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Long Essay

Discuss the aesthetic influence of Zen on fashion design

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The interplay between spirituality and creativity has been the driving force behind some of the most remarkable works of human ingenuity throughout history. The relationship between Zen Buddhism, a spiritual tradition, and fashion design, an art form, is a prime example of this phenomenon. The unique aesthetic sensibilities that Zen Buddhism brings to the world of fashion design demands contemplation. The question of how this ancient tradition has permeated an industry seemingly antithetical to its ascetic ideals is a perplexing one. The answer, perhaps, lies in the very nature of the creative impulse which defies easy comprehension. In this essay, I will examine the aesthetic influence of Zen Buddhism on the realm of fashion design, focusing on the creative visions and imprints of several prominent designers including Ma Ke, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo. The present inquiry will draw on three primary sources that expound on the profound role of aesthetic Zen ideologies on the sartorial arts. The main sources are "Japanese Fashion Designers: The Work and Influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo"[1] by Bonnie English, "From Symbols to Spirit: Changing Conceptions of National Identity in Chinese Fashion"[2] by Christine Tsui, and "Fashion Ritualization: Zen Designers and Spiritual Expressions of Identity"[3] by Leren Li.

The persistent use of traditional costumes such as the Japanese kimono and the Chinese qipao can be considered one of the most apparent signs of how Eastern cultures maintain a connection to their past.[4] While contemporary Japanese and Chinese designers draw inspiration from their respective cultures, the extent to which traditional symbols and cultural landmarks affect their creative processes and influence their design choices varies significantly.[5] On the one hand, modern Chinese designers strive to redefine the image of Chinese fashion on the international stage by eschewing explicit archetypal symbols like dragons and lanterns in favour of more subtle references to an amorphous Chinese spirit.[6] On the other hand, modern Japanese designers preserve ancestral techniques and adapt them to their designs.[7] Much like the *tatami* for Japanese architecture, the kimono, for example, serves as the foundation for Japanese designers to explore new concepts with regards to the spatial arrangements between

[1] (English, 2011)
[2] (Tsui, 2013)
[3] (Li & Jenss, 2014)
[4] (Hazel, 1734) (Finnane, 2009)
[5] (Reinach, 2010)
[6] (Tsui, 2013). P.586
[7] (English, 2011). P.4

the garment and the body and the balance between form and function.[8] Despite different approaches to incorporating cultural elements into their designs, both schools of designers prioritise the legacy of subtle elegance and the feelings of peace, balance, and harmony – concepts which resonate with the "Zen" philosophy and reject the sumptuously luxurious facets of Western designs.[9]

In the context of Japanese aesthetics, elegance is not synonymous with prestige or social class. According to Ikegami[10], the transformation of the samurai's role from belligerent to administrative by the late 17th century led to regulations being imposed on their excessively lavish kimonos. As a result, the national outlook on the samurai's kimono evolved into a more refined civic uniform that radiated a unique sense of beauty associated with simplicity and austerity. Famous modern Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo share a similar philosophy of constraint and refinement, evident in their designs that feature simplicity and subtle beauty.

By introducing innovative techniques such as consecutive layering and textile manipulation, Miyake revolutionised the fashion industry. He challenged the conventional perspective on the inherent value of textiles and the way they envelop the body. This is exemplified in his *A-POC* (A Piece of Cloth) series, which explores the potential of a single piece of fabric to transform into various garments through folding and manipulation.[11] His vision preserved the integrity of the clothing material to form a shelter that reflects the fundamental human need for comfort. Additionally, by focusing on the essence of the material and its intrinsic qualities, Miyake produced functional and organic garments that embody a sense of liberty through their flexibility.[12] Miyake's vision of modern simplicity and his desire to create versatile clothing is also apparent in his *Pleats, Please* series. He drew inspiration from collaborating with dancers and aimed to create garments that would move with the body, feeling like "second skin" and embracing fluidity.[13] Overall, Miyake's approach to fashion reflects the aesthetic Zen principle of *kanso*, which translates as an appreciation of simplicity,

[8] (McQuaid, 1998) P.2
[9] (English, 2011) P.6
[10] (Ikegami, 2005) P.275
[11] (English, 2011) P.15
[12] (Kiss, 2004)
[13] (English, 2011) P.22

flexibility, and fluidity.[14] Through emphasising the timeless allure of elegant simplicity, Miyake created clothing that remains undisturbed by the fickle nature of trends.

