

Japan and Japanese Culture

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Japanese Culture Overview

Japanese culture is very complex and layered. One of the central ideas in Japanese culture is harmony. The common good of the whole is much more valuable than one's individual welfare. Traditionally, one's private life and emotions are not commonly to be showcased. How one presents him/herself and their appearance is highly regarded.

Harmony is also present in Japanese food, rituals, and art. Everything must be balanced, from one's diet to the way a garden or building may be constructed. There is also emphasis placed on respecting the elderly, as they are believed to be wiser. The honorifics in Japanese language depict such respect, with the use of informal and formal words.

Japan offers a variety of entertainment. It offers a colorful music scene. Manga and anime have become popular worldwide, with Japanese cartooning and animation elevating to the next level. Japan is also regarded as one of the top cities in terms of fashion and shopping, with hundreds of stores and styles found throughout the country.

Japanese food is not just known for its satisfying taste, but artistic presentation as well. There is a method to eating sushi and savoring the flavors of every dish. Specific dishes are present at ceremonies and special events. Such events include girl's day, the cherry blossom festival, and coming of age day.

Japanese culture emphasizes the connection between one and nature, finding a balance between the industrial world and the peaceful surroundings of earth.

Characteristics of Japanese People

Japanese people are considered to be kind, patient, resilient, and well educated. Losing face and bringing shame to one's self or family is highly looked down upon. Japanese people are known to preserve self-respect. Pride and honor are two key elements in maintaining self-respect.

Authority and respect are also significant characteristics found in Japanese people. Politeness plays a vital role when one finds him/herself amongst a group of people. Honorific language in Japan contains levels of polite speech. The older one is, the wiser they are considered to be. Indirectness is disapproved in Japanese culture, as it is a sign of hiding one's true feelings.

Japanese people are considered very hard working. The country is known for a rigorous education system, which emphasizes the importance striving for the best. While they are hard working, they are also very calm. Japanese people are more practical than emotional.

Japan's two major religions are Buddhism and Shinto.

Buddhism, which originated from China states that emotions should be controlled and passions hidden. Controlling one's emotions and passions is a sign of strength.

Shinto is currently Japan's most prominent religion. The religion is focused on ritual practices that aim to connect present-day Japan with its ancient roots. Japanese people value their history and put in the effort to maintain ancient palaces and temples throughout the country.

Popular Cities in Japan

Tokyo

The capital of Japan is the world's largest metropolis. Central Tokyo consists of Tsukiji Fish market, the country's largest and busiest one. The Imperial Palace is also located in Central Tokyo. A popular tourist attraction, it is located on the former site of Edo Castle, a large park. Moats and stonewalls surround the area as well. While tours are regularly held, visitors are not permitted to enter the buildings. Western Tokyo is home to Shibuya, the most popular district amongst the young. It is a fashion district, famous for the abundance of fashion and cosmetic shops. Harajuku is also found in Western Tokyo, known to be the center of fashion and cosplay. The latest and most daring fashions are usually found along the streets of Shibuya and Harajuku.

Yokohama

Japan's second largest city is Yokohama. It is a popular city amongst expats, home to one of Japan's largest chinatowns. The city also promotes the country's popular noodle dish, ramen. The Ramen Museum consists of a gallery on the first floor, with the two basement floors modeled after the streets of Shitamachi (old town Tokyo). Ramen restaurants are found along the streets, with each specializing in a regional ramen dish. The Cup Noodles Museum is also found in Yokohama. It is an interactive museum where one not only learns the history of ramen, but make your own as well. The My Cupnoodles Factory workshop allows visitors to create their own cup noodle, choosing soup flavors and toppings. There is even a children's playground called Cupnoodles Park, modeled after the factory.

Osaka

Osaka is Japan's largest city. One of its attractions is the Osaka Castle. The landmark (which started constructed in 1583) is entirely modern on the inside. Surrounding the building is Nishinomaru Garden. It is a lawn garden with over 600 cherry blossom trees, which bloom in the springtime. Osaka is also home to Minami, a district encompassing famous fashion and food. It is also known for its entertainment, as hundreds of lights fill the street at night, showcasing the nightlife.

