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

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Handbook of Research on Applied Social Psychology in Multiculturalism

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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,

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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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2010), it is prevalent at all major firms across various industries, and it is possibly the most generic “way of life” in the corporate system.

This chapter explores wabi-sabi ways of life in today’s business settings and, as it has turned out, develop the concept by bridging business studies, cultural studies, and Japanese studies. It 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 the attributes of employment practice. The interview data reveal the existence of wabi-sabi as a way of life in the system, demonstrate the relative nature of the wabi-sabi values and show the duality of interconnected attributes. These grounded findings exhibit the shared features with the traditional interpretation of wabi-sabi based on the same philosophical values. This chapter concludes that the concept of wabi-sabi can be used for relevant research beyond the fine arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Japanese Philosophical Values

Linguistically speaking, the term *wabi-sabi* consists of two different words, *wabi* and *sabi*. Originally, *wabi* meant “the misery of living along in nature” and *sabi* meant “chill, lean, or withered” (Koren, 1994/2008, p. 21). Both words seemingly convey negative connotations but have started to be perceived as semantically positive since the 14th century or around then (Koren, 1994/2008, p. 22). The two words have then united over the centuries and the use of the term as a single word has become conventional (Koren, 1994/2008, p. 22). Koren (1994/2008, p. 15) writes that “Almost since its inception as a distinct aesthetic mode, wabi-sabi has been peripherally associated with Zen Buddhism”. The first Japanese tea masters indeed practiced Zen Buddhism and perhaps naturally had the Zen mindset (Koren, 1994/2008, p. 16). On the other hand, Zen Buddhism is not the only religion practiced in Japan. Perhaps the impacts of all major religions need to be reviewed for the aim of investigating the possible existence of wabi-sabi as today’s way of life. Gillespie (2009) has studied the three religions of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism as the sources of five Japanese values. Table 2 offers a synopsis of Gillespie’s work:

Table 2 can be a reasonable summary of the Japanese philosophical values and their religious backgrounds. The value of *muga* appears to concern self-interest, which is to be restrained possibly as the wabi-sabi way of life. This self-restraint seems to function well with other values of *wa* (harmony as the closest equivalent in English) and *bun* (status). To prioritize group and/or hierarchical harmony, individuals suppress self-interest. Interpreted this way, the three values may have supported each other and together forged the underlying philosophical values of wabi-sabi: Self-interest is not perfectly, completely, nor permanently satisfied. This shared element seems to have overlaps in the sources of values. In particular, harmony is associated with Shintoism and Confucianism. The three sources have likely generated synergistic effects and helped the philosophical values develop over time.

In this chapter, the term *self-interest* refers to an individual’s interest as opposed to a hierarchy’s interest and does not necessarily have negative connotations. The purpose of Table 2 is to present an adequate overview of Japanese culture as a set of regionally shared values for discussion, not to offer a rigid study of the religions as the sources of values.

Table 2. Japanese way of living, thinking and behaving

	Key Japanese values	Sources of values
1	<i>WA</i> (harmony) Shotoku Taishi: "Harmony is to be valued." Primacy of the group. Synthesis over analysis.	Shintoism
2	<i>Kata</i> (process) The <i>kata</i> factor. How over why. Process precedes results.	
3	<i>Kaizen</i> (continuous improvement) Impetus to flawless quality. Bunts valued over homeruns.	
4	<i>Muga</i> (self-restraint/self-denial) <i>Ma</i> : Interval in space and time - silence. <i>Mu</i> : Other-focused.	Buddhism
5	<i>Bun</i> (status) Hierarchy: <i>Tateshakai</i> (vertical society) Rank confers respect and elicits commitment. Stabilizing social structure.	Confucianism

(abridged from Gillespie, 2009, p. 9-12)

While the regionally specific terms may be translated as guidance into English, their semantic fields are not necessarily identical to the closest possible translations. One of the philosophically-driven words in Chinese can be *Guanxi*. A British educator, Crehan (2016, p. 169) offers the following caution regarding English translations of the term:

Guanxi is commonly translated as 'relationship' or 'connection', but neither of these terms really cover its pervasiveness and complexity. Guanxi is fundamental to Chinese culture, and describes a network of mutually-beneficial relationships that can help you in your personal life or business.

This quote provides three ideas: First, the English words *relationship* and *connection* do not fully denote the semantic field of the Chinese word that fundamentally signifies individuals' lives in China. The discussion suggests there be no exact English equivalent to convey the Chinese sense. It may be perceived as some sort of untranslatability of the word (cf. Kitamura, p. 2018), the degree of which is not absolute but perhaps relative depending on the setting. In Table 2, *wa* is a similar example. While the closest equivalent *harmony* helps understand the concept, it is not semantically identical to the English word. In the given context, *wa* represents the primacy of group harmony, which is considered a type of collectivism discussed in the following section. This point serves not only as an important cautionary note for cross-national studies but also as the reason why cross-national analysis is important when the research scope is global.

