

# Japanese Tradition and Culture: Aid or Obstacle to Future Success?

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Many aspects of Japanese tradition and culture have become widely recognized symbols of the Asian lifestyle. From sumo wrestling to origami, bonsai to sushi; remnants of traditional Japan have reached us all. The Japanese continue to place a heavy emphasis on tradition during every day life. Ancient ways are often juxtaposed against the hustle and bustle of today's technology driven society. It is quite common to see a woman in full kimono dress walking the burgeoning streets of Tokyo. And, the ancient art of sumo is still Japan's national sport. Even in modern times, traditions are held with the utmost reverence.

Much of the nation's past success has been attributed to various traditional practices and cultural beliefs. Japan rose from isolation and crushing military defeat to become the worlds largest creditor, and now enjoys the globes second highest GDP. Unique Japanese traditions have seemingly aided the nation's success in the past, but current crisis face Japan that these traditional ways may not surmount. The nation is now under the oppression of a severe economic crisis. The ever aging population is a growing concern. Political and bureaucratic corruption run rampant. And, last but not least, Japan is situated in a hot spot between the growing military giant, China, and the nuclear menace, North Korea. The power and ability of Japanese tradition will be put to the test against these current crisis.

Future Japanese success as a nation may largely depend on its strong foundation of tradition and culture. The first question this paper proposes will focus on the history of Japanese tradition: “Has the unique Japanese culture and its many historical traditions helped or hindered the nation’s success?” Through an in depth study of this question, predictions about the outcomes of current crisis, and the future of Japan will be attained.

This is an important issue to research for several reasons. First, Japan is an integral trade partner with many of the worlds leading nations. If Japan falters, then a significant economic ripple will be felt throughout the world. Also, Japan has become the economic hegemon of Asia. Through foreign direct investment and financial aid, Japan has successfully stimulated the once stagnant economies of many of its Pacific counterparts. The decline of Japan would spread to its Asian counterparts, causing a debilitating Asian recession “the beginnings of this effect are seen in the current Asian financial crisis”. Finally, the United States is deeply intertwined within Japanese foreign policy through the shared bi-lateral security alliance. If military conflict were to erupt in the Asian hot spot, the United States would be bound by treaty to intervene with a force of its own. Japanese politics, economics, security and daily life are deeply shrouded in tradition and culture. But will the success this tradition driven society experienced throughout the twentieth century continue?

### **Historical Tradition**

The unique traditions of Japan stem from several historical situations, and have since evolved into the colorful culture of the nation. Long ago, Confucianism and Buddhism took root in Japan, but neither had the traditional and cultural impact of Japan’s indigenous Shinto. The philosophical study of Shinto is found at the heart of historical

Japanese tradition. Another unique situation that established many traditions in its wake was the emphasis on the household. Many of today's most prominent and visible traditions come from the organization of the classical Japanese household. Finally, Japan's historic isolation and geographical limitations played an important role in sculpting the nation's traditional ways.

### **Shinto, "The Way"**

At the foundation of Japanese tradition lies Shinto, shrouded in mystery. "Shinto can be regarded as a two sided phenomenon. On the one hand it is a loosely structured set of practices, creeds, and attitudes rooted in local communities, and on the other it is a strictly defined and organized religion at the level of the imperial line and the state. These two basic aspects, which are not entirely separate, reflect fundamental features of the Japanese national character as it is expressed in sociopolitical structures and psychological attitudes." The Japanese characters used to write *Shinto* come from the Chinese based kanji: *shin / kami* (divinity), and *to / michi* (way). Hence, the word has come to mean the divine way, or more simply the way.

Indigenous to Japan, Shinto arose in the eighth century. Shortly after its birth, "the way" diverged down two separate paths. One school related Shinto to the religions of Buddhism and Confucianism. Shrines were constructed alongside Buddhist temples, and homage was paid to divine *kami* or spirits. The second school practiced Shinto through daily attitudes and creeds. This division of Shinto can easily be broken into three categories: ethics, etiquette, and aesthetics. While Shinto as a strict religious practice has substantially dwindled, the attitude based Shinto continues to be found at the root of Japanese culture.

