

Self-Reflection in the Tub: Japanese Bathing Culture, Identity, and Cultural Nationalism

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Abstract

This research looks at the development of Japan's bathing culture as a nationally and culturally significant activity. The goal is to show that ideas about bathing both reflect changing Japanese social norms and project an idealized form of cultural identity. This has been done by examining local and foreign sources that reference baths in Japan, academic articles, "Japanese interest" non-fiction, and scholarly works on the emergence of national nostalgia as a byproduct of modernization around the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: bathing, cultural nationalism, Japan, nostalgia, *ofuro*, *onsen*, *sentō*.

I. Introduction

Nightly baths are an essential and beloved tradition in almost every Japanese household. Family members, usually in order of seniority, soak in the bath after washing to relax and end the day, reusing the same clean hot water. While this practice is common to Japanese people now, baths were not always available for each individual family. Until the mid-1960's, only 60% of Japanese homes had bathtubs; the remaining population frequented communal neighborhood bathhouses called *sentō*.¹

Although there has not been a great deal of critical scholarship addressing Japanese bathing customs, they are a distinctive component of Japanese culture. Communal bathing has been an important facet of Japanese life since its inclusion in the *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*, an eighth-century chronicle of Japanese myths and the earliest known Japanese text published), and is viewed both internationally and locally as an iconic tradition in Japanese society.² In general, the role public baths play has been usurped by private *ofuro* (bathtubs) due to availability, convenience, and the desire for privacy, but *onsen* (hot springs) and *sentō* are still extremely popular destinations for both tourists and locals.³ Attitudes toward hygiene also play a role in the diminishing use of public baths, along with a purported loss of interest in the social aspects of the bathhouse. These changes not only reflect the values and needs of modern Japanese society, they also show how the country views itself. *Sentō* and *onsen* have become much more than mere recreational activities—they are irrevocably tied to Japan's national identity and viewed with nostalgia for traditional, "purely Japanese" ways. It is important to understand how bathing practices have changed over time, and the role this history plays in adding value to the current incarnation of bathing culture.

Although all practices and methods of social interaction, such as eating, dancing, or even patterns of speech, reveal cultural values and codes, bathing is unique in that not every culture has as complex and culturally loaded a

relationship with the mere act of immersing oneself in water. As anthropologist Scott Clark wrote, “to take a bath in Japan with an understanding of the event is to experience something Japanese. It is to immerse oneself in culture as well as water.”⁴ Clark refers not only to being surrounded by the cultural tropes that provide instructions for how to bathe, but how to derive meaning and enjoyment from it.

While the changes in bathing practices cannot be divided into definite time periods, this research seeks to examine its cultural significance throughout various incarnations over time, specifically: the importance of bathing as spiritual cleansing or a religious practice; the use of *onsen* and *sentō* for medicinal or healing purposes; the bathhouse as a location for social interaction and public discourse; the bathhouse as a center of entertainment; and the nostalgic view of bathing as a traditional Japanese practice.

Though bathing is often touted as a static picture of an unspecified “traditional Japan,” it has undergone numerous changes and been appreciated for very different reasons. Bathing culture transformed due to a series of religious, social, cultural, and economic pressures—while many traditions have stayed the same, practices continue to alter as needs and values change. Disparate historical events, such as the introduction of Buddhism, the rise of cities, and the end of *sakoku* (Japan’s closed-country policy) have all played key roles in shaping bathing culture into what it is today.

Bathing as a cultural practice has come to represent the very essence of what it is to be Japanese. Indeed, *sentō*, *onsen*, and *ofuro* have all become intertwined with the presentation and enactment of a national identity. This form of “cultural nationalism” is significant and has much in common with other cultural practices and values presented as specific to the Japanese people—it can even be used to assert or “reinforce... ‘Japaneseness’ or ethnic identity.”⁵

It is difficult to ascertain exactly why this national identity is created and preserved, but by analyzing the examples presented by Hotoka, Reader, and Yoshino in conjunction with other sources related to Japanese baths, one can posit a number of hypotheses as to what end bathing culture is presented as the epitome of Japanese culture and values. Having symbols or practices that allow one to “feel Japanese” are important in establishing individual and national identity. Indeed, appreciation for one’s own culture provides self-satisfaction as well as a collective identity, and being able to “enact culture” provides people with a sense of community even when they are alone.

This research will explore the development of Japan’s “bathing culture,” including its religious/spiritual origins, function as both a social and practical public utility, and the unique geographical features of Japan that enabled the creation of thousands of *onsen*, paying special attention to the regulation and eventual subsidization of *sentō* by the Japanese government. It will present a brief outline of the history and representations of Japan’s relationship to bathing from its earliest recorded instances to the modern day. In this way, readers can trace the development of bathing culture into what Lee Butler calls a “social and cultural institution of significance,” as well as the manner in which representations of bathing both reflect changing Japanese social norms and project an idealized form of a shared cultural identity.⁶

II. Methodology

In approaching this topic, it is first necessary to be aware of stereotypes and preconceptions of Japanese culture. I hope to adequately address the complicated nature of identity as viewed through specific practices—that it is possible for baths to simultaneously be a uniquely Japanese phenomenon as well as objects onto which an oversimplified national identity are projected.