Secondly, related to the first point, the concept may be difficult to comprehend for individuals with no exposure to it. One may need to spend a reasonable time in China to know exactly how *Guanxi* helps

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with their way of life. *Wa* as group harmony may have the same need. Finally, *Guanxi* is in general a shared way of thinking in China. This point supports the idea that the Japanese philosophical values in Table 2 are generally shared in Japan as well. For instance, *kaizen* is a shared practice in the nation beyond the corporate borders.

The value of *bun* in Table 2 suggests that there exists a local hierarchy, where the *wabi-sabi* harmony is maintained. Arie de Geus (2002) provides a parallel to explicate the hierarchy of systems. de Geus (2002, 77-128) writes of the concept of an entity's *persona*, originally coined by a renowned German psychologist, William Stern, who developed the intelligence quotient (IQ) formula. "To Stern, each living being has an undifferentiated wholeness, with its own character, which he called the *persona*" (2002, 84). To explain the concept, de Geus introduces a vertical ladder that William Stern drew in 1919. Stern's ladder has five levels; namely, *Deity/Divinity/Godhead* being on the top row, followed in descending order by *Nation*, *Tribe*, *Family* and *Individual* placed on the lowest row, each of which is "a *persona* in its own right" (2002, p. 87). As de Geus refers to the concept as "*persona* (identity)" in his book, the closest colloquial expression of *persona* can be *identity*, though they may not be semantically identical. Following de Geus, this chapter presupposes that a nation has its *persona* and refers to it as *national persona* developed over time with various social factors including religions. Table 2 is an attempt to describe Japan's national *persona*. With this study's theme, Japan may be said to have its *wabi-sabi persona* with philosophical values. The concept of a national *persona* can be generally shared character within the society and it does not strictly nor equally apply to all individuals. A *persona* at the individual level includes personality traits specific to the individual. The following section will advance the *wabi-sabi persona* with relevant concepts.

Wabi-Sabi as a Persona

Among the three sources of values in Table 2, Buddhism and Confucianism originated in ancient China. It can be instructive to review prior studies on Confucianism available in literature. Fam, Yang, and Hyman (2009) offer a useful summary of the Confucian ethics concerning business marketing in China. The regionally shared philosophical values include "respect of authority", "desire for harmony" and "order" when translated into English (2009, p. 393). These values of preferences correspond with the Japanese values in Table 2 and the overlapping generally supports Gillespie's work. Indeed, Fam, Yang, and Hyman (2009) note that much of the Confucian doctrine is prevalent in East Asian minds, part of which can be traced back to the sources in the case of Japan.

In relation to identity, Fam, Yang, and Hyman (2009, p.393) write "... a Chinese would identify him/herself as a subset of a society whose life centers on passive acceptance of fate determined by the surrounding community and nature". Their explanation suggests that an individual's identity is inseparably attached to the group or community, rather than the self. Furthermore, individuals are dependent or interdependent on the collective, even regarding one's fate. For the sake of understanding, Fam, Yang, and Hyman (2009, 393) explain the Western values¹, which seem opposite: "In contrast, a Westerner would identify him/herself as a separate entity whose life centers on self-reliance, equality, and a personally managed mode of living". The discussion suggests that Westerners are relatively more independent from the group or community, to which they belong in the respective societies.

The preceding discussion seems to mirror the concepts of individualism, and its opposite, collectivism ("I/C"), much discussed in the field of cultural studies, including Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012), the Project GLOBE (House et al., 2004), Hofstede (2001), and Schwartz (1992). I/C is a type

of national culture (Kim et al., 1994) or an element of the geography of thought (Nisbett, 2013), which is theoretically synonymous to the concept of a national persona discussed earlier. Numerous scholarly works in cultural studies (Thomas & Peterson, 2017) have attempted to reveal the attributes of national personas. In short, individualism is the primacy of individual interest and its opposite, collectivism, is the primacy of collective interest (Livermore, 2015). Chen, Peng, and Saporito (2002, p. 571) write "...when individual and collective interests are in conflict, individual interests have the primacy in individualist cultures whereas collective interests have the primacy in collectivist cultures".

