

Divergent Paths to Minimalism: Ontological and Sociological Distinctions Between Song Literati Aesthetics and Japanese Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

In the context of deepening globalization, cross-cultural comparative aesthetics holds significant value for understanding the spirit of East Asian art and its contemporary relevance. Song literati aesthetics and Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics, as two pinnacles of Eastern aesthetics, both champion simplicity, naturalness, and inner spirituality, yet exhibit distinct characteristics in their philosophical foundations and modes of expression. The Eastern aesthetic paradigm they represent offers the precious Other for reflecting on the “minimalism” narrative dominated by Western modernism. By excavating the profound ontological and ethical core beneath their minimalist appearance, this paper seeks to reveal an “organic minimalism”—imbued with spiritual warmth and distinct from Western industrial coldness—thus providing a theoretical basis for re-evaluating the universal value of Eastern classical aesthetics in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Song literati aesthetics, Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics, Organic minimalism

1. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL GENEALOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FORMATION

1.1 Song Literati Aesthetics and the Establishment of the “Blandness” Paradigm

The Song dynasty represents a cultural zenith, its aesthetics having been semiotized into a unique cultural memory. The formation of Song literati aesthetics was a lengthy process. François Jullien points out that the Song marks a turning point where “blandness,” previously seen as a deficiency, was established as the highest artistic ideal. Jullien suggests this represents the inwardness and maturity of vitality after full unfolding[4]. This paper adopts this line of thought, treating “blandness” as the most essential manifestation of Song literati aesthetics, using it as the anchorpoint for dialogue with Japanese wabi-sabi.

The philosophical foundation of Song literati aesthetics lies in the synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism[5]. Whether in the

argumentative nature of Song poetry or the precise capture of detail in Song painting, a spirit of “investigating things” (gewu) is embodied. Its aesthetic pleasure comes from “comprehension” rather than “being moved.” “Blandness” is not an emotional outlet but a rational contemplation of the world.

1.2 Japanese Wabi-Sabi Aesthetics and the Localized Translation of the Tea Ceremony

Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics is a product of cultural fusion and localization, absorbing Chinese Chan (Zen) thought and merging it with indigenous culture. Suzuki D. T., in his seminal work *Zen and Japanese Culture*, first established Chan as the philosophical link connecting Chinese and Japanese artistic spirits, pointing out that Japanese art represents an internalization and re-creation of Chinese Chan thought[1].

Wabi-sabi is based on the truth of “impermanence,” recognizing that nothing is eternal and that beauty exists only in the flux from “birth” to “death.” It opposes Song symmetry,

championing asymmetrical, accidental forms, and retains the raw coarseness of materials, believing that withering holds more power than full bloom. As Jun'ichirō Tanizaki details in *In Praise of Shadows*, wabi-sabi favors dim light, shadows, and blurred edges, rejecting clarity and brightness[6]. It represents a maintenance of spiritual nobility and freedom under extreme material scarcity, a resistance against consumerism and power structures, emphasizing the cherishing of the fleeting moment with tragic urgency.

2. AESTHETIC ISOMORPHISM AND MINIMALIST LOGIC FROM THE CHAN PERSPECTIVE

Despite their different birth contexts, the two exhibit striking structural isomorphism rooted in Chan Buddhism's shared pursuit of essentialism—the attempt to penetrate the veil of appearances and reach the ontology of being. Both negate excessive sensory ornamentation, seeking the manifestation of truth in the spiritual dimension. In art historical research, James Cahill, through his investigation of the circulation history of Chan monk paintings such as those by Muqi, provided visual empirical evidence that the transmission of Song aesthetics to Japan was not merely “dissemination” but a process of “value revaluation”[2]. It is noteworthy that Japan sanctified the marginal, heterodox Chan aesthetics within Chinese culture to confront the mainstream Chinese aesthetic narrative represented by Confucian Neo-Confucianism and official kiln perfectionism. This deliberate emphasis on “roughness” and “marginality” served the deep need to construct a native cultural identity and spiritual legitimacy independent of Chinese orthodoxy.

In this process, a subtle but crucial reorganization occurred: Japan strategically absorbed the subtractive logic of Song but selectively filtered out its Neo-Confucian foundation. The “simplicity” of Song literati aimed to eliminate human desire to access the universal “Principle” (Li); Japanese tea masters reshaped this “simplicity” into a vessel of experience purely oriented toward intuition and emotion. This creative misreading of “taking the form but transforming the essence” explains the high degree of visual isomorphism while planting the seeds for the inevitable and profound divergence in the ontological and sociological dimensions that unfold.