This article draws on historical accounts of public bathhouses and other institutions that promoted bathing for different reasons to understand why the justification for bathing changed over time. It cites articles that depict and describe Japanese bathhouses to a Japanese audience as well as the English-language scholarship written about them. In an effort to reach interdisciplinary sources, it also covers the presentation of Japanese bathhouses in less formal sources, such as travel websites and travel guides. Lastly, readers will note the linguistic and etymological approach used in analyzing the language used to describe bathing culture. This is particularly relevant for the original Japanese terms for practices and items related to bathing as many characters contain hints at deeper or historical meanings.

III. Definitions

In order to understand how bathing reflects upon and is in turn informed by perceptions of Japanese culture, it is useful to present a more detailed description of what makes this style of bathing different from the traditions of other cultures. This section briefly outlines the components, etiquette, and practices that encompass Japanese bathing culture as it stands today.

Sentō

When standing alone, the characters that make up the word *sentō* translate to “coin” or “money” (a *sen* is a discontinued coin worth 1/100¥), and “hot water” or “bath.” Nowadays, entrance to an average *sentō* in Tokyo costs 450¥ (approximately \$4.39 as of February 2014), with reduced prices offered for children.⁷ Though every public bath is slightly different, the process of using the *sentō* usually resembles the following: guests are greeted by the proprietor and pay entrance fees. They receive a locker key, sometimes on a chain worn about the wrist or ankle, and are directed to the appropriate changing room based on gender. After stowing away clothes and other personal articles, guests enter the gender-separated bathing areas naked—children of both genders generally bathe in the women’s section with their mothers or other female relatives. Armed only with bathing amenities and a small wash towel, guests shower sitting down on a stool, using the towel to scrub and get clean. Once washed, guests are free to enter any number of baths available. Though it is not allowed in the clean water, the towel can be used to wrap around the forehead or hair as a cooling device. Guests often strike up conversations and make small talk, particularly if the *sentō* has a regular neighborhood clientele.⁸

Public baths are currently not as commonly used as private *ofuro*, but this change was not necessarily an unavoidable, predetermined outcome. A great many factors influenced the progression of bathing culture into what it is today, from the development of indoor plumbing and rising fuel-import prices, to

the demand for the convenience and discretion of a personalized bath.⁹ As of 2013, there were approximately 5,200 public bathhouses throughout the entire country, but this number decreases by an estimated 300 *sentō* closed per year.¹⁰ Eric Talmadge argues that the dwindling numbers of authentic Japanese *sentō* are part of what prompted the Japanese government to intervene and “subsidize those that remain” in order to maintain important sites of cultural heritage.¹¹ Even though numbers of *sentō* continue to drop, they are still common enough to warrant inclusion in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) handbook for foreigners living in Japan, whose small or traditional-style lodgings may necessitate use of an outside bath.¹²

Onsen

The two *kanji* (characters) that make up the word *onsen* are those for “warm” and “spring” or “fountain.” Both characters contain *sanzui*, the radical representing water, as does the *to* in *sentō*. These distinctions are relevant because while all three of these practices are related, they are at heart different. Where the etymology of *sentō* emphasizes payment, the background of the word for *onsen* is a simple description of its most definitive qualities. All three words are the *onyomi*, or readings based on Japanese approximations of the original Chinese pronunciation of the characters. This can denote older origins of a word based on when the characters and readings were originally imported from China, and further serves to establish all three terms with historical weight and legitimacy.

Onsen have many of the same components that *sentō* do (communal bathing, cultural significance, entertainment and social value to the community) with a few important differences. *Onsen* rely on natural springs and are located outdoors, providing a direct view of the natural landscape. Seen typically as a vacation destination, *onsen* do not fulfill the same practical, every-day uses as *sentō*. Their primary function is to provide a site for relaxation and social bonding—as John W. Traphagan relates: “sitting outside and enjoying the manicured Japanese gardens that usually surround these bathing areas is considered a way to relax deeply and enjoy nature.”¹³

In order to qualify as a legitimate *onsen*, the water used for bathing must contain nineteen different minerals and include certain levels of hydrogen ion, fluorine ion, and sulfur as specified by the *Onsen* Law enacted by the Japanese government in 1948.¹⁴ The law also requires the temperature of spring water to fall within a specific temperature range, although cold baths are often included at both *onsen* and *sentō* as a way to invigorate the body and provide other health benefits. The government’s involvement in regulating and monitoring *onsen* speaks to the importance of these outdoor baths as a symbol of Japan’s cultural heritage, and the necessity of preserving them in a reputable state.

Onsen have also become a fixture around which many *ryokan* (Japanese style inns) operate.¹⁵ In addition to bathing facilities, these inns provide guests with *yukata* (light summer kimono or bathrobes), and traditional Japanese-style rooms furnished with *futon* (traditional frameless mattresses), *tatami* (straw floor mats), and *shoji* (sliding paper screens). Often, traditional refreshments like tea and small treats are served, and meals provided by the establishment harken back to older times as well. Guests are encouraged to roam the grounds of the

ryokan in their *yukata*, the uniform reinforcing the same comradery felt as naked equals in the *onsen*. As Robert Leutner writes, “the public bath is, to be sure, a leveling institution, for the superficial distinctions of social rank come off with one’s clothes, and a shared humanity is evident enough in the irregularities of the flesh.”¹⁶ This is especially interesting, given that hierarchies may still exist elsewhere in bathing culture, as will be discussed in the next section.