## **Shinto Ethics**

Shinto ethics can be viewed as one's inherent social responsibility. "In the far East, the concept of responsibility already existed in the classic period, but the individual was inseparable from his status in the community. Each individual had a responsibility toward heaven and the community, and virtue lay in carrying out this responsibility." The term *giri* arose in medieval Japan to encompass this idea of community responsibility. *Giri* has historically been the keystone of Shinto ethics, and continues to be found at the heart of the Japanese social system. The essence of Shinto is found in an individual's *giri*, and is often referred to by the Japanese as the beautiful heart. "If my heart but follow the Way, the gods will watch over me though I neglect to pray to them."

## **Shinto Etiquette**

The Japanese social system has historically been one of hierarchy and strict etiquette. These conventional rules of behavior have governed interpersonal relationships through the ages. Bowing, handshaking, seat arrangement, and gift giving represent the idea of etiquette, but no-where is a better example found than in the concept of *keigo*. *Keigo* is a complex form of honorific and humble language found within everyday Japanese conversation. Various degrees of *keigo* are utilized depending on one's age, social status, and gender. In certain instances a speaker of lower status will extol and praise the person they converse with. However, the same speaker may also choose to lower his own status through humble speech. *Keigo* is one of the mysteries of the Japanese language, but has been immensely valuable in establishing the strict social order and etiquette of Japan.

## **Shinto Aesthetics**

“Japanese rules of etiquette not only are concerned with how to please and comfort others, but are closely related to aesthetics.” The Japanese move through every day life with an air of grace. Beauty of motion and action not only exemplifies self respect, but aesthetically gratifies, showing respect to all. Throughout the day, aesthetics are encountered as the Japanese walk or open a sliding doors. The aesthetics of daily life have blended into the classical arts creating a rich mosaic of beauty prevalent throughout Japanese society. From the most graceful wood block print to the simple act of serving food, beauty abounds within Japan. Emphasis on daily aesthetics has combined with the other traditional Shinto practices, creating a culturally rich society full of respect, pride, honor and discipline.

## **Household Organization**

Stemming from Shinto social obligations, traditional household organization has bloomed. “The traditional household was the fundamental form of social organization among the farmers, warriors, and merchants of the premodern period.” The traditional etiquette associated with Shinto beliefs led directly into the male superior, seniority based household still dominant throughout Japan. The household was the primary social unit in historical Japan, dependent on shared resources and revolving about a common identity. Homage was paid to deceased elders, who continue to be honored through the ages by the practice of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship in a sense is the worship of the household and its history, laying the foundation for the remarkably strong “in-group”, family centered mentality modern families portray. Three fundamental building blocks compose this stable foundation: familism, paternalism, and loyalty.

## **Social Organization**

The household mentality soon spread through the streets of historic Japan, paving the way for social organization. The distinct class system of pre-modern Japan arose from the household's age superior, male dominant structure. "If each class carried out its prescribed duties, the whole system would work, and all would prosper." Samurai were the patriarchs of the class system with a wide range of lower classes in their wake. The low end of this spectrum was composed of butchers, prostitutes, and garbage collectors. These lowly citizens were deemed the burakumin, and their offspring are still discriminated against.

## **Isolation Mentality**

Separate from culture, but nonetheless an ever present factor in traditional thought was the isolation of the Japanese island. Because of their isolation, Japanese history has been dominated by fear and uncertainty. The attempted Mongol invasions of the twelfth century, combined with a traditional inferiority complex regarding China have often left the Japanese in fear of their surroundings. Historical hostility with China and Korea continues to strain relations. Recently, sufficient food production has become a concern for the isolated Japanese populous. Geographical constraints alongside the ever growing population leave many Japanese uncertain about future food availability. The unique isolation of Japan has led to an "island mentality" where self sufficiency and internal cooperation are immensely valuable.