This discussion helps understand how individuals make decisions based on either of the concepts, depending on their regional preference. I/C can be treated as the two extremes of a linear continuum (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). Many researchers have conducted studies of cultural subjects sitting between the extremes, which are often referred to as cultural constructs or dimensions. Their research outcomes vary depending on their methods but agree that it is not uniform across societies (Williamson, 2002). As a breakdown at the country level, "individualism is very high in the United States and generally the English-speaking countries", and "collectivism can be found in parts of Europe (e.g., southern Italy, rural Greece) and much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America" (Triandis, 1994, p. 41), including Japan as a collectivistic society. The I/C theoretical framework generally supports Fam, Yang, and Hyman's argument.

The East-West comparison shows that, relatively speaking, self-interest in Japanese minds at the individual level is not as perfectly, completely, or permanently satisfied as Western counterparts. This chapter treats this interpretation as its provisional description of wabi-sabi for the research aim. It is not to assert that East Asian minds have zero self-interest but to point out the relative difference of significance in corporate settings. The provisional description offers some clues to the aim to reveal the wabi-sabi values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence. If these values are found in the Japanese business sector, it can be said that the Japanese have discernable adherence to the wabi-sabi values.

The preceding discussions posit that there are at least two levels of wabi-sabi in the hierarchy: 1) wabi-sabi ways of thinking (or philosophical values) at the individual level and 2) wabi-sabi practices (or ways of life) at the system level. This chapter refers to them as regionally specific values and regionally specific practices, respectively. The following section will revisit the practice of lifetime employment focusing on its specific element of having no job description.

Lifetime Employment

Widely discussed in the extant literature, Japan's lifetime employment is "better understood as a long-term commitment between workers and employers rather than a permanent employment contract" since in Japan "the employment contract includes no explicit clause regarding this policy, and employers are under no obligation to guarantee employment" (Ono, 2010, p. 2). James C. Abegglen, who passed away in May, 2007, made tremendous contributions to Japan-related studies. Abegglen (1958, p. 11) wrote of the Japanese employment practice as "the critical difference: a lifetime commitment" in his book. It is a distinctly Japanese human resource (HR) system, not observable in English-speaking countries.

Abegglen's book is considered a ground-breaking work since it introduced the system to an English-speaking audience for the first time. According to Abegglen (2006), his original concept of lifetime commitment is later translated back in English to *lifetime employment*. Following this terminology, this chapter refers to the Japanese practice of long-term employment commitment as lifetime employment (LTE). This statement is not to claim that all individuals are employed under lifetime employment

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in Japan but to clarify the term. As for the Western pattern, it is the social fact that, especially in the English-speaking countries, employees ordinarily move from one company to another, which can even be a competitor in the industry (Vogel, 2006, p. 5). This chapter refers to it as arm's-length employment (ALE) (Riordan, 2014, p. 837).

One unique aspect of LTE is that no job description (JD) exists in the system. A JD is a vital tool for HR management in ALE but is typically not used in Japanese business, excluding Japanese operations in absolute need of it to deal with Western employees (Kopp, 2000; Shook, 1988). It is worth discussing for three reasons: 1) having no JD may have to do with the wabi-sabi value of incompleteness, 2) it is useful to have a physical object that exhibits wabi-sabi for contextualizing research, and 3) a JD is widely known in the English context and hence suitable for the scope of research and the approach of cross-national analysis.

A JD usually consists of four parts: 1) a job summary, 2) a list of job functions, 3) a requirements section, and 4) other information (Mader-Clark, 2013, p. 3). A job summary provides an overview of the position. A list of job functions are a set of more detailed descriptions of duties and responsibilities. A requirements section sets the necessary specifications, such as education and certifications. The final part provides anything else relevant, often including location and travel requirements. The literature commonly points out that a JD concerns the job, not the person doing the job (Mitchell & Gamlem, 2017, p. 47). In English-speaking countries, JDs are considered vital for reasons. According to Mader-Clark (2013, p. 4), JDs are helpful in the following: 1) enhancing communication between the employer and its employees, 2) measuring performance, 3) setting the stage to fairly and legally discipline or terminate employees who do not meet the employer's expectations, 4) improving the employer's ability to retain highly performing employees, 5) planning for the future as to various HR matters, and 6) improving employee morale.

While these merits are positive and important, the literature does not seem unanimous in the second point. Grant (1989, 4) argues that a JD is not a performance assessment device but shows what the employee is supposed to do. "How well it is done is determined with a performance evaluation instrument" that is to gauge "the quantity, quality, timeliness, and the cost of one's performance" (Ibid.). Perhaps JDs can be used as supplementary material for performance evaluation. JDs are probably not irrelevant to employee evaluation, though a separate instrument for evaluation is useful.

