

# Minimalist Interior Design and Decoration: Class Distinction in the Adaptation of Japanese Culture

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## Abstract

Class distinction lies at the core of peoples' preferences in interior design and home decoration. This paper attempts to understand the growing popularity of minimalist interior designs as a part of the social study of architecture in Thailand. Qualitative content analysis of YouTube videos about Japanese minimalist home décor is used to gain an understanding of capital accumulation and the distinctive social status of Thai minimalist homeowners. This paper begins with an attempt to understand the growing popularity of interior designs of Japanese minimalism in relation to the minimalist style home decoration trend in Thailand. This study suggests that the aesthetics of Japanese minimalism are accepted as representing good taste and promoting the distinctiveness of Thai middle-class people. The cultural and economic capital of homeowners encourage the taste of Japanese minimalist interior design. With restricted income, time, and space, the homeowners apply do-it-yourself home decoration in combination with affordability and functionality principles.

**Keywords:** Japanese minimalism, cultural adaptation, class distinction, Thailand

## Introduction

In the past decades, architecture has been integrated into life and has become a global phenomenon (Sklair, 2005). In *The Sociology of Architecture: Constructing Identities*, Paul Jones referred to Garry Stevens's observations on architecture and summarized it as "...the central

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function of the discipline of architecture is to produce instruments of taste” (Jones, 2011, p. 17). The selection of particular designs indicates individual taste (Scelders et al., 2017, p. 31). Arguably, minimalism sits at the top among the popular styles that currently embody good taste (Liu, 2018, p. 14). The “good taste” here refers to the taste that is associated with higher status cultural capital. It must be obtained by knowledge and education rather than inherited. More commonly seen in Japan than in other nations, the style is favored due to its simplicity and outstanding qualities in space utilization. In a capital city like Bangkok, daily life and lifestyles of the people are restrained by limited time, resources (incl. budget), and space. Convenience and simplicity seem to be the keywords and solutions for people, especially the urban middle-class, who are occupied by their busy schedules.

In the past few years, Thailand has witnessed growth in attention for home decorations and interior design (home as personalized space). Various interior design styles such as loft, industrial, minimalism, etc., have become viable options for the decoration of the increasing numbers of high-rise units and condominiums (Massey, 2008). Such styles offer practical home solutions without compromising appearance (Meissner, 2019, p. 185). For many people, they become modern and ‘right’ choices, replacing the overboard and unnecessary expensive older and obsolete styles that no longer serve their purposes (Meissner, 2019, p. 185-187). Among a few outstanding different styles, minimalism arguably stands at the top. Not only does it accommodate the conditions of life with limited time and resources, it also maximizes the practicality of available resources. Japanese minimalist home décor has become phenomenally popular among Thai people, especially among Japanese culture admirers. Many houses are furnished in minimalist style.

By reviewing the success of minimalism and the adaptation of minimalist home décor in Thailand, the authors suggest that minimalist style is associated with class distinction. Below, the authors first examine the development of architectural and interior design – minimalism specifically. Next, they refer to Bourdieu's theory of distinction in relation to the taste of and reputation from Japanese minimalist home decoration as culturally coded products. Following that, they unfold the choices of interior, furniture and accessories which express the cultural capital of Japanese minimalist homeowners. The rest of the paper then uses Japanese minimalist-style home décor to argue how the particular style has become a dominant trend among Thai middle-class strata despite economic capital restrictions.

## Literature Review

Minimalist lifestyle is the way to avoid ostentatious displays in everyday practices and goes hand in hand with a preference for “ordinary and simple” styles (Lee 2021, p. 2). Minimalist ideas emphasize understated design, produce and atmosphere, which reduce a strong sensitivity, display modest characteristics, and give plain and unadorned appearance. (Lee, 2021, p. 2; Wolff, 2005, p. 66).

Before minimalist design became popular in Japan and elsewhere, minimalism as a design style was first conceived in America by a group of artists in New York (Strickland, 2000, p. 42). It was a way for the higher educated strata to express their views and oppose what they perceived as over-the-top and unnecessary luxuriousness. They proposed minimalism as an alternative and escape. Ultimately, the style is seen as the “authentic” choice among the new and higher educated - or those associated with higher cultural capital. The authenticity here signifies the intertwining history and the original source created under specific context and conditions - capital, time, and space as such (Lee, 2021, p. 2; Scelders et al., 2017, p. 31).

