Some Differences in the Images of 'Wall' in Japanese and European Languages

Yutaka Mizuno

Chubu University

1. Masonry vs. Timber-Framed Houses

Reading *Le Passe-Muraille* written by the French novelist, Marcel Aymé, we are greatly surprised to encounter a scene in which the main figure is immured within a wall, which he is trying to go through with a magical power. The reason for our bewilderment as Japanese may be attributed to the thinness of walls in traditional Japanese houses. In general, it is almost impossible for most Japanese to imagine a thick wall in which a person is immured.

To investigate some differences in the images of walls between Japanese and Occidental people, it is necessary to study structural characteristics of traditional houses in Japan, and Europe and America. Two methods are especially predominant in building traditional houses in the world. One is to stack bricks and stones to make walls which support the load of a roof. The type of house built in this way is usually called a masonry house, and is typical of traditional Occidental houses. The other is to use pillars to support the load of a roof. The kind of house supported by pillars is commonly called timber-framed house. Most Japanese traditional houses belong to this type.

First, a masonry house will be discussed in more detail. As was mentioned above, walls have a very important function in supporting the load of the roof in this kind of house. This type of house will collapse if the walls fall down. The walls, therefore, must be very thick, especially in the lower parts. In addition, the taller the house, the thicker the walls must be.

As a result, some walls become thick enough to immure a person, as is written in *Le Passe-Muraille.* Most European traditional houses are masonry houses, though there are a few timber-framed houses and houses made of clay. In addition to the walls of houses, thicker walls surrounding cities or towns were built in ancient Europe. Houses made of bricks with thick walls and walls surrounding a certain area are also found in China.

On the other hand, Japanese traditional buildings like vernacular houses were usually timber-framed houses whose load was supported by pillars. Pillars were first set up to raise the roof of a house. After this procedure, walls were made by interlacing split bamboos. Then, mud was daubed on the grid of the bamboos. This type of house is still seen in rural areas of Japan. Only two sides of the house have walls with the whole surface, while the other two sides have sliding doors, etc., almost without walls. Inside the house, almost no partition walls are found. Paper sliding doors or screens, which can be easily removed, are used as partitions, instead of walls. The thinness of walls may be related to the fact that fences surrounding the house and yard were regarded as a more important boundary than the walls of the house themselves. For these reasons, most Japanese were not familiarized with the thick walls which were (and are) typical in Europe, though there were thick walls, such as castle walls, white-washed walls of storehouses, etc., even in Japan.

2. Morse, Taut and Berque

Architects and Japanologists who visited Japan between the 19th and the 20th century noticed that Japanese vernacular houses did not have thick walls, which were common in Europe and America. They tried to relate this fact with cultural characteristics of Japan.

Edward S. Morse, who came to Japan in 1877, claimed as follows in his book, *Japanese Houses and Their Surroundings:*

> A fire-proof building is certainly beyond the means of a majority of this people, as, indeed, it is with us; and not being able to build such a dwelling, they have from necessity gone to the other extreme, and build a house whose very structure enables it to be rapidly demolished in the path of a conflagration. Mats, screen-partitions, and even the board ceilings can be quickly packed up and carried away. (pp. 12-13)

For people living in wooden houses in over-populated cities, it was very important to protect their properties from the damages of fires. Consequently, very inexpensive houses were usually built, so that they might be able to rebuild them on the same site. This fact led to the uniformity of the plan of houses. Morse claimed that in this point, the wisdom of Japanese city dwellers was manifested.

Bruno Taut, who visited Japan in 1933, asserted in his book, *Houses and People of Japan:*

> The Japanese house, if one wishes to give a characteristic synopsis of its qualities, is like a stage in an open-air theatre, the background of which, visible through the open wall, is nature. (191)

Describing the south side of the house whose sliding doors were completely removed, and which faced the garden, Taut has compared the *tatami* (straw-mat) floor to a theater, since the floor was high above the ground. Tamami-mats themselves have been likened to a grassland. Sliding doors and screens have been, moreover, compared to a curtain in a theater. In this way, the harmony and co-existence of a Japanese house and nature have been emphasized in his book.

The last scholar I would like to cite is a French geographer, Augustin Berque who visited Japan after the Second World War. Although he has mostly agreed with Tetsuro Watsuji's claim about the differences in the spatial images of houses and the surroundings between Japanese and European people elaborated in his book, *Fuudo,* Berque has criticized Watsuji for his confusion in his book, *Vivre l'espace au Japon* as follows:

> Watsuji focuses on only the boundary of Japanese houses without taking it into consideration that the boundary should be observed from two viewpoints, namely the one between the house and the garden, and the other between the housing site and the outside. The former boundary is vague in Japanese houses, whereas the latter is very clearly defined. (130)

Berque's assertion clearly shows that outside walls, fences, or hedges are more important to define the boundary between the inside and the outside than walls of houses, sliding doors, and other partitions. Nowadays, this hypothesis is widely accepted as the most prominent boundary between *uchi* 'inside' and *soto* 'outside'.