Ofuro

Unlike *sentō* and *onsen*, *ofuro* does not contain any overt references to water. When separated, the characters that make up *furo* are *fu*, which can be translated to “wind,” “air,” or “manner,” and *ro*, meaning “spine.” It is also interesting to note that only the word for “tub” is preceded by the honorific marker *o*. While one can refer to the tub as a *furo*, the polite or respectful variation, *ofuro*, is most commonly used (for context, many other Japanese words are qualified with honorific markers—some of which represent objects of significant cultural importance, such as rice, and the words for family members, like mother and father).

However, many of the practices associated with taking a bath in one’s own private home are closely mirrored after those associated with public bathing. For example, the verb used is not “to take a bath” as it is in English, but “to enter the bath” (*hairu*), perhaps reflecting the fact that one does not wash inside the tub, but steps into it once clean. Traphagan provides an excellent description of how “entering the bath” in Japan differs from the American method:

In general, Japanese take baths in the evening, often after dinner, and may spend as many as 45 minutes in the process of cleaning the body and soaking. The water is kept at a comparatively high temperature ... (104°–107.6°F), and the tub, rather than being elongated, is deep enough that the water is normally up to one’s neck.... Japanese do not wash themselves inside the tub. Instead they lather, scrub, and rinse outside the tub. The room in which the bath is housed is separate from the toilet and is designed like a large shower stall with a tub at one end; thus it is acceptable for the entire room to become wet.... Part of the reason for cleansing the body outside of the tub is that Japanese do not normally change the water between each bath.¹⁷

Though Traphagan does not mention it, it has become increasingly popular to reuse the gray water from bathing for other household tasks, such as doing laundry or watering plants. Because bathers enter the tub once they are already clean, the bath water contains little soap or dirt. According to an online survey conducted in 2006, 55% of over 6,000 respondents reuse their bath water, adding another layer of cultural importance to the *ofuro*.¹⁸ By adapting and “greening” the practices surrounding bathing, modern Japanese people have made this important cultural practice more sustainable for future generations.

Certain habits associated with taking a bath are common throughout Japan, such as bathing nightly before bed. According to the same survey noted above, 85.3% of respondents take baths on a daily basis. Approximately 73% prefer to bathe in the evening, though many young people have adopted the “American” pattern of showering to get ready for the day rather than end it.¹⁹ Traditionally speaking, baths are associated with nighttime and relaxation rather than energizing mornings.

Anthropologist Scott Clark elaborates upon another interesting facet of bathing culture—that of bathing order within a household. He writes that Japanese culture possesses “an emphasis on social position” that requires a continual awareness of one’s position in relation to others.²⁰ This awareness translates to and is reflected in numerous cultural activities. Understandably, the freshly-drawn water is the hottest, cleanest, and therefore most desirable. It may have also at one time been seen as an extra privilege to not have to wait for one’s turn to enter the bath. Clark notes the historical origins of this practice:

Countless times I was informed that the proper order in traditional Japan was for the household head to enter the bath first, followed by other male members of the household in order of descending age. After the males had bathed, the females bathed in order.... This tradition of a bathing order is known to have existed among the warrior class at the time of the Meiji Restoration. Documents from earlier periods also indicate that prominent warrior and noble families followed a bathing order.²¹

Clark goes on to state that while many households still uphold these hierarchies today, just as many bathe in order of convenience—such as who arrives home first or who has the earliest bedtime. This is a perfect example of how the once inflexible rules of bathing have adapted to fit modern society’s desires—in this case for convenience and practicality.

Another example of how “traditional” bathing culture has been altered to fit society’s changing needs is found in Traphagan’s short article on the intersection of cultural values and social services for the elderly. He provides an excellent summary on the way bathing culture is utilized in improving quality-of-life care for Japan’s growing elderly population. He describes options of in-home care (visiting portable bath services) and community-based care (public bathing facilities at elder-care centers) for Japan’s senior citizens. In the former, professional care workers visit family homes to bathe elderly clients when their family members can no longer do so. In the latter, more able-bodied elders use a special *sentō* with modifications to suit their physical needs, where they can enjoy a soak and chat with friends. These services, offered through Japan’s national healthcare system and insurance program, demonstrate the nationally recognized importance of bathing not just as a way to become clean, but a necessity for a full life.

IV. Stages of Development

Religious Origins: Bathing as a Spiritual Practice

Some of the earliest recorded manifestations of bathing culture highlight its connection to religious rituals and institutions. Lee Butler’s 2005 article, “Washing off the Dust: Baths and Bathing in Late Medieval Japan,” helps lay the foundation for the later development of *sentō* and *onsen* by identifying the conventional starting point in the timeline of communal bathing. He extensively recounts the religious and therapeutic origins of community baths in the medieval period, focusing on purification rituals, various types of outdoor bath therapies for elites, and the establishment of early “charity” baths for the poor located at Buddhist temples.

