The Culture of Ambiguity: 
*Ma* in Japanese Culture and Design Movement Posters

Hung Ky Nguyen

**Introduction**

The concept of *ma* has a special place in, and has profoundly affected many aspects of, Japanese culture. In his speech titled “The Concept of Ma in Japanese Life and Culture,” Tsujimoto Isao, a former Director-General of The Japan Foundation in New York, stated that *ma* is manifested in the halt of the noh performance,¹ in the empty space of Zen painting, and in the pauses and gaps in everyday conversations. Japanese people enjoy these intervals in the third category; meanwhile, their Western counterparts regard them as an undesirable trait.² Since the early 1960s, and alongside the *Nihonjinron* movement, the concept of *ma* has been passionately developed by Japanese thinkers and leading design practitioners in Japan.³ While a majority of architects expounded on *ma* based on its reference to time and space, two renowned Japanese Design Movement (JDM) poster designers—Nagai Kazumasa (b.1929) and Sugiura Kohei (b.1932)—perceived *ma* as ambiguity.⁴ For Nagai, the design theories of the Bauhaus and the International Typographic Style (also known as the Swiss Style) influenced his creativity in the early stage of his career development, but he was not content with their objectivity, universality, and functionality. In an interview with *Graphis* magazine in 1968, Nagai pointed out the absence of *ma* in functional design:

> Although I admire the absolute beauty of functional designs, I often feel that something is missing in them. I find them too rigid to allow a free play of space and form, to permit the enjoyment of what we call *ma* in Japanese.... This peculiar sense of *ma*, which is not accessible to rationalistic thinking, has come down to us through the ages in various fields of our culture, such as music, painting and architecture.⁵

Since Nagai’s 1968 remark on *ma*, this abstract concept has attracted further research inside and outside Japan. Nonetheless, there has been no public explanation of *ma*, or ambiguity, from the Japanese

---

¹ Noh is also written as *nō* (Kanji: 能, derived from the Sino-Japanese word for “talent” or “skill”). It is a form of classical Japanese musical drama whose principles were comprehensively developed and mastered by the playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) in the 14th century. Noh has its name because its performance requires highly musicians and trained actors who can express complex emotions through masks and stylized gestures.


³ *Nihonjinron* ([日本人論](/en/), discussion on Japanese distinctness) is a genre of academic discourse and also popular media debate that focuses on the issues of Japanese national and cultural identity since World War II. Designer Sugiura Kohei has been invited to talk on national television about his Asian grammar of design. Sugiura Kohei, interview by Nguyen Hung Ky, October 22, 2008, Sugiura Kohei Design Studio, Tokyo.

⁴ Throughout this article, I place Japanese surnames first because this order was officially endorsed by the Japanese Government on September 6, 2019. However, I maintain the Western adopted order of Japanese names in publications before September 6, 2019. I use the term JDM to distinguish the body of work of eminent Japanese designers across the design disciplines in Japan since the 1970s. Those who are included in this movement are not necessarily aware of this movement. In the field of poster design,
Design Issues: Volume 36, Number 4  Autumn 2020

the styles of JDM posters are diverse, but ambiguity is a common characteristic.


Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Geertz’s view of culture and “thick description” is essentially highlighted in this passage: “Believing, with Max Weber, that man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” Ibid., 5.

During the two-hour interviews, I acted as a partner and collaborator in search of a constructed truth, which is only partially revealed in previous publications and thus partially untold. Although my research approach is interpretive, I work with an awareness of semantic barriers that might arise throughout the interview and in the process of data analysis, as noted by Weaver. With this awareness, my intent is to substantially minimize the subjectivity of my findings. For further information on the theory of Weaver’s semantic barriers, see Andreea Dobra and Alexandra–Valeria Popescu, “Barriers in Verbal Communication,” in Scientific Bulletin of “Politehnica” University of Timisoara 7, no. 1–2 (2008), https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c02b/6d59bb04af5ba9a5d2fb11395427fecc72857f.pdf (accessed June 22, 2019).

See https://jisho.org/search/間 (accessed December 21, 2019).

