

Final Essay: Japanese Culture Through Literature, Religion and Harmony

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Introduction

Japanese culture is an extensive topic that could hardly be explained by a simple college student. Many published books such as *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation* by Robert E. Carter and *Japanese Culture* by Paul Varley render different aspects of rich and endless expressions of history, religion, art and culture. Even so, these two books can only focus on particular aspects of the expansive culture because it's admirable facets lie in an intertwined connection between the past, the present and its society today. In this essay I will venture how Japans many cultural distinctions were set apart from other cultures through it's peace period, it's religion, and its cultural need for harmony. To add on, Japan's historical hierarchy also set up a distinct foundation through its use of Emperors, Noblemen, Court life, literature and son on. This set up a way of life and provided its society with roles and presumptions that its people were expected to live up to. Thankfully, the rendering of such expectations were recorded and written down for scholars to analyze and discuss today by famous writers such as Sei Shonagon, author of the *Pillow Book* and Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*.

From a different cultural standpoint, religion is also a significant contribution to the influence and creation of Japanese culture. Influences from other countries played an important role but Japan was unique enough to have its own religious establishment. These are only some of many contributing key factors that shaped Japans culture as it is today and will be further discussed in the remainder of the essay, including how the past may be connected to present day cultural norms and societal standards.

The Heian Period

During the Heian period, Japan encountered a time frame of prolonged peace that steered influence towards creating a more Japanized way of being. Chinese influences were being molded into what the Japanese thought more appropriate for their culture which led to the creation of Japan's stylized customs, traditions and unique written language. The Heian period is also known for its peak of Imperial Court life and its investment in the arts, literature, and music. Because court life was known for much of its leisure and aptness to obtaining an education, they are known for being the origin of Japan's many famous literature pieces that involve romance, court life, samurai life, poetry and so on. These written revelations provide a lens into the past which plays a role in Japan's cultivation of their cultural values and how they have changed or remained the same today.

Women's role in Literature and Court Life

The best examples of court life are those in which are represented through literature such as *The Tale of The Bamboo Cutter*, *The Girl who Loved Insects*, and *The Pillow Book*. The norms of the Heian period are both established and challenged in these stories. A redundancy in all three pieces is that they exemplify court life and expectations while in *The Bamboo Cutter* and *The Girl Who Loved Insects* have expectations challenged. Both protagonists embellish their character by mastering and understanding these norms but openly criticize them. These stories reflect criticism of a woman's expected role in the Heian period and demonstrate progression

within literate women who question their expected behavior. These strong independent protagonists provide role models to their audiences to stay truer to themselves and not allow others to force them into becoming what society expects. Although in *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* Kaguya conforms and masters an elegant lifestyle, she is not self fulfilled. In contrast *The Lady Who Loves Insects* pays no mind to what others think and lives on a self actualized life pursuing knowledge and embracing beauty in insects. This is something that may be root of why women have become more independent in present Japan and do not conform to having children or getting married. In the study by Shirair (pg 108) there has been a decreasing rate of women getting married. Although this may not be directly related to the rebelliousness of the protagonists in these pieces of literature nor on the influence it had on their audiences, there could possibly be an effect or impact to women's self worth in Japan.

To add on, women played a significant role in the Heian period and the shaping of cultural standards. Court life is best explained through the telling's of *The Pillow Book*, and *The Tale of The Bamboo Cutter*. These two pieces of literature best describes how people in that era socialized and intermingled with each other. Although the first mentioned piece of literature is from a diary point of view, it captivates the renderings of a psychological gateway into someone's mind from the past. This in turn provides a great study into what a woman in court life prioritized. As reflected in Japan's history, beauty played a significant role in all aspects of Japanese life. Whether it be in the way a woman dressed, the way someone walked, played an instrument, wrote poetry or poured their tea, beauty would be present, searched for and emphasized. Court life was no different. Lady Kaguya from *The Bamboo Cutter* reflected this well in her story. Her whole life revolved around her natural and further socialized beauty. This

in turn provides us with how Japanese women were valued in the past and how they may still be subjected to such standards today.

Preservation of Traditions Through Literature

Japanese literature from the Heian and the Kamakura period are very reflective of their time. Not only do they reveal court life and cultural values of their author's time period, the writing typically reflects their long days of leisure and ways of thinking through the use of long descriptive language, detailed imagery and the use of poetry. Sei Shonagon, author of *The Pillow Book*, and Murasaki Shikibu, author of *The Tale of Genji*, are both known as one of the biggest contributors to Japanese literature. Their impressive development of descriptive stories successfully captures the essence of their daily life and provide us with great insight of the past. Japanese literature during and previous to the Kamakura period is cherished due to many reasons. The essence of aristocracy is so far in the past that it evokes a sense of mythology. It's beyond the social norms of today and it provides a nostalgic yearning for a simpler life of leisure and the opportunity to admire beauty as it was praised. Japanese literature is rich in thoughtful poetry and vivid imagery that it can hardly be compared to what is rendered today. Modernized language has become very straightforward and to the point that the written language of poetry falling close to this style is worthy of praise. This in turn provides a reason as to why Japan values its past and upbringings and shares a common interest in preserving its traditions whether it be through literature, story telling or value systems.

The Art of Poetry

In the Heian period, many forms of art were established through the use of literature, painting, music and so on. A major form as discussed in class was poetry. This advanced manipulation of words was used in various ways and for different reasons. The first would be to

poetically captivate the beautiful nature of things and describe them in an elegant manner.