2.1 *From Linguistic Deconstruction to Spiritual Purification in the Ontological Dimension*

The primary consensus between the two rests on insight into the limits of language, i.e., “not relying on words.” The highest truth can only be realized through intuition. In the Song, this materialized as the realm of “blandness.” Su Shi's dictum, “extreme brilliance returns to blandness,” refers to the spirit's return to a “resonance” (yun) of infinite inner meaning[7]. This “blandness” shares a logic with Chan “emptiness.” Jullien defines it as “neutrality is plenitude,” where consciousness is liberated from enslavement to specific flavors, returning to the undifferentiated origin of things[4]. Japanese wabi-sabi inherits this path: Sen no Rikyū transformed the tea ceremony into “cultivation,” emphasizing “direct mind.” His ability to discover spiritual richness in scarcity is interpreted by Suzuki as “transcendental poverty,” indicating absolute freedom—seeing sufficiency within insufficiency—obtained after shedding material dependence[1]. Both view “stillness” as the only path to essence, forming the ontological ground of their aesthetics.

2.2 *The Visual Rhetoric of Anti-Formalism*

In formal language, both adopt subtraction, manifesting a minimalist tendency as a historical rebellion against previous “gorgeous aesthetics.” This “de-ornamentation” is embodied in a high regard for monochrome. Song painting advocated “ink divided into five colors,” escaping sensual enticement; its “blandness” was a safety valve invented by scholar-officials to enjoy art while preserving Confucian moral integrity. Japanese aesthetics promotes the “color of no-color.” Both, deeply influenced by the notion of “all conditioned phenomena are like dreams, illusions,” emphasize that “non-being” is more generative than “being.”

Although visually similar to Western modern minimalism, their essence differs. Both form a unique “organic minimalism” rather than cold geometric abstraction. This subtraction strips away artificial pretense, allowing the material's own naturalness and temporality to emerge. Whether the rational simulation of jade-like warmth in Song porcelain or the intuitive presentation of clay texture in Japanese Raku tea bowls, both retain the warmth of the handmade and the breath of nature. It

does not seek to conquer matter but to resonate with it on a spiritual level.

Examining the landscape paintings of Ma Yuan, vast areas of blank space are not physical absence but a field where qi flows, embodying the philosophy of “the idea arrives, the brush need not.” This anti-formalism is also a product of moral self-discipline. Ronald C. Egan notes that Su Shi advocated “lodging one’s intent in things” while opposing “fixating on things,” insisting on a non-attached aesthetic attitude. In wabi-sabi culture, Rikyū’s “Tai-an” tearoom stripped away all non-essential furnishings; the extremely compressed physical space created spiritual boundlessness, forcing entrants to shed social class and enter a Chan realm of “nothingness”[9].

2.3 The Material Phenomenology of Time

The third dimension of similarity lies in the attitude toward “nature” and “time.” Both highly esteem “clumsiness” (zhuo), viewing it as “innocence” transcending skill. Japanese wabi-sabi pushes the worship of imperfection to an extreme, seeing damage as the original face of things. This left a deep imprint on material culture. Song Ru ware aestheticized the firing flaw of “crazing” into a natural pattern; Japanese Chōjirō’s black Raku bowls retain hand-molding marks and coarse texture, breaking formal perfection and evoking participants’ intense focus on the present moment.

Both regard time as a co-creator of art. Song epigraphy made patinated bronzes an aesthetic paradigm, as rust represented historical orthodoxy; Japanese “sabi” philosophically appreciates moss and weathering. Whether the “archaic” (gaogu) pursued by Song or the “cold withered” (kare) esteemed by tea masters, both confirm spiritual eternity by affirming material decay. This temporal view of “organic minimalism” does not resist the erosion of time but treats its passing as an integral part of artistic completion, a key distinction from static industrial aesthetics that pursues eternal newness.

Song literati aesthetics and Japanese wabi-sabi resonate most profoundly in East Asian aesthetic history in their introspective ontology, subtractive form, and reverence for time, proving that the deepest “beauty” arises from restraint toward the material world and boundless opening toward the spiritual world[20].

3. THE BINARY DIVERGENCE OF SONG “BLANDNESS” AND JAPANESE “WABI-SABI”

Although deeply nourished by Chan learning, the two reveal completely different value orientations when translating metaphysical pursuit into aesthetic practice. Both strip away appearances; Song literati to reveal the radiance of reason, Japanese tea masters to gaze into the abyss of annihilation. Gao G., taking tea culture as an entry point, points out that although the Japanese tea ceremony historically inherited Chinese Chan thought and tea-drinking habits, the two present significant path divergence in aesthetic characteristics: Chinese tea culture, deeply influenced by Confucian thought, tends to pursue symmetry and completeness based on nature and harmony, whereas the Japanese tea ceremony turns its aesthetic gaze toward introspective “loneliness” and “sorrow,” emphasizing material “imbalance” and “incompleteness,” powerfully confirming the value reversal from “pursuing flawlessness” to “worshipping brokenness” in Sino-Japanese aesthetics at the material level [3].

