



Water, Tradition, and Innovation

Flowing through Japan's Cultural History

By Monika Dix

Floating torii gate at Shirahige Shrine, Lake Biwa, Shiga Prefecture, Japan. Source: © Shutterstock.

Water, a gift from nature, is an essential part of our daily lives. People use water every day, everywhere, for everything—often without much consideration for its significance in terms of the larger social, cultural, historical, economic, and environmental implications for the twenty-first century. As an island nation, Japan has a deep connection with water in various ways, creating a cultural history where water and life go hand in hand. In Japan, water bridges past and present, tradition and modernity. The usage of water and its connections to identity and lifestyles are highlighted in cities, religion, daily life, food, visual art, and technological innovations. Japan's relationship with itself and the world—the harmonious unification of ancient Japanese tradition and modern innovation, which defines the country's sense of its cultural heritage and history—is clearly evident through the significance of Japanese people not only using water wisely, but also in some very culturally specific ways.

Kyoto, City of Water

A chain of islands surrounded by the Sea of Japan to the west, the East China Sea to the southwest, and the Pacific Ocean to the east, Japan is a country with universal access to a saltwater supply. However, Japan's rugged and mountainous terrain poses a challenge for the country's freshwater supply. Although blessed with abundant rainfall and lush vegetation, the reason for Japan's limited freshwater supply is the lack of natural water reservoirs, the short and swift runoff of rivers, and the engineering difficulties of constructing large-scale drainage basins in the rugged mountains. Japan's

masterpieces of Japanese literature, art, and architecture such as *The Tale of Genji* and The Phoenix Pavilion (*Byōdō-in*) in Uji, which are still admired today as the fruits of Heian Japan's Golden Age. Today, Kyoto is one of the few cities in Japan combining historic temples, traditional Japanese houses, and prewar architecture with innovation, as is visible in Kyoto's modern central train station and the city's expansive high-speed transit system.

Situated in the Yamashiro Basin, Kyoto is surrounded by three rivers, the Uji River to the south, the Katsura River to the west, and the Kamo River to the east. These rivers form an alluvial fan that lets water percolate down, creating a supply of ample freshwater so vast that Kyoto is often described as a city sitting atop a large natural water table. In addition to being one of the main water supplies for Kyoto and its surrounding areas, the water flowing through the three rivers also functions in other significant ways—both symbolic and practical—demonstrating how Japanese people have been using water in contexts according to their beliefs and customs, from the past to the present. For example, during the Heian period, the Kamo River, which flows from northeast to south, was prone to overflowing, causing major problems for the people living along its banks in and around the capital. Therefore, in accordance with Japanese geomancy belief that the northeast direction is a source of evil and misfortune, Shintō shrines, collectively called *Kamo jinja* (Kamo shrines), were built along the Kamo River to pray for protection from its wrath. The most famous of these Shintō shrines are Kamo-wakeikazuchi Shrine and Kamo-mioya

Shrine in Kyoto. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designates both as World Heritage Sites.¹

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largest freshwater lake is Lake Biwa, which is located in west-central Honshu, Shiga Prefecture, northeast of Kyoto. Lake Biwa is fed by small rivers flowing from the surrounding mountains and serves as a freshwater reservoir for Kyoto, making the city more freshwater- than saltwater-based. Kyoto, one of Japan's oldest cities and well-known tourist destinations, has enjoyed the benefits of water for centuries and prospered as a result. Located in the southwestern part of Honshu, Japan's largest island, Kyoto today has a population around 1.5 million and is famous for its rich cultural heritage. During the Heian period (794–1185), Kyoto was called the “Capital of Peace and Tranquility”, and it was the capital and seat of the Imperial court, as well as the intellectual and cultural center for the production of

street scenes are still enlivened by old customs that use water effectively. *Yuka* are wooden decks that are common sights along Kyoto's rivers where travelers can relax and gain relief from the heat of the sun. Another popular practice, dating back to the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), is *uchimizu*, which refers to the act of sprinkling water on sidewalks and streets for the immediate benefit of cleaning and cooling (Figure 1). *Uchimizu* is also customary in temples and gardens, where the harmony between humans, water, and nature has a more ritual and contemplative function, tracing its roots back to ancient Shintō purification rites. The key to understanding people's growing interest in this ancient custom, as well as its present-day popularity, lies in its environmental implication. Interestingly, the water

