



Title	Exploring Global Collaborative Learning
Author(s)	Moinuddin, Mohammad; Kokado, Minori
Citation	
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/106353
rights	
Note	

The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

ISBN 978-4-908326-14-1



Exploring Global Collaborative Learning



International Affairs Office
School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan

Exploring Global Collaborative Learning

©2026 International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka

Any update on this “Collective Scholarly Monograph” (hereafter mentioned as monograph) will be posted on the following website.

<http://www.let.osaka-u.ac.jp/ja/international/publication>

Any part of the monograph may not be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. Any part of the monograph may not be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing from the copyright holder.

The title and the affiliation of the contributors are as of March 2026.

Exploring Global Collaborative Learning

International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka

(Editors: MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D., KOKADO, Minori, Ph.D.)

International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka

1-5 Machikaneyama-cho, Toyonaka, Osaka (Japan)

Zip-Code: 560-8532

Phone: +81-6-6850-6409

E-Mail: inter@let.osaka-u.ac.jp

ISBN 978-4-908326-14-1

First Published July, 2026

Exploring Global Collaborative Learning

International Affairs Office
School of Letters
Graduate School of Humanities
The University of Osaka
Osaka, Japan

Editors

MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Faculty of Liberal Arts, Sciences
and Global Education
Osaka Metropolitan University

KOKADO, Minori, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Graduate School of Humanities
The University of Osaka

Preface

In recent years, the landscape of Japanese higher education has undergone a significant transformation, driven by the dual goals of fostering global citizenship and achieving sustainability. Central to this transformation are the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT 2021)¹ regarding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the promotion of “Internationalization at Home”.

According to the MEXT, ESD is a vital framework for nurturing individuals capable of building a sustainable society. ESD encourages students to view modern social challenges, such as population decline, environmental issues and human rights, as their own and to take proactive action. (MEXT 2021)

The guidelines emphasize a “think globally and act locally” approach, aiming to transform students from passive recipients of information into actors who contribute to solving global problems while respecting cultural pluralism. This is often implemented through UNESCO Associated Schools, which integrate ESD to cultivate “Global Citizens” who possess the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral skills to thrive in a multicultural world. (MEXT 2021)

The special lecture delivered by Professor DUTTA, Arnab (Faculty of Arts, University of Groningen, the Netherlands) in the seventh International Seminar focused on this very theme. The seminar itself served as the primary inspiration for the publication of this monograph. Professor DUTTA’s lecture titled as “Intellectual Cooperation and the League of Nations: Global Promises and Asian Challenges in the First Half of the Twentieth Century”, examined the historical efforts of international organizations to promote intellectual cooperation while reflecting on the evolving role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in addressing contemporary global challenges.

The International seminar was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when border restrictions and lockdowns were imposed worldwide, with the aim of maintaining academic interactions between domestic students and overseas scholars. This project consists of a hybrid international seminar followed by the publication of selected and revised papers presented at the seminar. The seminar is organized into two sessions: a special lecture followed by an open discussion, and research paper presentations accompanied by expert comments.

Until 2025 seven such international seminars had been successfully organized, each followed by the publication of the presented papers. Previous seminars explored topics such as “The Opportunities and Challenges for the Virtual Learning and International Exchange”, “International Exchange During

¹ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2021). A Guide to Promoting Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Office of the Director-General for International Affairs, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japanese National Commission for UNESCO.

The COVID-19 Post Vaccination World”, “After Corona Influx of International Students at Higher Education Institutions” among others.

The sixth international seminar that was held on October 30, 2024, focused on “Reconceptualizing Cross-Border Academic Mobility in the Interdisciplinary Research Agenda”. It attracted more than double applications compared to previous years. It was at this point that it was decided to publish the revised papers in the form of a “Collective Scholarly Monograph”. Until 2023, the papers presented in the seminar were published in the form of conference proceedings.

