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KANNON BOSATU AT THE RENOVATED RIETBERG MUSEUM: DIALOGUES BETWEEN ERAS, ART ITEMS AND EXHIBITIONS

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It was with great expectation that in February of this year the Rietberg Museum in Zurich opened the doors of its new exposition areas after three years of deep changes. Therefore, on the year of its 55th anniversary, this event strengthens the enhancement of this museum specialised in non-European arts within the European and world panorama.

Its strategic formal renovation, in part deemed urgent due to the size of the collection that has gradually been developed now affords new areas for permanent exhibitions and boosts a range of temporary exhibitions with much scope such as the inaugural exhibition: “Kannon – Divine Compassion. Early Buddhist Art from Japan”.

Renowned for its neo-classical aura this Museum is spontaneously and subtly associated to the Museum-Temple concept (marked by the opulence

Front view of the glass pavilion “Canopies of Emerald”, facing Villa Wesendonck which will now be the entrance to the revamped Rietberg.

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of Villa Wesendonck), and is now in close dialogue with an emerald green glass pavilion that architects Alfred Grazioli (Berlin) and Adolf Krischanitz (Vienna and Berlin) designed.

In a rather impressive and poetic manner the title of the project, “Canopies of Emerald”, is the link between eras, structures, materials and feelings that now merge and enrich and enhance the history of this Museum. This reference falls upon the concrete and lively cultural and musical context lived in a rather particular way at Villa Wesendonck in the second half of the 19th century. XIX. Here the Wesendonck’s, wealthy hosts of the Zurich’s cultural and intellectual crème de la crème and art lovers, accommodated the Wagner’s (refugees in Zurich since 1849), and gave them Villa Schönberg (another building in the Rietberg complex which is now also an exhibition area) to live in.

The torrid and forbidden love of Mathilda Wesendonck and Richard Wagner gives rise to a series of poetic creations, amongst many love letters, such as “In the Hothouse” from Mathilda to Wagner (which “Canopies of Emerald” refers to) for which Wagner himself wrote the music (this happened many times with poems written by her and music composed by him). Inspired by this love Wagner’s creations flourished and he completed “Tristan and Isolde” and offered Mathilda the manuscript on New Year’s Eve in 1857.

“Canopies of Emerald” calls for a restructuration of most of the exhibition course of this non-European art Museum allowing specially for an increase in the number of art pieces being exhibited as well as new grouping by theme or object. The new underground permanent exhibition galleries that connect the glass pavilion to the Museum’s original, main exhibition building, Villa Wesendonck, follow the logic of the previous programme. On the other hand, it is quite fascinating to note the dialogues, inspirations and visual games that two buildings standing face to face with architectural styles that mirror the different periods, give rise to.

The new halls, from the glass pavilion on, are divided into: China, Japan, Congo, Gabun, Cameroon, West Africa, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Mali. When we climb again to the ground floor we enter directly into Villa Wesendonck to the halls assigned to: India, Pakistan, Himalaya and Tibet, South India, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Swiss Masks (the only relevant group of European art), Alaska, Mesoamerica, Western Mexico, Peru and Oceania. To complete the trilogy of exhibition areas of this museum the Park-Villa Rieter building presents Indian painting, Iran, Egypt and Oriental carpets in a permanent exhibition although its duration is slightly shorter due to conservation aspects.

All these categories of geographic divisions comprise sub groups organised according to themes, techniques, materials, types or chronology in a
permanent area. Therefore, temporary exhibitions should afford an approach to new knowledge and allow to distinguish new inherent aspects or their own samples. It is then, with a richer intersection of subjects and a greater variety of object types that new discussions and contributions are introduced bringing to light additional and more complex information.

From the very beginning the programme of the Rietberg Museum exhibitions has shown great interest in the aesthetics of both the display and the enhancement of the item. The excellence of the material and the technical finesse of the items afford them the statute of masterpieces, which according to this Museum should not be subject to the disturbance of any plastic “din” within the exhibition area. Therefore by opting to present less complementary information (charts, introductory texts, chronologies, contextualization...) the ambiance might end up unembellished but this is the ideal environment for the item to stand out. This orientation that determines the expographic decisions to be applied is on the other hand based on great concern for complement through the catalogues and various publications in which all the scientific knowledge pertaining to the items is expanded, presented and at the disposal of those who wish to consult it.