One way of describing a JD in ALE is that it is an HR tool to regulate individuals with job freedom in the fluid labor markets. Rochelle Kopp, Managing Principal, Japan Intercultural Consulting, offers the following article *Why do Japanese avoid detailed job descriptions?* (2011). Written from the American viewpoint, it discusses how American employees are confused without a JD:

In many Japanese organizations operating in the U.S., American employees complain that job descriptions are non-existent, or are outdated and irrelevant.... It seems that Japanese managers do not feel that job descriptions are important, and do not look at them as an important working tool. But for Americans, accurate up-to-date job descriptions are essential. In the U.S., the job description not only guides the employee to know what their work purview is, but also forms an important basis for making decisions on hiring, promotion, performance evaluation, and other human resource management matters. Without them, we feel lost, unsure what we are supposed to be doing. (abridged from Kopp, 2011)

The quote helps understand why JDs are important in ALE. The system of ALE demands JDs to deal with fluid labor workforce with high job mobility. Job freedom is typically based on the primacy of

individualistic interest to pursue a better job for the individual's reason(s). This primacy is a representative element of individual-level persona in the West. It is a regionally shared way of thinking, which is why the practice-level persona of ALE works well in the regions.

While JDs are vital in the English-speaking countries, it is not in Japanese business. There is no need to specify job duties for the Japanese employees because "your job is everything" (Shook, 1988, p. 129). At the individual level, the Japanese code of conduct can be described as no or low prioritization of individual interest in having specified job duties that the individual wants to do. This description can be paraphrased as the prioritization of collective interest of corporate task fulfillment over the individual interest of job freedom. Having no freedom can be interpreted as the wabi-sabi values of imperfection and incompleteness that the Japanese employees possibly have.

Regardless of their job interests, they must do "everything" for the employer. If they have a job preference on specific job tasks yet doing what they do not enjoy, they have a low level of job satisfaction, relative to the Western work force doing what they want to do at work in ALE. The following section will discuss how to explore the attributes of lifetime employment for the research aim.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted the qualitative method of interviewing as its primary tool for inquiry. The aim of this project is to discover the wabi-sabi ways of life outside the traditionally examined fields as mentioned at the outset. The ontological orientation of the research aim is constructivism, which required a qualitative approach (Bryman, 2004, p. 20). The findings are analyzed through a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In-depth interviews were conducted among the three major Japanese recruitment agencies located in London, United Kingdom. The initial field work began in 2014, and follow-up interviews were conducted over the next four years.

During the follow-up phase, additional interviews were conducted at a Japanese-owned bank in Los Angeles, the USA. The rounds of interviews had the following common grounds appropriate for this research: 1) regularly exposed to individualistic and collectivistic cultures, 2) conducted in cross-national settings with Japanese expatriates ("expats") and local hires, and 3) located in the English-speaking country. Data triangulation from different sectors helped maximize research confidence. Table 3 summarizes the research participants:

Table 3. Interviewee profile

	Employer	Job Title	Years of Residence	Professional Experience
1	Recruitment agency A	Consultant	3 years in the UK	2 years
2	Recruitment agency B	Senior consultant	10+ years in the UK	7 years
3	Recruitment agency C	Senior consultant	30+ years in the UK	20+ years
4	Japanese-owned bank	HR officer	Whole life in the USA	20+ years
5	Japanese-owned bank	Director	6 years in the USA	20+ years
6	Japanese-owned bank	HR officer	Whole life in the USA	10+ years

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The recruitment agencies had a pool of job seekers, most of which were Japanese, and some of which were various nationals with varying levels of Japanese fluency and/or empirical experiences gained with a Japanese organization. The agencies offered the service of screening job seekers and introducing them to Japanese companies looking to hire individuals typically as local hires in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. They had professional insights gained through the agency's global network. All the interviewees were Japanese nationals bilingual in English and Japanese in the first round of interviews. They were regularly exposed to the professional task of reconciling the differences between British and Japanese business.

The second round with the Japanese bank had two Americans and one Japanese expat. Unlike the Japanese interviewees, the American participants only had job duties specific to the system of arm's-length employment. As a result, they talked about their surprises concerning lifetime employment and its attributes. They provided helpful data in distinguishing the differences between the systems. All interviews started with a generic topic about working for a Japanese organization outside Japan (i.e., in a cross-national setting). This way of starting a conversation functioned as a semi-structured interview question logistically and theoretically suitable for this study about employment. It was topically appropriate and helped avoid leading questions.

