<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Constructing the present: influence of Japanese traditions on everyday life in contemporary Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Li, Jerome Matthieu Chun Yin (李俊賢)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citation</strong></td>
<td>Li, J. M. C. Y. (2016). Constructing the present: influence of Japanese traditions on everyday life in contemporary Japan (Outstanding Academic Papers by Students (OAPS)). Retrieved from City University of Hong Kong, CityU Institutional Repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue Date</strong></td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8792">http://hdl.handle.net/2031/8792</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td>This work is protected by copyright. Reproduction or distribution of the work in any format is prohibited without written permission of the copyright owner. Access is unrestricted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Meiji Restoration and the surrender of Imperial Japan after Second World War were two major events and turning points in modern Japanese history. Since then, Japan has undergone rapid modernisation and experienced intense Western influences in the above events, particularly American culture after the Second World War, which have a significant influence on the lifestyle of Japanese people and thus the traditional culture. Nevertheless, Japan today is renowned of its preservation of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. This paper will focus on the intangible culture of Japan that can still be found from the everyday life of contemporary Japanese people.

This paper will first look at the religious practices, particularly the festivals and rites that are still being practiced by Japanese people in contemporary society, as traditional religions, Shinto and Buddhism, have been secularised and become an indispensible part in Japanese culture. In the second part, key terms that have been derived from traditional Japanese culture, namely the Japanese Way of Tea, religions, performing arts and literature will be explained to show the ways they embedded in the thoughts of Japanese people, which can be reflected from their everyday practices.

Through demonstrating the connection between traditional Japanese culture and everyday life in contemporary Japan, this paper aims to highlight the irreplaceable position of the Japanese traditions in impacting its culture, while being invaded by other foreign cultures in contemporary era, as well as to accentuate the essence of traditional Japanese culture.
Introduction

A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or in a society, which often embeds symbolic meaning or special significance tied with history (Green, 1997, 800). Traditional culture might seem to be far from modern time, but we have to bear in mind that traditions are always the stepping-stones for constructing modern society. Therefore, it is vital to find out how the past contributes in constructing the present and their connection.

Traditional Japanese culture includes various aspects, namely religion, performing arts, cultural activities etc. This paper will evaluate some essential concepts in traditional Japanese culture, and discuss how do they affect everyday life of Japanese people, both directly and indirectly.

Calendar and Rituals: Religious Practices in Contemporary Japan

Religions play a vital role in traditional Japanese culture, especially Shinto and Buddhism, though they were from different origins. Shinto, the way of kami (gods), is believed to be an indigenous faith of Japan, while Buddhism is regarded as a foreign religion that was imported from China and India. However, due to Shinto-Buddhist syncretism and long history of development in Japan, both of them have directly influenced the everyday life of Japanese people (Tamashige, 2013).

This can be reflected from the annual events of Japan and let us take a deeper look at the festivals from the calendar.

---

1 Shinto-Buddhist syncretism is called 神仏習合 (Shinbutsu-shugo) in Japanese. Sometimes, it would be difficult to make a clear cut between them even though they were formally separated by law in 1868. For example, many Shinto shrines were built beside Buddhist temples since there is a belief that the kami (Shinto gods) would protect the Buddhist temples.

2 Festivals are called 祭り (matsuri) in Japanese, and the festivals that are celebrated throughout the year are called 年中行事 (Nenju Gyoji) in Japanese, literally means “events in the year”.
In Japan, majority of the population are followers of both Shintoism and Buddhism since Shintoism focuses on present life, while Buddhism focuses on the life. Therefore, the majority of the population turns to Shinto when they encounter life crises, and seeks Buddhism in funeral rites (Hendry, 1997, 120).

It is shown in Graph 1 that many major festivals throughout the year and rites in Japan are actually originated from Shinto, for example, hatsumode on New Year day, Boy’s Festival and Doll Festival, Seven-Five-Three Festival. They all in fact share the meaning of praying to kami, which means Shinto gods for protection (Hartz, 2014, 104). Shinto Shrines are visited in above occasions for prayers and they are part of the celebration for the festival. On the other hand, Obon was originated from Buddhism, and Obon festival is celebrated to honor the dead and spirits of their ancestors (Glover, 2016). Funerals are usually held in a Buddhist temple in Japan as well, and an altar would be set at home.

---

3 The table was retrieved from http://www.interblog.jp/fp/20080214.gif (accessed on 20 October 2016)
4 Some Japanese people might visit Buddhist temple as well during the occasions, as they focus on the action of praying, instead of whom they pray to.
It is inevitable that religion is less influential in contemporary Japanese society, and foreign festivals are celebrated also due to Western influences like Valentines’ Date and Christmas, nevertheless, traditional festivals have become an irreplaceable part in Japanese culture. This explains why many Japanese people would claim that they are non-religious yet they would still practice religious activities (Hendry, 1995, 115-116). Those religious festivals are regarded as cultural activities and are still widely celebrated in Japan. Hence, it shows the direct influences of traditional religions on the lifestyles of Japanese people.

