

Wabi-sabi Style: the Collision of the East and West, the Combination of the Fashion and the Nature

Ge Fang^{1, †}, Yuxin Fu^{2, †} and Linqi Peng^{3, *, †}

¹Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

²Department of Marketing, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom

³Department of Public Finance, Hunan University of Finance and Economy, Changsha, China

*Corresponding author: 15120140117@xs.hnit.edu.cn

†These authors contributed equally.

Abstract. In the past fifty years, Japanese fashion as one of the most prosperous Asian fashions has become a legend in the world fashion field through its special oriental design that breaks the fashion aesthetics with the West as the mainstream in the past. In recent years, wabi-sabi style has become a new fashion trend. As sustainable fashion is advocated by more and more people, the ecological concept wabi-sabi aesthetic holds also accords with the eco-fashion tendency. This paper aims to study the wabi-sabi style in the fashion field, which includes its power to collide with the fashion world dominated by the West, and its ecological function. First of all, this paper compares the aesthetic, religious, and women's fashion history of the wabi-sabi style and the western style. Then, it investigates the fashion collision between the East and the West in terms of design concepts and analyzes the inspiration for the wabi-sabi fashion style. What is more, this paper also integrates the wabi-sabi style and eco-fashion to analyze its positive impact on the environment. Ultimately, this study suggests that although the wabi-sabi style has a minimal influence in the fashion field, it will have a promising future for its sustainability and the comfort it renders to the secular life. The result helps to promote the wabi-sabi style, making more people know about this style and think deeply about their attitude to their lives, and grabbing more attention to wabi-sabi fashion for its environmentally friendly function.

Keywords: Wabi-sabi style; fashion warfare; eco-fashion; design concept.

1. Introduction

For a long time, western aesthetics have taken an absolute leadership position in the fashion field, which is based on the development of the European capitalist economy and the liberation of people's minds by the Renaissance. As early as the late 17th century, France, especially Paris, became the recognized center of fashion in Europe [1], while Asia was still under the tyranny of the feudal dynasties. Until now, luxury is still a major part of the French economy and Paris is also the fashion capital of the world. However, with the development of The Times, most countries of the eastern world gradually got rid of the control of feudal rule over people's thoughts. Firstly, Japan took the lead in realizing the capitalist system. With its rapid economic development, it was also the first to pay attention to the importance of fashion to society. Over the past 40 years, there have been many excellent Japanese designers, such as Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo, and Issey Miyake [2]. They have created a unique new fashion with Oriental aesthetics by combining traditional Japanese aesthetics: wabi-sabi with fashion design. Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete [3]. And wabi-sabi brought poverty beauty to fashion circle. These clothes look as if they were picked up from broken cloth bags, which are characterized by torn, ripped and ragged fabric, uneven hemlines, plain color and weakening gender differentiation [2]. Wabi-sabi was undoubted of great conflict and destruction to the fashion circle, which pursued fine art and high fashion at that time. Meanwhile, the emergence of wabi-sabi has also injected a new soul into the development of fashion. And more and more people have begun to pay attention to this unique design style with

Oriental aesthetics, including some celebrities and influential bloggers. The celebrity effect has further contributed to the popularity of this style.