This research intentionally had no structured interview questions since the pilot research proved that semi-structured, open-ended interviews were suitable for maximizing research opportunities by focusing on the interviewee's field of expertise. The participants had reasonable "requisite knowledge" (Bryman, 2004, p. 156) on their expertise and cross-national matters. They were able to articulate their ways of thinking and business practices, making comparisons between the Japanese and other nationals. The rounds of interviews collected sufficient data to reach theoretical saturation. The following section will present the categories of findings pertinent to the wabi-sabi values observed in the Japanese LTE system, which turned out to be still present in Japanese business regardless of geographic location.

FINDINGS

A London-based interviewee, working for a large Japanese employment agency with a global network, specializing as a senior consultant in recruiting Japanese professionals for the British and European operations of Japanese corporations, maintained that:

In the UK, as well as English-speaking countries such as the USA and Canada, JDs are required for hiring. JDs are a must-have because employers use them to not only hire new employees but also manage the hired employees, for example, for evaluation purposes. So it is used pre-employment and post-employment both. In Japan, there are no JDs. My Japanese clients (corporations) often ask me to create JDs for their UK operations. Japanese companies do not have one in Japan, perhaps because the notion of shusha (which means in English to join an employer to spend the whole professional life, synonymous to lifetime employment) still exists at all major companies in Japan. There have been changes in Japan's employment systems, for instance haken (which means the service of or practice of dispatching temporary employees), but those changes have taken place outside the systems for core employees and in the end make no difference in the long-standing practice of shusha. Because job duties for one employee (who is employed under lifetime employment) change over time at a Japanese employer, JDs are meaningless.

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Under Japanese management, employees must do everything that their boss asks them to, which may be a reason for their long working hours. In the UK, employees go home after finishing the tasks listed in the JD. This is rational as well here for minimizing the wages to be paid for overtime work. (Interviewee 3)

This interviewee's observation is based on 30+ years of experience in the cross-national HR sector. Corroborated among Interviewees 1, 2, and 3 are the following grounded elements of the interview data: 1) lifetime employment still exists, 2) the Japanese core employees do not have the freedom to choose job duties but do everything at work, and 3) the British way of thinking and the Japanese way of thinking are normative in the respective societies. These results support the relative nature of the correct practice.

The interview results provide clarification on the Japanese job duties at the Japanese multinationals' overseas operations. They indicate that "everything" does not literally mean everything at the United Kingdom and the US subsidiaries ("ALE operations") of Japanese multinationals. As testified, JDs are used at those Japanese ALE operations to manage local hires of various nationals, including the Japanese. Interviewee 1 explained:

Depending on the economic climate, there are quite many local jobs available to the Japanese living in the UK and Europe. Practically all of them are supporting positions created to help the expats in all industries. Once in a while, an open position with a managerial title becomes available, but it is not a managerial job in reality. The expats make all important decisions usually in collaboration with the head office in Japan. (Interviewee 1)

The interview results indicate that the whole job tasks are broadly split into two: managerial and supporting tasks. Similarly, Interviewee 2 maintained:

There is a distinct line between the expats and the local hires. In Japanese business, two different worlds exist in one workplace. Job applicants have mixed views on that. Some of the locally hired Japanese nationals with a local life partner are fine with having less responsibility and focus on their lives outside of work. Others get dissatisfied with being a local hand and go back to Japan in order to become an expat. (Interviewee 2)

The interview data indicate that the expats are generally responsible for everything managerial, and other supporting tasks are given to the local hires in the context of foreign operations of the Japanese multinationals. The findings correspond with the job segregation in Japanese business often discussed in the literature. Kopp (2000) refers to it as "the rice-paper ceiling", which appears to be the most grounded element of their research as it is the book title. The findings contextualize the wabi-sabi values that the Japanese local hires have. They typically do not have much job satisfaction, though it does not necessarily mean an imperfect life. According to the interviewees, some of the local hires find being a hand easy and regard it as a perfect job for having a good life-work balance. One grounded element of the data seems to be the idea that the wabi-sabi values are relative, depending on the personal preference, though the majority of local hires seem to have incompletely filled professional aspirations at the ALE operations.

Another grounded element in Japanese HR management was *tenkin*, which in English meant mandatory job rotation ("JR") ordered by the employer (Jacoby, 2005). Interviewee 4, who worked as an HR professional for an American subsidiary of a Japanese financial institution, conveyed what struck them most regarding Japanese expats:

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It is so surprising to see the Japanese expats move from Japan to the USA for assigned work to do something completely new (for example, the marketing division in Japan to the planning division in the USA), even though the new assignment is entirely a new task for the expat, or not really what the expat wants to do. I never understand.... (Interviewee 4)