3.1 Rational Harmony and Being-Toward-Death

In the orientation of life philosophy, they present a binary of “life” versus “death.” This paper introduces Heidegger’s “being-toward-death” as a heuristic interpretive tool. Japanese wabi-sabi echoes it across time and space, confirming the authenticity of present existence by gazing at material entropy and decay. Conversely, Song literati aesthetics constructs a path aimed at transcending this anxiety. Deeply influenced by the Confucian “creative vitality” (shengsheng zhi de) and Neo-Confucian ontology, Song literati sought “ontological security” in a transcendental cosmic order. Its minimalism does not display death but eliminates ephemeral contingency, resisting nothingness by imitating eternal law and achieving a life-affirming rational harmony. Su Shi’s “externally withered but internally rich” emphasizes the inner vital “richness” beneath the serene surface. This aesthetic affirms life, pursuing the Confucian “joy” (le). Wabi-sabi, however, is infatuated with the withering brought by impermanence, casting its aesthetic gaze on decay and annihilation—a profound “sorrow” (aware). This “being-toward-death” undertone is inseparably linked to the samurai spirit. Suzuki points out that Zen endowed the Japanese with an “immoveable

mind” of “life-death as one,” which, penetrating the tea ceremony, transformed into a gaze upon “extinction.” Song literati sought to establish worldly order; wabi-sabi, deeply influenced by samurai culture, tends to seek sudden enlightenment in momentary destruction.

It is this profound concern for life’s essence that endows East Asian aesthetics with organic warmth, essentially distinct from Western minimalism’s zero-degree writing that eliminates subjective emotion. The former responds to life’s predicaments, while the latter is a formal exercise of technological rationality. The difference in plant imagery hints at this: the plum blossom replaces the peony as the Song scholar-official totem, symbolizing rational resilience; the Japanese cherry blossom withers at its most brilliant, symbolizing “mono no aware.” One affirms life’s value, the other represents an aesthetic surrender to impermanence.

3.2 The Ideal Form of Perfection vs. the Triumph of Entropy

Differing understandings of “essence” lead to completely contrasting attitudes toward “completeness.” The Song pursued “minimalism under control,” using perfect craftsmanship to eliminate human traces and achieve idealized nature. Its “essence” is a pure form (eidos) stripped of impurities; objects are flawless, geometrically symmetrical, representing the victory of order over chaos. Conversely, wabi-sabi pursues “minimalism under submission,” accepting the entropy of matter and taking damage and asymmetry as the true state of things.

Here, a more precise demarcation of “organic minimalism” is needed. The perfection and symmetry sought by Song literati are not the mechanical geometry of industrial modernism but an “idealized organicism.” Song Confucians held that “Principle” (Li) is the highest law of all creation; ultimate control aimed to restore the ultimate natural state of matter before accidental interference—simulating the perfect order of the Creator. Japanese wabi-sabi represents a “primitive organicism,” accepting nature’s entropy and decay. Despite the methodological opposition of “control” versus “submission,” both belong to the “organic” category: one is the eternal “Law” of nature, the other the transient “Form” of nature, together distinguished from the alienated attitude of Western industrial modernism.

Take the Ru Ware Narcissus Basin without Craquele from the Northern Song as an example: its jade-like warmth, precise shape, and utter flawlessness demonstrate “blandness” as an ideal built on perfect technical control[12]. Zhao notes that Song craftsmen, deeply influenced by Daoist thought, strictly adhered to “formal aesthetic principles,” widely employing geometric patterns such as spirals and bead motifs that exhibit high degrees of “symmetry and regularity,” symbolizing eternal order and auspiciousness[13]. In contrast, the Japanese Ōido Tea Bowl, Kizaemon displays rough glaze, kiln runs, and cracks. In the kintsugi technique, cracks are conspicuously displayed with gold powder. This marks a shift in aesthetic judgment from “perfect stasis” to “the process of collapse,” where brokenness becomes truth.

3.3 The Dialectics of Class Distinction: Cultural Capital and the Aesthetics of Resistance

From a sociological perspective, the class attributes and construction paths of these two austere aesthetics are fundamentally different. Song “blandness” is an elitist product, extremely expensive and exclusive, requiring profound cultivation to “create blandness.” It is a form of “refined orthodoxy” (yazheng) aimed at affirming the cultural legitimacy of the Confucian elite. Although Japanese wabi-sabi was later absorbed by the ruling class, its spiritual origin carries an anti-cultural wildness. By simulating the environment of peasant huts amidst bustling cities, tea masters used material poverty to resist secular power’s opulence, establishing the spiritual legitimacy of a “counter-mainstream culture”[14].

