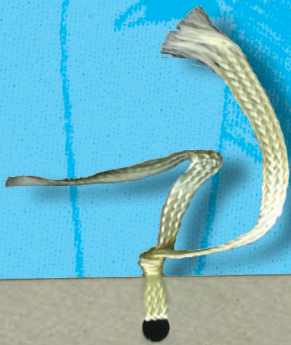


Japan

*the
living
culture*



ED.

SUSHAMA JAIN

JAPAN: The Living Culture

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Sushama Jain (Ed.)

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Contents

	<i>Introduction</i>	9
1.	Evolutionary Phases of Japanese Culture and Society – <i>Rajiv Ranjan</i>	19
2.	Language and the Jesuit Mission of Japan – <i>Saroj Kumar Chaudhuri</i>	40
3.	Merging of Words and Emotions: Works of Takenishi Hiroko – <i>V. Ramalakshmi</i>	53
4.	Societal Etiquette: Addressing ‘You’ and ‘I’ – <i>Sushama Jain</i>	58
5.	Education Culture of Japan – <i>Ranjana Narsimhan</i>	68
6.	Business Culture of Japan: Negotiating the Maze – <i>Srabani Roy Choudhury</i>	75
7.	Ukiyo-E Prints: From Mundane to the Magnificent – <i>Anu Jindal</i>	98
8.	Ikebana: More than a Bunch of Flowers – <i>Sushama Jain</i>	103
9.	Art of Japanese Food Arrangement – <i>Hideaki Ishida and Sushama Jain</i>	112
10.	Zen and Japanese Art and Architecture – <i>Shashibala</i>	123

11.	Cosmic View: Reflections in Miyazawa Kenji's Poetry – <i>P. A. George</i>	138
12.	Shinto Rites and Beliefs – <i>Rajendra Tomar</i>	146
13.	Religion in Japanese Life Trajectory – <i>Sushama Jain and Janashruti Chandra</i>	154
	<i>Bibliography</i>	165
	<i>Index</i>	171

Introduction

My direct contact with Japan began in 1974. I had accompanied my husband, Ashok who was posted in the Embassy of India, Tokyo to open the office of Science Attaché there. Preparatory to Ashok's posting I joined Japanese Language classes at the University of Delhi. The subtle sensitivity towards the person being spoken to, inherent in the language, had struck me even during the introductory exposure to Japanese as a very special feature of the language. During my four years of living in Japan and subsequent visits and while teaching Japanese at Jawaharlal Nehru University, I could discern this sensitivity for the 'other' being manifested in all aspects of living of Japanese people; in the way they act and behave and encounter the world, a sensitivity that pervades the Japanese society almost as a 'culture of living'....

Culture 'as sensitivity to things' is a formulation that may be traced to the writings of Motoori Norinaga, one of the most influential and celebrated scholars of Japanese culture and society. In response to the first exposure of Japan to foreign cultures during 1730-1801, Motoori Norinaga revived the concept of *mono no aware* to define the essential of what Japanese culture is; a deep-rooted concept that continues to find manifestations in Japan. *Aware* refers to something like 'sensitivity' and *mono* refers to 'entities or things.'

The Japanese culture is characterised by their deep sensitivity (*aware*) that seeks harmony in every day encounters with entities (*mono*), both animate and inanimate and it is this culture that the Japanese living is seeped in. Articles in this book compiled under the rubric of 'Living Culture' relate to this interpretation of culture, a culture of experiencing harmony in living.

In various chapters, scholars based on their engagements with Japan unfold their understanding of Japanese culture and its manifestations in philosophy, education, literature, art, and even in business, eating and addressing one another. As the book does not deal with esoteric dimensions of Japanese culture, it is hoped that the chapters will enable readers to appreciate the underlying theme of harmony Japanese living culture is seeped in, an appreciation that may enrich their interaction with Japan and its people.

In the first article Rajiv Ranjan takes us through the various influences that have resulted in the transformation of the Japanese society. From 3rd century BC to the present, we witness the transition from the feudal society to the democratic society of the modern times. *Wakon Yosai*—‘Western Technology and Japanese Ethos’ very appropriately sums up the sentiment of this transition. Despite Japan’s exposure to Christianity, the dissemination of western sciences and a slow substitution of China with Europe as the role model, Japan and the Japanese continue to defy an explanation for their rapid adoption and adaptation of the Western models of civilization without sacrificing their own cultural identity. Modern Japanese notion of liberty does not allow the excessive spirit of liberty that may generate disharmony and anarchy, apart from infringing upon the rights of others. Definition of right and wrong has been traditionally based on the collective prosperity and harmony by subordinating the individual. Today, an outsider would see a Japanese as having a multi layered personality; western in attire almost entirely dependent on Japanese language, by and large claiming to be a Buddhist, yet on occasions of marriage, birth and funeral, choosing rituals some times Buddhist and at times Christian or Shintoist (an aspect of Japanese society dealt with in some detail in the last article). Beneath this entire apparent change one still sees the ‘naturalistic’ Japanese, in constant, mutually gratifying hedonistic pursuits in private life. It is this great difference between the appearance and reality that makes Japanese enigmatic.