The reopening and restructuration of the Rietberg Museum brought upon various museographic solutions which were successfully implemented pursuing this same orientation. At the Wesendonck Villa, a neoclassical palace, the architecture of the space was equally well managed leading, through rooms, to the various geographical points, shaping and building an exhibition concept in the line of this structure.

The toned down and minimalist design of the equipment is rather harmonious with the colour schemes of the rooms. The light and airy atmosphere of the exhibition in the palace links the inner and outer areas through large windows and the intertwining of selected shades and the surrounding environment is decisive (walls in shades of blue to rooms overlooking the lake and others in earthy shades or in green for rooms with a view to the garden). On the other hand it is quite interesting to note that at sunset the atmosphere of the palace exhibitions changes substantially. The loss of natural light enhances the good lighting directed at the items affording greater dramatic effects and focusing the details.

In the sequence of underground rooms of permanent exhibition the good use of artificial light, the interesting show of symmetries of the display cases, the efficient array of objects, the colour scheme of the rooms and the enhancement of some items displayed on plinths which were strategically designed for this effect or still intelligently placed at the end of the spacious corridors allow one to engage in contemplation.
The Rietberg Japanese art collection might not be large in number but there has been a meticulous selection of items. The large groups of this collection shape this sub-division of the rooms dedicated to the geographical space of Japan.

The room that displays Japanese paintings and drawings does not present the expected visual dramatic effect that would resort to lighting tricks that assure the conservation of the items and also enhance the vibrant colours and outlines (if you recall, for instance the good expographic work of designer Mariano Piçarra for the exhibition “Worlds of Dreams: Modern Japanese Drawings of the Robert O. Muller Collection” at the Museum of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation from October 2006 to January 2007). In this section highlight goes to the Buddhist paintings of the Muromachi period (1333-1568); Zen paintings and of literary ambiances from the 18th to the 19th century, that join poetry, writing and painting in a typical and perfect manner; folding screens and drawings of renowned artists as the ultimate models of this technique. A comprehensive vision of the refined Japanese traditional arts is concisely transmitted.
The display of the small but sophisticated group of Buddhist sculptures attained a spiritual ambiance ideal for contemplation with effective and carefully thought out lighting. Amongst the various sculptures of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) highlight goes to the lovely Jizô and Kokûzô amongst other bodhisattvas.


The nucleus of masks of the Nô Theatre, a total of thirty four donated by Balthasar and Nanni Reinhart, is one of the most important collections outside Japan in which all the important varieties of characters are portrayed: humans, gods, spirits and demons. Most date back to the Edo Period (1615-1868), however some are from previous periods and most can be seen at the interesting visible storage (another new aspect of the museum).

At the new galleries, the most evident positive point is the choice of display cases that allow one to observe the three-dimensional objects at 360º (or the strategic array of the items for the same effect). The marked concern with aesthetics led to the inadequate placement of titles on the items, or the lack of them so that even this element does not interfere with the contemplation of the items.

Approximately 4000 items of various types can also be observed in a different context (that shows a “hunger” for contact with more proof by certain publics). In the museum’s visible storage one can visit and appreciate a large number of items in a different physical context, presentation and arrangement, directly related with the functions of preservation, cataloguing and study of the Museum.

For the grand reopening Katharina Epprecht, Curator of Japanese Art and Public Relations Manager and clearly an important learned person in Japanese arts and masks of the Nô Theatre, programmed and conceived the exhibition “Kannon – Divine Compassion. Early Buddhist Art from Japan” in a special partnership with the Nara National Museum, inaugurating one of the two spacious underground temporary exhibition rooms.