Nagai interview.

poster designers’ point of view. As a result, many Western poster observers and design practitioners still struggle to comprehend the ambiguity in JDM posters, despite several remarkable publications about Japanese posters in their heyday. This article examines the extent to which ma, or ambiguity, is valued in Japanese culture and how Nagai and Sugiura perceived and demonstrated ma in their works. I interviewed these two designers and explored their views for two reasons: because I first heard about ma from Nagai, and because Sugiura’s works are distinctly imbued with a sense of ambiguity and spirituality.

I use Howard Morphy’s ethnographic theory for my research. Morphy argued that a work of art is best understood as a product whose meaning is “encoded in relation to the use of art in social contexts.” Thus, apart from my cultural and iconographic analysis of form, I explore the making of JDM posters from the perspectives of Nagai and Sugiura. In doing so, my purpose is to understand these two designers’ intellectual influences, design philosophy, and process, as well as how they encoded meanings in their works. Using interpretive research, Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” approach, and the materials obtained from my two-hour interviews with Nagai and Sugiura, I decode the cultural significance of ambiguity woven by Japanese people generally and by these two designers specifically. I conclude with a case study of one of Sugiura’s acclaimed works to examine how ma was interpreted and visually expressed.

In the following discussion, I explore how ma is appreciated in Japanese culture; the metaphor, concept development, and philosophical influences of ma; how Nagai and Sugiura consider ma; and how Sugiura incorporated ma in his work.

How Ma is Appreciated in Japanese Culture

The word ma (間) has multiple meanings, spreading over many aspects of Japanese culture. Noteworthy meanings include “pause” (間, ma) in the noh performance; “interval” in the words kōkan [空間, space] and jikan [時間, time]; and “time span” in the word jinkan [人間, human realm]. From the “in-betweeness” inherent in these meanings, ma has stimulated much discussion in Japan. Since World War II, the meaning of ma has been significantly expanded, but its essence appears to have become synonymous with ambiguity. Nagai indicated that Japanese people have been brought up in a way to appreciate ambiguity. The renowned Japanese novelist, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886–1965), maintained that living with light deficiency in the past has affected the way Japanese people value shadow. However, Tanizaki argued that the condition in which things cannot be seen clearly should be considered a benefit in aesthetic judgment:
In his book titled *In Praise of Shadows*, Tanizaki explained: “A light room would no doubt have been more convenient for us, too, than a dark room. The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends.” Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (London: Vintage, 2001), 29.

In Japanese garden design, the rock garden at Ryōanji [Temple of the Peaceful Dragon] in Kyoto (see Figure 1) is a fine example of how *ma* might have been used in its design concept to communicate with both Zen pupils and spectators. To date, many observers and cultural researchers have tried to postulate the meaning of this garden. However, no single interpretation has been agreed on thus far. Because the rock garden is flat and filled with white gravel, the shapes of its 15 moss-covered rocks can bring to mind different images, one of which is a tigress wading across a river.

Lacquerware decorated in gold is not something to be seen in a brilliant light, to be taken in at a single glance; it should be left in the dark, a part here and a part there picked up by a faint light. Its florid patterns recede into the darkness, conjuring up in their stead an inexpressible aura of depth and mystery, of overtones but partly suggested.¹⁴

In addition, under the profound influence of Zen culture since the twelfth century—including through its philosophical concepts, kōan training technique,²³ haiku poetry, and nō—Japanese people and Japanese culture continue to enact ambiguity today. The kōan, “What is the sound of the clap of one hand?” posed by noted Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), might have shaped the way the Japanese prioritize intuition over reasoning—for example, by not spelling things out—in their everyday conversations.²⁴ Stories of Hakuin recount that no matter how hard his pupils tried, he just kept denying their answers until they completely exhausted their rationality.²⁵

Eminent American–born Japanese scholar Donald Keene (1922–2019) suggests that the expression of ambiguity is a unique characteristic of Japanese language. This characteristic often is shown in the way subjects of sentences are omitted and distinctions between singular and plural, or between definite and indefinite, are absent. Ambiguity also is used in poetry to impart “an atmosphere and an emotional state nowhere specifically stated.”²⁶ Fujiwara no Kintō (966–1041), a Japanese poet and critic, found ambiguity to be the highest among the nine levels of poetry.²⁷ Kintō remarked, “the language is magical and conveys more meanings than the words themselves express.”²⁸ In Kintō’s mind, precision in poetry would limit suggestion and consequently impoverish interpretation.²⁹ Meanwhile, Alan Watts, in *The Way of Zen* (1957), stressed that the economical form of haiku allows readers or hearers to capture the essence of a poem without relying much on their intellect.³⁰ In Watts’s view, a good *haiku* is like “a pebble thrown into the pool of a listener’s mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his [sic] own memory.”³¹