The core concept of minimalism overlaps with Japanese Zen philosophy since both emphasize and embrace simplicity and resourcefulness (Strickland, 2000, p. 48, 64). As commonly known, Japan has very limited land resources. Efficient utilization of space is the prime principle (Strickland, 2000, p. 48, 64). The essence of minimalism is to have necessary elements. The key is to “get rid of any excessive...unnecessary components and features” (Schenker, 2020). As the paper discusses below, instead of putting more features, minimalism minimizes and removes the use of color tones and simplifies space usage (Lee 2021, p. 2)

A broad definition of minimalist architecture involves everything and is not limited to designs, materials, production processes, management, and quality. The qualities of minimalist style (features - practicality and design) according to Schenker (2020) include “simplicity in design to serve general function; clear compositions; natural(-ish), light, and neutral colors”. Other associated terms are “classic” and “timeless” for it does not follow the everchanging (and luxury) trends (Lee, 2021, p. 2).

Al Qudwa, a scholar in design and architecture, simplifies the concept of minimalist architecture in “Developing Simple and Economic Buildings in the Gaza Strip Using Minimalist Architecture Principles” as follows:

“[stripping] everything down to its essential quality and achieve simplicity, by sorting out highest priority architectural requirements are, and then to do the possibly least to achieve

them. Other aspects of this trend are using basic and elemental geometric forms, raw materials, and the repetitions of structures which represent a sense of order and essential quality” (2013, p. ii)

Examples of items and combinations that can represent minimalist interior décor include the followings: a simple grey and white kitchen cabinet set with the same-appearance doors to serve storage functions; a living room decorated with white wall and natural flooring; a common area outfitted with light-colored natural finishes, wooden planks, oak panels, and black and white furniture; and, the timeless-style apartment with simple white accents and a monochrome visual design (Liu, 2018, p. 32, 50, 64, 88, 91, 200, 252)

MUJI brand (derived from Mujirushi Ryohin, meaning “high-quality goods with no brand”) is a Japanese retailer established in 1980 (Usui, 2019, p. 226). The brand claims that “simplicity, flexibility and modesty to fit different lifestyles and individual preferences” lie at the heart of its products (MUJI Retail). MUJI therefore presents “minimalistic and simple but artistic designs” (Usui, 2019, p. 226). Through the “no-brand” philosophy, MUJI interior home design and decoration come as home (space) owners have developed the so-called “Japanese minimalist aesthetic” (Yen, Lin & Lin, 2014, p. 59). Over the years, MUJI has expanded brand awareness and generated loyalty in the global market.

Social class refers to “a status hierarchy within the social system” (Tomley et al., 2015, p. 343). According to Bourdieu, society consists of three social classes: the bourgeoisie or dominant class, the petit bourgeoisie or middle class, and the working class. Members of the dominant class are supposed to have highest levels of capital, as opposed to members of the working class. Based on French society (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 332), the middle-class strata is categorized into three sub-levels: high cultural capital with less economic capital, high economic capital with less cultural capital, and similar levels of both types of capital (Chanida Sangiempaisarnsuk, 2007, pp. 80-81). In the Thai social context, which is central to this study, typical middle-class occupations include high school teacher, manager, owner of a small enterprise, and employee in the media industry. Those occupations are compatible with the definition of middle class as “well-educated people who do non-manual work” (Tomley et al., 2015, p. 343) and with previous literature on Thai middle class which defined such strata as professional people working in business, industrial and government sectors (Amata Jantarangsee, 2009, p. 180).

## Research Methods

This research investigates how Thai people use minimalist interior design to signify their distinctive social statuses with help of home decoration video materials. A qualitative content analysis is used to interpret audio-visual media of Japanese minimalist home decorations from YouTube through a “systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). With the approach of “directed content analysis” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1286), the codes—taste, distinction, middle class, economic capital, and cultural capital—are derived from the theory of Pierre Bourdieu.