utilized for uchimizu practice is not freshwater taken from rivers or household taps, but water that people recycled from their baths, rain, and air-conditioning equipment. In this way, uchimizu practice successfully exemplifies traditional religious, aesthetic, and utilitarian Japanese values by combining ends while at the same time making Japanese people think about using wastewater efficiently. In 2003, Japan conducted its first Mission Uchimizu, a campaign that took the country by storm in an effort to address the issues of climate change and heat-island effect. This phenomenon refers to air temperatures in densely built urban areas being higher than the temperatures of the surrounding rural areas—an increasing problem in large cities like Tokyo. These higher urban temperatures have a serious impact on the electricity demand for air conditioning in buildings and increase smog production, as well as the emission of pollutants. By means of social media and other campaigns, 340,000 people participated in the 2003 Mission Uchimizu, and as a result, in places where uchimizu occurred, the temperature decreased by about one degree. The 2005 Mission Uchimizu became a national movement, with 7.7 million participants.²

Japanese Religion and Water

Apart from being places of worship along the Kamo River, Shintō shrines offer a more in-depth look into the relationship between Japanese religion and water. Shintō, literally meaning “the way of the gods,” is the indigenous religion of Japan and focuses on the worship of nature deities called *kami*—invisible spirits believed to dwell in elements of nature such as trees, rocks, and waterfalls. Frequently, ropes are tied around trees, marking them as sacred places of the *kami*. There are many Shintō shrines throughout Japan, but one of the two most famous shrines is the Ise Grand Shrine.³ The Ise Shrine is dedicated to the Sun goddess *Amaterasu*, who is also venerated as the ancestor of the Japanese Emperor. Prior to entering a Shintō shrine, people pass through a simple wooden gate called *tori*, which symbolically separates the secular realm from the religious one, and purify themselves with freshwater from basins at the shrine entrance before praying and giving offerings to the *kami* (Figure 2).

Harae, or purification rituals, play a significant role in Shintō and involve cleansing one’s hands and mouth with water. *Harae* is performed at the beginning of the Shintō ceremony so that people can rid themselves of any kind of pollution that, according to popular folk belief, includes sins, uncleanness, bad luck, and diseases.⁴ This ritual cleansing is achieved by symbolic washing with water or by having a Shintō priest wave a wooden wand with *haraigushi* (white zigzag paper streamers) attached to its end in a left-right-left movement over the person, object, or place to be purified.

Harae purification rites take place in various contexts. For example, during the annual Seven-Five-Three (*Shichi-go-san*) festival, a Shintō priest symbolically purifies children (three- and five-year-old boys, three- and seven-year-old girls) to bestow them with health and prosperity. Shintō purification is also commonly performed at the groundbreaking ceremonies of homes and businesses, in a car before it is first driven, or in an airplane before it takes off in flight for the first time to ensure good luck and safety.



Figure 1. Uchimizu in Ginza, Tokyo, August 2010. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/ycqlk4ue>.



Figure 2. Purification before giving offering to the *Kami*. Source: © Shutterstock.

The origin of *harae* can be traced back to the mythological stories associated with the Shintō deity *Amaterasu* in the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*). The *Kojiki*, compiled in 712, is Japan’s oldest extant historical record recounting the country’s mythological origin legend. In the *Kojiki* account:

*One day, while Amaterasu was supervising the weaving of the garments of the gods in the pure weaving hall, Susano-o broke through the roof and let fall a heavenly horse which had been flayed. This startled one of Amaterasu’s attendants who, in her agitation, accidentally killed herself with the loom’s shuttle. Amaterasu fled to the heavenly cave Amano-Iwato. Susano-o was subsequently expelled from heaven and Amaterasu’s sovereignty resumed. The traditional *harae* Shintō purification ritual is represented when Susano-o is removed from heaven.⁵*

Another distinctive ritual related to *harae* is the rite of water purification called *misogi*. Originally, *misogi* denoted a practice of purification where devotees stood under the pounding cascade of a waterfall while chanting prayers. Since waterfalls are viewed as natural habitats of Shintō *kami*, the *misogi* practice elevates the *harae* purification practice to an immediate harmonious union between devotees and Shintō gods. The origin of *misogi*, a purification rite using water to free body and mind from pollution, can be traced back to the mythological stories of *Izanami* and *Izanagi* in the *Kojiki*.