In addition, the increasingly serious environmental pollution problem is gaining public attention. As a result, people begin to realize the importance of fashion environmental protection issues. Unlike traditional fashion design that prefers using animal leather and chemical materials, wabi-sabi clothing is designed to use more all-natural fabrics and reduce the addition of chemicals. For example, Uma Wang, a personal brand founded in London by Chinese designer Zhi Wang in 2003, inherits wabi-sabi style while also choosing extremely strict fabrics. Uma Wang is mostly made of cotton and linen, vegetation dyeing, and tea dyeing and the color inspiration comes from rocks, taken from natural elements to the greatest extent, emphasizing the harmony between man and nature. By introducing the historical origin and development of wabi-sabi, this article reveals the conflict and opposition of eastern and Western fashion, and rationally and objectively evaluates the future development prospects of wabi-sabi. This paper will explore the impact of wabi-sabi style as a Oriental popular aesthetic on the traditional Western fashion field by analyzing wabi-sabi fashion design concept, wabi-sabi style materials and ecology, and wabi-sabi style religious connotation influence compared with Western fashion.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, there have been a number of studies related to the comparison of styles between East and West. Au et al. took European designers Christian Lacroix and Karl Lagerfeld and Japanese designers Issey Miyake and Rei Kawakubo as representatives [4]. This study discusses the origin and structure of the differences between European and Japanese fashion garments aesthetics. Among them, European design is more inclined to get inspiration from its history, and most of them are the Renaissance of elegance and luxuriance, mainly in the "historical resurrection model", while Japanese design tends to co-construct history and future, with a sense of drooping and simplicity, following the theory of "art movement model" and "historical continuity model". Rusan introduced three Japanese pioneers of wabi-sabi style designers--Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto. By organically combining Japanese fabrics and shapes, their designs create clothing that is different from Western freedom and pragmatism, illustrating more of the functionality of clothes. In contrast to the flamboyant and idealized visuals of European garments, they impacted mainstream Western fashion with their imperfect and asymmetrical designs [5]. Samborska elaborated on the challenge of Japanese aesthetics to the design concept of Western aesthetics and the fashion revolution it has sparked regarding clothing and the body. Western designers are more interested in highlighting the curves of the female body. Thus, more tight-fitting designed clothing is applied and occupies the mainstream aesthetic status. In contrast, the Japanese wabi-sabi style is more natural, and the concept of gender limitation is blurred. At the same time, Issey Miyake has developed permanently creased polyester fabric, which can adapt to different users' external body characteristics effectively. The designers' requirements for fabrics also represent Japanese aesthetics' pursuit of a natural spirit based on Japanese Shinto, with practicality and functionality to counter the superiority of Western art [6]. According to Busch, the views and positions of visitors in browsing fashion exhibitions are different. They have vague definitions and controversy about the division between the East and the West due to many conflicts and tolerances between them. While Japanese designers used Buddhist thought as the root to showcase the concept of rough, ephemeral, modest, and empty Oriental aesthetics accentuated in wabi-sabi style designs, diverging from the traditional western fashion values of refinement and idealism. It can be seen from the above studies that the Eastern and Western dressing styles represented by the European and Japanese design styles are different both in the aspects of design and function. This study will focus on the comparison between the Western style and the Eastern style represented by wabi-sabi with historical background factors, fashion warfare, and eco-fashion [7].

3. Wabi-sabi versus Western Style in History Aesthetic

The long-term development of culture and history has led people to begin to produce a constant renewal and extension of their aesthetics and values. Eastern and Western fashions evolved in a continuous process and displayed certain regional traditions and beliefs that characterized them. During the reign of Louis XIV, dress became a symbol of people's power. Louis XIV's admiration for exaggerated courtly style led the nobles to intensify their consumption of extravagant clothing as a way to enrich their image. After, the French Treasury even made fashion a pillar of its economy [5]. Because as royal aristocrats, they need to wear clothes that fit their status and rank on special occasions, such as scarlet high heels and silk stockings. Luxurious fabrics and expensive wigs were the fashion trends during that period. When the appearance of Paris haute couture in 1858 continued the characteristics of traditional luxury clothing in French history, customized unique expensive clothing became people's recognition of the fashion concept understanding [6]. Wabi-sabi style is the power to shake the traditional Western gorgeous aesthetic. Three pioneering Japanese designers, Issei Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto, carried their works to the fashion capital of Paris. The garments with simple and asymmetrical designs challenged the concept of Western aesthetics.

3.1 Religious History of Wabi-sabi and Western Aesthetics

Religious history has a certain degree of influence on the aesthetic style of Eastern and Western fashion. As Ved der Leeu argues, religion can be shown through the medium of art, and artworks are the carriers of religion 错误!未找到引用源。 错误!未找到引用源。 . The Baroque style prevailing in the 17th century is one of the fashion styles acting on the characteristics of Western dressing. The Catholic Church used baroque art forms to influence people's aesthetics to satisfy the needs under the Reformation and to demonstrate the supremacy and status of the Church. Hedonism led to a shift in the papal aesthetic toward strong color palettes and the art of noble and luxurious design. As a result, the design of clothing became exaggerated and ornate, especially with the fact that male's clothing used lace, velvet, feathered hats, buttons, and other design elements to emphasize their luxury. Modern Western fashion designers were also influenced by religious aesthetics and adopted many revival elements in their couture design garments. Among them, Karl Lagerfeld referenced the 17th century Louis XIV baroque style jacket silhouette and fringe design, and the classic knee-length pants were also one of his inspirations [4].

