

# Aesthetics in Canadian Education: A Perspective From the East

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The notion of *shibusu*, understood in its Japanese social context, and subjected to conceptual analysis, is of interest to Canadian educators.

La notion de *shibusu*, comprise à la lumière du contexte social japonais qui lui a donné naissance et soumise à une analyse conceptuelle, présente de l'intérêt pour les éducateurs canadiens.

"From Sharp Minds Come Sharp Products." "Just Slightly Ahead of Our Time." "Oh, What A Feeling—Toyota." Slogans such as these beat down on us day in, day out. They are the tip of a technological iceberg from Japan that has melted its way into Canadian society. The flood of televisions, stereos, computers, automobiles, VCRs, copiers, pianos, sports equipment, printers, and cameras inundates us. We are more surprised to see "Made in Canada" than "Made in Japan." Indeed, we may prefer the latter.

In silent contrast, the aesthetic aspect of Japanese civilization has had almost no impact on our society or on our education. Japanese aesthetics may be implicit in the design of some Japanese products marketed in Canada. We may be familiar with Japanese paper folding (origami), flower arrangement (ikebana), wall dividers (shoji screens), and we may own some Japanese pottery (perhaps even a Bizen pot). Still, we are only vaguely aware of the aesthetic sense of Japanese life, and certainly unfamiliar with "shibusu," although we may know some of its qualities as the highest expression of Japanese aesthetic attainment.

By revealing the texture and tone of shibusu, we hope to encourage teachers' understanding of Japanese aesthetics, to influence concepts of education and of educating, and to counter the "High Tech" syndrome so pervasive in Canadian society and education.

## SHIBUSU

The asymmetry of forms, the openness to nature, the roughness of textures, and the naturalness of daily life are all aspects of shibusu (adjectival shibui).

Japanese architecture (the Katsura Palace near Kyoto is a prime example); folk crafts (Yanagi, 1972); poetry and haiku painting (Zolbrod, 1982), aspects of which have entered into our language arts programs (haiku poetry); gardens (Itoh, 1973); and everyday life (for example, an ikebana flower arrangement on a street corner in crowded downtown Tokyo) . . . all display shibusa. Scholars and humble lay people use the word. Yet because the concept is unique to Japan, even Japanese fluent in English find it all but impossible to translate. More surprising, scholars of Japanese aesthetics rarely use the word (Young, 1965). It is as if the word were too commonsensical for serious (scholarly) treatment. Explicating the idea may therefore be as revitalizing for Japanese education (which in many ways is dissonant with shibusa) as it is for Western education. Yanagi (1972) and Young (1965) show that shibusa may have seven qualities: simplicity, implicitness, modesty, silence, naturalness, roughness, and normalcy.

### *Simplicity*

Simplicity (austere, unadorned, plain, unfigured) occurs for example in the simple joy of sitting on a tatami mat after a hot relaxing bath, with a bowl of rice and some fish. Such simplicity brings a sense of deep well-being and of communion if not outright luxury. We in the West are rarely aware of simple everyday joys; we are too busy! Another example is the simplicity of the interior of the Japanese dwelling where the many sliding panels, if removed, effectively leave an open space defined by a roof supported by posts; this is about as close as one can come to dwelling outdoors while remaining inside.

In contrast, Western buildings (including schools or classrooms) are often constituted of exterior walls which in their massiveness act as boundaries that emphatically separate living (learning) space from outside space. The walls are not meant to invite that which is outside to come inside, nor for the inside to venture outside. Even the windows in the walls do not function in this way. Indeed, the outside is often interpreted as a distraction, and every effort is made to exclude it from classroom deliberations (children caught gazing out the window with eyes [or mind] are likely to be sharply reprimanded). In the same way, interior walls are often construed as barriers (impermeable boundaries) so that partitions within a school separate activities (for instance, science in the science room, music in the music room, movement in the gymnasium, studying in the library, sitting still in the classroom). A school of this kind can be interpreted as a collection of boundaries for defining spaces that *separate* activity. The appearance in the 1960s of open schools was anomalous; such schools came close to embodying aspects of simplicity. The separation mentality overpowered those open schools and North American

"open schools" no longer exist. Partitions and other boundaries now define spaces more resonant with a compartmentalized sense of well-being.

### *Implicitness*

Implicitness works together with simplicity. In simplicity there is implicit complexity that draws upon the deeper meanings that produce the simplicity. Implicit in implicitness is a wholeness valued in and of itself. The universe itself is an implicit whole within which everything exists and participates. From this perspective it is both unnecessary and redundant to make objects explicit by removing them from the wholeness in which they exist; doing so destroys both simplicity and implicitness, and substitutes a seeming complexity of parts. In shibusa, such complexity of parts is not seen as inherent in nature; rather it is mental imposition that destroys simplicity by separating objects from nature.

