"Looking for Japan"

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Abstract

Traditional beautiful objects that remain until now must be the ones created or developed using cutting- edge technologies of the time. Examples are Buddha statues in Nara, the pyramids in Egypt, etc. Living in Kyoto, I have many chances of meeting heads of traditional art schools. I have been impressed by the fact that they have not only tried to keep their traditions, but also to find new entertaining values in them and to change them from time to time. Because of this, these traditions could survive until now.

While I was staying as an artist fellow at MIT in Boston in 2002, I created an interactive installation called ZENetic Computer based on Zen principles and using various Zen concepts such as Dry Landscape Gardens, Zen Dialogues, the Ten Ox-herding pictures, etc. and exhibited it at MIT Museum. Also, I wanted to exhibit the system at one of the Zen temples in Kyoto for a month. The chief priest of the temple agreed with my request saying that such an exhibition would be a good chance for the young generation to understand Zen. Through these experiences I got the concept of Cultural Computing, by which I thought it would be possible to express Japanese culture including art utilizing information technologies and to let foreigners understand it.

During the ten years I lived in the westernized Japanese society since then, I have found that Japanese traditional beauty vigorously survives in myself. I, as a media artist, have found that Japanese beauty exists in various forms, for example: decorative handcraft, beauty of minimalism

that throws away unnecessary items and focuses on motifs, close-ups of a small part, composition of asymmetry, aesthetics of change, aesthetics of blank (or Wabi-Sabi), specific sacred beasts, such as a dragon and a tiger, Japanese nature, plum flowers, the mind to appreciate cherry blossoms, paintings expressing the four seasons in Japan, etc. Especially through my project of carrying out a projection mapping supported by the Kyoto Prefectural Government as one of the events to celebrate the 400th RIMPA anniversary, I have noticed that I am one of the successors of Japanese traditional culture.

How about other people? Have they noticed this too? I am afraid they might think that Japanese traditional culture is something old-fashioned or has nothing to do with them. If they notice that they are one of the successors of Japanese traditional culture, I can expect a bright future for Kyoto Zen culture. Since I feel like this, I want to express these beauties using cutting-edge technologies instead of using traditional methods focusing on natural phenomena that exist, but are invisible to our eyes. Based on such methodology, I want to express Japanese beauty, like the changes between the four seasons, refined beauty, the sacred dragon, mountains and water, the energy of mountains where hundreds of gods live, etc. For what purpose? To discover Japan and its future.

Kyoto Art and AI

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Abstract

"So what is art?" When I asked a friend of mine, Liang Zhang, who is a contemporary Chinese artist, he considered for a while and replied carefully - "Something that can move me." I like his opinion because this general and completely subjective principle leaves a large working space for computer-based systems, in particular, AI, to generate art.

In fact, recent AI has already showed a lot of interesting and successful stories. For instance, Elgammal et al of the Art & AI Laboratory at Rutgers University proposed an AI based system for "generating 'Art' by learning about styles and deviating from style norms," and they found that "human subjects could not distinguish art generated by the proposed system from art generated by contemporary artists and shown in top art fairs" (June 23, 2017, https://arxiv.org/abs/1706.07068).

In this talk, I will try to provide a survey of the recent stories about art and AI, then discuss our working project in creating or helping to create motion arts with the help of AI. This is a joint work with Prof. Naoko Tosa, Prof. Xuefeng Liang, and Prof. Ryohei Nakatsu, also from Kyoto University.