This sheer surprise can be a representative comment shared among those who are not familiar with the other side. In general, all the core employees are transferred from one office to another within the LTE employer's network in all industries. This rotation occurs every 3-6 years or so and is determined solely by the HR department (Jacoby, 2005, p. 7). Taplin (1995, p. 67) sees JR in Japanese business as an important feature, as the conclusion of extensive research on the Japanese manufacturing sector. "Almost everyone has worked at some point in other people's jobs which aids the decision-making process" (Ibid.) for group consensus, which is usually important for the Japanese. In essence, the employment system has a mutually sustaining relationship with other systems, such as the decision-making process. The system of JR can be seen as evidence to manifest the wabi-sabi values of impermanence, incompleteness, and impermanence. Any of these three words can explain how the core employees would feel about it especially when the new assignment is not what they have hoped for. Interviewee 5, a Japanese expat manager, who had just received jirei (a request made by the HR department for JR) confessed:

It has been about six years since I moved from Japan to the USA for my assigned work. I like being here because working here is interesting to me. I do not want to go back to Japan. It would be so nice if I was able to convert my status from an expat into a local hire and live permanently here. I know my family would be happy as well since all of my family members are already used to living here. (Interviewee 5)

The interview data indicate the three wabi-sabi values. Their aspiration of staying in the USA is not satisfied as they must leave back for Japan. The Japanese expat's life in the USA seems nothing but impermanent. However, the interview results indicate that not all expats exhibit the same feelings. Interviewee 5 added that many of the fellow Japanese expats seemed likely happy with returning to Japan. The findings on the expats suggest that the wabi-sabi values are typically relative. The following narrative conveyed from Interviewee 6, an American national with little exposure to Japanese culture, gives another explanation:

At a work party, a local hire asked a bunch of Japanese expats what they wanted to be or do five years later, which would be when they would have finished their assigned work in the USA by then and probably gone back to Japan or moved to another country according to the next job assignment given by the employer. All the Japanese expats commonly said something like this: "I do not know what I would be doing or where I would be, but I want to be in a higher position with my employer than what I have now" or "I want to work for a regional branch office to do marketing at their corporate lending section, but I do not know what my next assignment is like". Very different (from us, the Americans). (Interviewee 6)

The interview results indicate that the Japanese expats, who are employed as the core employees under LTE, wish to climb up the corporate ladder as their paramount goal, even if the next assignment may be against their will. This Japanese goal appeared to outweigh job freedom, which is generally valued in the English-speaking countries. Table 4 offers a summary of the interview data.

Table 4. A summary of saturated data.

	Not Satisfied	Satisfied
Japanese expats	Unwanted relocation Unwanted job position Much work stress	Working for the prestigious employer Advancement at work Overseas stint of assigned work
Japanese local hires	Not much authority given Being a hand No opportunities for advancement	Less stress with light responsibilities Live where you want to be Fewer working hours

Table 5. A summary of grounded findings

Grounded categories	Wabi-sabi way of life	Arm's-length way of life
Practice level		
Employment system	Lifetime employment	Arm's-length employment
System feature	Mandatory job rotation	Job freedom
System attributes	Unspoken (no job descriptions)	Job descriptions
Individual level		
Expectation	Community for job security and harmony	Function and utility for profit maximization
Sensibility	Duality: ambiguity and contradiction	Abusolute: no ambiguity or contradiction
Underlying belief	Collectivism	Individualism

The findings satisfy the aim of this research to investigate whether the practice of LTE exhibits wabi-sabi values. The value components are relative, yet they exhibit a discernible level of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence that the Japanese workforce has in their everyday lives. The Japanese appear to find a locally specific type of satisfaction dependent on the collective in the corporate world. The coexistence of satisfied and unsatisfied can be expressed as duality at the individual level. This duality is considered dynamic and better examined in contextualized settings at the system level. Table 5 summarizes these grounded categories of findings:

The practice and individual levels are linked for their coexistence. The opposite of wabi-sabi is provisionally named arm's-length for discussion purposes. Having the opposite helps understand the relative nature of attributes. The following section will examine the implications of the findings focusing on the three grounded points: intrinsic connections between the levels, the relative nature of attributes, and the duality of values.

DISCUSSION

As reviewed at the outset, today's interpretation of wabi-sabi can be described as "a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete... a beauty of things modest and humble... a beauty of things unconventional" (Koren, 1994/2008, p. 7). This interpretation rests on the Japanese philosophical values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence. This study's findings appear to boil down to the same philosophical elements: Self-interest in Japanese minds at the individual level is not as perfectly, completely, or permanently satisfied in the Japanese business sector. This section will discuss the shared points with today's interpretation of wabi-sabi.