In Western education, implicitness is often looked upon as weakness, as sloppiness, as imprecision. By contrast, the explicitness of precisely stated objectives is valued, as is education conceived in its parts (precise statements). In such valuations, *accountability* reduces to mastery of parts and concomitant neglect of anything not easily particularized. Curriculum guides, in precisely specifying content, remove implicitness from schooling: Only instructional objectives (parts) separated out of the parent discipline are taught and tested; all else need not be covered. In covering specified parts, we teachers often produce a complexity of disjointed parts that students find difficult to put together. We might ask whether such difficulty is inherent in the subject (for example, mathematics) or if we have artificially produced the difficulty by reducing the subject to isolated skills and procedures which, even if mastered, remain in the student's mind as isolated parts. Implicitness has managed to survive in Western education perhaps only in the arts. But even here, precision of technique and teaching conditions often overpower implicitness (see in particular Martin, 1986).

### *Modesty*

Modesty underscores the quiet unpretentiousness of a beauty not asserted through striking design or bright colours. The personality of the artist or teacher does not dominate; it is implicit. The virtue here is understatement: If the surroundings are simple and unassertive, even a tiny flower shines through like a gem (Young, 1965). Are children tiny flowers that, in some classrooms, never see the light of day? In an ethnographic study, Brailsford (1985) gives a lucid, even touching story of two "flowers" that could not grow in a kindergarten.

In Western education, the personality of the teacher is often dominant: the many displays and bulletin board arrangements; the detailed organization and arrangement of teaching spaces and learning experiences (perhaps as carefully sequenced learning stations through which children go) shout the identity and presence of the designer, the teacher. This is "Mrs. Brown's" Grade 1 class, and obviously that is "Mrs. Smith's" Grade 2 classroom. But where is Jennifer's place? Is there any space for Kim? That desk has "Mark" written on it, but is that really space for Mark or is it a boundary within which Mark is kept? Who decided that Mark would sit there? When everything is made explicit by the teacher *for* the child, there is very little space for the child to be or to become. The tiny flower may die. Was it ever there?

### *Silence*

Silence (tranquility, composure, sobriety, calmness) is felt most meaningfully in the quiet of the Japanese tearoom. Serenity of spirit comes from the absence of sound save that of gently boiling water and the swishing tea brush: For a moment (in our busy life) we participate in the silent eternity of the universe. Silence is the ideal of understatement. It is an invitation to become, to bring oneself into being without clashing with another. The granting of silence in the tea ceremony is the acknowledgement of respect for the being of the other. The participants are invited to be with the eternity of each other in the universe.

In Western classrooms, silence during a lesson is not often an invitation; it is usually imposition of the teacher's will upon the space of the students. The command to be silent issues a boundary over the classroom, and over each individual student, which is not to be transgressed without the teacher's permission ("put up your hand" if you wish to break silence). In this sense, the command to be silent is the antithesis of an invitation. Rather than inviting students to fill the void with their becoming, the command confines each student within the bounds of silence. As a boundary within which to keep students, this kind of silence is the negation of becoming, of growth. Thus when silence is not the wish of the teacher, it is avoided like the plague. Even a few seconds of a unintentional silence seems like eternity. Teachers generally feel highly uncomfortable with unintended silence, and, as research shows, such silence is tolerated for only a matter of seconds: very soon the silence is filled with teacher-speech. Paradoxically, the teacher's speech fills the silence and again the space for becoming is filled. Thus, silence in classrooms is doubly negative: When it is not a boundary to separate and confine, it is quickly filled with speech that, in having no purpose other than to end the silence, is not only meaningless but also occupies the space which under other circumstances could have been an invitation to become.

*Naturalness*

Naturalness expresses the spontaneity that arises in being in harmony with nature. Shibui art, for example, is not deliberately designed and produced as a product; rather, it emerges as a *by-product* of ongoing life. Raku pottery is a case in point. The true craftsman does not produce Raku pottery for the sake of producing Raku pottery but produces pottery as a by-product of ongoing relations within nature. The concept of a by-product is difficult to appreciate when we think that to produce something is to know the specifications of the product and to follow the specifications. The technological mind likes the explicitness of direct production, but not uncertain implicit production. In this sense, the penchant to state behavioral objectives is a prime example of unnaturalness. Objectives stated in this way are *operational specifications* of criteria which define the production of the desired products. There is nothing implicit about such production. Production of this kind is a straightforward technical task and as such is best done by machines. As Marcuse (1964) recognized more than two decades ago, the preference for direct production in education reduces living beings to one-dimensional machine operation. The criteria for successful machine production are often embodied in a course of studies some teachers follow technically so as not to contaminate the process of production (instruction), and so as to realize precisely specified objectives (Barrett, 1979). The aesthetics of shibusa see such production as unnatural.