Tracing Japan’s exposure to Christianity to Francisco Xavier’s landing in Kagoshima in August 1549; Saroj Kumar Chaudhuri’s

article describes the interaction of missionaries with Japanese Language. To spread the message of Christianity, the missionaries had to comprehend what must have appeared to them as an inscrutable alien culture, the first window for that being the language of the people. In the age of great discoveries, Pope gave the Jesuits the right to spread Christianity in the lands discovered by the Portuguese adventurers who had gone eastward while the Spaniards went westward. Christianity being a proselytising religion, the fathers had to speak to the masses in their language. Again, they had to listen to confessions of sins made by the believers, a very important function in the religion. So they were forced to attach much importance to the Japanese language. The missionary activities went on smoothly in the first half of the 17th century and have left, for posterity, notable achievements in the language before Tokugawa Shogunate put the country under seclusion in 1650 thereby putting an end to their activities. The first part of this paper is devoted primarily to the interaction of the missionaries with Japanese language, and the second part to the language-teaching programme of the mission.

V. Ramalakshmi provides a glimpse of a distinctive cultural signature in Japanese approach to language; an approach whereby words in language are viewed not as just 'units of language' used in communicating thoughts and feelings but as 'the thoughts and the feelings themselves.' Ramalakshmi exemplifies this with reference to Takenishi who writes with such involvement that she and the words used by her together seem to entirely metamorphose into the subject dealt with. Her attempt to depict the Hiroshima experience and its aftermath stands out in contrast to other narratives by her use of an extremely rich contemporary vocabulary interspersing it with expressions found in classical Japanese language. According to Takenishi, in order to enjoy and properly understand nuances of literature, one has to view the language, even of the so called classical literature, as an integral part of one's existence without delineating the language from other aspects of existence; language in essence represents a state of total submersion whereby the 'self,' becomes an integral part of the world of literary work being read or created.

Another manifestation of this submersion of 'self' is highlighted in my article on societal etiquette of addressing 'You' and 'I'. The article unravels a specific, though limited, facet of submersion of self with the 'other' as manifest in the language of day-to-day conversation. Japanese would avoid using in conversation the general word parallel to English 'you'. In English 'you' is a general word used for addressing a person without concern of the 'context' of the person being spoken to (her/his position, relationship etc). A fairly polite of the second person pronouns in Japanese for 'you' is *anata* which, if used, at times may be considered as conveying a feeling of tension felt in speaking to a 'stranger'; tension because not knowing 'you' reflects unconcern for the 'other', therefore addressing some one as *anata* is considered to be quasi polite. Further, compared to Hindi that has three second-person pronouns, '*aap*', '*tum*' and '*tu*', applied according to the degree of politeness required by the situation, the Japanese etiquette goes even further—kinship terms, business names, family and personal names are used as second-person pronouns. These examples of language etiquette reflect Japan's socio-cultural environment and psychological attitudes of the Japanese people.

Moving from individual to organizations, Ranjana Narsimhan takes up the theme of organization of education in Japan and provides an insight into Japan's unique educational experience in its historical and cultural contexts. Until about the 7th century AD Japan was devoid of a written script. The article takes us through different periods of development of education in Japan that started with Japan perfecting written scripts (abbreviated Chinese ideographs *kanji* and the native phonetic script *kana* inspired by India's *Devanagari*) in a short span of 50 years, a development that was Japanese society's very early manifestation of its deep rooted and strong culture of preference for learning through written and pictorial forms. Organized system of education began with Buddhism-oriented centres of learning, followed by Confucianism-guided uniform national education system aimed at promoting an orderly society and a loyal citizenry and then on to the enactment of the Education Ordinance by the Meiji

government in 1872 based on the principles of building Japan into a 'rich and strong country' (*fukoku kyohei*) on the model of the wealthy and powerful West. The ultra nationalistic tendency that crept in the education system and its consequences finally led to its replacement after the war by the Fundamental Law of Education (March 1946) with a democratic orientation; courses in morality and ethics were dropped and replaced by social sciences. Since then Japan has continued to reform its educational system on democratic principles in not only national but also international contexts. Despite changes starting from the very beginning of organized education in the form of Buddhism oriented centres of learning to the present day modern institutions, two characteristic features in Japan's educational culture stand out; (1) meticulously planned implementation of national education policy of the time formulated by conscious adaptation of ideas from outside by everyone—government agencies, educational institutions, parents, students and society in general, and (2) retaining its roots in written and pictorial learning cultural tradition even while expanding its education network at international level.