Intrinsic Connections

The findings demonstrate that wabi-sabi philosophical values have reciprocal connections with the wabi-sabi systems in LTE. The practice of LTE can be seen as a wabi-sabi way of life that has evolved over time in the locally specific context. One way to describe the idea is that a regionally specific practice is the result of a regionally specific value(s). Conversely, decision-making individuals are regularly exposed to the system and tend to mold their preferred values from carrying out their professional duties daily. There exist intrinsic connections between the two levels for their mutual existence.

A type of beauty as today's definition has become prevalent possibly because of the availability of suitable research subjects, such as the Japanese tea ceremony, for scientifically testing the validity of its connection with the underlying wabi-sabi values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence. This interpretation supports the existence of theoretical connections between the philosophical values and the practice of the tea ceremony. This study's findings share the same idea that there exist intrinsic connections between the philosophical values and the wabi-sabi way of life.

In addition to intrinsic connections between the levels, there can be multilateral connections between the systems at the practice level. In discussing a JD, Kopp (2011) says that employees are "known as members of a particular team" and "because Japanese companies do little external hiring, there are few occasions where they are absolutely necessary." Kopp (2011) elaborates:

The Japanese culture of teamwork also makes its job descriptions less important. Rather than relying on set definitions of what they are supposed to be doing, the Japanese tend to work like amoebas, shifting their work and taking on new activities as the organization's needs require. Everyone is expected to be on the look-out for things that need to be done but that no one is taking care of, so that nothing falls between the cracks.

This quote elaborates on Shook's explanation: "your job is everything" (1988, p. 129). From the American viewpoint of individualism, Kopp perceives the Japanese as amoebas that helps understand the Japanese culture of teamwork ("Japanese teamwork"). This Japanese teamwork can be treated as a system that works in tandem with having no JDs. This interpretation supports the idea that the systems under LTE are connected through multilateral connections.

Relative Nature of Attributes

In discussing the wabi-sabi aesthetic, Koren (1994/2008, p. 8) writes "Admittedly, the beauty of wabi-sabi is not to everyone's liking". In other words, wabi-sabi is a relative concept. There exist two viewpoints on the audience side: one that appreciates wabi-sabi, and another that does not or is neutral to it. The wabi-sabi aesthetic is valuable for the former and not for the latter. The characteristic of relativity seems important for advancing the elusive concept. One grounded element shared across this study's findings is the relative nature of wabi-sabi. The Japanese appear to find locally-specific satisfaction within the Japanese context.

This Japanese satisfaction can be a relative notion since it may not appear as satisfactory on the audience side. In a global context, all the "not satisfied" categories of findings in Table 4 are generally, though not absolutely, irrelevant to the individuals in ALE. For instance, if an ALE individual is not satisfied with the current job and does not want to relocate, they will find another in the same area. If

they find an excessive level of work stress, they will move somewhere else for another job. If they wish to have a salary increase, they will look for an advancement opportunity with another employer. The ALE reality is not as simple nor binary, but these solutions are generally available and practiced in the ALE system. ALE job mobility seems to reduce the “not satisfied” elements in the Japanese system. As such, the Japanese wabi-sabi values may not make much sense to ALE individuals, though it may ultimately depend on individual preference.

In addition to the wabi-sabi values, many other related attributes appear to have a relative nature. As examined earlier, the significance of a JD is relative: It is a vital tool in the ALE system, and typically it is not even used in the LTE system. The findings suggest that having no JD is suitable for LTE and wabi-sabi values.

The preceding section has discussed the concept of Japanese teamwork that differs from what is considered teamwork in the English-speaking countries (“ALE teamwork”). The notion of teamwork is another example of a relative concept in a global setting. In the context of ALE, teamwork usually means working collaboratively for fulfilling their JDs individually, not being “amoeba” to do everything required at work. This ALE definition of teamwork indicates the relative importance of adherence to the JD in the system. The discussion suggests that judging criteria are generally relative as well on a global basis.

Duality

The findings support the provisional description of wabi-sabi posited earlier: Self-interest in Japanese minds at the individual level is not as perfectly, completely, or permanently satisfied in the LTE settings. On the other hand, the results indicate that wabi-sabi is not entirely negative. This point of duality corresponds with today’s interpretation of wabi-sabi: It is not necessarily negative but is a type of beauty, while the term seemingly contains negative connotations. Peter Drucker, the renowned scholar in the field of business management, once discussed the uniqueness of Japanese management as follows (Drucker, 2005):

Suppose that we have a gathering of Westerners and Japanese. When asked what one does, a Westerner usually answers, ‘an accountant’ while a Japanese would most probably say ‘[I am working for] Toyota’. Introducing not one’s profession, but one’s organization shows that each individual member of a Japanese organization has a kind of family consciousness. Here lies the greatest strength of Japan.