This exhibition on the bosatsu (Bodhisattva in Japanese) the compassion or the mercy, Kannon, presented a selection of refined sculptures and paintings dating back to the 7th century up to the 14th century that reveal the great popularity of this Buddhist divinity in Japanese lands and its plea is one of the main aims in the temples of the Land of the Rising Sun.
The opening of the Rietberg’s visible storage is the clear answer to various aspects related to the imaginariun of the actual Museum and of its functions. Note how the dialectics “Preserve/Exhibit versus Observe” is materialised in this room. This visible storage reflects and reaffirms the position of the Museum whilst organism that preserves memories or the “memory of the world”, through its functions of connoisseur, scholar and producer of knowledge that through it becomes eternal (reflexions and metaphors that the Museum of Ethnography of Neuchâtel develops in a rather curious manner). On the other hand the mythical role of the Museum is present in certain publics through the fetish wish for museum objects. This aspect of wishing to see testimonies does not fall back only on quality but also on the possibility of greater quantity. Therefore, the intention, of the Museum, is to render accessible a larger number of items and to assure its statute of organism that maintains, studies and preserves “memories”, which interestingly fits in with the public’s wish for quantity. The visible storages are now a fundamental area of all Museums.

Amongst the masterpieces that came from other Japanese museums where the only exception of non-Japanese loan of the Metropolitan Museum of Art - NY, the stars of this exhibition are assessed by the Japanese government as “National Treasure” and “Important Cultural Property”. Some of these pieces of art have never left Japan and even on Japanese territory their display is not constant thus making this exhibition a crucial moment that witnesses the good connections of Rietberg and the fabulous possibility that the latter generated.

This exhibition that comprises around 33 amazing art pieces featuring great quality in style and technique reveal the universe of bosatsu Kannon.
Kannon, bosatsu that embodies the divine compassion, the one that answers the cries of the world setting aside anguish, disease and death can adopt six different ways (composing the Six Kannon Group, which can be adored as a group or each Kannon individually) according to the origin of the soul that cries for help and the place of calling.

In brief:

– Shō or Saintly or Holy Kannon helps the souls in hell; this is the one that presents a more human form; sophisticated appearance and clothes of prince Siddhartha; it is the most common expression of Kannon;

– Senju Kannon with 1000 arms interferes in the kingdom of the hungry ghosts; it can also have 11 heads (its head in natural size and 10 small ones placed on top of this one) and 1000 arms (on the sculpture only 42: 2 in natural size and 40 smaller ones, that represent totality) and it has various objects to save the souls of each of the 25 stages of existence;

Senju Kannon
Kamakura period, 13th century
Wood with gold leaf over lacquer,
H. 168.8 cm
Chōkōji, Hyōgo
Important Art Object

This Senju Kannon initially belonged to the Temple of Sanjusangendō to the group of the 1001 Senju Kannon. For some reason it was transferred to the Chōkōji Temple, in the city of Katō that belongs to the Koyasan Shingon Sect, during the Muromachi period. The highlight of this lovely sculpture in the exhibition lies firstly on the identification of one of the six forms of Kannon and also on the representation of the magnificent Sanjusangendō temple in Kyoto, depicted in a hypnotic and rather intriguing manner by photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto.
– Batō Kannon with a horse head at the top of its topknot helps the people of the animal domain (specially horses and cows); initially in the 8th century it actually had a horse’s head; it can have lots of faces with violent and furious expression (against the evil), in each three eyes and wavy hair; it also helps to control the passions of the humans (as these feelings are more instinctive and therefore belong to the animal sphere);

Fukūkensaku Kannon
Heian period, 12th century
Cypress with polychromy, H. 90.6 cm
Ôgenji, Nara
Important Cultural Property

Fukūkensaku Kannon has a rather interesting characteristic, its feeling of compassion that allows it to save all the creatures with its infallible lasso pulling them to salvation "Kannon whose lasso is never empty" or the "Rope-snarfing Kannon". Amongst its characteristics highlight goes to: its third eye on the vertical between the eyebrows; its 4 pairs of arms (a top central pair in prayer or adoration and the remaining hands can hold: a bowl; a lasso – here on the bottom left hand; a lotus – left side hand; a monk’s staff – right side hand or a fly-whisk (on the central right hand at the bottom).
This National Treasure has been afforded great focus in this exhibition. Different studies made with X-rays, infra-red and ultraviolet rays are presented in one of the four secondary rooms of the exhibition. Here the Nara National Museum and the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, that carried out this study revealed various technical elements and painting aspects that are not visible to the naked eye. This type of approach, increasingly common, produces rather enjoyable moments for the public.
-- Juntei Kannon (a rare representation of Kannon in the feminine form called "Mother of the Seventy Million Buddhas"; it has 18 arms that represent features of the Buddhist divinities; it has a third eye on the forehead). This one has a special association to Fukûkensaku Kannon through the Tendai e Shingo School of Japanese Buddhism. Both help the people in the human dimension and answer the people in general that are in need;