Butler cites the earliest evidence of commercial baths as appearing in a fourteenth century diary kept by Shinto priests at Kyoto's Gion Shrine. The priests reference a "penny bath" (*sentōburo*) opening at Gan'aiji, and speculate that it would help generate revenue for the shrine.²² This differs from earlier references in the *Kojiki* to a uniquely Japanese form of communal bathing as it indicates a factual commercial enterprise rather than myths regarding spiritual practice.

Peter Grilli and Dana Levy's *Pleasures of the Japanese Bath* is another text that provides a general overview of the history of bathing and its current incarnations, specifically focusing on Shinto (the indigenous, animistic religion of Japan) as an inspiration for the creation of traditional bathing practices. The book is well-researched and contains a close examination of what real *onsen* and *sentō* are like. However, the imagery in the book is also somewhat problematic. Filled not only with pictures from traditional Japanese artists, it also contains photographs of modern baths and bathers. While the images of Japanese men are relatively discreet, the photographers enact a distinctly Western gaze with overly sexualized photographs featuring demurely posed Japanese women. The soft focus of the lenses adds to the slightly pornographic feel of the photos that seem to unnecessarily and almost hilariously contain gratuitous breasts and buttocks. Given that people do bathe in the nude, some degree of nakedness is natural, if not expected. However, Grilli and Levy's prose also drips with Orientalism, praising the ingenuity of the Japanese in keeping their culture safe from Western encroachment, and oversimplifying the intentions behind each bather as Zen moments of reflection. Perhaps without being aware of it, this exotification feeds into stereotypes of cultural uniqueness promoted by many Japanese, which will be explored later in more depth.

Shinto (literally, the way of the gods), places a great deal of emphasis on purity, and accordingly has numerous rites associated with physical and spiritual cleansing. The connection between these practices and modern bathing culture specifically credits two Shinto rituals, *yuami* (the term now translates to simply mean "hot spring cure") and *misogi* ("purification ceremony"), with the origination of the first Japanese baths.²³ Interestingly, one of the two ways of writing *misogi* includes the character for the physical body, suggesting that it is necessary for spiritual purification to include a physical component.

Shinto also draws connections between the physical land of Japan and its people (as well as to that of emperor). Given the location of the islands on volcanic belts that provide heated groundwater, it seems only fitting that the *kami*, or indigenous gods of Japan, would be linked to this naturally occurring geological phenomenon. This fact also provides further justification for the idea that bathing is intrinsically tied to Japan, which I will visit later in the essay.

Surprisingly, the relationship between the imported religion of Buddhism and communal bathing is even more frequently documented. Japanese Buddhists easily incorporated their existing bathing culture into new religious practices. In the Nara period, "charity" baths for the poor or infirm were located at Buddhist temples and sponsored by local elites or royal families.²⁴ Baths could even be held in honor of one's ancestors or the recently deceased, in which case bathers would offer prayers for the dead and perform other Buddhist rites.²⁵

These religious baths not only represented literal and spiritual purification, but were sometimes thought to be acts of devotion in and of themselves. For example, members of a sect honoring the Bodhisattva Kannon chanted Buddha's name before entering the bath and while in it.²⁶ These rituals both attracted followers who desired the material comforts of warmth and cleanliness in addition to the formation of spiritual community and salvation.

Spiritual aspects of the communal bath were also felt in a less institutional context. In the late Edo period, comedic writer Shikitei Sanba introduces his book of humorous bath-time tales with a surprisingly touching and poetic treatise on the true meaning behind communal bathing. He describes the public bath's theoretical capacity to create a Buddhist-inspired utopia where the hierarchies that so clearly define Japanese society are broken down:

The nakedness of infancy purges them of all sorrow and desire, and renders them selfless, be they Sakyamuni or Confucius, Gonsuke or Osan. Off with the wash water come the grime of greed and the passions of the flesh; a master and his servant are equally naked when they rinse themselves. As surely as an evening's red-faced drunkard is ashen and sober in the morning bath, the only thing separating the new-born baby's first bath from the cleansing of the corpse is life, fragile and a paper screen.²⁷

By listing the names of divine or enlightened religious figures along with two generic names often associated with members of the generic serving class, Sanba speaks to concepts of the dissolution of ranking, while hinting at the transformative power of communal shared water itself. Though his writing is not an official religious text, its references to Buddha, Confucius, and the Shinto rituals of washing a corpse set the reader up to consider deeper spiritual meanings behind his stories, and perhaps even their own next visit to the *sentō*.

Over time, Butler posits that religious ties were abandoned for commercialized communal bathing practices with a greater emphasis on hygiene and social interaction. The following section will cover the shift in viewing bathing as a bridge between physical and spiritual, to one centered more on the improvement of the physical body itself.

Healing Waters: Medicinal and Therapeutic Baths

Hot water has long been viewed in Japan as an all-encompassing natural remedy, and this is all the more true for the water issuing from hot springs. The healing effects of natural springs were at one time reserved for samurai, Buddhist priests, or locals. As these baths became more established, travelers from all over the country with medical problems would frequent them to soak away their ailments.²⁸ Edo-period medical texts recommend bathing in hot water as a cure for sicknesses as disparate as diarrhea, colds, colics, stomach aches, skin diseases, and mental issues.²⁹ The diversity of these illnesses in no way negates the legitimacy of the claims, but it does make them difficult to believe. Whether or not all of the claims are valid, it is fascinating that water cures were not only supported by traditional Eastern medicine (with allusions to Chinese culture and Daoism) for things like "imbalances in *yin* and *yang*," but also by eighteenth-century imported European "hydrotherapy" that claimed bathing in hot water would "properly flush out stale fluids and any obstructions in the body by means of sweating or excretion."³⁰ In this way, despite the uniquely Japanese nature

of the healing waters, foreign sources were used to provide extra proof of their effectiveness and merit.