Kyoto

A break from the city may mean a trip to Kyoto. The city was the former capital of the country, with the former Imperial Palace and preserved historic districts still in place. Many temples such as Kiyomizudera and Ginkakuji are still visited by many. Western Kyoto is filled with lush nature. Kokedera is referred to as a moss temple, while Katsura Villa is known for being one of the prime examples of Japanese architecture and garden design.

Japanese Food

Japanese cuisine consists of a combination of healthy options and artistry. Similarly to surrounding Asian countries, rice is a staple food in Japan. While it is still the main carbohydrate being consumed, noodles and bread have become increasingly popular.

There are a variety of noodles found in Japan. Perhaps the most popular is ramen, thin wheat-based noodles that are pale yellow. Ramen noodles are served in a broth. Miso and shoyu (soy sauce) broths are commonly sold. Soba noodles are thin and made up of buckwheat flour,

typically served cold with a dipping sauce in the summertime. Udon noodles are very hearty with their thick structure, and can be served either hot or cold.

Fish is the go-to protein in Japan, with an abundance found from the country's surrounding waters. It is typically eaten raw. Many people around the world tend to think of sushi when raw fish is heard. There are three common types of sushi – maki (rolls), sashimi (solely raw slices of fish, no rice), and nigiri (a slice of raw fish placed on top of rice). Sashimi don, sushi rice covered with slices of fresh sashimi can also be found in most sushi places. Unagi (eel) is also freshly prepared, and raw Kobe beef is considered a treat.

Vegetables are usually served as a side dish, pickled. Pickled vegetables, besides serving as a source of nutrition, allow one to cleanse his or her palate before moving on to the next dish.

There are many cheap eats found throughout the country. Tonkatsu is a deep-fried pork cutlet that has been breaded in panko (bread crumbs).

Okonomiyaki is a very popular pan-fried dish, made up of batter and cabbage. Depending on the region, the ingredients and toppings vary. For example, in Hiroshima, noodles, seafood, and vegetables are present. In Osaka, noodles are eliminated.

Takoyaki (deep fried octopus balls) can be found served on long skewers and topped with a sweet sauce and smoked fish shavings.

As far as desserts go, Japan offers an extensive array. Mochi (rice cakes) are a more traditional dessert, but crepes have made their mark in recent years. They are sold through street vendors, and overflowing with fillings beyond one's imagination.

To wash everything down, green tea is served. Sweeteners are not added to allow the natural flavor come through. Traditional tea ceremonies are still held to this day. As far as alcoholic beverages go, sake is the main one found in most restaurants. Sake is made from fermented rice and typically paired with sushi and grilled food.

Japanese Music

Traditional Japanese music differs from Western traditional; music in that its intervals are based on human breathing rather than structured timing. Two forms of traditional music are present in Japanese history: shomyo and gagaku. The former is Buddhist chanting, with the latter being orchestral music. Traditional instruments include the biwa (short-necked lute), kakko (double-headed drum), and fue (flute).

In recent years, traditional and folk music has been replaced by more popular genres. Japanese pop (J-pop) had its early influences stem from 1960s rock and pop music. Girl and boy idol groups are common artists found in J-pop. They typically top the singles chart. One of the best selling boy bands is Arashi, still active after 16 years. The most popular girl group is AKB48. The girl group currently consists of 140 members aged from early teens to mid-20s. The group is known for its graduating system, where older members are allowed to leave, being replaced by younger trainees.

Rock music is very popular in Japan. Similar to J-pop, Japanese rock music is influenced by 1960s groups such as The Beatles and Rolling Stones. There are yearly festivals such as Fuji Rock Festival, Rock in Japan Festival that take place. Heavy and extreme metal are considered underground forms of music in the country. Many metal bands that tour worldwide have been known to be highly successful in Japan.

Amongst the genres of music found in Japan, a more distinct one is game music. Just as the name implies, it is the music one may find as the background instrumental in games, anime, and TV shows. Many anime themes and instrumentals can be bought online through iTunes, while CDs are available for purchase as well.

