

Chapter 2

Wabi-Sabi as a Way of Life in the Japanese Employment System: Multilateral Connections, Relativity, and Duality

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ABSTRACT

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese concept traditionally described as a type of beauty that conveys the philosophical values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence. Going beyond the traditional interpretation of the concept, this chapter attempts to discover wabi-sabi as a way of life in Japanese corporate settings. This chapter first revisits the concept of wabi-sabi and the system of lifetime employment, positioning them as intrinsically linked systems. To contextualize employment practice, it examines the tool of a job description and the system of job rotation as attributes of employment practice. The findings reveal the existence of wabi-sabi as a way of life in corporate settings, demonstrate the relative nature of the wabi-sabi values, and show the duality of positive and negative attributes. The grounded findings exhibit the shared features with the traditional interpretation of wabi-sabi based on the same philosophical values. The shared features suggest that the concept of wabi-sabi can be used for relevant research beyond the fine arts.

INTRODUCTION

Wabi-sabi is a Japanese concept that conveys the philosophical values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence (Treviranus, 2010). Durston (2006, xiv) writes that today's interpretation of wabi-sabi is based on Leonard Koren's work, which describes it as "a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete... a beauty of things modest and humble... a beauty of things unconventional" (Koren,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6960-3.ch002

1994/2008, p. 7). Along with this definition, literature often discusses the Japanese way of tea ceremony as the archetype that exhibits the modest, humble, and unconventional aesthetics. Wabi-sabi is also examined in association with artistic or decorative ornaments: for example, dried flowers or branches, aged, faded, and scuffed wood, and rough and uneven stone walls (Adams, 2017, p. 20). High-tech office chairs, flashy cars that spark envy, and giant warehouse discount stores are not wabi-sabi (Adams, 2017, p. 20). These objects are mostly associated with modernism (Koren, 1994/2008). Modernism has shaped aesthetic sensibility of its own that has little commonality with wabi-sabi. Koren (1994/2008) offers the following comparison to have a better sense of wabi-sabi:

Wabi-sabi can be more of a relative concept, which is subject to individual judgment or preference. Modernism tends to prioritize standardized beauty appealing to a wide audience. Standardization can help minimize costs and maximize functions in general. Wabi-sabi may be considered ambiguous or contradictory aesthetics that pursue something other than utility maximization. This chapter attempts to find what matters to wabi-sabi.

The interpretation of wabi-sabi as a type of beauty is helpful in understanding the concept, as it is often perceived as notoriously difficult to understand (Durston, 2006). However, today's interpretation may not precisely represent the very gist of the concept. Koren (1994/2008, p. 21) argues in the first place "Wabi-sabi can in its fullest expression be a way of life". Perhaps this description should be treated as the plain yet precise definition. Having said, Koren (1994/2008, p. 21) places the foothold for today's popular descriptions: "At the very least, it is a particular type of beauty". Koren suggests that "a type of beauty" is not an exhaustive or rigid definition. A study of wabi-sabi as a type of beauty is certainly meaningful, but wabi-sabi as a way of life is more holistic than that and seems to call for further research. This chapter will explore the uncharted area and aim to discover the wabi-sabi ways of life for advancing the concept beyond the traditional realm.

This study will examine Japanese business as its research field. The business sector is chosen for three reasons: First, it is suitable for the research aim to explore outside the traditional fields of wabi-sabi. The business sector has been rarely examined as a wabi-sabi subject. Secondly, Japanese business has its distinctive forms of business practices. Japanese style management includes continuous improvement (kaizen), just-in-time manufacturing, lifetime employment, the form of keiretsu, and the main bank system (Abegglen, 2006). The wabi-sabi way of life may be observable in any of them. Finally, ample literature is available pertaining to the second point. The body of literature in cultural studies (Thomas & Peterson, 2017) highlights the intrinsic connection between the local forms of business practices and the local values of preference, possibly including wabi-sabi in the case of Japan.

Based on the preceding premises, this chapter chooses lifetime employment among others and challenges the research question of whether the wabi-sabi way of life exists in the system. Lifetime employment is suitable for the research aim since it has been frequently discussed and generally supported (Ono,

Table 1. A comparison between wabi-sabi and modernism

Wabi-sabi	Modernism
Relative	Absolute
Comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction	Intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction
Function and utility are not so important	Function and utility are primary values

(abridged from Koren, 1994/2008, p. 26-29)

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