-- Jûichimen Kannon featuring 11 heads, one natural one and 10 smaller in size accompanying the hairdo (7 around the diadem; 2 on the front part over the first row of the diadem and a Buddha one at the top of the topknot); it helps with the ghosts of warriors; it has only two arms; the left hand holds a vase containing lotus and the right one is held down in the position of giving and charity;

-- Nyoirin Kannon who is holding a wish-granting jewel helps those in the heavenly realm; its typical position is that of a seated Kannon in the royal ease position; with the right leg bent upwards, on which the elbow is resting on the knee to allow the chin to rest on the hand; the 6 arms that explore the 6 realms of existence appease all the evils and sufferings.

This was the way that this exhibition found to recall the complex context of Kannon bosatsu. Its various forms, the grand temple for adoration of Jûichimen Kannon as a model, Hasedera (in the city of Sakurai in the town hall of Nara) and the constant reference to the Lotus Sutra (which can also be heard in singing) indicated the different types of information that one aimed at connecting.

Together with the various and exquisite sculptures (some off which can be seen in these images) that depict the six forms of Kannon highlight goes to some items that due to their quality, richness in style and rareness in exhibition:

-- Illustrated Scroll of Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra (Calligraphy by Sugawara Mitsushige; Kamakura period, 1257; ink, colour and gold on paper; 23.9 × 934.9 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Featuring bright colours and sumptuous compositions of scenes, all the characteristics and history of Kannon Bosatsu are here alluded to;

-- on paper scroll Iconographic Drawings of Manifestations of Kannon (Heian period, 12th century; Ink on paper, 30 × 1064.3 cm; Nara National Museum; Important Cultural Property). The rarity and variety of these drawings make of this testimony a precious tool for the insight on iconography related to the different forms of Kannon bosatsu;
– the drawing Jūichimen Kannon (Heian period, 12th century; Ink and
colour with cut gold and silver foil on silk; 169 × 90 cm; Nara National
Museum; National Treasure). A true masterpiece of the Heian period Heian
(794-1185), see previous image, this painting still preserves the vitality of
its colours and sophistication and perfection of aspects related to style,
technique and material;

– Jūichimen Kannon in the “Hasedera Style” (Kamakura period, 13th cen-
tury; gilt bronze, H. 70.9 cm; Hasedera, Nara; Important Cultural Property).
This amazing sculpture is a testimony of a continuous and restricted tradi-
tions of bronze sculptures, when wood, as of the Heian period became the
favourite material for Buddhist sculptures. The refined plastic characteristics
of this sculpture are proof of the technical ability of the artisans that con-
tinued to preserve these types of techniques enhancing the complex work
of halo’s open-worked hōsōge karakusamon (arabesque design combining
precious flowers);

– Jūichimen Kannon and the Thirty-three Manifestations (Kamakura
period, 14th century; colour on silk, 116.6 × 58.8 cm; Nōman’in, Nara; Impor-
tant Cultural Property). This painting is a complex and rare composition
that evokes in a clear manner the huge miraculous sculpture of Hasedera,
of Jūichimen Kannon, connected to the faith coming from Kannon around
which its 33 manifestations are painted;

– Illustrated Scrolls on the Founding of Hasedera (Scrolls 2, 3 and 5 of 6;
Muromachi period, 1523, colour on paper; 17.9 × 710 cm/17.9 × 1159.3 cm/
17.9 × 818.7 cm; Hasedera, Nara; Important Art Object). The history of the
Hasedera temple, here written and illustrated in detail begins long before
worshipping Jūichimen Kannon during the Heian period. The legend about
the origin of the sacred tree, from which the wood was taken to carve the
10-metre statue of Kannon, the whole carving process, the ceremony for the
consecration of the sculpture (with the placing of the eyes), the foundation
of the temple and all the miracles afforded by the statue are referred here;