Because this study focusses on middle class people having good Japanese minimalist taste, the criteria of moderate interior budget and good audience feedback (high record of viewers and positive comments) are applied. Two YouTube videos with a high number of viewers (approx. 68,000 and 200,000 views per video) on the AomThara home decoration channel, namely “Small Budget (700,000 Baht), Big feeling of MUJI: Minimalist own-decoration house” (AomThara, 2020, December) and “Young couple’s Japanese Minimal House: Home Décor with Budget of 650,000 Baht” (AomThara, 2020, August) are then selected. Therefore, two couples, each owning a house are the case studies for this paper. They are called ‘Japanese cultural product enthusiasts’ and ‘young entrepreneurs’ in the remainder of this paper.

Conversations between the homeowners and the channel host and the display of Japanese minimalist interior design in both YouTube videos are analyzed. The analytical framework is based on Pierre Bourdieu's notions discussed above. Japanese minimalist home décor as an expression of social status is examined with the notion of “distinction”. “Cultural capital” or the ability to create and appreciate the Japanese minimalist design is explored. Meanwhile, spending on decoration and social disposition of homeowners are indicated through “economic capital”. After that, “the relationships among those categories are identified” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1285). At this stage, correlation between middle class peoples’ lifestyle, economic capital, and cultural capital is observed to understand capital accumulation by homeowners. The interplay between cultural and economic capital is investigated to gain insight how Japanese minimalist home decoration is influenced by both.

### Class Distinction of Japanese Minimalist Houseowners

“The interior makes me feel as if I was in Japan. It looks very habitable.”

“With such serene and stylish interior design, the house looks lively rather than dull. It’s hard to describe. All in all, it’s super cool.”

Above are examples of positive opinions on minimalist style homes in YouTube videos. They represent beautiful Japanese-style home interior, which speak for owners' good taste and artistic home decoration skills. Such admiring words mark their high level of cultural capital.

The owners of both places make clear statements about their Japanese minimalist taste in the videos. The Japanese cultural product enthusiasts view themselves as admirers of Japanese cultural values and aesthetics. Their appreciation of Japanese homes was cultivated during several trips to Japan and brought home to decorate their house. The young entrepreneurs in turn, accepted that their home decor style can be labelled Japanese minimalist. Their preference for white color tones, wood, and back at the proportion of 60:30:10 is in line with Japanese minimalist tone of white and wood, and recently famous in Thailand.

In Thailand, the Japanese minimalist house is the object of aesthetic joy and asserts the social status of its owners. A choice for Japanese minimalist decor arguably signifies superior social status for the houseowner. Together with the positive comments received, the choices of Japanese cultural product enthusiasts and young entrepreneurs attest to their class of distinction.

If we consider the class disposition of the owners who apply Japanese minimalist style in these videos, comments regarding home decoration expenses such as "700,000 [baht] it's not a small budget. So rich!! [laugh]" illustrates how decoration is perceived as a priced activity, which echoes the higher social status of its owner. From that perspective, the Japanese minimalist houseowner is not associated with lower class strata. Simultaneously, the 650,000-800,000 baht baseline budgets used by the owners for their interior designs, is not overly high considering the average living costs in Bangkok. Due to their moderate level of cultural capital, the authors therefore argue that both owner couples belong to the middle class.

The owners of both places have background careers and experience in "professional jobs" (Chanida Sangiempaisarnsuk, 2007, p. 80-81) - photographer and online content writer and garment business owner. Their careers and jobs are consistent with Bourdieu's (1979, p. 39) suggestion that petit bourgeois or middle-class people are "industrial and commercial employers" as well as "private-sector executive". According to social class typology in Thai society, the houseowners' job positions of small entrepreneur and employee in the media industry are indicative of their middle-class status.