The Seventh International Seminar, held on October 31, 2025, explored global collaborative learning as a transformative approach to education, research, and international exchange across cultural and national boundaries. By bringing together perspectives from a wide range of disciplines within the Humanities and Social Sciences, the seminar aimed to deepen understanding of collaborative learning practices that foster mutual respect, inclusivity, and intercultural competence. Global collaborative learning emphasizes not only shared academic goals but also the development of ethical and dialogic relationships among learners and educators worldwide. The seminar also sought to move beyond conventional perspectives by examining the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of global collaborative learning. Through this collective scholarly monograph, we hope to contribute to ongoing discussions on collaborative learning by offering fresh perspectives that will be valuable to students, researchers, educators, and academic leaders navigating the complexities of international education and global collaboration.

The papers presented at the seminar covered a wide range of academic disciplines. All chapters included in this monograph are revised and expanded versions of the papers originally presented at the Seventh International Seminar.

We deeply appreciate the speakers and all the participants for their support and insightful contributions. Our special thanks go to Professor DUTTA, Arnab for his valuable time and significant contribution to the seminar. We also thank Professor MOCHIZUKI, Taro and other participants from Japan and overseas, as well as everyone who provided direct or indirect support. We express our sincere gratitude to Professors DŌYAMA, Ejirō, ITOU, Nobuhiro, IKEGAMI, Hiroko, YAMADA, Yuuzou, and MABUCHI, Eri for their cooperation in reviewing the papers despite their busy schedule. We are also grateful to Mr. MINEKURA, Yutaka (Specially Appointed Researcher, Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka) for designing an excellent poster and to Mr. NAKAI, Satoshi (Office staff, International Affairs Office) for his invaluable administrative support without which this publication would not have been possible. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka.

MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D.
July, 2026

Table of Contents

Preface	V
Table of Contents	VII
Global Collaborative Learning and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Social and Ethical Challenges	
KOKADO, Minori, Ph.D.	1
The Future is Collaborative Learning: Diversity, Collaboration, and the Transformation of Japanese Higher Education Institutions	
MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D.	3
The Indian Potter Gurcharan Singh: Exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula, Asian Solidarity, and the Poetics of the Lotus and the Swan	
HASHIMOTO, Yorimitsu, Ph.D.	6
“Japan in Thailand”: Japanese-Themed Establishments and the Tourist Image of Japan Among Thai People	
HORSIRIMANONT, Issara	24
Sacred Flames Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Fire Festivals in India and Japan	
KAUR, Manmeet, Ph.D.	36
Comparative Literary Gerontology: Portrayals of Aging and Care Giving in Japanese and Hindi Literature	
KUMAR, Pankaj, Ph.D.	47
Murakami Haruki and the Making of Japanese Cool Literature	
MOKHTAR, Moin	54
Toward the Establishment of Cosmopolitan Norms: Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib	
MORISHIMA, Atsuki	65
Preserving Culture under Occupation: Individual and Collective Agency in Postwar Japan	
TAKENAKA, Wakako	72
Japan and China’s View on Ethical, Legal and Social Implications of Neuroscience	
HAO, Zhechen, Ph.D.	79
List of Contributors	
	87

Global Collaborative Learning and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Social and Ethical Challenges

KOKADO, Minori, Ph.D.

As Chief of the Study Abroad Support Section at the International Affairs Office / International Exchange Center, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your participation in this international seminar, “Exploring Global Collaborative Learning,” organized by the International Affairs Office of the School of Letters / Graduate School of Humanities at The University of Osaka. This seminar seeks to examine the concept of global collaborative learning as a transformative framework for education, research, and academic exchange across cultures and national borders, through the integration of perspectives from a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. By approaching this theme from an interdisciplinary standpoint, we aim to deepen our understanding of its complexities and challenges and to contribute to the development of new scholarly approaches. We are committed to providing young researchers with opportunities to present their work to international colleagues and to receive feedback from diverse academic perspectives. We believe that such engagement supports the refinement of their research and the further development of their scholarly contributions.

