

Japanese Aesthetics in the KonMari Method

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Marie Kondo's *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* has quickly become a cult favorite in the self-help genre since its American publication in 2014. Her popularized work combines various Japanese cultural influences to create a unique philosophy to improve the physical and spiritual lifestyles of participants. While the self-help genre has "had the fastest growth in print-book unit sales among adult segments," Kondo continues to develop her philosophy to create a brand that now exceeds beyond the household phenomenon (Maloney and Fujikawa). The popularity of the KonMari Method continues to surpass other organizational influencers, as her name has become a worldwide, household staple in many countries—a direct result of the new wave in the minimalist culture. Kondo's claims, like many other modern works discussing home organization, "perpetuate consumerism's tendency to revolve around individuals' self-expression" (Meissner 197). This focus on the individual relates to Japanese spiritual and architectural influences that each promise a distinct knowledge of the self and its ultimate potential. Although, as Kondo's philosophy has become marketed to create a brand that includes various products, a Netflix show, and numerous publications, it seems that much of her original philosophy is becoming Westernized.

Prior to her popularization, Kondo simply had her first publication and a website that allowed consumers to apply for consultations. The simplicity and strong Japanese cultural appeal made her products almost mystical to other areas of the world. While not a new movement, her take on minimalism is what places her apart from other organizers. One of the major components of minimalism is the lamentation of a sense of "original authenticity" that Kondo promises to restore through a "curiously rigid" and "ritualistic appeal" (Chayka). Despite the claim that one's space will come to represent the person, many critics find that her approach acts as "a one-size-fits-all process that has a way of homogenizing homes and erasing traces of personality or quirkiness" (Chayka). Her universal solution can be seen as a denial of personality, but her inclusiveness of introspection in the process provides a unique twist to the otherwise monotonous movement.

She references one's internal desires often within her tidying method. Since her process requires one to discard of any unnecessary items that do not provoke joyful responses, the individual's perspectives and emotions play a major role in obtaining a successful end result. Kondo reiterates multiple times what she states early on in the book—"Tidying is just a tool, not the final destination" (21). This contemplative mindset enhances one's internal self and external environment. One of Kondo's fundamental lessons of this philosophy involves learning how to identify items which "spark joy" in an individual. In understanding this phenomenon, one must acknowledge personal desires and intentions, which relates to a deeper spiritual purpose. Through her usage of the "spark joy" concept, clients or participants must acknowledge their own intuition and hone-in on their emotions, which their environment reflects. This ideal and her constant reference to personal happiness insinuate that a spiritual connection to the self exists as the most important factor in a successful declutter—a direct correlation to Japanese cultural influences.

*The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* alludes to or explicitly references Shintoism often through many of her ideological discussions. The Shinto religion consists of "reverential service to the dead, the gratitude of the present to the past, and the conduct of the individual in relation to the entire household" (Kitasawa 480). While the ancestral component does not apply to her teachings, the other two interweave themselves into much of her philosophy. Her methods to remove any items that no longer possess a purpose, regardless of one's past history with them,

promotes a present-focused mindset. Kondo states, “It is not our memories but the person we have become because of those past experiences...,” and the “space in which we live should be for the person we are becoming now, not for the person we were in the past” (118). Similar to Shintoism, Kondo recognizes that past items provide people with memories and experiences that affect their current lifestyle, but this “gratitude” to the past does not culminate in an accumulation of all items that once served her clients in the past. Kitasawa also states, “One of the most remarkable features of Shinto is the special emphasis laid on cleanness,” as it “regards physical impurity as identical with moral impurity” (481). Kondo’s entire organizational philosophy promotes overall cleanliness—both in and out of the household. Her claims regarding cleanliness also resemble the Shinto emphasis on the individual’s relation to the household. To incorporate practices of Shinto respect and worship practices, Marie Kondo recommends creating a shrine for any “charms” or talismans that promote positive energy in the home. This suggestion correlates with one of her final goals of “transforming the home into a sacred space, a power spot filled with pure energy” (Kondo 161). An area of positive energy promotes further happiness and helps individuals connect to their homes and reflect on the physical environment.

In addition to the Shinto emphasis on positive energy and cleanliness, many of Kondo’s ideas relate to other ancient Japanese practices. One of these practices includes feng shui, which focuses on incorporating and “living in accordance with the rules of nature” (Kondo 197). Kondo promotes a connection and return to nature through her philosophy and discussion of energy in items. Like people, objects possess their own energies, so in decluttering items, participants of the KonMari Method promote positivity and remove all items considered unnatural, whether from a lack of purpose or overuse, for the individual and the home. By promoting positive energy, Kondo also promotes a meditative or Zen-like state. Keene states, “Simplicity and the natural qualities of the materials employed...are now common ideals of the Japanese people” (301). Similar to the natural components of feng shui, Kondo’s concept of living simply and purposefully mirrors these ideas of Zen. The simplicity of the Zen philosophy underlies each aspect of her method. These two Japanese practices relate to the detoxification effect that she claims her clients experience and place value on the individual’s intuition to object relationships.