Understanding Japanese Mindset: Key Terms in Traditional Japanese Culture

Other than direct influences, some values of the traditional culture are embedded in the mindset of the Japanese. This is especially evident in terms of aesthetic standard, outlook of life and the nature, thus collectively influenced their daily behaviors. Here are some key terms that were come from traditional culture and are still predominant to the everyday life of Japanese people.

➢ Shizenkan (View of Nature)

Shinto is often regarded as an indigenous religion of Japan, which believes in the power of nature. As noted by W.G. Aston, one of the pioneers who studied the ancient Japanese history: the earliest forms of Japanese religion were grounded in a reverence for nature which reflected gratitude and delight, rather than fear. (Tames, 1991) Davies & Ikeno (2002, 153) also pointed out that “agriculture was the centre of all life in ancient Japan, and people were greatly concerned with the seasons, and the climate, living throughout the year in accordance with rice-farming schedules... Modern Japanese have inherited these attitudes from their ancestors, which is why the seasons are still closely connected with contemporary Japanese life.”

For example, sakura and foliage forecast are released before spring and fall respectively, since season change is a very important occasion to Japanese people. Hanami and momijigari, meaning viewing sakura and maple leaves, are still celebrated throughout Japanese society nowadays in form of social gathering (Nute, 2004, 76).

Other than seasons, as “Shinto is concerned with notions of pollution and purity” (Hendry, 1997, 118), Japanese pays high regard to environmental protection.
The Ministry of the Environment was set up in order to erect and promote environmental policies in various aspects.⁵

Graph 2. Garbage Disposal System in Japan⁶

One very obvious example is Japan has strict policies and laws regarding waste recycling as shown in graph 2, and the overall recycling rate of Japan is higher than other countries thanks to its holistic approach in formulating related policies (Kaye, 2012). Though Japanese spend a lot of time to process and categorise their waste, and they even need to remember the day of collecting different kind of waste, they are still willing to spend time to do so. It shows that Japanese concerns the natural environment looking at their daily practices.

Besides, animation films of Miyazaki Hayao reflects shizenkan as well. In Miyazaki’s animation, nature is often described as a power. In “The Art of


⁶ The photo was retrieved from https://quotidianwonders.wordpress.com/2013/05/14/japan-garbage-and-its-cultural-roots/ (accessed on 20 October 2016)
Princess Mononoke”, the story itself is an environmental fable and there are many elements of nature, for example forests and river. The theme of nature dominates the entire film (Martin, 2014).

To sum up, shizenkan has taken root in various aspects of the life of Japanese, particularly their daily practices and cultural products.

- **Mono-no-aware and Mujyokan**

According to Davies & Ikeno (2002, 35), aware refers to great subtlety, and relates to the Japanese feeling of appreciating something that is regarded as worthless. The term “mono-no-aware” was coined by Motoori Norinaga in his criticism of The Tale of Genji (Lee, 1995, 142). This echoes with the concept Mujyokan, which was originated from Buddhism meaning the awareness of impermanence.

The main reason of developing the above concepts is because of the geographical location of Japan. Japan is prone to natural disasters, like volcanic eruption, earthquake, tsunami and blizzard. Karen (2005, 33) explained that natural disasters are abundant on the Japanese archipelago and their frequency and magnitude are important human concerns. Thus, the challenging geographical conditions never give Japanese a sense of calm and leisure; on the contrary, they make people restless and diligent (Miyazaki, 1969, as cited in Davies & Ikeno, 2002).

This can be reflected from the importance of Sakura (cherry blossom), which symbolises clouds due to their nature of blooming en masse, besides being an enduring metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life (Lee, 1995, 142). Sakura has a very strong cultural significance in Japanese culture; for example, numerous popular songs took Sakura as the song title or theme, and hanami as a cultural activity as mentioned in previous text.

The 311 disasters happened in 2011 reminded Japanese people again of the concept of mujyokan, that one can never predict and control what is going to be happened in the future, and human beings are trivial before the nature, as they experienced strong earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident just in a few hours and had brought serious destruction to the Tohoku area. Therefore, after 2011, Japan reacted more promptly towards natural disasters so as to avoid replicating the same tragedy.

According to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, Japan scored very high in Uncertainty Avoidance Index and Long Term Orientation, meaning that “Japanese learned to prepare themselves for any uncertain situation” and
maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. In general, Japanese are always on guard for natural disasters. Evacuation drills are held frequently and emergency shelters are abundant for speedy evacuation in times of earthquake.

Take 2016 as example, Japan has experienced Kumamoto Earthquake, Mount Aso volcanic eruption and several typhoons. They had brought severe damage to Japan, but still the number of casualty in Japan caused by natural disasters is much lower than other countries.

All the above reflects the extent in which the ideologies of mono-no-aware and mujyokan are rooted in the mindset of Japanese.