Figure 3. Screen capture from the video *Misogi Water Purification Ritual*. Source: Shinsenjutsu Japanese Fighting Arts YouTube channel at <https://tinyurl.com/ybq3kp37>.



Figure 4. Participants taking a “purification” dip in ice-cold water during the annual New Year ice bath ceremony at Kanda Shrine in Tokyo, Japan, January 2015. A traditional “soul-purification” ceremony to test their endurance they believe will purify their souls and bring them good luck. Source: Screen capture from a Nippon News video on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/y7nzf7mj>.

Izanagi, after visiting the “bottom country,” or place of afterlife, returned to Earth and ritually bathed in the Tachibana River to rid himself of impurities.⁶

Today, the misogi ritual encompasses more meanings of cleansing one’s body and soul, includes drinking sacred water from a waterfall, standing in a river or in an artificially constructed pool in front of a popular Shintō shrine, and emerging one’s entire body in water. Women wear white kimono-like robes and men white loincloths; both wear headbands (Figures 3 and 4).⁷ For example, at Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto, people flock to the “Sound-of-Wings” waterfall, but the majority of visitors only drink the water instead of bathing in it, signaling a shift from tradition to modernity.

Japanese Cuisine and Water

The purity of water and its usage also plays an important role for traditional Japanese cuisine or *washoku*. The heart of traditional Japanese cuisine is *dashi*, a broth made by steeping a variety of dried foods in water to release their flavor (Figure 5). It is the base for a clear soup (*suimono*) and miso soup, which are essential parts of traditional Japanese meals. Once the dashi is made, ingredients for the soup are added, simmered in, and then seasoned with soy sauce or salt for *suimono* and miso for miso soup. As for the dashi itself, the most common ingredients are a type of seaweed called *kombu* (kelp) and *katsuo-bushi* shavings (bonito fish that has

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been heated to dry it). Other items used to make dashi are small dried sardines, or *niboshi*, and dried *shitake* mushrooms. Due to the dried ingredients, dashi contains no fat, setting it apart from the soup stock of Western and Chinese cuisine. Regarding the making of dashi, the *katsuo-bushi* shavings are added to the water after it begins to boil, whereas the *kombu*, *niboshi*, and dried *shitake* are generally steeped in cold water first, after which you have a choice depending on the meal you are preparing—either bring the temperature up to simmer or take the ingredients out before heating the water. Due to Japan’s topography, the water is very soft, which gives the dashi its light characteristic of *washoku* cuisine.

Water and Art

In addition to constituting an indispensable element of traditional Japanese cuisine, water is also an integral part of the Japanese visual arts. Among the many representations of water in ancient and modern Japanese art, the most famous motif is the wave. The simplest depiction is that of concentric semicircles aligned in a staggered fashion to symbolize waves, a pattern known as *seigaiha* (blue ocean waves) (Figure 6). The origins of *seigaiha* can be traced back to the *gagaku*, ancient Japanese court music and dance, that flourished under the patronage of the Imperial Court in the Heian period. The *seigaiha* pattern is believed to have originated from

a *gagaku* piece by the same name, where dance performers wore costumes decorated with this blue ocean wave pattern. Although simple, the gentle waves extend in all directions without end, creating a feeling of happiness and good luck that hopefully will last forever. This *seigaiha* motive is a favorite in Japan, a nation surrounded by the sea, as well as with foreign visitors. Today, items decorated with this blue ocean wave pattern include silk kimono, *yukata* (traditional Japanese cotton robes), hand towels, and tableware such as cups, plates, and bowls. Most recently, the *seigaiha* symbolic wave patterns have also become popular among graphic designers and tattoo artists, two growing art trends in twenty-first-century Japan bridging tradition and innovation.

Japan: Water Conservation and Sustainable Living

Water conservation and sustainable living in Japan have overcome numerous challenges. As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Japan benefits from universal access of water due to its topography. In terms of sustainable living, Japan also has one of the lowest levels of water distribution losses in the world, as well as very high standards for the quality of its drinking water and treated wastewater. While Japan is not a country stressed for water, the country’s water availability varies greatly from year to year, season to season, regionally, and at times of natural disasters such as droughts or earthquakes. In an effort to promote water conservation and sustainable

living, the Japanese have come up with innovative technologies for water conservation and sanitation.⁸