Srabani Roy Choudhury provides us a glimpse of a refreshingly new aspect of culture. Taking culture out of the conventional domain traversed by anthropologists and sociologists she places culture into the domain of business and deals with managerial culture of Japanese business organizations. It is shown how to an uninitiated, negotiating business deals with Japan may look like a maze, through which movement often gets blocked by some not so apparent factors. Locating these factors in the culture of people that constitute an organization the article juxtaposes Japanese business culture against Indian business culture. Attention is drawn to what the Japanese consider as important facets of organizational culture while the same to an Indian may appear as unimportant; differences that remains dormant but often become the determinants of success or failure of business deals.

Three articles on *Ukiyo-e*, *Ikebana* and Art of Food Arrangement bring out some unique and characteristic features of aesthetic sensibility inherent in Japanese culture.

Anu Jindal's article deals with the Japanese art of woodblock printing. *Ukiyo* means 'the floating world of pleasure and amusement' which refers to a hedonistic way of life. Woodblock prints which depict *Ukiyo* themes are called *Ukiyo-e* (the Japanese word '*e*' means picture). With increasing refinement of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, *Ukiyo-e* evolved into a sophisticated and magnificent art form. Anu Jindal's article provides an understanding of co-evolution of woodblock print along with people's cultural sensibilities.

My article on *Ikebana* provides another manifestation of evolution of people's aesthetic sensibilities. *Ikebana* is said to have come to Buddhist temples in Japan as an ancient Chinese tradition of offering flowers to Buddha and to the souls of the dead. Initially floral offerings were viewed simply as a bunch of flowers. In around late fifteenth century, with the growing understanding and appreciation of aesthetics especially amongst the Japanese elite, floral offerings began to be recognised as a beautiful ceremony purifying the heart and mind. Very soon what was originally a simple act of offering a bunch of flowers became a sophisticated act of aesthetic expression and got transformed into a full-fledged art (*Ikebana*). Initially confined to the elite section of the society, however, the Japanese society's inherent attachment to nature in all its aspects saw the spread of *Ikebana* or art of flower arrangement from elite to all sections of Japanese Society. With time, different traditions of incorporating, interpreting and giving meaning to aesthetic of flower arrangement emerged along with 'masters' of various traditions or 'schools' of *Ikebana*.

The aesthetic sensibility amongst Japanese expresses itself beyond *Ukiyo-e* or *Ikebana* to even the way they view the act of eating to meet the very basic human requirement of food. This is the theme of the article by Hideaki Ishida and me. There is a saying amongst the Japanese – 'Chinese cuisine is eaten with the tongue, French cuisine with the nose, and Japanese with the eyes.' This is the starting point of our article on Art of Japanese Food Arrangement. In Japanese cuisine, the harmony between food and its serving dishes is a must; the colour, the shape (with attention to asymmetry rather than symmetry, a

uniquely Japanese concept based on Zen), and material of the serving dishes are chosen with great care. The food, the serving dishes, the eating-place and the season and external surroundings should all match to create a beautiful harmonious whole. Japanese culture does not treat eating as a mundane act of meeting the bodily requirements, but as an occasion to experience aesthetically pleasing harmony. The relationship between food and its containers is just like that of people and their clothes, in rapport with the time and occasion. Different stylised settings are adopted for different occasions and locations. Each setting is identified as a specific type or category of meal. For example *Kaiseki-Ryori*, the 'Buddhist Temple Meal'; *Cha-Kaiseki*, 'Cuisine for the Tea Ceremony'; *Honzen Ryori*, 'Ceremonial Meals'; and *Kaiseki*, 'Restaurant Meals'; even everyday meal in a common household follows an etiquette to harmoniously blend sight, taste and surroundings.