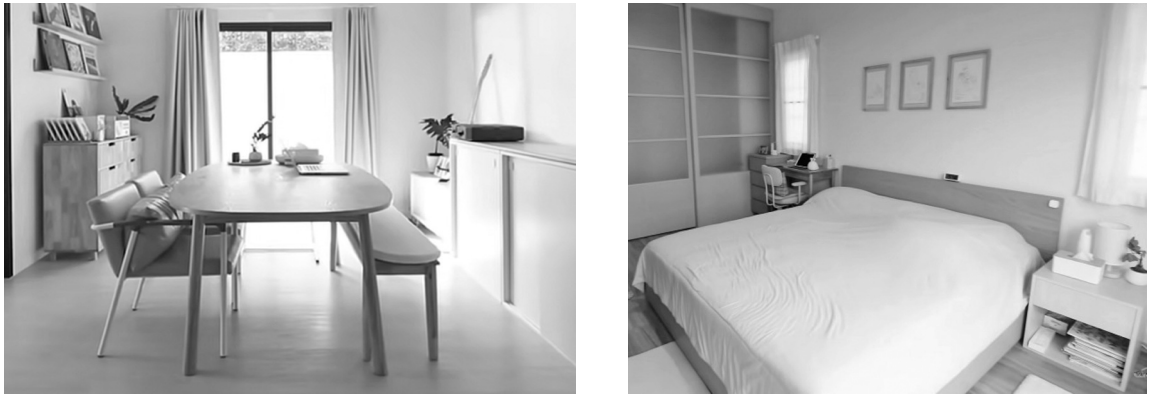
### Houseowners' Taste of Japanese Minimalism

Both owners have successfully applied Japanese minimalist style to furnish their homes. Their choice of furniture and home structure signify how cultural capital-the level of knowledge and understanding towards the principles of minimalist interior and architectural designs-is embodied in the houseowners' bodies. The designs and colors must go with the rest of the space - simple and white. The Japanese minimalist-style houseowners reveal their tastes through indoor coloring, floors, walls, ceilings, and door frame designs. Light laminate wood flooring, and pure white walls and ceilings are the key components of both places. Some walls are decorated in the form of wavy white texture and white tiny tiles with black grid to keep color at a minimum to go in line with the minimalist concept. Within Japanese minimalist code, door frames and wardrobes with latticework similar to "Shōji" (Britannica, 2008) are used (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Japanese minimalist space showing white walls and ceiling, and lattice wardrobes (AomThara, 2020)

Houseowners also express their Japanese minimalist taste via their choice of furniture. Such choices range from the shapes of table legs to the color tones of cabinets and beds. The wooden dining tables and bed frames illustrate naturalness and calmness for both Japanese minimalist houses (Figure 2). The self-designed working desk with I-shape legs is placed such to give a sense of orderliness to the bedroom. Moreover, the simple platform wooden beds in both places are consistent with the concept of basic geometric form and the use of raw materials.



**Figure 2** The wooden Japanese-style table and bed offer a sense of nature and calm (AomThara, 2020).

The owners are aware that all decisions and details matter, no matter how small they may appear. Even the aesthetics of electric appliances and accessories are not overlooked. White electric fans and air purifying machines are welcomed in places of unadorned appearance. The brand name on the fan's front grille was hidden with a wooden cap pad to comply with the no-logo principle (Figure 3). Simple and foldable plastic cloth lines and the plain plastic storage boxes concur with the philosophy of simple design and functional purpose. The light brown flags from Japan are adapted as a door curtain to add to the Japanese atmosphere (Figure 4).



**Figure 3** The brand name of fan was hidden with a wooden cap pad (AomThara, 2020).





**Figure 4** Japanese minimalist door curtain (AomThara, 2020)

The owners successfully incorporate Japanese minimalist aesthetics, knowledge and admiration to decide on their architectural interior design and select their home furniture until their expectations are met. Arguably, they may use their knowledge to judge which styles can be categorized as minimalist and which are not, and therefore tasteless (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 99). This aesthetic sense allows minimalist homeowners to distinguish themselves from those favoring other styles and draws a class distinction. Importantly, Japanese minimalists' distinctive capabilities accrue from years of learning about home design and decoration among young working people of the same generation and society. This is when minimalism was spread and became popular (Srisak Pattanawasin, 2010, p. 130).