From my own research perspective, I consider it increasingly important to foster opportunities for collective learning and to address issues that extend beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. My research focuses on questions arising at the intersection of science, technology, and society, with particular attention to the social and ethical challenges associated with the development and diffusion of reproductive medicine, as well as the regulatory frameworks designed to address these challenges.

Within this field, the right to know one’s origins has emerged as a significant and increasingly prominent issue. Advances in reproductive technology now enable individuals to have children through sperm or egg donation, as well as through surrogacy. The right to know one’s origins encompasses both disclosure of the circumstances of one’s conception through assisted reproductive technologies involving third parties and access to relevant information about donors.

Individuals born through assisted reproductive technologies enter the world without having had any opportunity to receive information about, or to consent to, the procedures that led to their birth, including whether gamete donation was involved, the identity of donors, or the conditions of anonymity. While this is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, assisted reproductive technologies introduce a distinctive layer of complexity by creating circumstances in which genetic, gestational, and social parenthood may not coincide. In such cases, the provider of genetic material, the individual who gives birth, and the person who assumes the role of parent may be different, resulting in highly complex family structures. Parents may exercise choice; however, children themselves do not.

Perspectives among individuals born through assisted reproductive technologies vary. In recent years, however, critical perspectives have become increasingly visible, particularly among those conceived through anonymous sperm donation¹. For many years, sperm donation operated under strict conditions of anonymity, and individuals were often not informed about the circumstances of their conception. Some became aware of these circumstances only incidentally, or in the context of significant life events, such as parental separation. Such experiences have given rise to critiques of regulatory systems that are perceived as concealing aspects of biological heritage and as having been designed without sufficient consideration of the perspectives of those born through donation.

In response to these developments, and in parallel with the rapid advancement of genetic testing technologies, legal frameworks recognizing the right to know one's origins are emerging in a growing number of jurisdictions. To design systems that effectively serve the interests of individuals born through assisted reproduction, an interdisciplinary and cross-border perspective is essential.

I believe that it is increasingly important to establish and sustain spaces in which such challenges can be identified, examined, and addressed, and in which knowledge and insight from diverse academic and cultural perspectives can be brought together. It is my privilege to contribute to the creation of such a space with all of you.

¹ Kermalvezen, Arthur avec de Dinechin, Blandine, 2008, *Né de spermatozoïde inconnu...*, Presses de la Renaissance ; Kermalvezen, Audrey, 2014 *Mes origines : une affaire d'État*, Max Milo Éditions ; 非配偶者間人工授精で生まれた人の自助グループ・長沖聡子編著、2014『AIDで生まれるということ 精子提供で生まれた子どもたちの声』萬書房; Brès, Vincent (dir.), 2019, *Je suis l'une d'entre elles La première génération de personnes conçues par PMA avec don témoigne*, L'harmattan ; ディングル、サラ（渡邊真理訳）、2022『ドナーで生まれた子どもたち 「精子・卵子・受精卵」 売買の汚れた真実』日経ナショナルジオグラフィック

The Future is Collaborative Learning: Diversity, Collaboration, and the Transformation of Japanese Higher Education Institutions

MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D.

In the post COVID-19 years, the concept of collaborative learning has been widely discussed at higher education institutions (HEIs) and has become a driving force for educational reform around the world. In Japan, universities are shifting their focus from merely increasing the number of international students to fostering meaningful “International collaborative learning” (国際共修). This pedagogical approach encourages meaningful interaction between Japanese and international students, moving beyond visible diversity to cultivate intercultural competence, communication skills, and collaborative problem-solving abilities. Faculty members are encouraged to avoid lengthy and complicated lectures, and instead incorporate group work, discussions, and collaborative projects into their classes.

Many Japanese universities are now planning to launch new degree programs based on a balanced participation of domestic and international students. The “Gateway College” at Tohoku University¹, scheduled to open in April, 2027, “College of Design” at The University of Tokyo², scheduled to begin in September, 2027, “Faculty of Global Innovation and Development” at Tokyo Metropolitan University³, planned for April 2028, and the College of Creative Studies at Osaka Metropolitan University⁴, scheduled to open in September 2029, are among the leading examples that would define the changing education system at the Japanese higher education institutions. These programs place diversity and collaborative learning at the core of their educational philosophy. They aim to prepare students not only for local contexts but also for active participation in increasingly diverse and interconnected global communities.

