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*Gilded Space*  
*Creating Spaces with Gilded Folding Screens*

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*Introduction*

This short essay discusses the meaning of the spaces which are decorated by *kin-byōbu* (gilded folding screen). The gilded folding screen is a screen for which gold is used as the background, and on which, in many cases, flowers and/or birds with seasonal landscape are depicted. Although the forms of the folding screen itself originated in China, Chinese and Koreans regarded the gilded folding screen as an important gift from Japan, because the gold background was unique to Japan.

In comparison with other folding screens, gilded folding screens are special owing to their extraordinary and gorgeous surface, created out of gold material. In the study of art history, although scholars have researched what is depicted on the gilded folding screens, there is little discussion about where they were used and how they functioned. According to the historical documents, there seems to be some specific spaces where gilded folding screens were used, including funerals, Buddhist rituals and tea ceremonies, etc. To put it more precisely, I hypothesize that gilded folding screens were erected during special occasions.

To shed light on the above context, in this essay I will reveal the characteristic of the gilded folding screen as a media to create an “extraordinary space.” Extraordinary space is particularly important because it was often utilized to create a homogenized and ideal place by men of power.

### 1. *Folding Screen as a Border: Between Exterior and Interior Space*

First, I would like to show where and how the folding screens were used in Japanese houses. They were furniture and partitions, and in many cases, were decorated with paintings. In ancient times, there were few walls in Japanese architectural structure, so the screens were put in order to divide a room into some parts. However, due to insufficient documentation it is not easy for us to know exactly where and how they were used. In addition, since folding screens were not part of the architectural structures and they were portable, it was usual for the folding screens alone to be handed down and separated from the original place where they were put.

Fortunately, we can find the folding screens in those paintings at the same period as the following illustrations show. Although most folding screens are lost, former research has already pointed out the way folding screens were used by means of analyzing other paintings which depict folding screens. Akazawa Eiji tried to classify folding screens of the 14–15th centuries into five categories focusing on their functions:<sup>1</sup> (1) They were used as a partition in wide room to divide

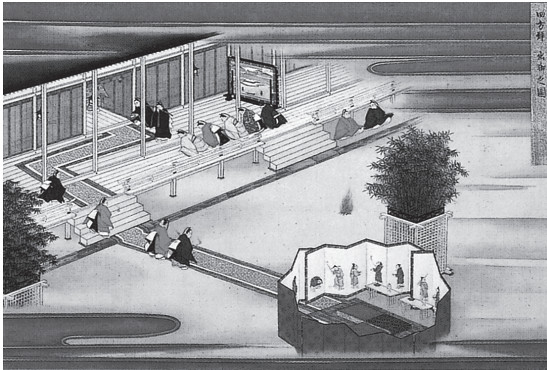


fig. 1

1. Akazawa Eiji, “Jyugoseiki no Kachozubyobu: Ushinawareta Sakuhin wo Motomete” [The Folding Screen Depicting Birds and Flowers in 15th century: Seeking for the Lost Work], in *Nihon Byobue Syusei* [Compilation of Japanese Folding Screen], vol. 6, (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1978).

fig. 2



into some parts, (2) To surround the space both inside and outside of the room, (3) They were used to enclose one's bed (*futon*), either around one's head or around one's feet, (4) They were put behind one's seat, including mortuary tablets, (5) as a gift to foreign countries such as China and Korea. Although these folding screens are missing, the classifications give us a clear idea of the usage of folding screens.

However, very few attempts have been made at analyzing their context. We need to inquire about the socio-politic background in which folding screens were used. As I mentioned earlier, because folding screens were movable furniture, they could create a transitory space on demand. It can be seen from the paintings (fig. 1–fig. 4) that they were not merely for daily use as partitions but also put for special occasion such as rituals. Depicted in these paintings are multiple folding screens. As [fig. 1]<sup>2</sup> shows, at the place for the ritual called *shihouhai* at the Court, folding screens were set. In [fig. 2]<sup>3</sup> the folding screens surround people. Here, inside the surrounded folding

2. 「四方拜」(「恒例公事録・臨時公事録附図」) *Shihouhai at Koureikujiroku Rinjikuji-roku fuzu*. It depicts court functions before the Meiji period.