Japanese Anime and Manga

Manga

Manga refers to Japanese comics. It was established during the 1940s. The post-war period saw a surge in manga. It is read by people of all ages in Japan. Unlike Western comics that read left to right, manga reads right to left. A broad spectrum of genres is found in mangas, such as romance, science fiction, suspense, and sports. The majority of mangas are printed in black and white. Magazines may concurrently run a few pages of a certain manga story in their issues, but collected volumes have become the most prominent way to read manga stories. Softcover books are more commonly used than hardcover.

Manga has become extremely popular overseas, especially in the United States. Some publishers have started to “flip” their manga, in order to make reading easier for Westerners.

Anime

Anime refers to Japanese animation. It is very stylized and dependent on overlapping patterns, stemming inspiration from classical Japanese art. Anime, similarly to manga, encompasses a wide range of genres. Romance, action, and fantasy anime are popular amongst viewers. Anime is also recognized for carrying social issues and ideas out. Studio Ghibli produced a number of

films with Hayao Miyazaki, one of the best-known animators. His films, “My Neighbor Totoro,” “Princess Monoke,” and “Castle in the Sky” are critically acclaimed and loved worldwide.

Japanese Clothing

Traditional

Perhaps the most well known traditional garment in Japanese culture is the kimono, which are worn by both men and women alike. Japanese kimonos are wrapped around the body. A sash (*obi*) completes the outfit. Many different kinds of *obi* exist: simple to intricate, those made of brocade. The design of an *obi* classifies its use (for example, the narrower an *obi* is, the more informal it may be). The kimono is now worn mostly for traditional ceremonies or special occasions.

Street Fashion

The streets of Harakuku and Shibuya are known to be home to the latest street fashions. Here, people wear an eclectic mix of current and classic trends. Inspiration comes from everywhere. Those inspired by hip-hop or a music genre embody its trends. Lolita fashion (which is based on Victorian clothing) can also be found on the streets. There has also been a trend where one mixes punk and Lolita styles together. No outfit is the same, as a colorful and wide variety of styles can be seen.

One of largest subcultures is Gyarū (gal). There are many subcategories that fall under the Gyarū umbrella, but typically it consists of wearing trendy clothing and wearing dramatic makeup. Elaborate nail art is also a part of the Gyarū culture. While the trend has steadily declined in recent years, it is known for creating icons and making names of women. Tsubasa Masuwaka, a popular gyaru icon was able to launch her own makeup brand, Candy Doll.

High-end clothing brands have also made their mark. Cecil McBee offers clothing for women in their twenties and thirties. Cecil McBee has numerous brands, catering to women in school or just getting their careers started.

Liz Liza is a clothing brand catered towards teens and women in their early twenties. The clothing brand is known for its feminine and cute designs.

Japanese Festivals

Japanese festivals refer to festive events. There are a wide variety of festivals found in Japan, some exclusive to certain cities, many nationwide.

Sapporo Snow Festival

The Sapporo Snow Festival is one of the country's largest winter occasions. Millions of people nation and worldwide attend the event. Snow and ice sculptures line Odori Park for seven days, where a winter wonderland comes to life.

Cherry Blossom Festivals

Cherry blossom festivals are held the entire season of the trees. Nearly every region of Japan hosts a festival.

Nationwide Festivals

Seijin Shiki (Coming of Age Day)

The Coming of Age Day festival takes place the second day of January. It celebrates those who have reached the age of 20. The holiday allows them to celebrate adulthood, while fondly reflecting over the past year. Less popular these days, coming of age ceremonies still take place. Traditional clothes are to be worn, however many young men prefer to attend donning Western clothing. Speeches are typically made, with small presents given to those who have just reached adulthood.

Hinamatsuri (Doll's Day)

Doll's Day (alternatively called Girls' Day) is a day where families pray for the well being and health of their girls. Health and beauty are prayed for, with young girls donning their most beautiful kimonos. Hina dolls (a set of dolls in ancient attire to represent the emperor, empress, musicians, and attendants) are set up in the home. Special food is also prepared for the day, including shirozake (sake brewed from fermented rice), hina-arare (bite-sized crackers), and hishimochi (diamond shaped colored rice cakes).

