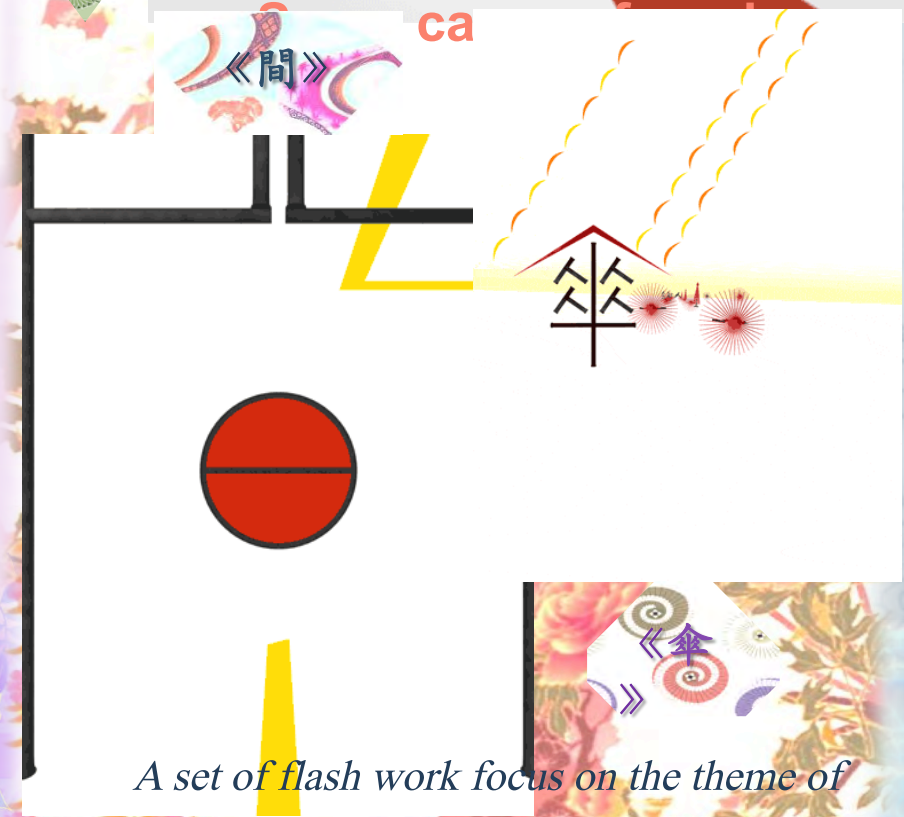
When Zen encountered with modern life

Transparent vase

design

Blank closet

*A transparent building in China, anhui province.*



*A set of flash work focus on the theme of Chinese character, designed by a Japanese artist named Kota iguchi(井口 皓太).*



# Conclusions



⊕ **Nothing can generate of anything?**

⊕ **Blank signs is potential signs?**

⊕ **Zero zone of meanings**





THANK YOU  
FOR LISTENING!