## **Modern Effects of Classic Tradition**

The classical Japanese established unique traditions that were well suited to the island. Remarkably, these traditions have passed through the tests of time unscathed. More importantly, certain traditional practices and cultural beliefs have greatly effected the history of Japan. The various traditions that historically sprang from the guidelines of Shinto beliefs, household organization, and isolation mentality, continue to impact Japanese life. These traditions were key to the formation of the society we see today.

### **Shinto Culture**

The etiquette, ethics, and aesthetics associated with Shinto have paved the way for the high level of national unity and respect displayed by the Japanese today. Shinto ethics introduced the idea of social obligation to traditional Japan. Etiquette and its system of hierarchy have added to these ethical obligations, creating a society full of respect and honor. The Japanese are proud of their nation and its many unique traditions. Over the ages, their pride has fostered high levels national unity. Pride and national unity have even given way to outside allegations of Japanese ethnocentrism. The homogeneity of the society has not aided this issue; nonetheless, pride and unity have been key ingredients to the recent success of Japan.

Traditional aesthetics also continue to play a large role in the modern Japanese society. Museums are adorned with the classic style of wood block prints and silk patterns. Kabuki theater rivals the Italian opera, even food continues to be arrayed in the beautiful styles of old. Aesthetics further promote pride, national unity, and respect for the land of the rising sun.

## ***Matsuri*, The Festivals of Japan**

Traditional Shinto rituals and festivals are re-born annually in *matsuri* throughout Japan. *Matsuri* are much more than simple festivals, they are a catharsis from the strain and stress derived from the strict Japanese lifestyle. “The ritually controlled “chaos” of *matsuri* allows people to let go and behave in manners prohibited during normal times. Laws, taboos, and other rules of behavior are relaxed in an effort to abolish the distinctions that uphold the ordinary social order. Society is leveled as all become equal.” While embodying the traditional spirit of Japan, *matsuri* provide a healthy escape from the repression of living under Japan’s “sacred order”. Still, another important bi-product of *matsuri* is its preservation of the traditional arts. The festivals often include classical theatrical performances, traditional raiment, and renditions of classic artwork. *Matsuri* have served as a device to transport these ancient aesthetics to the modern age. “*Matsuri* embody the totality of Japanese culture and behavior. They reveal both the violent and peaceful nature of Japanese, their ceremonial behavior, respect and deference, license and strictness, hard work and relaxation, making observers aware of the industriousness and sheer energy of the Japanese.”

## **Social Organization**

Organization of the Japanese society has historically stemmed from the firm roots of household structure. Until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, social organization had been limited to separate peasant villages throughout the Japanese countryside. The Meiji Restoration however, provided the impetus to unite Japan under one great system of social organization based on the classic pattern of household structure.

The Meiji Restoration was a coup d'état in which a group of southern antishogunate forces captured the imperial palace and reversed political power from the Tokugawa shogunate to the emperor. This brief military encounter had the remarkable impact of uniting Japan. Prior to the restoration, Japan had been a land of warlords and unrelated shogunates. The Meiji restoration re-structured the nation's system, regarding the emperor as a father figure with supreme control over the lands and people. The new system was primarily based on the structure of a traditional household, where the father rules and all family members work together for the common good. The familism, paternalism, and loyalty of the traditional household spread through Japan in a fire of unity. All Japanese were now united under their father-emperor, and were working together for the good of the nation.

Shortly after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese industrialization began. The nation's industrialization was swift and complete. In 1853, Japan was a backwards nation with no international prowess. By the turn of the century, Japan had surprised many and become one of the world's leading industrial nations. The rapid Japanese industrialization was largely due to the new structure established under the Meiji Restoration. The father-emperor bent his will on swift industrialization, and for the good of the nation, his loyal citizen-children obeyed his commands. Infant industries were allocated heavy government subsidization, quickly growing strong under the watchful eye of their parent-government. The centralization of Japanese industry was key to the swift success of industrialization. Without the household-like organization of politics established in Japan through the Meiji restoration, such centralization and success would not have been possible.