National Holidays

Shogatsu (New Year's Day)

Traditional food is served during the *Shogatsu* celebration. The dishes are referred to as *osechi-ryori* (*osechi* for short). They are organized in special boxes stacked on top of each other called *jubako*. Broiled fish cake (*kamaboko*), specific kinds of seaweed (such as *kombu*), and an

omelette consisting of fish or shrimp paste rolled together (*datemaki*), are just a few examples of what one may find inside *jubako*. Soba noodles (*toshikoshi*) are also eaten on New Year's Eve, as they symbolize a long life. Sweetened rice wine (*otoso*) is the popular drink of choice, and eating rice cakes (*mochi*) is a Japanese custom for this celebration.

Houses and clothing are cleaned for a fresh start to the new year. Bamboo and pine ornaments adorn homes.

The Japanese celebrate the new year with the mindset of leaving the past year's troubles behind at *bonenkai* ("forget the new year") parties. *Bonekai* are not part of *Shogatsu*, but act as a way to ring in the new year as a group.

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Japanese Garden

The traditional Japanese gardens have been developed over the course of centuries, with significant periods of Japanese history influencing the current structure found in many modern-day ones.

Many elements are combined to create a Japanese garden. One of the elements is water. Water symbolizes the importance of the surrounding sea. A popular style of garden, *chisen*, is when a small body of water (i.e. a pond) occupies a large amount of space. The amount of

water in a garden is not as important as the symbol it takes on. Cascades and waterfalls are important that they should face the moon to capture its reflection.

In Japanese culture, a sea without land is impossible. This concept is brought over to the garden. Rocks and sand are meant to balance the soft water – rocks and water symbolize yin and yang. Rocks may represent certain landmarks such as Mount Sumeru. The arrangement of rocks is very important; a certain number may mean a representation of heaven, earth, and humanity.

In present day gardens, the walls of houses can typically be opened to allow the garden and home to become one. Again, this is a representation of the Japanese people's love for nature.

Japanese people are also very careful in planning what goes in a garden; nothing is ever randomly placed somewhere. Trees, flowers, and every plant found in a garden serve a purpose. They may serve to create a certain landscape or backdrop. Trees are especially carefully selected because of the change of their leaves in autumn. Certain plants are selected for their religious symbolism as well.

Simplicity (kanso) is key in designing a garden. It ties in with the Zen influence found in Buddhism. Naturalness disapproves of elaborate designs, as the root of nature is most important.

Ikebana

Ikebana (living flowers) is the Japanese art of flower arrangement. The goal of ikebana is to create a link between the indoors and outdoors. This is the reason why a variety of plants are used in a single arrangement. Leaves, flowers, and branches are all considered important, and using each kind of plant symbolizes its importance. Ikebana is considered a very disciplined art form, as it brings nature and humanity together. Color combinations and graceful lines are present to show the Japanese love and appreciation for nature. As it is an ode to the simplicity of nature, the arrangement of plants takes on a minimalist approach.

Ikebana's spiritual aspects are very important to those who practice it. Silence is a necessity, as it allows one to appreciate the things in nature many overlook when busy with their daily routines. Ikebana allows one to feel close to nature, relieving their mind, body, and soul of the stress and allowing relaxation to take place.

Common and Popular Japanese Words and Phrases

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| Konnichiwa (こんにちは) | Hello |
| Ohayou gozaimasu. (おはようございます) | Good morning. |
| Konbanwa こんにちは。 | Good evening. |
| Ogenki desuka? (お元気ですか?) | How are you? |
| Watashi wa genki desu. Arigato! わたしは元気です。ありがとう! | |
| (I'm fine. Thanks!) | |
| Sayonara! さようなら! | Goodbye! |
| Sumimasen (すみません) | Excuse me |
| Otetsudai shimashouka? お手伝いしましょうか? | Can I help you? |
| Namae wa nandesu ka? 名前は何ですか? | What is your name? |
| Watashi no namae wa 私の名前は... | My name is... |
| Arigatou! ありがとう! | Thank you! |
| Toshi wa ikutsu desu ka? 年はいくつですか? | How old are you? |
| Watashi wa ____ sai desu. 私は ____ 才です。 | I am ____ years old. |
| Itadakimasu いただきます | Let's eat (Thank you for the food). |
| Gochisousama Deshita ごちそうさまでした (said at end of meal). | Thank you for the food |

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