In recent years, diversity and collaborative learning have emerged as essential foundations for educational innovation, intercultural understanding, and sustainable knowledge creation. Collaboration is increasingly becoming a defining characteristic of the future educational landscape. Students from different parts of the world bring diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, values, experiences, and

1

https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZRSP698425_S5A021C2000000/?msockid=094654223113630f074a458030c16213 (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

² <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/935754?page=2> (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

³ https://www.kyodo.co.jp/pr/2026-02-13_3992324/ (Accessed on June 11, 2026.) The

⁴ <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/local/kansai/news/20260313-GYO1T00069/> (Accessed on June 11, 2026.)

ways of understanding the world. Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge to be managed, contemporary educational theory increasingly recognizes it as a valuable resource for learning, creativity and innovation.

Diverse learning environments expose students to multiple perspectives, encourage critical thinking, and promote the development of intercultural competence. Moreover, the presence of students from different cultural backgrounds provides ample opportunities to analyze complex issues from different angles, develop a deeper understanding, and generate solutions that are more inclusive and applicable for a larger number of people. In such learning environments, individuals are expected to work effectively across cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries. However, it is very important to recognize that the benefits of diversity do not emerge automatically. Educational environments must be intentionally designed to encourage meaningful interaction, mutual respect, and inclusive participation.

Collaborative learning provides an educational framework through which the benefits of diversity can be realized. Collaborative approaches move beyond traditional teacher-centered models by emphasizing dialogue, collaborative projects, shared responsibility, knowledge co-creation, and mutual learning. Shonfeld and Gibson (2019) argue in *Collaborative Learning in a Global World* that global collaborative learning environments create opportunities for learners to engage with peers across geographical and cultural boundaries. Such experiences help students develop global competencies, including intercultural communication, empathy, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving skills. The authors further emphasize that digital technologies have transformed the possibilities for international collaboration by enabling learners to participate in meaningful intercultural exchanges regardless of physical location.

The collaborative learning methods could be an effective source and powerful driver of sustainable educational transformation when collaboration among educators is strategically realized. Voogt, Pieters, and Handelzalts (2019) demonstrate that educational innovation is most effective when teachers work collectively on curriculum design and engage in reflective practice. Collaborative curriculum development enables educators to share expertise, address common challenges, and develop a shared vision for learning. In this way, collaborative learning provides a structure through which diverse perspectives can be transformed into collective knowledge and shared understanding.

Future educational systems must therefore prioritize not only academic knowledge but also the development of collaborative and intercultural competencies. Global challenges such as climate change, migration, social inequality, conflicts and rapid technological change require solutions that transcend national and disciplinary boundaries. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to prepare learners for this reality by fostering educational environments that value diversity, encourage collaboration, and promote innovation.

In conclusion, diversity and collaborative learning are central to the future of higher education. Diversity enriches educational experiences by bringing multiple perspectives into the learning process, while collaborative learning provides the

mechanisms through which these perspectives can be shared, negotiated, and transformed into new knowledge. As Japanese universities continue to internationalize through initiatives such as international collaborative learning, they can create educational environments that prepare graduates to contribute meaningfully to an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world.

References

- Shonfeld, M., & Gibson, D. (Eds.). (2019). Collaborative learning in a global world. Information Age Publishing.
- Voogt, J., Pieters, J., & Handelzalts, A. (Eds.). (2019). Collaborative curriculum design for sustainable innovation and teacher learning. Springer.
- https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZRSP698425_S5A021C2000000/?msockid=094654223113630f074a458030c16213
- <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/935754?page=2>
- https://www.kyodo.co.jp/pr/2026-02-13_3992324/
- <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/local/kansai/news/20260313-GYO1T00069/>

The Indian Potter Gurcharan Singh: Exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula, Asian Solidarity, and the Poetics of the Lotus and the Swan¹

HASHIMOTO, Yorimitsu, Ph.D.