This idea of Zen and feng shui involve an exchange of energy that correlates with many Buddhist traditions. At the most basic level, Buddhism simply refers to an “accumulation of positive Karma that comes with thinking and behaving in a manner consistent with that which is morally just” to obtain “Nirvana (self-enlightenment)” (Peek 528). While Kondo does not explicitly state a connection to Buddhist sentiments, hints of its basic principles appear throughout her piece. In her explaining her philosophy, Kondo states that “underlying [her] method of tidying is transforming the home into a sacred space, a power spot filled with pure energy” (161). This energy exchange and creating an environment that is “pure” relates directly to this idea of self-fulfilling prophecy that induces a sense of awakening in the individual. She confirms the Buddhist idea of proper living through her push to remove unessential possessions. Buddhism encourages its followers to possess “right thought,” which “involves a renunciation of lust and greed” (Peek 528). Kondo consistently reminds her audience that excessive material items that do not have a specific function are neither needed nor beneficial. Her emphasis, instead, focuses on removing materials that no longer serve a purpose for the individual to allow them to “move about your world as energy...and come back to you as the thing that will...bring you the most happiness” (Kondo 192). The passage echoes the karmic exchange in Buddhism,

which offers an even more mystical and spiritual appeal to Kondo's ideology. This combination of Buddhist, Shintoist, and other components of Japan's teachings indicate that Kondo's ideas remain authentic and differ from other techniques used to obtain a minimalist lifestyle.

Kondo's focus on object relationships corresponds with her incorporation of Japanese Aestheticism. Keene describes the Ryonanji, a popular garden in Japan, and its simplicity. The writer claims that people "might derive greater pleasure from...the Ryoanji garden than of the Sistine Chapel..." because "[the garden] asks our admiration rather than our participation" (Keene 301). Kondo exemplifies this idea in her technique as she forces her clients to actively participate in the process. The KonMari Method must allow individuals to sort their own possessions as they are "a result of choices made in the past by no one other than ourselves" (Kondo 183). This ability to recognize our past correlates to a final component of Aestheticism—perishability. This component of Japanese Aesthetics conveys that "without the possibility of aging with time and usage there could be no real beauty" (Keene 305). Kondo explains that all items expire their purpose, which qualifies them for discard. The Japanese Aesthetic ideals celebrate this ability to age and complete their purpose. Keene explains, "Not all Japanese homes are aesthetically pleasing...but whenever financially possible it is attempted to create at least in one corner something suggesting the simplicity and elegance of the traditional aesthetics" (294). This incorporation into the Japanese culture originated from the small spaces of Japanese homes, which require creative organizational techniques. This aestheticism suggests "ingenuity born out of the constraint of small spaces in Japan and a love for orderliness are national traits" (Bruculieri). While Japanese Aesthetics may have arisen out of small living conditions, the popularity of Kondo's book arises from a similar condition in other modern-day countries. America's households parallel Japan's as "a trend toward downsizing as U.S. population growth shifts from the suburbs to city centers" (Maloney and Fujikawa). The popularization of smaller spaces and urbanization result in a move from excessive consumerism to minimalism, which better reflects Japanese Aesthetics.

These Japanese Aesthetics are exhibited by other architectural forms and even appear in Kondo's new product line that incorporates both minimalist and Japanese design. Much of Japan's architectural history relates to its spiritual history, so many buildings and articles discuss the design of temples, palaces, or gardens like the Ryonanji. One article mentions Kisho Kurokawa<sup>1</sup> and claims that spiritual buildings and locations had blueprints that consisted of "an independent unit—which he called *jiga*, the Buddhist term for 'individual'—and at the same time a part of the whole" (Urban 92). Kondo's practice consists of sections and categories that one must follow and adhere to, so this architectural influence explains her emphasis on her intense storage methodology. Kondo briefly describes Japanese homes as places with small storage spaces but designed perfectly for a basic purpose. For example, when discussing her folding technique, Kondo states that she has yet to find "any other culture in the world where storage units and clothing were matched so precisely" (74). She then continues later with an oddly in-depth description of Japanese closets that offer a perfect solution to closet organization dilemmas. These two specifications seem to act as her subtle way of acknowledging architecture of her culture, while also "promoting Japanese culture" that was used to "convey an image of modernity" (Urban 97). These techniques were shared by the architects that Urban discusses, which supports the idea that Kondo still adheres to her Japanese style and has not fully succumbed to Westernization.