The term wabi-sabi derives from the Buddhist teaching of suffering, impermanence, and emptiness of life [7]. Thus, the wabi-sabi style is influenced by Eastern philosophy and permeated with Buddhist truth. In contrast to the pursuit of artistry in Western clothing, Japanese aesthetics pay more attention to the functionality of their garment. Designers of the wabi-sabi style hold a belief that the meaning of beauty lies in the brevity of time and the imperfection of things. They are modest and not decorated by pompous things. Besides, they are always in a state of progress and change [6]. The ideology of non-self in Buddhism considers the mind as a curious monkey trapped in an empty house, but it constantly explores its impressions of its surroundings, and the root of that exploration is a fascination with its own charms [7]. Busch explains that the identity presented by clothing is like the house of the monkey [7]. People are only focused on themselves, but they are not aware of the emptiness of the house. Therefore, designer Rei Kawakubo focused her design concept on the koan mu, where meaning is empty, and the notion of ma, where meaning is space, to convey the aesthetic of visual and sensory ambiguity [7]. Buddhist ideology influences the wabi-sabi style of design through irregular knits, ripped hems, casual and borderless tailoring, and unique tie-dye techniques to present an aesthetic of authenticity, mundanity, and imperfection. The aesthetic from the wabi-sabi is expressed more through Buddhism with simple, subtle, and imperfect designs contrasting with the free, bright, and sophisticated dress of the West.

3.2 Women Wear on Wabi-sabi and Western Aesthetics

In 18th-century European courts, the Rococo style became acclaimed. The fashion trend of women's clothing evolved into a tight-fitting body, low necklines, and large hemlines, with ornate and intricate embellishments, which displayed the elegance and curves of women's bodies. Western women's clothing continued with the design feature emphasizing tight upper body clothing and exaggerated hemlines basis for a long time. In the 1920s, Western fashion still followed the design language of highlighting the female waist. Driven by Oriental fever, the structure of women's clothing has changed. The clothing reform in the early 20th century brought a similar wide design of the Japanese kimono into the fashion trend, and designers shifted the emphasis of women's wear to the shoulders [6]. With the advent of the 21st century, feminism received more support and development. In this context, Rei Kawakubo makes a new interpretation of women's clothing by taking the wabi-sabi style as the medium and the alienation of clothing being its most obvious design presentation [5]. Rei Kawakubo wrapped the body in fabric to display undifferentiated body curves; while designing irregular padding around the neck or back to alter and challenge the stereotype of female sensuality [6]. The transformation of women's dress style brought by wabi-sabi arouses people's new thinking about gender, body, and clothing and also shocks people's concept of traditional Western fashion and patriarchal aesthetics.

4. Fashion Warfare between Eastern and Western

4.1 The Difference between Eastern and Western Clothing Design Concepts

Most clothing designs are inspired by local traditional culture, religious beliefs, or even the natural environment. Western culture pays attention to individual independence and pursues rationality, freedom, and innovation. Therefore, a wide variety of fashion styles, such as Dark Gothic style, South French style, and Athflow style, have been born in the vast course of western history. The Dark Gothic style is influenced by Christian architecture, and its clothing mostly uses longitudinal cut lines to highlight the slender figure, women's top is a tight fit, and the skirt is wide, forming a conical shape like a church. As an embranchment of French style, South French style pursues minimalism and has a lazy holiday vibe, through shirts, jeans, and floral dresses, paired with simple accessories to foil the French lady's romantic and free temperament and the spirit of the pursuit of natural beauty. Athflow (Athleisure Flow) style, as a newly popular fashion trend, it seeks a balance of movement and elegance, pursuing the concept of clothing comfortable materials, and protecting the environment. This style of clothing, with an oversized coat with sports underwear and sweatpants, looks casual but comfortable. Oriental culture attaches significant importance to tradition, pays attention to inheritance, pursues the harmony between human and nature, emphasizes self-cultivation, and incorporates many concepts of Oriental philosophy. Taking Yoji Yamamoto as an example, which is influenced by traditional Oriental culture and different from the structure and customization of western fashion, its clothing tends to be deconstructed, such as no hems or finished edges skirts, asymmetric tailoring and seemingly casually collage together cloth [2]. It was defined at that time as anti-fashion and subverting the clothing tradition, though these designs exactly embody the core idea of wabi-sabi aesthetics-imperfectionism. However, Yoshi Yamamoto's works have contributed profoundly to the evolution of fashion styles in the 20th century and have also deeply influenced many future designers [2].