In Japanese garden design, the rock garden at *Ryōanji* [Temple of the Peaceful Dragon] in Kyoto (see Figure 1) is a fine example of how *ma* might have been used in its design concept to communicate with both Zen pupils and spectators. To date, many observers and cultural researchers have tried to postulate the meaning of this garden. However, no single interpretation has been agreed on thus far. Because the rock garden is flat and filled with white gravel, the shapes of its 15 moss-covered rocks can bring to mind different images, one of which is a tigress wading across a river
Compositionally, these rocks are arranged in a baffling way, so that spectator cannot see all 15 rocks at the same moment from any position along the viewing deck.  

In addition, in moritsuke [food arrangement], Tsuchiya stated that the beauty of a dish is best expressed not in the food itself but through the empty space around it. With an awareness of ma, empty space is seen as a dynamic entity.

Metaphor, Concept Development, and Philosophical Influences of Ma

Through the two interviews with Nagai Kazumasa and Sugiura Kohei, I realize that ma is a complicated concept. However, through an implied comparison made between this concept and the Sefa-Utaki [purified place of Utaki], or the expression of a pause in a noh drama, as well as the architectural concept of Andō Tadao’s Church of the Light, this concept can be better understood through deciphering their common characteristics in physical structure and connotations.

Ma as Metaphor

Sugiura maintained that ma is a common concept for, and part of the everyday life of, the Japanese people and that ma has been deeply rooted in Japanese culture since antiquity. Ma still can be experienced today at a sacred site called Sefa-Utaki in Okinawa.
Figure 2
Entrance of Sefa-Utaki (courtesy of Soramimi 2015)

27 Sefa Utaki (斎場御嶽) also is written as Seifa Utaki.
28 Sugiura interview.
29 Likely because of this symbolism, only the Kikoe-Okimi (priestesses), the virgin members of the royal family, were privileged to enter Sefa Utaki from 1470 to 1869. See John Dougill, “Okinawa 5: Sefa Utaki,” Green Shinto, http://www.greenshinto.com/wp/2012/12/04/okinawa-5-seifa-utaki/ (accessed August 4, 2018).
30 Shingon (真言, True Word) is also called Japanese Esoteric Buddhism, a branch of Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle).
31 Throughout the article, I use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) because of its academic standard for the romanization of Indic script. Words used in IAST often are placed after the Romaji words to note which Indic words the Japanese versions originated from (e.g., Kegon [Avatamsaka Sūtra]). These five myō-ō are: 1) Fudō (Acala/Avatamsaka), 2) Gōzanze (Trilokavijaya), 3) Kundari (Kundali), 4) Daiitoku (Yamatotaka), and 5) Kongōyasha (Vajrayaksha).

After walking through the narrow entrance in between two big rocks, visitors enter an empty space—a ma space. Surrounded by lush vegetation and with restricted access, this sacred site metaphorically resembles a vaginal conformation. Empty space in this case is a metaphysical space inhabited by kami or Shinto deities. The metaphorical meaning of the Sefa-Utaki site is theoretically similar to the Shingon concept of the Womb Realm Mandala. According to Shingon tradition, the Womb Realm is the abode of the five myō-ō (Vidyaraja, Wisdom Kings)—the divine guardians of Shingon. The similarity between the Shinto and Shingon beliefs reveals a confluence of Shinto and Buddhism that echoes throughout Japanese history.