Shashibala's Article on Zen and Japanese Art and Architecture informs us about Zen, a sect of Buddhism and how its concepts provide the main philosophical foundation of the Japanese aesthetic sensibilities in general and in Japanese art and architecture in particular. The opening lines of the article state:

'Zen is a practice that cannot be bound by time and space. It has grown from an Indian seed, but nurtured on Chinese and Japanese soil. It has penetrated into the Japanese life far more deeply and widely than the Chinese.'

The article gives a brief account of the history of the growth of Zen in Japan and provides us an introduction to its basic concepts and main elements of its practice with reference to the commonly known parallel concepts in Indian philosophical tradition. Conceptual basis of Zen's philosophy is *satori* or sudden enlightenment (known by different names in Indian philosophical traditions). Route to enlightenment (*satori*) is concentration and meditation. In Sanskrit meditation is *dhyana* and the term Zen has originated from it. Just as meditation or *dhyana* involves contemplation or *chintan* and concentration or *ekagrachitta*, Zen involves *zazen* to solve riddles

regarding one's existence, impermanence of life, reality of death, action and inaction etc. After introducing the foundations of Zen's conceptual issues, the article discusses Zen in the context of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. These are: asymmetry, simplicity, austere sublimity, naturalness, subtle profundity, freedom from attachment and tranquillity. There is no sequence, each of them is equally important. Asymmetry means imbalance, irregularity and informality. It is implied in architecture, painting, flower arrangement, interior decoration and art of food arrangement. It is important to note that, compared to standardised symmetry; it is more difficult to bring out beauty in an asymmetry that also allows for much more variety. The aesthetic sensibility based on the concept of asymmetry therefore entails creator's stronger involvement in the act of creation and for a user or viewer a deeper immersion the creation he/she interacts with.

P. A. George discusses yet another dimension of the philosophical concepts in the context of Japan's transitional period from agriculture to industrialization. Expanding the horizon of relationships and harmony experienced in immediate surroundings, his article provides us with a glimpse of the 'cosmic' or harmony with higher values reflected in the imaginative treatment of celestial objects, other wonders of the nature and the feelings and psychological upheavals of not only human beings, but also of animals and plants in the poetry of celebrated Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933). Kenji's cosmic view was founded on the teaching of *Hokke-kyo* or *Hokke-sect* (the Lotus Sutra Sect of Buddhism). The teaching of *Hokke-kyo* assured a man salvation right in this world itself, provided that he strived for it through sacrificing his own happiness for the betterment of others. Kenji lived in a period when the country was fast moving towards industrialization and was undergoing great changes in the socio-economic and political fronts. Kenji was disturbed by repercussions of industrialization on the agricultural front and the worsening situation of the farmers. Following *Hokke-kyo* he became a strong advocate of equality, non-violence, vegetarianism and self-sacrifice for the betterment of fellow human beings; implied in this sect was a world

view of the universe as a composite body of all living bodies, where each living being is a part of all others and all in the universe are intertwined with the Karmic thread. This guiding spirit is reflected in his works as 'cosmic' to convey a higher level of harmony.

The book would have been incomplete without reference to *Shintoism*, the most important native belief system and faith in Japan. *Shinto* rituals continue to be an integral part of the lives of Japanese lives and this is the subject matter of Rajendra Tomar. Origin of *Shinto* beliefs and rituals dates back to about two thousand years but the term Shinto, derived from the Chinese words *Shin Tao* (the way of the gods) had to be adopted in the eighth century as an unavoidable need to make a clear distinction between the native cult and foreign beliefs coming from Buddhism and Confucianism. Unlike the deities of Hinduism where gods are treated as omnipotent and transcendent, in *Shinto* the god-man relationship is like *oya-ko* (parent and child) relationship. Within this concept, the divine origin could be ascribed to the Imperial family, a myth that has since continued. As an independent stream, identified with the imperial family, it grew beyond rituals and beliefs and developed ethical principles and philosophical doctrines and gradually gained the status of native religion. *Shinto* believes that this world where the human beings act and interact with each other is what matters and no other world exists outside the world of mankind. Moral transgression against society is considered as bad and this, according to *Shinto*, emanates from pollution of evil in society - whether physical or spiritual. Whereas the term for moral transgression against society in Christianity and Hinduism is crime and not sin, *Shinto* does not make any such distinction, in *Shinto* crime and sin are synonyms. The *Shinto* outlook is that Human beings are basically good, pure and clean, capable of good behaviour in their act and interactions; evil is a negative element that can be removed by ritual purification (*Misogi Harai*). Attention to purification is reflected in the popularity of *Shinto* shrines and festivals in Japan and in the meticulous attention given by the Japanese to cleanliness in wherever they do.