

Culture through the looking glass

One can only see oneself in a mirror. Something akin to the mirror is the perspective of a third person. My discovery of a single Instagram post taught me that the same applies to culture.

Although there are many kinds of eye-opening situations when discussing cross-cultural experiences, my encounter with this post was especially impactful.

Steven McRae, who is the poster of the post, is a principal dancer of the Royal Ballet. The Royal Ballet is a ballet company with a worldwide reputation located in the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Ballet, having originated in the Italian Renaissance and developed in France, serves as the foundation of many European dance forms. Nowadays, ballet is taught and performed worldwide, and Japan is one of the countries with the most students. I myself have loved watching, and dancing ballet since the age of three. In the process of learning ballet, facing obstacles was inevitable. The hurdles were both physical and mental, including mild injuries such as sprained ankles, and shin splints. Even minor injuries can be serious to dancers, for they hold the dancer back from practicing. This causes the dancer to be left behind by the class, resulting in frustration and the requirement of huge efforts to catch up. Even without injuries, every dancer learns at a unique pace, and has a body of their own. There almost always are mirrors in every studio, making it natural to observe oneself and compare with others. This

often causes a feeling of inferiority, and it is a fact that many dancers suffer from perfectionism and eating disorders. Consequently, a professional dancer appears superhuman, having overcome all of the difficulties of dancing to the young dancer's eye. In fact, Steven McRae appeared to be perfect in my eyes when he performed as the Mad Hatter in 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', a show from the Japan Tour 2013. He was tall and slender with beautiful lines, and had an air of mesmerizing sophistication in his performance despite the Mad Hatter's comical costume and character. I had never imagined that he would have interest in, let alone post about Japanese art.

On July eighth, 2020, Steven McRae posted pictures of himself on Instagram with the following comment : "The thought of a Career threatening injury for a Dancer is terrifying, and anyone, Dancer or not, will experience some sort of physical or mental break at some point, BUT the pain does not have to dictate to us a negative new world..... The concept of Kintsugi highlights the need for us all to focus on these moments as an opportunity to add even more value to ourselves by creating another chapter in the stories of our lives..... I will now be visualising my scars coated in Gold, Silver and Platinum." Kintsugi, which he mentions in the comment, is a Japanese art form of fixing broken pottery using lacquer. The lacquer is then coated with metal powder of gold, silver, or platinum, giving the pottery a new and distinctive look rather than

leaving it looking flawed.

Reading this post on Kintsugi was an eye-opening cross-cultural experience. The post enabled me to observe and respect an art of my own culture from another perspective. I had known about Kintsugi from a fairly young age, for some of my grandmother's crockery were fixed using the techniques of Kintsugi. However, never had I viewed it as anything impressive. To me, the art of fixing broken pottery was a mere outcome of the "*Mottainai*" spirit, a way of thinking that criticizes the production unnecessary waste. How he had related the pottery's cracks to his own life tribulations was profound. Besides, the idea of a professional in ballerino posting on Instagram about a culture different to his own from nearly six thousand miles away was fabulous. Steven McRae's comments on Kintsugi added a more modern, powerful, and dynamic sensation to the art, improving the original image of old, worn out pottery on the shelves. I felt proud of Kintsugi, and of belonging to the culture of this art. My desire is that more of these empowering discoveries occur through cross-cultural interaction both on and off line. [694 words]