Hot springs are still portrayed as aiding in the treatment of various ailments, such as “neuralgia, myalgia, rheumatism and dermatosis[,] ... high blood pressure and arteriosclerosis” due to their heat and mineral compositions.³¹ Newspapers as established as the *Japan Times* validated and endorsed these claims, along with scientific journals and studies. Called “balneotherapy,” the specific treatment of various diseases and infections through bathing is attributed to the “effect of the heat of the water on the body, the effects of the minerals in the water, and the psychological benefits of the spa environment itself.”³² This legitimizing exercise is important, not just because it demonstrates the importance of bathing to the Japanese press and public, but also the “contemporary Japanese need to seek for alternate ways to market and legitimize hot springs and bathing in general.”³³

Naked Friends: The Bathhouse as a Locus of Community

Though medical uses of baths still continue to this day, over time, Buddhist and Shinto ties were abandoned for commercialized communal bathing practices with a greater emphasis on hygiene and social interaction. Social bathing among families and clans was a common practice in the late medieval era.³⁴ By the time of the Edo period, the public bath was “not just a hygienic facility but a vital social institution, a natural daily (or for many a twice-daily) gathering-place where the full range of neighborhood social business could be transacted.”³⁵

Robert W. Leutner’s book *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction* is a translation and analysis of the four parts of *Ukiyoburo*, a famous novel of the late Edo period that takes place in a public bathhouse. The novel is originally written in a colloquial style featuring multiple, often unconnected dialogs of bath patrons. In addition to containing descriptions of the type of interactions common to bathhouses, this work firmly identifies the *sentō* as the social center of Edo. It is also important in that it highlights the way the bathhouse provides a locus for community building among a particular neighborhood within a common social caste.

Reading Shikitei Sanba’s *Ukiyoburo* in the original Japanese reveals that Shikitei uses *furigana* (phonetic renderings of characters) alongside almost all characters. This could suggest that he 1) has used difficult *kanji* but wanted a more diverse (or less educated) audience to have access to his work, 2) intended the audience to be diverse in terms of age and reading ability, 3) used words or readings specific to a particular region that would be unrecognizable to Japanese not from that area, or a combination of any of the above. Each possibility speaks to the universality of the bathhouse as a recognizable and important location for Japanese of all ages, regions, and education levels.

Ukiyo can either mean “urban life” or “the floating world,” referring to the transience of existence, and *buro* simply means “bath” (a modified pronunciation of *furo*). According to Leutner, the accepted definition most likely highlighted the urbanity of the stories within. Though fictional, this short passage describes a friendly social interaction common to an Edo period *sentō*:

Two men were in the dressing room after their baths. One of them was Hachibei, from whose head steam was still rising in little puffs[,] ... the other, Matsuemon, was holding one end of his loincloth under his chin, in the old manner....

“Hachibei. Look over there,” said Matsuemon. “See that guy walking along with the big hat pulled down over his face? ... He’s a sad case. He’s what’s become of a big landowning family that had thirty-odd pieces of land.”³⁶

Each vignette is followed, often without comment, by another random interaction between strangers or friends. The strength of the novel is in its continuous and diverse array of urban encounters, speaking to the centrality of the bathhouse in the lives of people from all walks of life.

Super sentō and Sex: The Bath as Entertainment

In the early Edo era, *sentō* sometimes employed female attendants (*yuna* literally translates to “bath girl”) that would perform sexual services for an added cost.³⁷ In 1657, the Tokugawa shogunate officially banned these additional services and replaced female with male attendants. However, according to Leutner, prostitution was the outlier rather than the norm:

Some bathhouses, most especially those near the entertainment districts[,] ... on the outskirts of Edo—Shinjuku, Shinagawa, Senju—doubled as brothels, but that seems to have been the exception to the general rule. Most *sentō* were ... upright neighborhood service institutions that observed the sorts of rules laid down by the Edo *machibugyo* city magistrates to govern their conduct that Sanba parodies ... including the injunctions against mixed bathing.³⁸

Historians are divided as to exactly when and why this change was officially made. Some historians say that the Japanese government abolished mixed-gender bathing as a result of “the culmination of a very long campaign dating from as far back as the early eighteenth century.”³⁹ Others draw a direct connection between negative Western reception and changing laws, mentioning further legislation passed during the American occupation of Japan after World War II.⁴⁰ Regardless of who initiated the reforms, the government involvement speaks volumes, and the image of shame tied to Western perceptions of Japan most likely influenced those that knew of it. Ironically, this may have led the Japanese to embrace bathing all the more as a cultural phenomenon that outsiders could not understand.