### *Zaibatsu*

*Zaibatsu*, the business conglomerations of modern Japan, provide another example of the successful nature of traditional household organization. Much like a family, *zaibatsu* are composed of many interacting units united under a common goal. “Several of the great commercial households of the premodern era, including the Mitsui and the Sumitomo, survived and evolved into the most powerful *zaibatsu*.” In the case of these *zaibatsu*, the father figure is represented by a central holding company. Like children, many subdivisions and related companies branch out from the center. These divisions accomplish diverse tasks for the good of the entire conglomeration. Certain *zaibatsu* have taken root overseas, extending their influence internationally. Many of the world’s most successful multinational corporations are composed of Japanese *zaibatsu*. This success however, would not have been possible without the strong framework of traditional household organization.

Another factor behind the success of *zaibatsu* has been the prestige and honor of modern businessmen. Referred to as “salarymen” in Japan, these industrious workers often sacrifice family life and recreation for the good of the company. “The hardworking “salaryman” is a high ideal in Japan, one reminiscent of the loyal samurai of Japanese history and legend.”

### **Island Mentality**

The history of twentieth century Japan has been largely an effect of its unique island mentality. Population growth and a lack of indigenous resources have driven the Japanese toward many crucial historical actions. The Japanese invasion and annexation of Manchuria in 1931, was aimed at establishing a larger natural resource base. The invasion was successful, but the Japanese soon became greedy. Under the guise of the Greater East

Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, the Japanese extended their imperialism throughout Pacific Asia. This act set the stage for the Pacific stage of the second World War, propelling Japan towards crushing defeat.

Shortly following reconstruction, natural resources once again headlined Japanese priorities, but instead of historic imperialism a new course of action was followed. Japan wove deep economic ties with its neighbors. Through foreign direct investment and financial aid, Japan provided much needed capital to its trade partners. In return, Japan received the precious natural resources and low production costs its geographical constraints would not allow. This new system of economic and trade related interdependence successfully replaced Japan's pre-war imperialism.

Japan now has the highest level of trade surplus in the world. Its multinational corporations have extended branches of influence far and wide, creating a vast network of overseas Japanese business. Oil, the most valuable natural resource, has recently been a great concern of the Japanese. Japan has poured large amounts of investment into the Middle East to secure favorable trade relations. They have even gone as far as criticizing American involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. Japan hesitated in providing support during Desert Storm, and has recently opposed American pressure on Iraq. Japan aims to keep trade relations running smoothly above all else. Nonetheless, Japan has successfully overcome its geographical constraints through a global web of interdependence.

Internally, Japan has had to deal with many geographical constraints as well. The overcrowding of urban areas has led to a substantial lack of personal space. And, grain production has primarily been limited to rice. However, both of these constraints have been overcome through traditional Japanese ingenuity. The ancient art of *bonsai* provided

the Japanese a means of making the most of their limited space. The beautiful, miniature trees conveniently replace a spacious garden, yet offer the same satisfaction. Food uniformity has been artistically conquered by Japanese tradition as well. Sushi for example, combines the most common indigenous foods, fish and rice, in many aesthetically pleasing combinations. The Japanese have found many ways to please the palette with their limited national resources. The ancient arts of sushi and bonsai serve as examples of traditional Japanese ingenuity that continues to enrich life in the modern era.

### **Current Crisis: Will Tradition Prove Successful?**

Past Japanese success may be largely attributed to tradition. The traditional household structured organization of Japan has paved the way for its miraculous twentieth century productivity and economic success. Shinto ideals have proven the tests of time adding to the pride, national unity and cultural richness of the nation. Through dedication and ingenuity, even geographical isolation has been overcome. The once prevailing Japanese isolation mentality has dissolved with modern interdependence, but a new set of obstacles loom in front of the Japanese on the horizon of the twenty first century.