– Nyoirin Kannon (Kamakura period, 14th century; Colour on silk,
101.7 × 41.6 cm; Nara National Museum; Important Cultural Property).
This representation of Nyoirin Kannon within its sphere Fudarakusen,
the Pure Land of Kannon, is marvelous in all its composition of vegetable
and water elements amongst which we enhance the focus on the different
seasons reflected on the flowers. Here all cyclic periods are conjugated and
the human being observes them but in this celestial and supreme sphere they
all occur at the same eternal moment which is Fudarakusen.
All these Japanese testimonies that continue to dazzle the world due to their fusion of influences, philosophies, religions (Buddhism zen) and due to their very own pure and refined aesthetics, are scientifically developed within the exhibition catalogue. Unlike the art items, the catalogue does not feature a breath-taking design but it expands on some rather interesting issues that help to situate us within the complex context of Kannon bosatsu.

The exhibition’s curator Katharina Epprecht in “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds...” introduces us to the story, symbology, linguistic issues and the cult of Kannon bosatsu, which spread rapidly as of the 7th century when Buddhism arrived in Japan.

Michael Cunningham in “The Path of Kannon’s Compassion and Appearance in Early Japan” evokes the onset and development of Buddhism in Japan, the importance and power of visual arts, the “arrival” of Kannon, unveils the Lotus Sutra and outlines the interesting role of Kannon until today.

“Compassion in the Christian and Buddhist Traditions” by Maria Reis-Habito develops in a rather precise and interesting manner the Jewish, Christian and Buddhist traditions as pertains the concept of compassion and their mutual influences.

Hermann-Josef Röllicke in “The Roots of the Wisdom of Avalokiteshvara: The Hearing of Profound Awareness” outlines the path and invasion of the Avalokiteshvara cult (Kannon bosatsu) in Japan and analyses the sutras.

Sherry Fowler in “Between Six and Thirty-three: Manifestations of Kannon in Japan” explain and exemplifies the possible forms of Kannon bosatsu. This article, which is in fact the one that allows us to better understand the exhibition profits from the interesting and complete analysis of sculptures of the 6 different forms of Kannon by making a symbolic interpretation of positions and of objects.

“Hasedera and the Worship of the Eleven-headed Kannon” by Kajitani Ryōji expands on what the “Illustrated Scrolls on the Founding of Hasedera” portray in a brilliant manner. The complement between article and the art item is quite fascinating.

Lastly and following the concerns and studies of the Nara National Museum “Construction of Buddhist Sculpture: Wood Carving Methods” by Washizuka Hiromitsu demystifies the techniques and complex manner of producing and composing these lovely sculptures.

Let us now analyse the design and museographic composition of the exhibition. Curiously, according to what was proposed by the actual curator Katharina Epprecht, bearing in mind that the objects presented are of sacred nature and the latter bear spiritual powers that are still today worshipped by followers (in religious places or not), the aim was for the exhibition to create
and transmit the solemn and preeminent atmosphere that surrounds each bosatsu Kannon image.

In relation to the large space available and relatively to the latter, a not so large quantity of objects that would fill it, support structures were created that in addition to moulding the space and displaying the items framed the items in a sort of evocation of visual arts and even in a possible exchange of views. Inspiration is felt in the rooms of Buddhist sculptures of the National Museums of Nara and Tokyo but however the final results are quite different.

In these rooms on Japanese territory, curators and designers intelligently proceeded with the stylization of structures that display the sculptures in niches/plinths that bring out their magnificence. Added to this element, a detailed lighting technique was developed leading to rather important effects: the toning down of the space that displays the items, a spiritual ambiance, a dramatic and contrasting effect and spectacular focus on the items. Here the exhibition room is suppressed from our visual perception and the sculptures are carried to an enhanced physical sphere with no beginning or end, the possible Fudarakusen of Kannon. The stylized supports and plinths appear merely as evocations of temple structures through their forms and dark colours, suggesting the solid wood of sumptuous constructions.