Applying Bourdieu’s theory, these two aesthetics map onto completely different strategies of “distinction.” Song “blandness” is a high-order display of “cultural capital.” It negates the secular “taste of necessity” and establishes a “taste of contemplation” only obtained through long cultivation, presupposing the aesthetic subject’s superior position beyond material scarcity, thus barring the masses at the threshold[15]. Sen no Rikyū’s wabi-sabi shows a more radical strategy of “counter-distinction.” By negating the aesthetic standards of secular power, it declares the absolute spiritual dominion of the tea master.

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tea masters used material poverty to resist secular power's opulence, establishing the spiritual legitimacy of a "counter-mainstream culture." Feng confirms that this aesthetic style essentially represents resistance against mainstream "consumerism" trends[16]. Whether confronting the luxuriousness of Momoyama-period power or the material excess of modern society, wabi-sabi asserts its spiritual legitimacy as a "counter-mainstream culture" fortress through deliberate "incompleteness" and "roughness."

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Here, however, lies a profound sociological paradox. Although wabi-sabi originated as marginal resistance, with Rikyū's political rise and the institutionalization of his aesthetic standards, this resistant aesthetic rapidly alienated into a new, harsher symbolic hegemony. Those seemingly coarse tea utensils were endowed with extremely high value, becoming political currency among the daimyōs[17]. Rikyū's aesthetic standards established a higher hierarchical order, requiring participants to possess very high cultural capital to decipher its hidden codes. Bourdieu's "symbolic alchemy" operated here, transforming "poverty" into "noble scarcity." This deliberate poverty is actually much more expensive than direct wealth, as it presupposes the aesthetic subject possesses the moral superiority to refuse material temptation. Wabi-sabi ultimately completes a dialectical cycle: beginning as resistance to power, it became the most elite instrument of distinction within the power structure by establishing an ostentatious minimalism.

Li Gonglin's *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden* is a paradigmatic visual representation of Song spatial aesthetics[18]. Famous scholars gather in a garden, the overall atmosphere bland, but upon closer examination of the spatial furnishings, this "blandness" rests on an extremely high material and cultural threshold—a plenitude refined through

selection. Through the appreciation of "purposeless" objects, scholar-officials transformed wealth into elegance and power into cultivation. Beneath its "blandness" surface lies a spiritual sublimation exclusive to the elite. In contrast, Rikyū's "Tai-an" tearoom used rough earthen walls, old wooden pillars originally for farmhouses, and a tiny entrance forcing samurai to remove their swords and bow their heads, attempting to dismantle class barriers by simulating "extreme poverty" and returning to pristine human relationships.

In summary, Song literati aesthetics is the ultimate confirmation of rational order, aiming to construct a perfect, eternal ideal world; Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics is the profound gaze upon the fragility of existence, aiming to gain sudden enlightenment by accepting brokenness and death.

4. CONCLUSION

The affinity between Song literati aesthetics and Japanese wabi-sabi originates from the essentialist consensus of Chan thought[19]. Together they form an East Asian aesthetic paradigm: discovering the infinite within the finite, and establishing solitude and nature as the highest forms[20]. Examining their contemporary value, they are not merely remnants of classical art but profound responses to the crises of instrumental rationality and consumerism. They offer an "alternative modernity" program: Song "rational harmony" provides an ethical model for rebuilding harmony between humanity and nature; wabi-sabi's acceptance of damage and weathering challenges the worship of the "new" and "perfect," teaching us to settle body and mind amidst entropy. Both deconstruct the happiness concept based on possession, establishing a spiritual orientation centered on experience and introspection. This may be the most precious universal value that East Asian classical aesthetics can offer in the crisis of globalization.

This study clarifies the similarities and differences of two aesthetic paradigms within East Asia, and further provides a unique reference for reflecting on "minimalism" in the context of global modernism. Western modern minimalism often pursues the objectification of form and industrialized coldness, aiming to eliminate subjectivity and historical reference. By contrast, whether Song "blandness" or Japanese "wabi-sabi," beneath the minimalist surface surges intense spiritual undercurrents—the former is the

internalization of Confucian moral order, the latter the settling of existential anxiety. This “organic minimalism” proves that simplified form need not lead only to cold emptiness; it can equally serve as a vessel carrying profound historical memory and ethical warmth. This insight holds significant corrective value for revising the West-centric narrative of “minimalism” in contemporary art history.

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