The most frequently encountered and commonly used innovative technology of this sort is the modern Japanese toilet. Originally, Japanese toilets were simple squat toilets that looked like miniature urinals set horizontally into the floor. Today, this kind of toilet can still be found in some public places such as train station restrooms. However, after World War II, the introduction of the Western-style toilet, which has a pedestal for sitting, marked the beginning of what would become Japan's revolutionary toilet industry, leading up to today's high-tech, water-saving, and environmentally friendly "super toilets."⁹

Most of these modern super toilets are produced by Toto Ltd., which is the leading Japanese company in this business.¹⁰ The indigenous Japanese word for toilet is *ōtearai* (hand washing), which is significant because it ties the simple cleansing act of washing with the innovative feature of water conservation. One of the unique features of the Japanese toilet is the sink mounted on top of the water tank. A spigot on top of the tank allows users to conserve water by washing their hands with clean water coming directly from the wall outlet (Figure 7). During hand washing, the water collects in the tank in order to be used for the next flush. Another feature of the Japanese toilet design that bridges tradition and modernity are the large and small flush buttons that conserve water on common, less advanced toilets.

A more technologically advanced feature of the modern Japanese toilet is the control panel that lets the user choose from functions and settings such as automatic lid opener, flushing modes, water jet adjustments, sound, seat heating, and massage options. For example, the luxury Toto Neorest hybrid-style toilet conserves water by using three different flush buttons that use only one gallon of water per flush. In addition, this model includes an innovative tornado flushing system that uses a whirlpool technique to force everything to the center of the bowl, and then the jet wash system takes over, combining two types of flow to clean the bowl thoroughly.¹¹ In terms of sustainable living, this water-saving and self-cleaning innovation reduces the amounts of detergent and toilet paper released into the environment. On the flipside, these toilets consume energy and are rendered useless in power outages.

Conclusion

The role of water in Japan, especially its contribution to aspects of daily life, religion, food, art, and innovation, is still closely tied to ancient Japanese tradition and is constantly evolving in often-creative ways. Increased attention to the usage of water in Japan promises an exciting outlook for future innovation and research concerning Japanese people not only using water efficiently, but also in some very culturally specific ways. ■

NOTES

1. See, for example, the "Links" page from the *Kamigamojinja* website, accessed April 1, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yb6v3pju>.
2. For more information, see the *Uchimizu* website (in English), accessed June 20, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ycmzu58w>.
3. *Izumo* is the other most revered shrine.
4. Eyal Ben-Ari, "Transformation in Ritual, Transformation of Ritual: Audiences and Rites in a Japanese Commuter Village," *Ethnology* 30, no. 2 (1991): 135–147.
5. This is a summary of the *Kojiki* story and its relevance to the *harae* purification ritual. For a detailed discussion about this story, its analysis, and its relevance to Shintō purification rituals, see Alan L. Miller, "Ame no miso-ori me [The Heavenly Weaving Maiden]: The Cosmic Weaver in Early Shintō Myth and Ritual," *History of Religions* 24, no. 1 (1984): 27–48.
6. Ann Llewellyn Evans, *Shintō Norito: A Book of Prayers* (Victoria: Trafford, 2001), 167.
7. For further reading on the *misogi* purification rite, see Appendix C: *Misogi* and Spiritual Exercises from Guji Yukitaka Yamamoto's "Kami no Michi: The Life and



Figure 5. Dashi broth. Source *Sina Blog* at: <https://tinyurl.com/ycpy5fbq>.



Figure 6. Seigaiha plate. Source: *Houzz* at <https://tinyurl.com/yahm8knr>.



Figure 7. Japanese toilet with a sink mounted on top of the water tank. Source: *NPR* at <https://tinyurl.com/y71779cx>.

Thought of a Shintō Priest," *Tsubaki Shrine*, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y82ryu6l>.

8. Ninety-seven percent of the Japanese population receive their water supply from public utilities, and 3 percent, mainly people living in rural areas, receive water from their own wells. See "Overview of Water Supply Services" from the Japanese government Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare website, accessed June 20, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9e5ngvt>.
9. For more on these "super toilets," see "The History of Toilets in Japan," *Web-Japan*, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y8956ucp>.
10. In addition to toilets, Toto Ltd. also makes water-saving showerheads and other bathroom furniture.
11. For more, see "Japan's Smart, Gorgeous Toilets," *CNet*, accessed June 20, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/yaxm3sma>.

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