Sugiura’s account of Sefa-Utaki clarifies the etymology of ma (間). This word is made up of two elements: the enclosing character 間, which means “opening” or “gate,” and the inner character 日, signifying “sun.” The two elements together, 間, suggest a light shining through an opening, which can be actualized in different ways. For example, renowned noh playwright and theorist Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) indicated that by using ma in the expression
This is a phrase in Zeami’s classic teachings of noh titled “The One Mind Linking All Powers” (cited in Donald Keene ed., Anthology of Japanese Literature [Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995], 259). Ma in the expression of a pause is also popularly used in the dance and music of kabuki (see Bandō Tamasaburō’s “Orochi” [Great Serpent] part 1, 2, 3. For part 1, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nm_u9qOfE7g&t=9s) (accessed December 22, 2019).

Church of the Light (1989) is the main chapel of the Ibaraki Kasugaoka Church in Osaka. With its aesthetic of insufficiency and simplicity, the design of this church won Tadao numerous awards and widespread recognition, including the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1995.

Kurita Isamu, ma to nihon no kukan, 間と日本の空間, MA and Japanese Space, Interior Design (1963), 77–78.


of a halt, or no action, on a noh stage, the actor’s “inner strength will faintly reveal itself and bring enjoyment.” Similarly, the prominent Japanese architect Andō Tadao (b.1941) actualizes this spiritual strength, or “light shining through an opening” in his “Church of the Light” (see Figure 3). Andō created the slits in the wall to suggest an image of a cross and also brought a modest amount of natural light into the windowless chapel. His distinctive use of light also captured the ascetic atmosphere of the traditional tearoom design of Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), a renowned architect of tea ceremony pavilions, in the Muromachi period (1336–1573) and Momoyama period (1574–1600).

Concept Development of Ma

After World War II, ma emerged as a Japanese religio–aesthetic concept. In 1963 Itō Teiji wrote Nihon no toshi kukan [Japanese Urban Space], and Kurita Isamu discussed the ma concept in ma to nihon no kukan [Ma and Japanese Space]. In 1966 German architect and Kyoto resident Günter Nitschke (b.1934) wrote a first essay in English about ma, titled “MA – The Japanese Sense of Place.” Since the publication of these works, the concept of ma has stimulated much interest from thinkers and practitioners inside and outside Japan. Subsequently, two noted Japanese architects, Isozaki Arata (b.1931) and Itō Toyo (b.1941), developed this concept further and presented it to a wider audience. In 1978, Isozaki set up a grand exhibition called “Space-Time in Japan MA”, and a few years later, in 1985, Itō collaborated with Sugiura to set up a 3-D installation.
called “Reflecting Space” as part of a grand touring exhibition around the United States titled “Tokyo: Form and Spirit.” In his 1979 essay titled “A Culture of Grays,” the eminent Japanese architect and thinker, Kurokawa Kisho (1934–2007), enumerated the important contributions of the concepts of ma, kū, and the intermediary space of Japanese traditional architecture on Japanese culture. Since then, numerous studies have depicted ma as an emerging philosophy and aesthetic of Japan.

**Philosophical Influences of Ma**

Although Shinto was dismantled as a state religion of Japan after World War II, its compelling legend, originating in the early sixth century—that Japanese people are descended from the kami—has led numerous Japanese scholars to use this religion as an intellectual tool to promote nationalism. Consequently, a majority of accessible publications on ma seem to be confined to Shinto philosophy and references. Although these theorists have tried to develop ma as a key Shinto philosophical concept, this concept is still implicitly embedded in East Asian Buddhist ideals. Japanese American scholar Joseph Kitagawa (1915–1992) described ma as Japan’s unitary structure of meaning—a “poetic, immediate, and simultaneous awareness” within which the past and future, time and space, are all collapsed into the present. Kitagawa’s remark essentially reflects one passage of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* [Flower Garland Scripture] that states, “Because past, present, and future are not beyond a moment, Sudhana saw events of all times.” The lack of originality in the way Kitagawa and other Shinto theorists developed a theoretical framework for ma seems to result from the rigorous integration of this indigenous religion into East Asian Buddhism, from the sixth century to the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868–1912). In this mutualistic relationship, East Asian Buddhism provided a philosophical and ethical framework, religious teaching and training for priests, and care for society. Meanwhile, Shinto fostered the happy side of human affairs, such as granting good health and good fortune to the devotees. From this sensible partnership, the philosophical concepts of East Asian Buddhism have been deeply rooted in the thoughts of Japanese thinkers and Shinto theorists and have laid a foundation for the ma concept. In addition, because the Buddhist concept of kū [空, emptiness] denies any distinction between the opposites, argues Kurokawa, the concept of kū challenges dualistic reasoning and thereby contributes significantly to Japanese culture. In a similar way, the engawa [verandah]—with its intervening space connecting the outside and the inside—is a “synthetic of contradictions.” Also, given the Japanese word for space is kikan, which consists of two characters kū [空] and kan [間], interval or ma, Kurokawa contends that the concepts of kū, ma, and engawa are all interrelated and permeated with ambiguity.