An inevitable characteristic of the mythical adoration, of the dialogue with divinity, of the presence of the sacred and the supernatural in Japanese Buddhist temples in which Kannon bosatsu truly breathes, lives and answers is the twilight. The solemn and powerful atmosphere in which these souls live is always at half-light. It is not easy for us to see them because they are the ones that control us and look after us. Therefore, in our view, the decisive factor in the creation of an exhibition of this nature is to place these fabulous bosatsu under a “veil” that slowly opens to believers/followers that can then adore/observe them. However, similarly to Buddhist temples this adoration/observation is done gradually and through the adaptation to a level of inferior brightness. It is a game of expectation, a certain anxiety, the wish to reach the divine, the glorious, the magnificence that looks upon us from up top and that can save us with His enormous compassion. This effect can be found in the rooms of Buddhist sculptures in the National Museum of Nara and Tokyo.

Therefore, in the exhibition “Kannon – Divine Compassion” symmetry, the sparse secondary information, the simplicity of the structures, the delightful contrast through the use of red and the magnificence of the sculptures afford expographic harmony and lightness. On the other hand the poorly developed lighting element, of which the abundant general luminosity was the decisive negative factor, did not allow for the dramatisation and the possible and magnificent visual effect that would allow for an amazing contact with these divine creatures.
General view of the main and central exhibition room. In the foreground Fukúkensaku Kannon, on the left Juntei Kannon (Kamakura period, dated 1224; Jôkei – active 1224-1256; Figure: nutmeg, H. 175.6 cm; Pedestal and Halo: cypress, H. 276 cm; Daihôonji, Kyoto; Important Cultural Property), on the right Nyoirin Kannon (Heian period, 10th century; Nutmeg with traces of polychromy; H. 94.9 cm; Nara National Museum; Important Cultural Property) and the golden Senju Kannon, with a paintings on the each side, also represent it.

The work by the fantastic Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto “Sea of Buddha” marked one of the highest points of the display. “Sea of Buddha” is the most pure and enigmatic vision of the 1001 Senju Kannon of our favourite Sanjunsoangendô temple in Kyoto. As intended by the brilliant and modern vision of Sugimoto the infinite alignment of the Senju Kannon appears precisely from the twilight so that with the only source of light, the sun, it can help humanity. The idea associated to the conceptual and minimalist art that it evokes and with which he did the 48 photographs of the 1001 Senju Kannon, resides in the clear observation of the magnificence of the sacred in the presence of the sun, similarly to the way the Heain aristocracy of Kyoto welcomed them. Here one finds an amazing and perfect understanding of the divine effect, of the solemn power and visual potential of Senju Kannon. On the other hand, the contemporary approaches of the original items, also on display, allow for exhibition moments rich in dialogues (thematic and visual) and of great interest for the public.
Back part of the central room. The impressive painting of Jūichimen Kannon (hanging from the central structure), in a display case on the left a sculpture also by Jūichimen Kannon (Heian period, 9th century; wood, H. 45.5 cm; Kaijūsenji, Kyoto; Important Cultural Property) and on the wall at the bottom of the room the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, “Sea of Buddha”, of the 1001 Senju Kannon of the Sanjusangendō temple (The Hall of Thirty-three Bays) in Kyoto.

In 1997 Sugimoto composes in a film the hypnotic “Accelerated Buddha” from the 48 photos also exhibited in this display. The uniqueness of the divinity and the hallucinating effect of the 1001 Senju Kannon in movement compose an experience which is to be imperatively tested.

“Kannon – Divine Compassion. Early Buddhist Art from Japan” witnessed the merit of the Rietberg Museum of Zürich. Accompanying the history of this Museum one can find various generations of communities that have one thing in common: the awareness of the crucial need for all that is cultural and the feeling that they have to fight for it. Those same connections and memories persist in dialogue until today both in inspirations and in concepts that, for instance, culminated in the big restructuring works of the Museum.

Katharina Epprecht, and the rest of the team are to be congratulated for the conclusion of a “divine” challenge where the art item is to be still and its magnificence and uniqueness are to be enhanced for an uncommitted observation that will allow for a personal view and understanding of the forms and symbologies that the latter evoke.
Kannon bosatsu, through its 6 splendid manifestations, of the different means that witness and enhance them or through the hypnotic effect of the brilliance of Sugimoto, brought to Zürich and to Europe the refined style and profound feeling of sacredness that still encourages the Land of the Rising Sun.

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