### **The Financial Catastrophe**

The Asian financial crisis has crippled the Japanese. While the crisis is easily explained with basic economic principles, it is a mystery as to why such little Japanese resistance has yet been encountered. Instead of uniting to combat the crisis, Japanese political factions have disagreed, hindering the reconstruction process. Even within parties, leader centered factions have fought, causing overall political indecisiveness. The

fate of Japan now lies in the hands of its politicians and bureaucrats, but they have failed to take initiative.

Why has the Japanese political system been so weak and indecisive with regards to the current financial crisis? One answer to this question lies within the post-war United States drafted treaty of Japan. This treaty is most famous for its military implications, but many of its articles were aimed at restructuring Japan's political system as well. With the Cold War on the horizon, the United States established a system of democracy and multi-party politics in Japan. The new system greatly contrasted Japan's traditional one party, emperor governed system. "Any examination of present Japanese society reveals the democratic ideals of contemporary public culture existing in uneasy truce with more traditional values." Japan's pre-war success was based on traditional politics. The current indecisiveness within Japan's political system may be based on its lack of concrete leadership. There is no longer supreme rule in Japan, but instead a disorganized structure of feuding parties with conflicting aims and goals.

It is true that democracy worked in Japan for the latter half of the century, but it has never been put to the test against a crisis nearly as significant as this one. Current political indecisiveness is merely a struggle between the post war United States drafted constitution, and traditional Japanese politics and ideals. A return to the single party, household structured political organization of Japan may be what the nation needs.

### **Aging Population**

The rapidly aging Japanese population has seemingly created a large problem for the twenty first century to deal with. By 2025, one out of every four Japanese will be 65 or older. This raises questions about future labor availability, but more significant is the

related question of social welfare. Elderly Japanese have long enjoyed an extremely generous system of social security and health care. With the large increase in the elderly, many of these benefits will be lost. The system of social welfare that elderly Japanese have counted on for a half century will no longer be sufficient. However, as alarming as this may seem, the Japanese will deal with this problem through tradition. The household organization established in classical Japan continues to hold elderly family members with the highest respect. It is a child's duty to provide for an aging parent. "The rate of parents and children living together in the same household in Japan is high because of the fundamental ideals about security that come with certainty. The three generation household is an entirely concrete and tangible informal social security system that establishes exactly who will do what for the elderly when they become frail, bedridden or otherwise acutely needy." As long as this tradition is upheld within Japan, the aging population will not pose a problem.

### **Classic Militarism Overturned**

Japan has historically been a militaristic society. From the feuding shogunates of medieval Japan to pre-war expansionism, the role of Japan's military has been very large. However, these militaristic social currents were overturned through the post-war United States occupation of Japan. Under US occupation, the Japanese were forbidden to possess a standing military. Although this decision was later revised, it still had a large impact on the attitude that modern Japanese have about their military. The crushing defeat of World War II and the occupation that followed crushed Japan's militaristic spirit. Today, Japan is a peaceful society relying on the security umbrella provided by the United States.

Asia has recently shown the potential for future military turmoil that could engulf Japan. China's amazing military potential, and North Korea's unabashed use of nuclear arms pose a threat to Japan's security. Simultaneously, the United States has been relaxing its role in Japan's security issues. Japan's future security may largely depend on its ability to re-cultivate some of the lost militarism of old. While the military expansion of pre-war Japan is far too extreme, a return to the honor based ethics of the samurai would be welcome. Traditional military values would add much strength to Japan's security in the twenty first century.

### **Tradition, The Key to Future Success**

Tradition has been a huge factor in forming the successful modern Japanese society. Traditions such as: sushi, samurai, and Shinto continue to play important roles in the prideful heritage of the Land of the Rising Sun. Classical household organization and Shinto ideals perhaps encompass the most prominent traditions of Japan. Stemming from these traditions come Japan's unprecedented national pride, the incredible system of social ethics, and the magnificently successful *zaibatsu*. These traditions have proven the tests of time, lending to Japan's success. And it will be these traditions that will propel Japan on into the twenty-first century.

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