3. 「当麻曼茶羅縁起絵巻」Handscroll of *Taima Mandala Engi*.

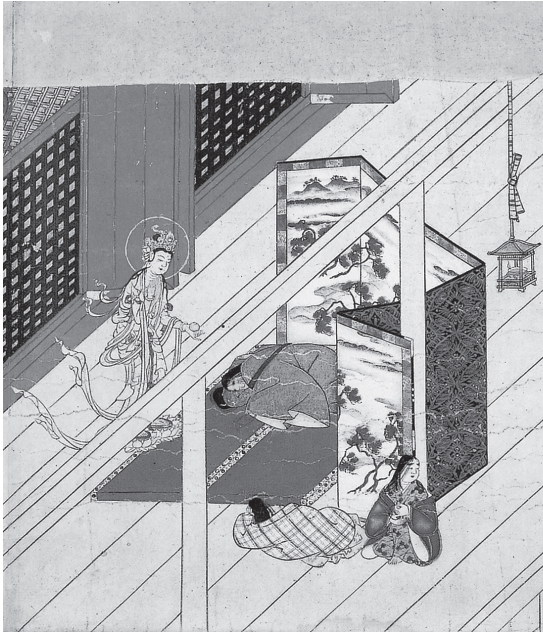


fig. 3

screen the woman is dyeing lotus strings to be used for weaving a mandala (a kind of Buddhist image). It is important to note that the space enclosed by the folding screen turns into a space for the religious act, that is, a “sacred space.” It is clear that the folding screen was used in order to distinguish religious from non-religious space. In [fig. 3];<sup>4</sup> the folding screen was put behind a dying woman who prays to god, and following that, Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, appeared in front of her in a dream. Here, the folding screen seems to be a device for showing that an extraordinary event happened. [fig. 4]<sup>5</sup> is a scene of the death of a revered priest, 親鸞 *Shinran*.<sup>6</sup> The folding screen was put during his death, which was a major and dramatic event for his followers.

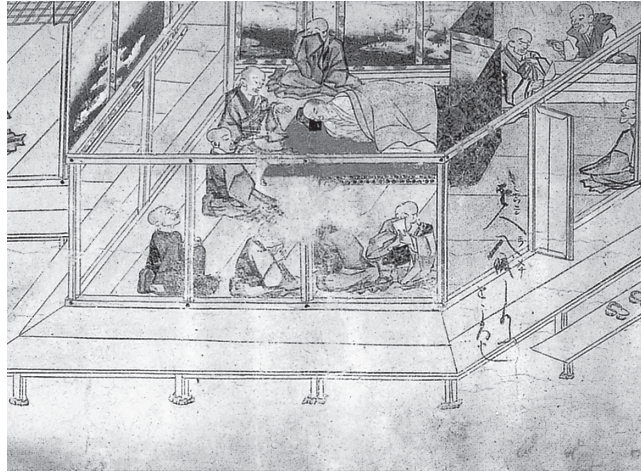
While there are some paintings which depict folding screens as in the examples given above, it seems difficult to find records document-

4. 「石山寺縁起絵巻」Handscroll of *Ishiyamadera Engi*.

5. 「親鸞聖人絵伝」*Shinran Shonin Eden (Takada version)*.

6. 親鸞 *Shinran* is a founder of the True Pure Land sect of Buddhism.

fig. 4



ing how folding screens were used. However, some can still inform us of the original space where they were put. 『看聞日記』 *Kanmon Nikki* depicts many rituals vividly such as Buddhist ceremonies, tea ceremonies and some festivals. According to the record of the Star Festival celebrated on July 7, the meeting place was furnished from a previous day with some folding screens and flowers, and they were immediately taken away when the festival was over. This example makes clear that this kind of furnished space with folding screens was not a permanent but a temporal space created for the event.