As was discussed, all three scholars' claims I cited put great emphasis on the relatedness between the characteristics of Japanese traditional houses and those of Japanese society and culture, as well as on the relationship of houses in Japan with its climate, etc.

3. Metaphors of 'Wall' in European Languages

Besides differences in architectural characteristics, great disparities are found in the metaphorical expressions of European Languages from those in Japanese. Metaphors of 'wall' in all the European languages investigated have positive connotations, such as 'protection', and 'defence', in addition to negative ones, such as 'barrier', 'isolation', etc. The thickness and solidity of walls in European countries may be relevant to the rise of both connotations in European Languages. First, several metaphors with positive connotations will be cited as examples. In French, the expression, *Bienvenue dans nos murs* (lit. 'Welcome to the inside of our walls') is used in the situation where a host or hostess is inviting guests to come in his or her home, or hometown with the connotation of the security people have when they are inside the interior space. The phrase, *le mur de la vie privée,* 'walls of privacy' implies that the interior space inside the walls as a private zone cannot be violated. The connotation of 'protection' can be also found in the expression, 'to make a wall', in English, which means to protect against the other team's attack in front of a goal post in a football game. Similar expressions are used in European languages, like *eine Mauer bilden* in German, and *faire le mur* in French.

On the contrary, 'to have one's back to the wall' in English and *être le dos au mur* in French, which have similar meanings, show a situation where people are in difficulty and at a loss. Moreover, *in mur du son* 'supersonic wall' and *mur de la chaleur* in French, the term *mur* is used with the meaning of barrier or limitation which should be overcome in science by all means. In English, too, in various kinds of expressions, the term 'wall' frequently occurs with negative connotations as in 'a wall of prejudice', 'walls in life', etc. As for the Wall in Berlin, which was destroyed recently, it was a barrier to mutual communication between the West and the East, though it may be asserted for the people in former East Germany, it was a means of a protection from the invasion from the Western world. Incidentally, the verb 'to wall' in English also has two kinds of meaning: 1. to enclose a house or town to defend, 2. to immure. Likewise, *murer* is derived from the noun *mur.*

4. Metaphors of *Kabe* in Japanese

The term *kabe* in Japanese, which approximately corresponds to the term 'wall' in English, is hardly used with a positive connotation, contrary to the terms of 'wall' in European Languages. The literary and obliterate phrases *kabe-to-minasu* and *kabe-ni-suru,* both of which are literally translated into 'to see as a wall', mean 'to look on something as foolish' or 'to make fool of someone'. *Norikaketa-kabe* lit. 'the wall which one has started to climb up' means 'a great difficulty to be overcome at any cost'. In addition, *kabe-ni-uma-o-norikakeru* 'to climb a wall on a horse' was used in the situation where a person is embarrassed to meet with a great difficulty, or where he or she takes some action suddenly and tries to finish it despite its impossibility.

In contemporary Japanese, too, the term *kabe* is frequently used to mean a barrier or a difficulty, as in the expressions *kabe-ni-butsukaru* and *kabe-ni-tsukiataru,* both of which are literally put into 'to encounter a wall'. Furthermore, *kabe-o-yaburu* 'lit. to break a wall' means 'to overcome a barrier', as in the sentence *hyaku-metoru-jubyou-no-kabe-o-yaburu* 'to run in less than ten seconds and have broken the world record'. Especially, the metaphors of the term *kabe* are prominently used in *hoshu-no-kabe* 'a wall of conservatism', *bunka-no-kabe* 'a wall of culture', *hinpu-no-kabe* 'a barrier between the poor and the rich', etc. To cite a few examples from actual contexts, in the *Asahi-shinbun*, a newspaper which is read nationwide, a headline says *Danjo-no-kabe-mo-kuzureru-kizashi* 'lit. The wall between men and women is going to be destroyed'. The expression was used in an article reporting about a symposium held for commemorating a publication by a finishing school. More recently, in the morning version of the newspaper *Mainichi-shinbun* (December 9, 1992), the paper used four expressions, including the term *kabe,* reporting about the Sagawa Kyubin scandal concerning the violation of Political Funds Control Law. They were *kochijo-no-kabe* 'a wall of a prison', *byoin-no-kabe* 'a wall of hospital', *shisha-no-kabe* 'a wall of the deceased', and *inaori-no-kabe* 'a wall of an intimidating attitude', in all of which term *kabe* means a barrier. Furthermore, in an article about the integration of Europe, the same paper reported that EC countries were preparing measures to refuse immigration from Eastern European and

African countries. In the passage too, the expression *aratana-kabe* is used referring to a new barrier.

Incidentally, the sentence *kare-ha-jibun-kara-kabe-o-mokete, tomodachi-tono-tsukiai-o-sakete-iru* 'He is trying to shut himself up by building a wall' insinuates the existence of a 'fender' behind which the person is 'hiding himself', according to the Japanese linguist, Yoshiyuki Morita. In this example, too, the term *kabe* does not have a positive implication since from his friends' viewpoint, it may be presumed that the word makes them imagine an impenetrable barrier to them. Even for the person himself, the term *kabe* does not have a positive connotation, owing to the inherent negative nuance of the term.