Writers such as the author of *The Pillow Book*, provided us with an extensive amount of poetry and because of that we are able to analyze and learn how this poetic usage was developed and used. In other stories such as in *The Tale of Genji*, we learn how poetry was used in a different manner as well. Poetry was used in many occasions for love letters and given to women who often were kept away from public eye. In historical terms these letters written by men would also demonstrate their dedication to their woman of interest and cause them to become determined to improve their poetic abilities while also aiding them in gaining a more sensible side to their character. Poetry strongly accentuates an appreciation of things while writers captivate objects, people, or events in their specific setting. The artful use of language embodies a manifestation of life through paper which is why Japanese culture is so well rounded in this literature aspect and how it influences their depth in value.

Religious Influences

Japan has a very strong tie with its religious affiliations with Shinto and Buddhism. Although today many people do not identify themselves as being religious by nature, their traditions and teachings of over hundreds of years has become intertwined with their daily lives. It's seen everywhere whether it be a daily custom a prayer or how people today ask for permission to use kami's land for use. Although Shinto is the more dominant religion, Buddhism still holds a small influence in how the two intermingle, co-exist or in how they are interpreted to fit the values of Japanese culture. This Chinese influence brought over during the Heian period aided in the creation of one of many important aspects of Japanese culture through meditation, self enlightenment and gardening. Although the religion at some point in time was banned, its

fame and practice outlived the restriction and resulted in it's exchange of beliefs with Shinto. In this section we will explore the purpose of both religions and their function in society.

Buddhism

Buddhism was brought to Japan during the Heian period and has been modified to coexist with Shinto beliefs in most of Japan. Although Buddhism was banned in the Meiji period it was still practiced and later reinterpreted to fit and compliment Shinto beliefs. It brings about a sense of need to search for enlightenment and is influential to Japanese culture in a way that intermingles with Shintoism through meditation, in pilgrimage, and the search for the self. Meditation is seen in many self disciplinary training lessons through most martial arts or in learning to fight with a sword such as historically seen in samurai custom. This is one of many reflections of religion seen in it's culture. Amongst the Japanese meditation is also seen in prayer, or in one's decision to reflect on their life through a pilgrimage. This enables people to think about what they hope to accomplish in the future or slow down during their fast paced life to really put things into perspective, breath into events and replenish the mind and body. The enlightenment aspects of Buddhism served a strong purpose in self discipline and enlightenment. This influence is strongly seen in Japanese Zen Gardens and other landscaping forms. In *The Japanese Arts and Self Cultivation*, the author explains on page 52, "Everything that is, is a manifestation of the divine: everything is divine, although more often than not, totally unaware of its divine origin, and of the divine origin of other things". This paragraph in the chapter best captures how Buddhism and Shinto walk similar paths in its beliefs and how it's manifested in the art of landscaping and gardening. Although a stronger purpose is found through Shintoism, Buddhism influence lies predominately in the search of meditation and through these gardens, with their patterned rocks or its refined visuals of nature aid in such journey towards

enlightenment. To add on pg 57 of Carteres book explains "... only with the rise of Zen in medieval Japan did gardens become deliberately symbolic of the human quest for inner understanding."

Shintoism

Shinto lies heavily in the belief that Kami is an entity that is infused in all living beings within nature. This in turn creates a sense of respect and gratitude towards nature for providing humans with food, shelter, water, life, protection and so on. Although not many Japanese identify as having religious ties or in turn identify themselves as atheists, many superstitions and beliefs are present in their everyday life because it's a belief that has been deeply rooted in Japan's social and cultural structure. It can be seen in the way cleanliness is important because of the idea that pureness is related to sacredness and also in the idea that offerings such as food and sake are important to bridge the spirit realm in order to obtain *kami's* attention for a prayer or to give thanks. With many customs and traditions, the one repetitive aspect through it all is the co-existence with nature and how important it is to respect it. This shows how the Japanese do not take nature for granted because *kami* is more often manifested in places of nature often times larger unchangeable natural phenomena's such as within rain, sky, ocean, mountains and son on. From a psychological stance there may be a connection where between nature and self actualization. When a person allows themselves to be a part of nature or work with it, it's most probably that in this time you will feel a spiritual connection or unexplainable self fulfillment. "One who works in and with nature is working with *kami*, the divine, and as such is engaged in a spiritual practice." (pg. 56 Carter) This idea and practice is also very well reflected in the practice of landscaping and through Shinto and Buddhist gardens. The person who is responsible for creating a gateway to concentrated spiritual atmosphere is at constant practice with these

values and beliefs. They put into perspective the interaction with the person viewing it and how the garden is upheld. This lies within one of the many principles in Japanese society that is most valued which is the respect and co-existence of nature and appreciating the most beautiful aspects within it because everything that exists is valuable.

Conclusion

In this essay I explored the values of Japanese culture through literature, court life, religion and so on. There is an abundant connection in the depth of how beauty is appreciated, expressed and tied with spiritual practices. This respect of life and existence plays a key factor in how Japanese culture lends itself to be a well rounded and respected way of living. With this in mind there is no question as to why Japan is a hotspot for tourism for it's many shrines, spiritual getaways and natural parks and gardens that evoke a high esteem for spiritual connections. Historically and for over hundreds of years Japan has been known to be flourishing with rich culture and practices and the preservation of said traditions lends Japan to be a never ending exploration of culture and practices. It can be found in it's literature through poetry, in pilgrimages that date back hundreds of years, or the simple act of going to pray at a shrine or meditating in a garden. The value of preservation and respect for everything that exists is what Japanese culture stands by in many of its life aspects and can be seen and be reflected in almost anything that is Japanese.

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