### **Capital Accumulation of Japanese Minimalist Houseowners**

The application of Japanese minimalist style symbolizes the cultural capital of homeowners cultivated from their middle-class lifestyle and careers in a process of capital accumulation. Two types of capital are determined: economic and cultural. For cultural capital accumulation, the fondness for house decoration with numerous build-in cabinets in white and wood tones is a result of making frequent visits to Japan (6-7 times per year) and staying in Japanese houses, which allows these people to appreciate and unconsciously absorb the ideas of a tidy, simple, and functional home. While working as fashion accessories brand owners, the young entrepreneurs apply a combination of white, wood, and black colors from the design concept of the natural color products to decorate their Japanese minimalist house (Figure 5). Japanese minimalist home décor is a big-budget activity. Therefore, the economic capital of its owners is key. As evidence, the homeowners made their income from selling fashion accessories since they were undergraduate students and recently earned more from their growing business.

With their financial credits, they received a house loan to buy a single-attached house at a young age. Under the Thai social class system, their achievement in accumulating economic capital signifies their social disposition as middle-class people.



**Figure 5** The design of natural color products, like the bags on the shelves, are used to decorate the house in white, wood, and black tones (AomThara, 2020).

The cultural capital of middle-class homeowners shapes their economic capital. On the one hand, economic capital enhances cultural capital since the former is required to achieve Japanese minimal home décor at a budget of 650,000-700,000 Baht. Also, cultural accumulation from frequent holiday trips to Japan is only possible for homeowners enjoying a good economic status. On the other hand, economic capital also constrains cultural capital. Arguably, the abovementioned amounts cannot be considered overly high for a home décor budget, which relates to the moderate level of economic capital of middle-class people in Thailand (Chanida Sangiempaisarnsuk, 2007, pp. 80-81). Self-home decoration and affordable decoration items are chosen to save money; cultural capital, which requires good taste and comprehensive knowledge and artistic skills with regard to Japanese minimalism, is necessary. The affordable, modern-style, white particle cupboards topped with wooden boards and placed in a row reflect understanding of the concepts of naturalism and repetition of structure. Low-cost home decoration items sold at Daiso shops and the Aliexpress website, require young entrepreneurs' judgement on ordinary and simple products according to minimalist taste. The two-tone built-in cabinet explicates how Japanese cultural product enthusiasts give precedence to the harmony between white walls and natural flooring as well as spatial utilization.

The house then has become a minimalist space – representing Japanese minimalist interior décor – without spending a large amount of money on hiring interior decorators or high-priced brand items like MUJI. Also, the videos emphasise that all homeowners prioritize

functionality and practicality. Apart from minimalist-styled home decoration and accessories, another main criterion concerns the initial principles of minimalist architectural design (as illustrated at the beginning of the article). These principles should serve the core functions of today's city life that maximize the (multi-functional) use of limited space. An example includes storage cabinets that can replace a wall-partitioned board. Maintenance is also crucial. With limited time in their hands, the owners prefer pieces that do not demand constant care, and that are easy to keep in order. A hanging cabinet in the bathroom, for instance, means they do not have to worry about grease and dirt on the floor.

## Conclusion

Personal spaces and furniture are considered cultural goods. They speak of the owners' taste and reflect their economic and cultural capital. Applying minimalist architectural and interior design styles is one way to express one's identity and social status, or class distinction. While it is called minimalist style, in the limited space available for this article, the authors demonstrate that it is in fact anything but simple. Minimalist style is arguably as closely knitted with cultural capital as with economic capital as can be learned from the positive comments (toward both the houses and their owners) the YouTube videos garnered, and the spending on decoration. To fully enjoy and embrace minimalist style, Japanese minimalism in this case, the homeowners require cultural capital accumulation in terms of specific stylings and principles. As such, the detail of both houses, e.g., their structure and furniture, is in line with natural, functional, unornamented, and Japanese-style principles. The owners' middle-class lifestyle and careers facilitate their Japanese minimalist cultural capital accumulation. While their economic capital enables them to adopt a taste of the Japanese minimalist home via their decoration budget and their ability to spend leisure time in Japan, their moderate income simultaneously forces them to perform much of the decorating work by themselves, and use affordable, multi-functional and practical furniture and decoration items.

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