5. Conclusion

In this concluding part, I would like to discuss the reason why the terms standing for 'wall' in European languages have positive connotations, as well as negative ones, whereas the term *kabe* in Japanese has only the latter.

In many modern European countries, ideas of self-independence, and freedom and equality of human-beings have been firmly established. It may be claimed, therefore, that each individual with autonomy and self-independence has acquired the concept that he or she has made a contract with one's own society and country. To say the least of it, the head of a family as an individual has contracted with some larger communities to which he or she belongs. As a consequence, homes and families where individuals live are considered to be the most important. Based on the smallest units in society, cities and nation states are organized. In the situation, a boundary is clearly defined between an individual and other larger communities such as regional society, country, etc. A community within its walls has contractual relationships with individuals there, and respective rights and duties should be observed by all means. These ideas result in the concept that a community, a family, and an individual, respectively, have its own autonomous domain inside the walls which cannot be violated or invaded by any unit in society. That is the reason why walls are perceived as a means of protection or defence, in addition to a barrier, depending on the situation in Europe and America.

In Japan, on the other hand, individuals or units in society are not conceived to be dependent and inviolable inside their own walls. On the contrary, they are considered to be under the same roof. Before the Second World War, for instance, the emperor as the symbolic patriarch of the Japanese controlled all the individuals and societies in Japan, and the people were looked upon as children raised up and educated by the emperor as a father. Furthermore, within the family there was a patriarch as the son of the emperor who controlled his family members. In this way, in almost every part of society, we were able to find a parent-child relationship.

The concept of parent-child relationship is still found in many parts of society as well. In corporative bodies, for example, the atmosphere of a happy family relationship with a patriarchal head has been greatly emphasized and desired. This atmosphere is usually called *kazokuteki-funiki* in Japanese. Furthermore, it may be claimed that a decision made in a town or village association with a familial atmosphere still has a coercive controlling power which cannot be resisted by our assertion of freedom and egalitarianism. In this type of society, familial solidarity, not individuality, is especially valued. In other words, people living under the same roof may be protected as members of a society, as long as they are obedient to it. In Japan, therefore, there is a tendency that individuality and self-independence are not respected, and that a strong ego cannot be formed.' This leads to the vagueness of the distinction between a private domain and a public domain. A person's privacy is often violated as a natural consequence.

Incidentally, *engawa* is a Japanese style porch or platform attached to a traditional house, facing its yard. The part of the house is where neighbors would often visit to chat, and still do in some rural areas. Therefore, *engawa* has been a place where the boundary between the inside and the outside is vague. As a result, the invasion of a private zone tends not to be taken as a serious infringement of an individual's rights. In addition, as we have discussed, a private domain has not been clearly defined, not only because of the thinness of walls, but also because of the fuzzy function of movable partitions, such as paper sliding doors or screens, etc. Therefore, most Japanese have been brought up to try to make efforts to adopt themselves to the circumstances where there has been no definite boundary between the private and the public. When someone cannot adjust oneself, he or she is to be rejected as a drop-out, or outsider. It may be concluded that these characteristics in the environments inside and outside houses have contributed to the formation of features which are very different from those in Europe and America, where individuals put great emphasis on contracts.

Finally, I would like to discuss a current trend of the images of *kabe*. Only quite recently have Japanese begun to live in houses made of concrete, or newly developed building materials. Now, more than 50 percent of houses are made of reinforced concrete. Such houses are not built in a way similar to either timber-framed, or masonry houses. Consequently, walls in modern Japanese houses tend to be much thicker, like those in Europe and America. That may be the reason why some people, especially the young, are apt not to be surprised to read stories about an immured person, or a person going through a wall. Moreover, it may be assumed that pictures, photos, movies, and programs on TV, etc., have contributed to the formation of the image of thick walls. Therefore, it will not be strange for some Japanese to have a stereotypical idea that walls are usually thick, even though these persons live in houses with thin walls without going to European countries to see thick walls around cities, or borders. Nevertheless, between Europeans and Americans, on the one hand, and Japanese on the other, there are still great disparities in the images of 'wall', as well as in the meanings and connotations of metaphors about the term 'wall'. Is there a chance that the meanings of the metaphors about a wall in Japanese will be more similar than nowadays with European languages, as the real characteristics and materials of the walls become much closer in the future?

References

Aymé, Marcel
1943 *Le Passe-Muraille.* Paris: Gallimard.
Berque, Augustin
1982 *Vivre l'espace au Japon*. Paris: P.U.F.
Morita, Yoshiyuki
1984 *Kiso-nihongo* 3 Tokyo: Kadokawa-shoten.
Morse, Edward S
1961 *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* . New York: Dover Publications.
Nishikawa, Yuko, *et al.*
1987 Kotoba-ni-arawareta-kazoku-to-ei. In *Kokusai-Kenkyu* 4 Kasugai: Chubu University.
Taut, Bruno B.
1958 *Houses and People of Japan*. Tokyo: Sanseido.
Yamada, Kouichi
1984 *Kabe.* Tokyo: Hosei University Press.