In his autobiography *Talking to Myself*[15], Yohji Yamamoto states that 'dirty, stained, withered, broken things seem beautiful to me'. In an attempt to deconstruct the conventions of haute couture, Yamamoto showcased garments at 1981 Paris catwalk that conveyed indigence, aridity, and hardship.[16] His avant-garde vision was evident in the unconventional cuts, asymmetric shapes, oversized silhouettes and monochromatic colour pallets that dominated the collection.

The garments were characterized by a monochromatic palette of black, with occasional pops of white. The designs were notable for their imperfect harmony, with seams exposed, unusual positioning of pockets, and hems left unstitched or unfinished. The garments were often asymmetrical, with one sleeve longer than the other. The textures were varied, but the fabrics were frayed, battered, ragged and often layered. The oversized silhouettes created a sense of volume and movement, with the models appearing to float down the runway.[17]

Yamamoto's stylistic choices reflect the Zen concept of *fukinsei*, asymmetry or irregularity. This asymmetry is encapsulated in the symbol of Zen, the enso, which is a circle drawn with a single brushstroke.[18] The value of *fukinsei* goes beyond a simple aesthetic preference for irregular shapes and forms. It hints at the concept of 'perfection of imperfection'[19] which is associated with the notion of *wabi-sabi*, another prominent aspect of Zen philosophy.[20] Yamamoto's desire was for the Western world to perceive beauty in the incomplete, recognize refinement in his dark shrouds, and find depth in the layered drapes of the texture.

Yamamoto believed that the dynamic use of subdued colours and pared-down silhouettes could give form to clothes. His choice of the black colour served to illustrate a state of no-colour – an absence rather than a presence[21]. In Buddhist notion, emptiness is not seen

[14] (Purser, 2013) P.40
[15] (Yamamoto 2002: n. pag.), (Sozzani & Yamamoto, 2002)
[16] (English, 2011) P.38
[17] Ibid
[18] (Loori , 2005) P.176
[19] (Pursar, 2013) P.42.
[20] (Watts, 1957) P.
[21] (English, 2011) P.45

as a nihilistic state, but rather a source of infinite potential. As such, form and emptiness are complementary[22].

An atmosphere of darkness and melancholy permeated Yamamoto's work. The colour black has been perpetuated his collections, creating a sense of mystery. His use of heavy materials like wool and leather contributes to a sense of intensity and depth. His clothing often enveloped the body creating a sense of introspection[23]. Perhaps, his artistic work is a reflection of the inner conflicts and personal experiences. Nonetheless, it invites the wearer to re-evaluate their preconceived notions of beauty with unique lenses.

Yamamoto was not the only Japanese designer to showcase a collection at the 1981 Paris fashion week. Rei Kawakubo, the founder of Comme des Garçons, also presented a collection that reflected a similar set of core values, outlook, and philosophy as that of Yamamoto[24]. Like Yamamoto, Kawakubo fully embodied the use of monochromatic colours and irregular shapes challenging prevailing modernist artistic conventions and protesting against mass-manufactured 'prêt-à-porter' fashion items[25]. Additionally, she also valued the positive and negative space between the fabric and the body – a concept that we have seen earlier in the design of the kimono. In Zen art, the concept of *ma* represents the space between objects, which is as important as the objects themselves. It emphasises role of negative space in finding a balance form and non-form, existence and non-existence[26]. Combined with a signature "gender neutral" design, this negative space gives a voluminous appearance to the clothing, nullifying the stereotypical gender-specific Western designs and allowing the garment to conform to the wearer's shape[27].