It is inferred from the above examples that folding screens could have been used for certain rituals only when they were needed. Therefore, they are not mere tools to divide space but they function as a border to create an interior space which should be shut out from exterior space. To put it more precisely, by using the folding screen as a border, interior space could be transformed into “sacred space,” which intercepts the “space” of the outside world.

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7. 『看聞日記』 “*Kanmon Nikki*” is a diary written by Sadafusa, an Imperial prince from 1416 to 48.

## 2. Gilded Folding Screens

The folding screens functioned as a border between interior and exterior space, and they were used in ritual ceremonies. Above all, the glittering and gorgeous surface of the gilded screens was suitable for religious rituals, because the screens could indeed create extraordinary spaces. As is often the case with religious ceremonies, for example, the interior space of the room where Buddhist rituals such as funerals or memorial services are held is decorated and surrounded by golden utensils.

As for the gilded folding screen, it has been recognized that it was often recorded after the *Muromachi* period,<sup>8</sup> and it was initially regarded as an important gift from Japan to China and Korea.<sup>9</sup> It is said that the subject of the gilded folding screen tended to be trees such as the pine tree, bamboo, flowers and birds. Takeda Tsuneo argues that because of the characteristics of gold foil, the gilded folding screen could be used in “extraordinary” occasions.

Now, I will give some examples to show that gilded folding screens were used by analyzing some historical documents. These are some remarkable cases where gilded folding screens were used in “extraordinary spaces.” According to a record describing the funeral of a *shogun* general, the gilded folding screen depicting azaleas under a pine tree was placed behind the coffin of *Yoshikatsu* who was the 7th shogun of the *Muromachi* period and died very young.<sup>10</sup> Another example is a case where the wife of the 8th shogun commanded that a gilded folding screen with bamboo be placed behind the mortuary tablet of the 8th shogun.<sup>11</sup> In the same document, an author explained how to obtain the gilded folding screens which were set up for funerals. These records show that gilded screens were necessary to create reli-

8. Especially after the 15th century.

9. Akazawa Eiji, “Jyugoseiki ni okeru Kinbyobu ni tuite” [On the Gilded Folding Screen in the 15th Century], *KoKKA* 849 (1962); Takeda Tsuneo, “Kimpeki Syohekiga ni tsuite” [On the Gilded Folding Screen], *Bukkyo Geijyutu* [Buddhism Art] 59 (1965).

10. January 28, 1491 (『蔭涼軒日録』“*Inryoken Nichiroku*,” a public diary written in the mid-15th century by the chief monk at *Inryouken* in *Shokokuji* temple).

11. April 8, 1489 (『蔭涼軒日録』“*Inryoken Nichiroku*”).

gious and extraordinary spaces for funerals.<sup>12</sup>

It is said that creating golden space is related to the belief that the land of Buddhist paradise (*Gokuraku Jodo*) is decorated with gold. Furthermore, the gilded space might be thought to lead dead people to Buddhist Paradise. For many reasons, Buddhist ceremonies were generally decorated with golden utensils. For instance, the place for the sermon of the 法華經 *Hokekyo* was decorated with gold brocades, flowers in a vase, folding screens, etc., and interior space was shining.<sup>13</sup> In addition to this, gilded space clearly implies that the place is not an “ordinary space” but an “extraordinary and sacred space.”

However, we should consider that the gilded folding screens were not only put in religious rituals but also used in places of the performing arts such as the tea ceremony and the “linked poem” (*Renga*).

One of the earliest records documenting gilded folding screens, a pair of gilded folding screens depicting a pine tree, and a pair of folding screens depicting pine tree on sandy beach were borrowed to furnish the meeting place of the court at the Star Festival celebrated on July 7.<sup>14</sup> The room was decorated with these gilded folding screens with many flowers in a vase. In the festival, close people at the court gathered in the drawing room and celebrated the day with a feast, sometimes following court music played on wind and string instruments. What we should note is that this furnished room with gilded folding screens created a temporary space, only for a few days during the festival, and immediately after the festival finished, all the decorations were removed. Gilded folding screens were also used as a meeting place where people read linked poems which were held outside under the cherry-blossom trees.<sup>15</sup> In this poetry meeting, two pairs of gilded folding screens were carried out to the precincts of a

12. There were cases where upside-down folding screens were set around dead people. This might be another way of expressing “extraordinariness.” (Sakakibara Satoru, “Byobu=Girei no ba no Chodo” [Folding Screens as Furniture for Rituals], *Koza Nihon Bijyutsushi* 4 [2005]). This clearly shows that folding screen set upside down as well as gilded folding screen were used in “extraordinary space.”