As opposed to Kondo's methods and lifestyle, a consumerist culture dictates the lives of households in various countries. Kondo's book exists as one of a growing population of

resources, which “stimulate aesthetic disenchantment with affluence” and “illustrate the benefits that emerge from reduced consumption and productivity” (Meissner 195). For Kondo, excess results in a scattered mindset and this lifestyle does not promote happiness. The effects of a consumerist culture “makes it hard for many people to imagine how much they need to live comfortably” (Kondo 124). Kondo revolves her practices around one’s ability to remove these societal constructs of accumulation and attempts to convert populations with a focus on happiness through the internal and not material. Ironically, Meissner describes this approach as “*minimizing in order to maximize*” (190). Instead of a material “maximization,” Kondo promotes an individual lifestyle enhancement that relates to traditional cultural influences, which further promotes her minimalistic approach. Through a promise of an emotional approach, Kondo’s philosophy offers a “sharp departure from home-organization convention” and applies cross-culturally as the “concept of decluttering has been gaining steam for more than a decade” (Maloney and Fujikawa). Her unique ideology coupled with the present economic shift towards a minimalist movement depict the significance of these basic Japanese principles. Kondo explains that people must focus on ““experiencing beauty in simplicity and calmness”” (qtd. in Bruculieri). Through a complete declutter and reconnection to the self and intuition, one gains happiness and spiritual contentment, while also reducing the unnecessary aspects of life that detract from this purpose.

These great claims of ultimate satisfaction in Kondo’s work, and other minimalist teachers, are what many critiques struggle to accept. One article claims that minimalism is marketed as “therapy” that acts as “an exorcism of the past, clearing the way for a new future of pristine simplicity” (Chayka). This therapeutic promise appears early in Kondo’s book when, in bolded words, she claims that her process is “life transforming” (3). With such a promise, minimalism attracts those who are seemingly suffocated by consumerist culture and need to prioritize. In an entire section labeled “No need for commercial storage items,” Kondo argues that one should never buy more stuff to make her process work. Showing a progression in her own philosophy from the first book to the present, Kondo’s current line of organizational products seems to label her as a hypocrite of her own teachings<sup>2</sup>. Despite the plainness of her items that adhere to the overall aesthetic she promotes, one critic claims that it is “the aesthetics of simplicity [that] cloak artifice, or even unsustainable excess” (Chayka). Through this assumed change in dynamic, it seems that Kondo’s work may have become too Westernized according to some.

As previously mentioned, Kondo’s new line and change in some of her original philosophy mimic other lifestyle brands, such as *Goop*. With the growth of her Netflix show and the addition of publications, Kondo may seem to value professional growth more than spiritual enlightenment for her clients. Her success has affected the tone of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, but her Japanese foundation is still prevalent. Despite her new, and rather expensive, brand, she still integrates items that reflect her culture, such as incense and a shiatsu stick, which maintain her Japanese essence. Even in her book, Kondo leaves room for this brand interpretation when she says that her clients should “wait until [they] have completed the entire process and then take [their] time looking for storage items that [they] really like” (150). By keeping her first book vague and focused on introspection and determining what one truly desires, Kondo unintentionally allowed for her current growth and business scaffold. With the continued simplicity and elements of her unique perspective, Kondo does not allow a complete shift to Western thought, but instead combines modern Western consumerist culture and allows

for her audience to choose what fits their lifestyles best. Ultimately, by expanding her brand, she also broadens her audience and keeps them interested and motivated.

Overall, Kondo's belief in minimalism parallels the simplicity of many Japanese practices, as they focus on the individual and a more philosophical development through introspection. In her original publication, minimalism provides an escape from the consumerism that affects many households. When looking at her current-day brand, it seems that she has strayed slightly from her original work, even showing some contradiction, but the foundation still remains. Instead, her works display a sense of consciousness to the needs of the American culture and desire to declutter and create an aesthetic space that mirrors modern minimalism. With her line, website expansion, and growing consultant team, Kondo has only furthered her worldwide presence and influence. Seemingly, this expansion makes her original book and method more palatable for her audience who live in a world often obsessed with form over function. Despite the extension of her brand and continued work, Kondo still incorporates major Japanese cultural components that differentiate the KonMari Method from other modern-day organizational techniques. Presumably, her upcoming work, *Joy at Work*, will continue to reflect Japanese influences, but the effectiveness of a cross-cultural approach to professionalism is ambitious and will test the business mogul's true philosophy.

Notes

1. Kisho Kurokawa (1934-2007) is a prominent Japanese architect who was most famous in the 1970s for his commentary on and work in design. Urban's article comments on his work and influence, among others.
2. Full product line can be accessed at <https://shop.konmari.com/collections>.

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