Kawakubo's garments often incorporate intentional flaws, such as frayed edges, uneven stitching and fastenings, pockets in unconventional places. This primitive and adventurous tendency to experiment with radically new concepts highly corresponds with the Zen principle of *Datsuzoku,* or beginner's mind[28]. In an artistic context, Kawakubo approaches her craft with a fresh perspective rather than relying on monotonous formulae. This approach

[22] (Lomas, Etcoff, Van Gordon, & Shonin, 2017)
[23] (English, 2011) P.47
[24] (English, 2011) P.38
[25] (English, 2011) P.74
[26] (Pilgrim, 1986)
[27] (English, 2011) P.72
[28] (Loori , 2005)

of taking risks and embracing the unknown allows her to push the boundaries of traditional fashion, creating designs that are truly unique and innovative[29].

By departing from the conventional use of overt Chinese symbols and instead embracing the Zen spirit of harmony, simplicity, and austerity, modern Chinese designers have established a new and tacit identity on the international stage. This contemporary notion is not only alluded to in the visual aesthetic of their designs, but also in the creation process itself.[30]

In a time where the desire for opulence and lavishness are deeply ingrained in society, Ma Ke aims to guide people back to the fundamental simplicity that underlies human existence[31]. Growing up in a small town and living a modest, practical lifestyle, Ma Ke sought inspiration not only from modern trends but also from the cultural heritage of the past.[32] Rather than conforming to the ever-expanding urban lifestyle, she charted her own path, rooted in the principles of Zen philosophy.

Through her initial brand, Exception, Ma Ke embodies the essence of Zen philosophy. The garments are made of natural fibres, and characterised by subdued, monochromatic earthly tones, with a clean cut that emanates elegance.[33] The simplicity of their design and fluidity of their form reflect the aesthetic Zen principle of *shizen*, or naturalness, eschewing artificiality and contrivance in the creative process[34]. Ma Ke embraces *shizen* fully, not imposing naturalness forcefully in her designs, but rather immersing herself in nature's spirit while creating with purpose. Moreover, the choice of the name Exception itself is a testament to her dedication to natural materials and handcrafted artistry, distinguishing her brand from the mechanized, mass-produced fashion landscape that dominates China and the world.[35]

Ma Ke's second brand Wu Yong (Useless) embodies the notion of "anti-fashion luxury" and emphasizes *shizen* through a profound connection with nature. The garments are heavy and coloured in earthly tones, buried for two years in the soil to acquire a unique history and a direct touch by the divine hand of nature[36]. Through this communion with the natural

[29] (Judelson & Koppel, 1998)
[30] (Li, 2014) P.2
[31] (Bonelli, 2012)
[32] (Bernstein & Kaiser, 2013)
[33] (Tsui, 2013) P.586
[34] (Purser, 2013) P.36
[35] (Jia, 2007)
[36] (Li, 2014) P.6

elements, Ma Ke reminds the urban consumer of the power of nature. Furthermore, through Wu Yong brand, Ma Ke aims to convey the message that clothes transcend the mere physicality of garments, placing the emphasis on the creative process of fashion conceptualisation. In addition, the Wu Yong Home presents an idyllic vision of place adorned with handmade textiles and decorations, where Ma Ke eliminates unnecessary possessions and modern appliances and tools.[37] The space is infused with a natural energy and simplicity, evoking the *Danshari*-inspired Zen lifestyle of decluttering and letting go of attachments[38].

In conclusion, the influence of Zen Buddhism on modern fashion designers from the East is an exquisite blend of aesthetic philosophy. The designers' creations, like Zen itself, are imbued with a sense timelessness and abstraction, and they often marry the simplicity of a haiku with the austerity of a tea ceremony. In the heart of their design ethos is a tension between the sophisticated and the simple, the natural and the technologically advanced. It is a dialectic that echoes the Eastern aesthetic sensibility, juxtaposing sensory richness with emotional restraint. For these Zen-inspired designers, their craft transcends the egotistical pursuits of self-expression, wealth, or fame. Rather, they perceive design as an opportunity to an amicable existence between humanity and the world. They remind us that the most important things in life are often the most simple, and that beauty can be found in now and the everyday.

Word Count: 2038

[37] (Li, 2014) P.11
[38] (Kapur, 2019)

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