Appearing as part of MIT’s *Visualizing Cultures* project, John Dower’s essay and visual narrative, “Black Ships and Samurai: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan (1853–54)” shows how Western influence is portrayed as having shaped Japanese cultural practices. This is particularly apparent in the reception of an illustration of a mixed-gender bathhouse by one of Commodore Perry’s men, William Heine. The image shocked the American public with culturally loaded insinuations of indecency and was later banned from publication. When juxtaposed with classic Japanese woodblock prints like artist Torii Kiyonaga’s *Interior of a Bathhouse*, it is interesting to see the differences between Japanese and Western interpretations of *sentō*.⁴¹ While Torii’s print depicts a collection of mostly modestly posed females and one child bathing with strategically placed robes and washcloths, Heine’s shows both genders washing right next to each other.⁴² The breasts of the Japanese women are quite pronounced. This is not to say that Torii’s print did not attempt to titillate—a

male peeping tom can be seen in the upper left-hand corner of the print. These images and others like them formed a collective image of Japanese culture to both foreigners and Japanese alike.

Rather than involve patrons in illicit activities, *sentō* provided other forms of entertainment that cemented the place of the bathhouse as one of culture and class. Leutner describes the settings Shikitei wrote about, stating, "... the second floor ... normally offered tea and light refreshments for a few coppers more, and a place to relax with conversation or a game of *go* or *shogi*."⁴³

Another example of bathhouses expanding to offer different features can be found in the past few decades with a new genre of bathhouse. The so-called "super *sentō*" has emerged to engage younger demographics, evoking imagery more in line with the electric Tokyo cityscape than traditional or neighborhood bathhouses. These super *sentō* are often multi-level complexes that offer a myriad of themed baths ranging from perfumed water; fantastical interpretations of Roman, Greek, Turkish, or Russian-style baths; to baths with mud, clay, or electric currents. *Time Out Tokyo* describes a local super *sentō* that "boasts a dizzying array of facilities: once you've finished soaking in the open-air *rotenburo* and bubbly massage baths, you can go and sample one of the multitude of beauty treatments on offer, or check out the high-tech saunas."⁴⁴

While most *sentō* are open six days a week with limited hours, many super *sentō* run on 24-hour cycles reminiscent of casinos. Though super *sentō* do not exactly fit in with the general paradigm of bathing culture being associated with relaxation and tradition, they are an important manifestation of the ways in which *sentō* are continually adapting to fit current cultural needs. They represent the version of a modern, technologically advanced Japan that is just as important an aspect to cultural identity as tradition. Super *sentō* also often include sections devoted entirely to the re-enactment of traditional Japanese bathing practices, further complicating their relationship to both tradition and modernity. Perhaps this overt and almost anachronistic blending of traditional and modern will be the next wave to change the national view of bathing culture once more.

Looking to the Past to Inform the Future: Cultural Nationalism

Yoshino Kosaku's theories on national identity can be applied toward the many ways Japanese baths have been altered in order to stay culturally relevant. In addition to applying his analysis to bathing culture, this work incorporates some of the theories and critiques of Ian Reader's 2013 piece from the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, "Back to the Future: Images of Nostalgia and Renewal in a Japanese Religious Context" and Tsukada Hotaka's "Cultural Nationalism in Japanese Neo-New Religions." Though these two pieces specifically refer to religions in Japan, they offer a useful lens of "reinvention" through which baths can be viewed. Hotaka also brings up the discourse on Japan's cultural distinctiveness, referring to discussions among Japanese scholars and lay-people defining "Japanese-ness" and how this affects the way that Japanese people experience their own culture.

In order to understand the use of baths as a culturally loaded symbol and the use of nostalgia as an ideological tool, it is helpful to view both in the context of nationalism as defined by Kosaku:

Nationalism is the collective belief that “we” are a community that possesses a history and cultural characteristics distinct from other groups, as well as the will, emotion, and energy to maintain and promote that distinctiveness within the framework of an autonomous state.⁴⁵

Kosaku’s theories on how national identity can be objectified provide a fascinating interpretation of the changing face of Japanese baths. In applying his analysis to bathing culture, one can posit that culturally distinct icons or symbols such as *ofuro*, *sentō*, and *onsen* are needed to promote nationalism and a collective character.

This also offers a useful lens of “reinvention” and historiography through which baths can be viewed. Hotaku cites theories of Japanese cultural or racial specificity, known as *nihonjinron*. This concept refers to discussions among Japanese scholars and lay-people as to what it means to “be Japanese,” and if this spirit can be distilled.⁴⁶ The involvement of the government in subsidizing public baths, creating laws around what constitutes an *onsen*, and providing public service baths as part of nationally funded insurance programs complicates the presentation of bathing culture significantly. Though many communal bathing traditions appear to be losing popularity with the public and relevance to the market, government intervention keeps the practices alive and makes sure they follow a specific representation of “Japanese-ness.”