This comment highlights three points: 1) Japanese professionals ascribe their identity to their employer, rather than their profession, 2) the idea of family consciousness is generally shared within the nation, not just Toyota, and 3) Japanese family consciousness is their strength. This interpretation never means that Japanese business is unconditionally stronger than others. The findings demonstrate that, like humans with character, societies have personas that come with unique strengths and weaknesses. In the case of the wabi-sabi hierarchy, there seem to be trade-offs within the realm of duality at the individual level. While self-interest is not perfectly, completely, or permanently satisfied, being a part of the collective compensates the Japanese for the unsatisfied. Being a part of the collective may be “Japanese family consciousness” in Drucker’s words.

Kameda (2013, p. 12) elaborates on the idea of family consciousness: “These words aptly describe Japan’s collectivist culture”. This country-level view corresponds with the cultural concepts reviewed earlier. The term *culture* requires careful handling, but the research indicates that the Japanese generally

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prefer their collective identity over individual attributes, such as an accountant, an analyst, or a researcher. The primacy of the collective (or collectivism) is also explainable with the Confucian ethics (Fam, Yang, & Hyman, 2009) reviewed earlier: a Japanese identify him/herself as a subset of, for example, Toyota whose life centers on passive acceptance of fate determined by the surrounding community of Toyota. An individual's identity is inseparably attached to the group of Toyota, rather than self. A Toyota employee may want to move to another company or another division within the organization, yet they accept their fate, which is part of the duality.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings show that the Japanese exhibit wabi-sabi values at the individual level in corporate settings. The philosophical values can be described as the primacy of being part of the collective over the primacy of the individual interest of job freedom in Japanese minds. The prioritization of the wabi-sabi way of life seems to hinge on the wabi-sabi values of imperfection, incompleteness, and impermanence of self-interest in the given context. The philosophical values explain why the Japanese use their employer as their identity, rather than the individual's attributes.

As presented earlier, the findings can be summarized as the three grounded points: multilateral connections between the levels, the relative nature of attributes, and the duality of values. These grounded points are shared with today's interpretation of wabi-sabi. Having the same theoretical foundations generally supports the findings as a wabi-sabi way of life. To explain the wabi-sabi aesthetic, Koren (1994/2008, p. 21) writes "The closest English word to wabi-sabi is probably *rustic*". It may be described as rustic beauty. In the Japanese corporate world, professionals' self-interest may not be perfectly, completely, or permanently satisfied at the individual level. While so, they are perhaps satisfied with the "rustic beauty" of being a part of the collective of a major firm. The findings can be summarized as the duality of positive and negative attributes, each of which is embedded in the system and is relative depending on the observer.

The findings show that the wabi-sabi values are relative between the Japanese, as well as between the societies. One way of probing the complexity of relativity is to have contextualized attributes. There are intricate dialectics of attributes, such as job descriptions, between the individual and organization levels. Individuals have shared ways of thinking, one of which is the respect for the freedom of job mobility in ALE. Societies have a unique employment system, which suits the regionally shared ways of thinking. These personas are suitable to each other, and that is why they coexist, perhaps creating their own equilibrium.

This chapter has attempted to open the door to a new field of research on wabi-sabi with the broader interpretation of the concept. The broader interpretation incorporates the holistic impacts of the major religions, the Japanese practice of lifetime employment as a way of life, and the mainstream arguments in cultural studies. While this study is carried out in the context of Japanese business, the grounded findings may apply to other fields of enquiry concerning Japanese, comparative, and/or transferability studies for future reference. A regionally specific practice may be transferred to another region. For example, kaizen has been exported and tailored to local needs. This study has focused on the original form and its connection with the local philosophical values of wabi-sabi.

The findings suggest that each society has its character, which can be expressed for example as ALE and LTE, or individualistic and collectivistic. Neither is inferior to the other, as the intrinsic connections

between the levels suggest that the regional practices suit the respective societies. Regionally shared philosophical values, including religious beliefs, can be part of one's identity and possibly govern individuals' behavior. Akin to the Japanese way of tea, lifetime employment - the way of corporate life - can be said to exhibit and be supported by the wabi-sabi values. The findings support the existence of dynamic dichotomies with two extreme ends and consequently the idea that the world is not homogeneous. Perhaps policy makers should not disregard the regional preference. In the case of Japan, wabi-sabi in corporate settings may be valued in reality more than it appears.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ The terminologies *West* or *Western* and *East* or *Eastern* are used for discussion purposes only, as they can be further subcategorized in many ways. Refer to the J-system (the Japanese corporate system) vs. the W-system (the corporate system found in the West) in Aoki and Dore (1994) for similar use.