4.2 Design Inspiration for the Wabi-sabi style Clothing

In Yohji Yamamoto's clothing design, asymmetrical tailoring and texture fabrics are ubiquitous, which reflects the incomplete beauty of what the wabi-sabi aesthetic has always been pursuing [3]. In fact, wabi-sabi aesthetics contains many traditional Oriental philosophies and Zen propositions, which respect and develop the original beauty of the objective things, advocate people to be indifferent on fame and wealth, and go more inward for pursuing the peace of the spiritual world.

This is also reflected in that the wabi-sabi style of clothing mostly prefers to choose linen, cotton, and silk as the dominating fabrics, which are much more skin-friendly and comfortable, but less expensive. Part of the wabi-sabi style clothing design is also inspired by nature, such as branches, withered wood as well as rocks.

4.3 The Relationship between Oriental Clothing Design and Oriental Cultural Elements

For example, Peng Tai is a wabi-sabi style brand from Taiwan, China and insists on using crafts to make timeless clothing that can stand against time. Peng Tai incorporates Oriental elements and the five elements of Taoist thought into the clothing design, forming its unique cultural symbols. Peng Tai is a brand with a strong craftsman spirit whose designer is attracted to the Compendium of Materia Medica. The fabrics used are often dyed in Chinese herbal medicine, such as pepper grass, mugwort leaf, and gardenia. This special process is called tea dyeing and vegetation dying. In addition, the designer also personally writes the words on the tag. As an important part of ancient Chinese philosophy, the Taoist five elements reveal the objective laws that all things in the world complement each other and are constantly changing. Peng Tai inherits and innovated the Chinese traditional culture, forming a distinct clothing style and has a great influence on the Chinese fashion industry.

5. Wabi-sabi Style and Eco-fashion

Wabi-sabi style combines nature and fashion and embraces the eco-fashion trend. Wabi-sabi is a nature-based aesthetic, which refers to appreciating the flaws of the world when coming across force majeure and unprecedented circumstances and pursues people to coexist in harmony with nature [9]. Wabi-sabi clothing is comparatively more ecologically friendly than other clothes, such as fast fashion, which counts on cheap and low-cost fabrics, consecutive consumption, and short-lived garment use [10]. Furthermore, the most common and profitable fiber in many contemporary fashion productions is polyester, and the frequency of using polyester has grown higher with the development of the fast fashion industry. Materials like polyester consist of a large number of micro-plastics that finally flow into the sea with washing machine water, contaminate the marine environment, and finally exist in marine lives' bellies and endanger their lives. In recent years, environmental issues, such as water pollution, carbon dioxide emissions, and dissolved wastes, have been caused by toxic chemicals contained in synthetic dyes and waste clothes in the manufacturing processes of many fashion products. As the environmental impact of the fashion industry has been concerned by more and more people and the support for the sustainable fashion industry has increasingly soared, wabi-sabi fashion that is dedicated to protecting the environment and human beings' lives can be the representative of eco-fashion that ensures the clothing and accessories are made in an ecologically friendly process. Compared with materials that cause tremendous damage to the environment, the materials for manufacturing wabi-sabi clothing can be easily renewed and biodegraded, cause less clothing waste and water pollution, and, more importantly, do harmless to the environment. For example, natural plant dye is one of the main techniques in wabi-sabi fashion production. Before it was applied in Europe, the earliest record of the use of natural plant dye was discovered in China, dated 2600 BC [11]. It is regarded as a traditional dyeing technique that spread to Japan from China in the Tang dynasty and then practiced in the production of wabi-sabi clothing. Pigments used in the part of dyeing wabi-sabi fashion production are usually roots, leaves, barks, flowers, trunks, and fruits, which are all provided by nature 错误!未找到引用源。 . Besides, the fabrics of wabi-sabi garments are mostly from natural resources, such as cotton, silk, wool, and linen. That is one of the reasons why wabi-sabi fashion brands like Uma Wang and Peng Tai are regarded as luxury wabi-sabi fashion brands by most normal consumers. Because the production of wabi-sabi clothes comes from natural resources, on the one hand, the priority for the use of the land is for the demand for food and feed purposes, so the raw materials are limited for manufacturing clothing, on the other hand, natural plant dyes require lengthy dyeing procedures, and the amount of natural dyes is usually larger than synthetic dyes, according to the study, one pound of cotton can be dyed with about five grams of synthetic dye,