As mentioned above, the foreign interpretation of bathing culture also has an effect on how it is viewed within Japan. Quasi-orientalist books on Japanese cultural practices produced for Western audiences tend to overlook the complex development of bathing culture into what it is today, focusing instead on a stereotypical representation of a sort of Buddhist spa.⁴⁷

In his essay on the use of nostalgia in promoting Japanese religions, Reader created a “table of dualities” that addresses qualities and items commonly presented as polar opposites. By showing this dichotomy, Reader creates a clear sense of how traditional values are conflated together to form a picture of Japanese identity. Though he was highlighting techniques specifically designed to bring patrons back to particular Zen Buddhist sects, the collection of terms is shockingly apt in describing both *sentō* and *onsen*. Presented here is an incomplete list of his dualities, where applicable categories are shown:

City	Country
Modern	Traditional
Concrete	Wood
Dehumanizing	Humanizing
Separation	Unity
Disharmony	Harmony
Spiritual decline	Spiritual revival
Western	Japanese ⁴⁸

Bathing culture represents all of the qualities on the right-hand side—many sources promote the idea that bathing is a traditional practice native and precious to Japan. *Onsen* in particular are conflated with pristine and secluded locals, destination points out in the country that will refresh city dwellers exhausted by the harshness of overcrowded and increasingly modern cities. Many *sentō* also

feature wooden bathtubs made of *hinoki* (Japanese cypress). Perhaps this list can be expanded to further illustrate the dichotomy between bathing-related objects and practices seen as uniquely Japanese with foreign and “modern” objects:

Western dress	Yukata
Soda and other beverages	Green tea
Isolation	Community
Foreign	Local, indigenous
Morning	Evening
Outsiders	Family

Reader further argues that there is a direct correlation between the development of modernity and that of nostalgia. Though he was using this point to illustrate how religions utilize tradition to create “emotive appeals to an idealized spirit of the past,” it can also be applied to the way traditions are newly viewed and imbued with a nationalistic meaning.⁴⁹ By showcasing baths as uniquely Japanese, a collective spirit is promoted for people to bond over and to which they can feel allegiance. Since it formed in relation to foreign influences and a changing social and cultural landscape, this form of nostalgia has become an integral part of and reaction to modernization itself.

V. Conclusion

When viewing a nation through specific practices, it is vital to acknowledge the complicated nature of identity—as stated earlier, it is possible for the bathing culture of Japan to simultaneously be a legitimately unique cultural product as well as an object onto which an oversimplified national identity is projected. Bathing communally in bathhouses or at hot springs can be traced back to Japanese religious practices, both Shinto and Buddhist, as well as the natural formulations of the land itself. It has a rich history, including a period of time where bathhouses functioned as social halls or information centers in addition to therapeutic and hygienic institutions. The government of Japan has long been involved with the industry of hot springs and *sentō*, for both economic reasons and those of cultural preservation. Hot springs are identified as “by far the country’s most lucrative domestic tourist attraction,” stimulating travel and trade within the archipelago and internationally.⁵⁰ People visit *onsen* and *sentō* to relax, to enjoy a traditional Japanese experience, and to escape the demands and trials of modern life. Super *sentō*, the newest phenomenon to emerge in bathing culture, seems to subvert this paradigm in the opposite direction, capitalizing on the Japanese love for technology, convenience, and variety by creating the ultimate modern Japanese bathing experience.

Whether deliberately or by accident, this complex collection of meanings is evoked in the presentation and perception of Japanese baths as an icon of tradition and nostalgia. By conflating the idealized image of a simpler, more “Japanese” past with public baths and hot springs, Japan follows the pattern that comes with the development of modernity—one of looking back to ascertain what constitutes an authentic national identity.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Brador and Masako Tsubuku, "Dip into the History of the Japanese 'System Bath,'" *Japan Times Online*, July 03, 2012, accessed February 15, 2014.
- ² Lee Butler, "Washing off the Dust: Baths and Bathing in Late Medieval Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 60/1 (Spring 2005): 2.
- ³ Eric Talmadge, *Getting Wet: Adventures in the Japanese Bath* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 238.
- ⁴ Scott Clark, *Japan: A View from the Bath* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 1.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁶ Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 35.
- ⁷ Bath Federation of Oota Ward, Tokyo, 2009, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://ota1010.com/sentou.cgi?code=e>.
- ⁸ To learn more about proper Japanese bathing manners, I recommend the helpful website maintained by the Bath Federation of Oota Ward, Tokyo, that acts as a database of public baths in the region and a guide to Japanese bathing etiquette. The site is maintained in Chinese, English, Korean, and Japanese, but appears primarily geared toward tourists afraid of committing cultural taboos—all the more horrifying when one is naked.
- ⁹ Jacob Adelman and Ichiro Suzuki, "Natto Makers to Public Baths Suffer in Abenomics Divide," *Bloomberg News Online*, June 16, 2013, accessed February 15, 2014.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 21.
- ¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFA), "Guide to Living in Japan," last updated November 01, 2013, accessed February 17, 2014, http://www.mofa.go.jp/j_info/visit/visa/pdfs/guide_living_en.pdf.
- ¹³ John W. Traphagen, "Culture and Long Term Care: The Bath as Social Service in Japan," *Care Management Journals* 5/1 (Spring 2004): 53–60.
- ¹⁴ Hiroko Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs Part of Social, Geologic, Historic Fabric," *Japan Times*, January 22, 2008, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/01/22/reference/japans-hot-springs-part-of-social-geologic-historic-fabric/#.UIN5WrwmXUW>.
- ¹⁵ Maido Nippon Corporation and the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), site last updated January 04, 2014, accessed February 22, 2014, <http://selected-ryokan.com/>.
- ¹⁶ Robert W. Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba and the Comic Tradition in Edo Fiction*, (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Asia Center, 1985), 109–10.
- ¹⁷ Traphagan, "Culture and Long Term Care," 54.
- ¹⁸ Ken Yasumoto-Nicolson, "Over Half the Japanese Reuse Their Bath Water," *What Japan Thinks*, November 28, 2006, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://whatjapanthinks.com/2006/11/28/over-half-the-japanese-re-use-their-bath-water/>. As part of an effort to locate more recent and scientific sources, blogger Ken Yasumoto-Nicolson's translation of a research study conducted by Japanese company DIMSDRIVE on Japanese attitudes toward bathing was included in this article. DIMSDRIVE polled 6,436 people using their internet monitoring group with a variety of questions ranging from how often people bathe on average, to preferred times for bathing, and level of enjoyment. Conducted in 2006, this data was helpful in forming a picture of how personal use of the *ofuro* varies based on factors like gender, age, and whether or not one lives alone.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Clark, *Japan*, 68.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ²² Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 20.
- ²³ Peter Grilli and Dana Levy, *Pleasures of the Japanese Bath* (Boston: Weatherhill, 1992), 26.