13. August 11, 1421 (『看聞日記』“*Kanmon Nikki*”).

14. July 6, 1437 (『看聞日記』“*Kanmon Nikki*”). This document describes the festival almost all years around the 7th of July.

15. March 15, 1471 (『大乘院寺社雜事記』“*Daijyojin Jisyu Zoujiki*”).

temple. As Matsuoka Shimpei argues, the meeting place of the linked poem under cherry-blossom trees was a sacred space which transcended the world in that this place was managed by monks and the cherry blossom trees were regarded as a medium between this world and the hell in the ancient times.<sup>16</sup> Taking all these considerations into account, gilded folding screens functions as a border dividing the space of performing arts from ordinary space.

It follows from what has been said thus far that this kind of extraordinary and temporary space is suitable for the transitory nature of the practice in the performing arts. Gilded folding screens were the most suitable media to create such a temporary and extraordinary space.

We should note that the place for the performing arts is a space of 無縁 *Muen* (literary meaning “non-connection”).<sup>17</sup> To put it more precisely, *Muen* is a concept denoting that there is no connection with ordinary space, and it should be shut out from “real” society. Amino Yoshihiko pointed out that it is a kind of “utopia”: power-relations could not intervene, various kinds of labor were exempted, it has nothing to do with conflicts in the hierarchical world, etc.<sup>18</sup> Poetry meeting spaces and teahouses were often considered *Muen* spaces. By cutting the connection from outside social order, *Muen* space embodies a place where there is no hierarchical order. Since it is totally an equal space and social orders are ignored in principle, people from any kinds of classes and gender can stay in a tea house or poetry meeting place, and warriors must not bring their swords. Although this concept is not directly relevant to the occidental concept of utopia, Japanese medieval society had this kind of utopian space, which negates reality. This is the space of nothingness (*mu*), cutting the connection with mundane life. Furthermore, it would be next to the other world or death.

16. Matsuoka Shimpei, “Utage no Shintai: Renga, Ikki, Kaisyo,” in *Utage no Shintai* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1991).

17. 無縁 *Muen* as a concept of utopian space was suggested by Amino Yoshihiko (*Muen, Kugai, Raku* [Tokyo: Heibonsya, 1987]).

18. It tended to be a place such as some temples. As Amino argued, we should note that this concept was not necessarily realistic and it was sometimes discriminated and suppressed by political power.



As I mentioned earlier, gilded folding screens are suitable for creating temporary spaces for the Buddhist rituals, which is cut off from society. In this point, gilded folding screens make it possible to secure *Muen* space for performing arts by surrounding the place with them.

### 3. Homogenized Space of the Gilded Space

It is quite likely that the people who used this extraordinary gilded space were men of power who could afford gold. It is necessary to keep in mind that to decorate space with gold was closely related to the ostentation of the power. One could perhaps say that although the gilded folding screen created a space that suspended hierarchical distinctions, in practice it was a site where men of wealth mobilized the monetary and symbolic functions of gold to further specific political ends. With this in mind, we will now take a look at some interesting cases where gilded space was used by men of power.