➢ Wabi-sabi

Wabi-sabi is the term that expresses a sense of beauty. The term derives from Buddhist ideals of the medieval period but even today, this defines the essential nature of many traditional Japanese art forms (Davies & Ikeno, 2002, 156).

The aesthetic standards are reflected from the way of tea, since tea culture was introduced into Japan with Zen Buddhism, by Buddhist monks, who were also Imperial embassies to China. In Japanese Way of Tea, elements including the architecture of tearoom and pottery are preferred to be simple and natural due to the concept of wabi-sabi, and it in fact has influenced other art forms also, including ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement; poetry like haiku; as well as contemporary architecture and art.

Take Muji, a famous Japanese brand for example. It has indeed deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism and Muji has adopted the concept of wabi-sabi and minimalism in its products and branding. Muji was launched in Japan in 1980, and its name in Japanese, Mujirushi Ryohin, actually means “no-brand quality goods”, and it aims to call for spiritual awareness when Japan was undergoing economic boom.

---

7 Japan scored 92 in Uncertainty Avoidance Index and 88 in Long Term Orientation Index. Further statistics of Japan's results are available on Hofstede's website: [https://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html](https://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html) (accessed on 20 October 2016)

8 Japan's country profile on disasters is available on the website of Centre for research on the Epidemiology of Disasters: [http://www.emdat.be/country_profile/index.html](http://www.emdat.be/country_profile/index.html) (accessed on 20 October 2016)

(Killingsworth, 2015). Muji’s products are produced mainly by natural materials and unlike other brands, you cannot find the logo on its products. There is only a label indicating what the product is, and after removing the label, it would be completely neat. Muji has gained a great success in international market and promoted Japanese aesthetics to the world.

Muji’s example demonstrates that the concept of wabi-sabi in Japanese Way of Tea do not affect the practitioners of tea ceremony only. In fact, wabi-sabi has become a prevalent part of Japanese culture. It is deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetic standard, and serves as a reminder for Japanese to be more spiritually-aware by living simple lives.

➢ Ichi-go Ichi-e

Another concept that derives from the Japanese Way of Tea would be Ichi-go Ichi-e. It was suggested by Ii Naosuke, who was a daimyo, as well as a tea practitioner, and it can be understood as “once in a lifetime”. In tea ceremony, both the host and the guests have to pay full attention to the present moment. Though the host can invite same guests and hold the gathering at the same place, and even use same utensils, every gathering is unique. Everyone would have different life experiences, and the season would not be the same. As such, all who participate in the tea ceremony should pay full attention, especially in terms of spirituality (Varley & Kumakura, 1989, 187).

It is interesting that this concept has affected Noh as well. In Noh, the actors practice individually but not as a group. They believe that every show is the an opportunity for them to perform; therefore they treat every show as the first, and the last show that they are going to have. They don’t repeat the same show on the same day as well.10

The concept of “ichi-go ichi-e” was passed down from way of tea and noh, and it was eventually adopted in Japanese hospitality. The Japanese style hospitality is called Omotenashi, and it is not only about the way to serve the guests, but it has more to do with a philosophy of serving (Spivock, 2015). A common perception is that Japanese always has to bow to each other, especially when visiting a shop

---

10「能は『一期一会』を重んじる為、歌舞伎公演とは違い、同じ演目を連日上演する事がありません。舞台は役者にとっても『一期一会』。これが最初で最後の演目になるつもりで演じています。中には何十年に一回しか上演されない演目もあります。そこに巡り合えるかどうかはあなたの運次第です。」The original text in Japanese was retrieved from the website of Tatsushige Udaka Noh Actor, [http://www.tatsushige3.com/4.html](http://www.tatsushige3.com/4.html) (accessed on 20 October 2016)
or even a convenient store. Outsiders might find this uncomfortable, but it is because in omotenashi, there is the idea that every guest can be met once only, therefore, the staff has to serve the guest wholeheartedly as it is the only chance for the guest to be served. It also set out the code for formal hospitality: when the guest leaves, the staff has to bow until he or she, or the vehicle cannot be seen as if the guest would never come back again.

The example of omotenashi shows that the concept of “ichi-go ichi-e” has been passed on through traditional culture and adopted in modern Japanese society, especially in terms of hospitality.

**Conclusion: Connecting the Past and the Present**

Traditional Japanese culture is a very broad topic, and there are still a lot to discuss regarding the connection between traditional Japanese culture and everyday life of Japanese. This paper cannot cover all the topics, however, from the above examples of Japanese festivals and key terms, we can conclude that traditional culture is not something far from present times, but instead it has deeply influenced the mindset of Japanese and become a dominant part of Japanese culture. As mentioned in the introduction, it is always crucial to find the connection between the past and the present.

Besides, many essential values can be discovered from Japanese traditional culture, and they urge Japanese to pay attention to their spiritual awareness in this materialistic society and in an era of Japan’s lost decade.
Bibliography (In alphabetical order)

Books

Online Articles