- 24 Constantine Nomikos Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life during the Age of the Shoguns (Voices of an Era)* (Santa Barbara: Westview Press, 2011), 56.
- 25 Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 8.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 27 *Sakyamuni* is the name for Buddha transliterated from the original Sanskrit; Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 137, citing Shikitei Sanba.
- 28 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 20.
- 29 Keiko Daidoji, "Water Cures in Japan: The Case of a Health Manual in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Asian Medicine* 5/1 (January 2010): 80–107.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 31 Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs."
- 32 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 47.
- 33 Adam M. Merry, "More Than a Bath: An Examination of Japanese Bathing Culture," (CMC Senior Theses, 2013), 10, http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/665.
- 34 Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 23.
- 35 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 37 Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*.
- 38 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 40 Vaporis, *Voices of Early Modern Japan*, 56.
- 41 Torii Kiyonaga, *Interior of a Bathhouse, 1787*, accessed November 2013, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/interior-of-a-bathhouse-467811>.
- 42 William Heine and W. T. Peters, *Public Bath at Simoda*, accessed November 2013, http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/black_ships_and_samurai/gallery/pages/01_408aL_narr_bath.jpg, as cited by John Dower.
- 43 Leutner, *Shikitei Sanba*, 107.
- 44 "Tokyo's Top *onsen*: Where to Enjoy a Relaxing Hot-Spring--Without Leaving the Capitol," Time Out Tokyo Editors, January 25, 2013, accessed February 23, 2014, <http://www.timeout.jp/en/tokyo/feature/536/Tokyos-top-onsen>.
- 45 Yoshino Kōsaku, "Globalization as 'Internationalization': Perspectives on Nationalism in Japan," in *Asian Nationalism in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Roy Starrs (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 46 Tsukada Hotaka, "Cultural Nationalism in Japanese Neo-New Religions," *Monumenta Nipponica* 67/1 (2012): 133–57.
- 47 Bruce Smith, *The Japanese Bath* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs-Smith, 2012).
- 48 Ian Reader, "Back to the Future: Images of Nostalgia and Renewal in a Japanese Religious Context," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14/4 (1987): 298.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 287.
- 50 Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 21.

Glossary

English Translation	Transliteration	Characters
Bath girl	<i>yuna</i>	浴女
Bathtub	<i>ofuro</i>	お風呂
Closed-country policy	<i>sakoku</i>	鎖国
Coin	<i>sen</i>	銭
Enter	<i>hairu</i>	入る
Go (board game of capturing territory)	<i>go</i>	碁
Honorific marker	<i>o</i>	お
Hot spring	<i>onsen</i>	温泉
"Hot spring cure"	<i>yuami</i>	湯浴み
Indigenous animistic religion of Japan	Shinto	神道
Indigenous gods of Shinto	<i>kami</i>	神
Japanese "chess"	<i>shogi</i>	将棋
Japanese cypress	<i>hinoki</i>	檜
Japanese-style inns	<i>ryokan</i>	旅館
Japanese characters	<i>kanji</i>	漢字
Light summer kimono or bathrobe	<i>yukata</i>	浴衣
"Penny bath"	<i>sentoburo</i>	銭湯風呂
Phonetic renderings of characters	<i>furigana</i>	振仮名
Public bath	<i>sentō</i>	銭湯
"Purification ceremony"	<i>misogi</i>	禊 or 身滌
Radical representing water	<i>sanzui</i>	氵
Reading based on Chinese pronunciation	<i>onyomi</i>	音読み
<i>Records of Ancient Matters</i>	<i>Kojiki</i>	古事記
Sliding paper screen	<i>shoji</i>	障子
Straw floor mat	<i>tatami</i>	畳
Theories of cultural/racial specificity	<i>Nihonjinron</i>	日本人論
Traditional frameless mattress	<i>futon</i>	布団
Type of open-air bath	<i>rotenburo</i>	露天風呂
"Urban life" or "floating world"	<i>ukiyo</i>	憂世 or 浮世

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