As an example of this, 豊臣秀吉 *Toyotomi Hideyoshi*, the general who conquered the country in the late 16th century, held a tea ceremony with gilded folding screens.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi probably knew this characteristic (*Muen*) of the tea room very well, and so he was able to make use of it in order to create an ideal space for himself. He brought gilded folding screens into the beach near Hakata to hold a tea ceremony with soldiers.<sup>19</sup> They were members designated by Hideyoshi to conquer Korea. A pair of gilded folding screens was set near a pine tree on which an iron pot was hung. We should recall that this place is the base from which he attempted to conquer Korea. By shutting out the real world, the gilded tearoom made it possible for all the members to be homogenized, and it was utilized to raise the morale of the soldiers who had the same aim to conquer Korea with Hideyoshi.

Another example can be seen in a portable golden teahouse, which was also commissioned by Hideyoshi [fig. 5].<sup>20</sup> The golden teahouse

19. This tea ceremony was held on 5th of May, 1597 (『宗湛日記』“Soutan Nikki”).

20. This golden tea house is said to be created in 1585 by Hideyoshi under the guidance of 千利休 Sennorikyu, the originator of the tea ceremony.

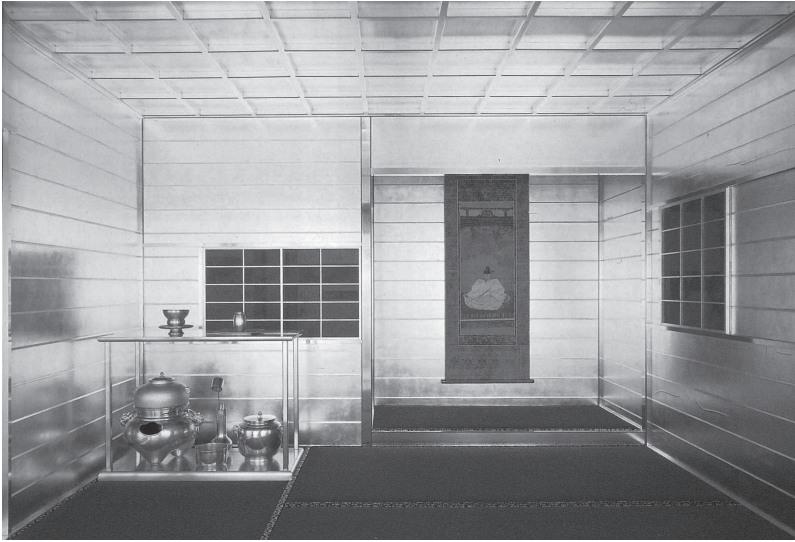


fig. 5

is made of gold except for a tatami border and paper sliding doors. It was carried to the Imperial Palace, some temples in Kyoto and even to 名護屋城 Nagoya castle, which, as was mentioned earlier, was the foothold for invading Korea. It is said that this golden teahouse was created so that Hideyoshi could show it to audiences such as people in the Imperial Court, the general public and vassals.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, the characteristic of *Muen* made it possible to transcend the social status and for Hideyoshi to be seated with the Emperor in the same space of the golden teahouse.<sup>22</sup> As described earlier, he brought this teahouse to the Imperial Palace, and served a cup of tea to the Emperor. He could not be seated with the Emperor in ordinary space, but since hierarchical distinctions are ignored in the extraordinary space of the teahouse, he could take advantage of this and be seated with the Emperor. In this way, the golden tea house functioned as a gilded folding screen.

21. Nakamura Toshinori, "Buke no Chashitu," [The Teahouse of Samurai Family], in *Sadougaku Taikei* [A Compendium of Tea Ceremony], vol. 6, (Kyoto: Tankosha, 2000).

22. Matsuoka Shimpei, "Sennorikyu," in *Chusei wo Tsukutta Hitobito* [People who Created Medieval Period] (Tokyo: Shinsyokan, 2001).

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As the above examples show, gilded spaces for tea ceremonies deliberately create *Muen* space where ordinary social order is suspended. Even if only for a passing moment, when gilded folding screens are set up, gilded space embodied ideal space for Hideyoshi.

### *Conclusion*

To sum up, I explored the possibility that gilded space created a kind of temporary utopian space called *Muen*. It is neither a paradise nor something which will be realized in the future. *Muen* space did exist in the very moment when gilded folding screens shut out the world of hierarchical relations.