---

39 Li Tong Xuan, cited in Thomas Cleary, trans. *Entry into the Realm of Reality: A Commentary on the Gandavyuha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), 80–81. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is probably the most elaborated and important work of East Asian Buddhism. This sutra is noted for its philosophy of interpenetration of infinite realms-within-realms, all of which contain one another.
41 Ibid., 7–8.
East Asian Buddhism, Taoism and Shinto have also impacted on the way the JDM poster designers Nagai and Sugiura have articulated *ma*. While the styles and artistic expressions in these designers’ works are diverse, ambiguity is used as an aesthetic in each. In the following discussions, I present my research findings from the two separate interviews with Nagai and Sugiura in their offices in Tokyo on November 04, 2008 and October 22, 2008 respectively. My interviews aimed to find out how these two designers perceive *ma* and how their design philosophies, aesthetics, concept, and art direction are shaped by these perceptions.

**How Nagai and Sugiura Perceive Ma**

In the five tenets below, I detail how Nagai and Sugiura elaborated on *ma*. I group their remarks into three themes: namely “what *ma* is” (tenets 1, 2, and 3), “how *ma* functions” (tenet 4), and “how to obtain *ma*” (tenet 5). Lastly, I then examine how Sugiura incorporated *ma* into one of his most distinguished works.

**Tenet 1: Ma Is Incomprehensible**

Despite having different aesthetics and approaches to their poster design, both Nagai and Sugiura considered *ma* to be incomprehensible. Nagai remarked:

> Although thinking has been humans' greatest strength, there are many things human beings still do not comprehend. However, we should cherish what we do not understand as if we try to understand them, they will vanish. There is a limitation of what we can do with our intellect. Thus, we should surrender ourselves to what we do not understand. It is like the concept of Kami and Hotoke [Buddha]. Although we cannot see or touch them, we should believe that they exist. Faith is the belief in formless and impenetrable things. There are some precious qualities in ambiguity. So it is important not to reason it out.42

In the same manner, Sugiura pointed out the obscure nature of *ma*:

> *Ma* is the space where you see what you cannot see, and you hear what you cannot hear. We should see the light that cannot be seen. If we try to theorize or analyze *ma*, it will run away. *Ma* belongs to a vast world, and we can only see or touch a small part of it... *Ma* is elegant, vivid and profound, something like *ch'i*, which cannot be explained easily.43

Similar to the way intuitiveness is used as an effective approach to respond to a Zen *koan*, these two quotations show that *ma* could be fully realized when intellectual acuity is surrendered.

---

42 Nagai, interview by Nguyen.
43 Sugiura, interview by Nguyen. In the context of Sugiura’s design philosophy, *ch'i* can be understood as life force or spiritual energy.
Tenet 2: Ma Is Like the Opacity of a Shōji

According to Nagai, the Tokugawa Government’s Isolation Policy (1633–1859) enabled Japan to fend off the domination of rationalism from the West. As a result, Japanese people are now able to preserve their intuitive thinking and express it in all types of communication. In Zen painting compositions, an empty space can be used to convey *ma*. Similarly, the Japanese spirit can prevail on the painting surface of Japanese traditional sliding doors and walls—the *shōji.*

---

*Nagai describes this perceptiveness:*

> Let’s take the *shōji*, for example. Behind the *shōji*, there are a veranda and garden, and in daytime through its opacity, we can vaguely see the shadows of various things in the garden. Like this, we perceive beauty when we see things not directly. *Ma* raises our perception to another dimension.