which means natural dyes will cost more than synthetic dyes [13]. In addition, Natural dyes provide fabrics with different shades with all kinds of mordant ratios and combinations, which enables the colorfastness property of wabi-sabi clothing to be strengthened by washing, rubbing, light, and perspiration [12]. In a word, wabi-sabi garments are not only environmentally friendly in terms of limiting harmful chemicals discharged in production, but also have the confidence to guarantee their quality and durability for their natural materials and stable color fastness property, which are able to produce fewer cloth wastes and enable people to wear them longer. These are all factors that qualify wabi-sabi fashion to be a new eco-fashion.

6. Conclusion

As a newly popular clothing style that can represent Oriental aesthetics, wabi-sabi will still have a lot of space for development in the future. The more prosperous urban life is, the more people will resonate with the wabi-sabi. In the high-speed running society, people gradually become busier, but they do not know why they are busy, so people often need to empty their minds to seek the satisfaction of the spiritual world. Wabi means simplicity, sabi means peace of mind. Everything in the world always deteriorates with the passage of time. Instead of treating the traces of this time passage as a deterioration, people choose to accept it and feel its beauty from it. This is the wabi-sabi aesthetics. And wabi-sabi's inadequate, impermanent and incomplete beauty warns people to keep a low profile, reduce anxiety and stay away from the secular world, which can even more inspire modern people, and meanwhile, have a strong explanatory power in the design of clothes. The wabi-sabi style is unique in modern society, which is why so many people pay for it. In today's aesthetic trend is more pathological and fuller of vulgarity, people should appreciate the emergence of advocating the beauty of nature styles like wabi-sabi. Beauty is pleasant only when it comes from nature, from the heart and becomes a part of life, "plain, silence, humility, nature...". These labels related to wabi-sabi are exactly the ideal lifestyle that modern people have always pursued. Instead of the modern production line by handmade production, not only to protect the environment but also to inherit and carry forward the traditional Oriental culture to advocate Oriental aesthetics. Wabi-sabi clothing is not a mainstream fashion, but in the future, there are unlimited development prospects. Countless designers are also working to carry it forward, more and more people will appreciate the wabi-sabi style.

References

- [1] William H. Sewell, Jr. *The Empire of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France*. *Past&Present*, 2010, 206(1): 81-120.
- [2] Bonnie E. *Japanese fashion designers: the work and influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo*. Berg. London. 2011, 37-66.
- [3] Leonard, K. *Wabi-sabi for artists, designers, poets & philosophers*. Imperfect Publishing. Point Reyes. 2008, 1-7.
- [4] Au J S C, Taylor G, Newton E W. East and West think differently? the european and japanese fashion designers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 2000, 4(3): 223-242.
- [5] Rusan A P. Japanese design in western fashion the three Japanese designers who changed the fashion world. *Editura Eurostampa*, 2015, 22(1): 127-136.
- [6] Samborska M. Intolerable ugliness. A turn in European fashion as a result of confrontation with Japanese aesthetics. *Art Inquiry*, 2015, XVII (XXVI): 309-320.
- [7] Busch O V. Beyond the in-between: Rei Kawakubo at the met and the clash between Eastern and western concepts in fashion studies. *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 2018, 5(1): 111-128.
- [8] Chidester D. Aesthetic strategies in western religious thought. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1983, LI(1): 55-66.
- [9] Ailun, Wu. *Japanese Packaging Design with Influence of Japanese Philosophy*. Master's Thesis of the Department of the Industrial and Graphic Design of Auburn University, 2021.

- [10] Niinimäki, Peters, Dahlbo, Perry, Rissanen & Gwilt. The environmental price of fast fashion. *Natural Reviews Earth & Environment*, 2020, 1:189-220.
- [11] R Siva. Status of natural dyes and dye-yielding plants in India. *Current Science*, 2007, 92(7):916-925.
- [12] Iqbal Sanjeeva, Ansari Taiyaba N. Natural Dye: Their Sources and Ecofriendly Use As Textile Materials. *Environmental Research And Development*, 2014, 8(3A): 683-688.
- [13] Asim Kumar Roy Choudhury. Eco-friendly Dyes and Dyeing. *Advanced Materials and Technologies for Environmental Applications*, 2018, 2(1): 145-176.