*Roughness*

Roughness, in conjunction with naturalness, points to irregular textures of nature (the bark of a tree, a moss-covered stone, small pebbles embedded in clay) and to the beauty of their imperfection. One may anticipate that aesthetics of naturalness and implicitness would also value roughness. Machines may produce nearly perfect pottery, but such pottery would not be shibui. It would simply be perfect in a technical sense (or nearly so) according to the criteria embodied in the specifications. As an example, McDonald's produces "perfect hamburgers" by the billions, and for such hamburgers this may be both desirable and appropriate. Schools produce "educated" adults by the billions, but is such production desirable and appropriate? While, in a certain sense, such perfection has a beauty of its own, it is a beauty that in the commercial world is largely confined to the smooth regularity of glass, steel, porcelain, plastic, and hamburger buns. In the educational context, it is a beauty created by the smooth regularity of basal readers, mimeographed worksheets, standardized tests, and textbook-determined lessons. These machine-produced materials are the antithesis of nature, the opposite of

roughness, the exclusion of the natural. They embody a beauty contained in the precise specifications of a production system. On the contrary, as the evening sun settles over the crackling campfire, hamburgers, somewhat dirty and rough, emerge out of the conversation as hikers gather around the fire to relax in the close of the day. Such hamburgers can be very shibui. They would likely be rejects at McDonald's.

Western educators see roughness as something to be made smooth or well-rounded. The pebbles need to be removed from the clay or else the clay is no good for pottery. Likewise, children's everyday experiences, rough and ready as they are, are often seen as too irregular and unprocessed. They fail to meet the specifications of the production system. Preference is given to smoothly processed experiences contained in textbooks or videotapes or workbooks. Experiences directly from the child's world are too unwieldy; textbook problems are much smoother. However, if we remove the roughness, are we removing the richness of his everyday life? In this connection the so called "Language Experience" (Whole Language) approach is a notable exception—the roughness of the child's everyday experience is highlighted and enhanced in this approach to language. In shibusa, the roughness of daily life has a beauty all its own. Removing roughness removes the beauty of life. A shibui education would retain and value such roughness.

### *Normalcy*

Normalcy is found in the healthiness and endurance of everyday life. Shibui art, because it emerges from the ordinary experiences of ordinary people, has a utilitarian strength that serves daily needs. A good example is folk art created for everyday use by ordinary people; it is rough and robust, not necessarily the work of genius. Rather, it is the work of simple honest people who toil close to nature. As such, anything too complex, ornate, or luxurious is abnormal. Normalcy in education brings an aesthetic dimension to the everyday studies of the ordinary pupil. In this sense, a shibui education is not exclusively reserved for the artistic student, for the exceptionally creative student, or for the academically talented; it is the province of the student who lives education as a natural expression of daily life. This contrasts with the usual role of aesthetics in education wherein school art is the exclusive domain of the aesthetic. With aesthetics separated from all other subjects, science, language arts, social studies, mathematics, and the rest of the curriculum need not be aesthetically significant. They are subjects to be taught; they are not normal in the sense of realizing the aesthetic in everyday life.

Young (1965) summarizes the seven qualities:

At first, it is difficult to keep all of these qualities in mind, but upon reflection it is obvious that they are all very closely related. *Shibusa* is a rich and meaningful concept, and as one gains experience in using it, all seven qualities gradually fuse together into one standard of beauty—*shibusa*. A good, short definition which illustrates the “check and balance system” inherent in the concept is given by Harada Jiro (1937:31) who says: “it is that quality which is quiet and subdued. It is natural and has depth, but avoids being too apparent, or ostentatious. It is simple without being crude, austere without being severe. It is that refinement that gives spiritual joy. . . .” (pp. 5–6)

#### CLOSING STATEMENT

In its own organization, this paper has been a counterexample of *shibusa*. We have presented *shibusa* explicitly as seven qualities artificially separated from the whole. To alleviate this, allow us to suggest a way of bringing *shibusa* under one principle. This is the principle of the *unfinished*. A *shibui* object, in having no mechanical regularity or quantitative precision, invites participation by the observer because it suggests rather than commands; it opens up new possibilities because it is inherently unfinished. According to Okakura (1956),

in art the importance of the same principle [the unfinished] is illustrated by the value of suggestion. In leaving something unsaid the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea and thus a great masterpiece irresistibly rivets your attention until you seem to become actually a part of it. A vacuum is there for you to enter and fill up to the full measure of your aesthetic emotion. (p. 46)

The principle of the unfinished can be contrasted with an opposite principle of traditional pedagogy in which anything left unfinished is seen as a weakness or a deficiency: homework not done, a problem not completed, or instructions not followed. In a *shibui* education, the unfinished is a call to participate, an invitation to become; not a cause for reprimand. It is a call for the student to call up an inner vitality and to set the stage for the enactment of ordinary experiences of a simple, implicit, modest, silent, natural, rough, and normal kind. It is a call for the teacher to do likewise. It is a call to *listen*, for in listening, we encourage the *shibusa* dwelling in others. Perhaps in a small way, this paper will encourage teachers to listen to and for the *shibusa* that lives and grows in students and in themselves.

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