---

In Nagai’s view, ambiguity is necessary for people around the world. This statement appears to be justified, given that ambiguity has been steadily incorporated into problem-solving approaches across different academic fields.

Tenet 3: Ma Is the Realm of Mystery

Sugiura also is known as an Asian iconographer and has published many books in the field of Asian iconography. Sugiura expounded on how a design work should be treated:

> A design should be regarded as a *thangka*, or *mandala*, in which the audience can enter the realm of mystery, or *ch'i*, through experiencing the manifestations of *ma*, such as vividness, liveliness, spirituality, and the union of form and spirit. *Ma* is the beauty revealed by the divine. Without *ma*, a design can become static, emotionless, and unappealing to the audience.

---

With his inspiration from, and passion for, Asian religious paintings, Sugiura was able to combine the spirituality and vividness of form of these Asian iconographies in his works. Consequently, many of his seminal works, including the “Graphistes Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques,” have been produced in this manner. I examine this poster in the following section, “How Sugiura Incorporated *Ma* or Ambiguity in His Work.”

Tenet 4: Ma Elevates Things to Higher Levels

*Ma* allows viewers to define the meanings of things and stimulates their imaginations and emotions, according to Nagai. For example, seen in the light of *ma*, the *Ryōan-ji* rock garden is not a place where various-sized rocks are scattered in the raked white gravel. *Ma* transcends viewers’ minds, enabling them to imagine...
the raked white gravel as the ocean or clouds, while rocks are conjured up as mountains or tigers. Nagai remarked:

We can feel a three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional painting. Likewise, we can feel multi-dimensionality in the three-dimensional world of the Japanese garden. This means we cannot define meanings of things in an absolute term. It all depends on how a thing is interpreted. Although certain things could be vaguely shown, it is the viewer who ultimately defines the meaning. The interpretation is always decided by the emotional conditions that a viewer might have at a certain time and place. This vagueness, or *ma*, enriches the world.\(^49\)

Ambiguity has been appreciated and used in Nagai’s work ever since 1968, when he advocated for *ma* in *Graphis* Magazine. Among Nagai’s notable works in which he uses *ma* as a new design aesthetic is a 1974 poster designed for Lilycolor, a Japanese interior firm in 1974.\(^49\) This poster features a collage of a blue sky, a line of mountains, and a sun half-hidden by a veil of cloud. Superimposed on each of these elements were three geometric drawings arranged along an invisible axis. This unusual combination of the seemingly unrelated visual elements to convey the nature of Lilycolor’s products transforms a two-dimensional poster into a three-dimensional and mysterious space. Nagai reflected:

When I had exhibitions overseas, although I didn’t intend to apply Japanese characteristics in my work, many Western design critics commented, “Nagai’s posters are very Japanese.” They said they felt the Japan-ness in my posters. I wondered why they said so. Probably because my abstract designs were spatial, and although they were supposed to be two-dimensional, they were also somewhat three-dimensional.\(^50\)

Nagai stated that in the early stage of his career, the design principles of the Bauhaus and the Swiss style were his sources of inspiration. Later, Nagai experimented with a new style, called “spatial structuralism,” by integrating his own geometric drawings into the landscape photographs. By conveying the effect of the abstract shapes floating in a vast space, Nagai was able to express his concept of cosmic order.

**Tenet 5: Ma Is Obtainable to Those Who Appreciate Ambiguity**

In answering my question about whether *ma* is exclusive to the Japanese, Nagai insisted that, although *ma* has been ingrained in Japanese culture and has influenced the Japanese way of thinking for centuries, not all Japanese designers can demonstrate *ma* in their designs:

---

48 Nagai, interview by Nguyen. Nagai’s perspective challenged the modernist ideology of the eminent Swiss typographer, Emil Ruder (1914–1970). In his seminal work, titled “Typographie” (first published in 1967), Ruder asserted: “Typography has one plain duty before it and that is to convey information in writing. No argument or consideration can absolve typography from this duty. A printed work which cannot be read becomes a product without purpose.” Emil Ruder, *Typographie* (Zürich: Verlag Niggli AG, 2001), 6.


50 Nagai, interview by Nguyen.
No matter what their nationalities are, if they appreciate ambiguity, I believe they can apply _ma_ for their design. I suppose human beings used to value ambiguity when they lived in primitive ways. This is why I have been attracted to the primitive cultures. Human beings used to have ambiguity as a common attribute. However, reasoned thinking has refrained them from maintaining that characteristic. The reason why Japan still has ambiguity in its culture is because Japan secluded itself from rationalism for centuries. In reality, ambiguity, or _ma_, is not exclusive to Japan, as the aboriginal peoples around the world still hold on to such concepts in their cultures.

Nagai’s remark demonstrates that the concept of _ma_, or the perspective that _ma_ articulates, is not exclusive to the Japanese culture. In fact, Nagai revealed that his creativity was deeply inspired by the indigenous visual paintings of the world, including in Africa, Ainu, India, and Korea. As a result, since the 1980s, many of Nagai’s posters are based on mythological themes of traditional cultures. By refraining from all visual conventions, such as scale, shadow, and perspective, Nagai can create ambiguity through an unpretentious visual form.

**How Sugiura Incorporated Ma in His Work**

After World War II, like Nagai and many young Japanese intellectuals, Sugiura first looked to Western design principles in the hope that Japanese design could soon catch up with its Western counterpart. Subsequently, after Sugiura taught for two years (1964–1965 and 1966–1967) at the Hochschule für Gestaltung [Ulm School of Design], he found western design principles too rigid. He then traveled extensively in the Himalayan region and across Asia. During this journey, Sugiura discovered that many Asians live humbly and accept themselves and others as they are. Similar to the pilgrim Sudhana, in his ante-penultimate spiritual journey as narrated in the _Avatamsaka Sūtra_, Sugiura came to realize that each human, including himself, is like a jewel among countless jewels hung in the garden of the God Indra. In this setting, the surface of each jewel reflects other jewels in the Indra’s net, like a mirror ball. Sugiura eventually became aware that all things in this world are interdependent and that they are empty of a separate self.

Being deeply inspired by this inward journey, Sugiura developed a holistic approach to design that he called an “Asian grammar of design.” In this grammar, Sugiura combined various

---

52 Nagai, ibid.
53 Sugiura, interview by Nguyen.
54 In Buddhist cosmology, Indra is the king of the realm of deities [devas], one of the six realms of rebirth [Samsāra]. The six realms of rebirth are gods, humans, demi-gods, animals, hungry ghost, and hell.
56 Sugiura, interview by Nguyen.
Taoist, Shingon, and Asian iconographies in his works, as if these elements were the jewels co-existing in the Indra’s net. Sugiura explains how he harmonized the philosophical differences of diverse Japanese religions in his holistic approach:

*Shinto, Buddhism, and animism all existed in my childhood. For that reason, I have never thought about the differences between them. I want to understand them as they are. Just like wrapping various things together with a *furoshiki* [wrapping cloth] without theorizing it, because the theorization act would require unnecessary separation and classification. In my mind, everything is merged together as a single entity.*

Based on a philosophy of design as stated in tenet 3—“Ma is the realm of mystery”—Sugiura incorporated *ma* in a poster that he designed for an exhibition of the works of 12 leading Japanese poster designers held in Paris in 1984 (see Figure 4). Sugiura’s key objective was to captivate viewers’ imagination through the manifestation of *ma*. In a close examination of this work, I consider how *ma* is embodied through what Sugiura described as “vividness, liveliness, spirituality, and the union of form and spirit.”

---


58 Sugiura, interview by Nguyen.

The philosophy of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* has profoundly affected Sugiura’s thought.60 I suspect that this sutra, with its description of mysterious, grandiose, and vivid landscapes, might have inspired Sugiura’s design philosophy and aesthetic. Sugiura considered his work to be a thangka or a mandala, which he saw as a painting medium endowed with spiritual power and the divine energy, or *ma*.61 *Thangka* is a genre of sacred Tibetan Buddhist painting used for religious meditation. Its themes often contain the images of the cosmological and historical Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spiritual teachers. It is traditionally believed that once a *thangka* is properly consecrated, it is the abode in which these Buddhas or Buddhist deities reside.62 Since Sugiura advocated his “Asian Grammar of Design” in the late 1960s, *thangka* has been used as a key theme of his posters. In this poster, Sugiura used the *mandala* theme and the religious iconographies of *Shingon*—including Mount Meru, gorintō [Five-ringed stupa], two-storied pagoda, and lotus. He incorporated the iconographies of Taoism, such as sun-and-moon, clouds, and tortoise. And he chose the *mandala* because it is the abode inhabited by the cosmic Buddha *Dainichi* [*Mahāvairocana*, The Great Illuminator] and the other four cosmic Buddhas.63 Finally, to suggest a sense of infinity and vastness of space, Sugiura positioned the gorintō in an upside down position from the axis of the silhouette of the *Dainichi*.64 Apart from integrating diverse Asian religious iconographies, Sugiura also combined the contrasting arrangements of *Kanji* and French characters in creating a feel of cultural hybridity. While the *Kanji* inscription is displayed vertically, the French text is set horizontally. The translation of the seven *Kanji* words is “tradition and modern-time techniques.”65 However, the way these words and the mandala diagrams are placed in an alternating display—reading from top down and right to left—gives a serene impression to his poster. Moreover, using the gravure-printing technique on aluminium foil paper, Sugiura made his poster stand out. This technique has a similar effect to that of a common Taoist talisman, where black ink is printed on red paper, or red ink is printed on yellow paper. Furthermore, Sugiura explained that he intended to create the “invisible noise” effect: “I aimed to capture the surroundings of the key images (e.g., *Dainichi*, East Asian Buddhist, and Taoist icons), which spread outside them like dust or small flying insects. Such surroundings are sometimes called the ‘invisible noise.’”66 These “flying insects” traditionally were believed to be the manifestation of *kami*,67 as stated by the noted Japanese poet and scholar, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801):
All who are called Kami,
You may think,
Are one and the same.
There are some which are birds,
And some, too, which are bugs!¹

In reality, not all insects are considered to be kami. However, because of its ability to light up in the dark, the firefly was commonly thought to be an embodiment of kami. Thus, Sugiura often shows a kind of luminescent dust around a central image in his work as if it were a sign of kami.

Conclusion
Through the use of “thick description” and an emphasis on the production of JDM posters from the designers’ point of view, this research has untangled the web of cultural significance of ma, or ambiguity, as it has been woven both in Japanese culture and also in the work of Nagai and Sugiura. Having lived in a distinct natural and cultural environment for centuries, Japanese people from all walks of life seem to appreciate ma, or ambiguity. The creative works of Nagai and Sugiura accordingly reflect this national cultural psyche. In one sense, ma simply means “interval” or “pause,” but since World War II, Japanese devotional thinkers have developed ma concurrently with the Nihonjinron movement as a spiritual aesthetic and philosophical concept to balance the pervasive influences of Western culture and design. Essentially meaning “in–betweenness” and expressing ambiguity, ma has been subjectively interpreted by individuals. In the field of poster design, despite having different opinions on and different ways to express ma, Nagai and Sugiura perceived ambiguity as its essence. Consequently, they both use ma or ambiguity to enrich the content of, and also to establish a distinct identity in, their works. When viewing a poster through a lens of ma or ambiguity, most Japanese viewers try to puzzle out the possible meanings within it. In this way, ambiguity appears to serve these posters well at both production and consumption levels. As a result of globalization’s effect on cross-cultural communication, ambiguity has been highly valued by a non-Japanese audience, as a problem-solving approach across many contemporary design and non–design-related disciplines.

The case study of Sugiura’s poster reveals that Sugiura has enthusiastically developed and elevated the concept of ma to convey a religio-aesthetic and spiritual meaning. From this

---

outcome, Sugiura’s “Asian grammar of design” and his intellectual and artistic position are firmly established in Japan and across Asia.” Through the use of Asian religious iconographies, expressed in a spiritual, vivid, and ambiguous manner, Sugiura’s work has captured *ma* and theoretically been transformed into a *thangka*, from which his audience can enter into the realm of mystery.

**Acknowledgments**

I thank designers Nagai Kazumasa and Sugiura Kohei for their precious time, enthusiasm, and elucidation of the concept of *ma*; and my son, Lan Ky Nguyen, for his copyright, invaluable support, and suggestions.

---