Abstract: This paper traces the career of the Indian potter Gurcharan Singh (1896–1995), who studied ceramics in Japan from 1919 and forged a transnational, pan-Asian practice through his exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula. Situating Singh at the crossroads of three lineages—William Morris’s revival of handicraft, George Birdwood’s colonial reading of Indian craft as an extension of an “Aryan” Graeco-Egyptian palmette tradition, and Okakura Kakuzō’s assertion that “Asia is one”—it shows how Singh neither simply followed nor wholly rejected any of them. Arriving in Japan shortly after the Amritsar massacre of 1919, Singh entered the circle of Yanagi Sōetsu, Bernard Leach, Tomimoto Kenkichi, and Hamada Shōji, joined the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society, and travelled to colonial Korea in the summer of 1920, where Asakawa Takumi guided him and where he felt a colonial kinship between Koreans and Indians. Re-reading the lotus of Ajanta not as Birdwood’s Aryan palmette but as a pan-Asian symbol diffused from India across East Asia, Singh carved it into his own wares as a quiet rebuttal of colonial art history. The twin symbols of the lotus and the swan—both emblems of purity preserved amid the mud of colonialism and partition—run through his art and thought, culminating in the revival of “Delhi Blue” pottery and works such as the “Three-Symbol Jar,” and offering a still-resonant critique of narrow nationalism.

1. Introduction: The Lineage of Birdwood, Okakura, and Morris

Ever since William Morris in Britain called for a revival of handicraft against the mass-produced goods of mechanized industry, Asia has frequently been regarded—or rediscovered—as a utopia of pre-industrial art and craft. Yet this entailed a serious dilemma: how to protect and preserve indigenous craft from the civilizing and modernizing forces emanating from Britain, the very source of the so-called Industrial Revolution.

In the case of India, once Britain had established a stable political and economic dominion, another conflict with modernization came into focus. George Birdwood, the Anglo-Indian official responsible for introducing and promoting Indian art and craft at the international expositions held between 1857 and 1901, lamented and denounced the rapid deterioration of craftwork that had come under the influence of

¹The following discussion integrates and partly overlaps with two earlier studies: “Indo no tōgeika Gurucharan Shin” [The Indian Potter Gurcharan Singh], *Mingei*, no. 747 (2015); and “An Irish Theosophist’s Pan-Asianism or Fant-asia? James Cousins and Gurcharan Singh,” in Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube (eds.), *Theosophy across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

British models and education. At the 1878 Paris Exposition, for instance, Birdwood turned his attention to ceramics in the handbook for the Indian section and condemned Wilkins Terry of the Bombay School of Art—known for the revival of Sind pottery—and his Indian pupils, on the grounds that their work was an abominable chimera mixing British, Chinese, and Japanese elements. His strong warning was endorsed by an open letter from influential figures in the art world, including William Morris. Two years later, in 1880, he repeated the same severe criticism in *The Industrial Arts of India*, one of the South Kensington Museum's art handbooks: glazed Bombay pottery decorated in a Sind style of the kind seen on Chinese or Japanese jam and pickle jars was, he held, a violation of every artistic and historical congruity in art.

Birdwood's judgment rested on a Victorian ideology that placed the fine arts at the apex of a hierarchy. He declared, for example, that sculpture and painting as fine arts do not exist in India. Moreover, Birdwood argued that the Indian lotus motif derived from the Greek palmette—a pattern of slender, fan-like leaves resembling the palm. He maintained that, through the eastward migration of the Aryans, this motif had been transmitted to Egypt and India and there rendered as the lotus. This belief in an “Aryan connection,” which interpreted even the Indian lotus said to derive from the Ajanta cave murals as a transformation of a Graeco-Egyptian palmette, contained within it a desire to legitimize British rule by treating India as, in effect, of the same culture and stock.

Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard Kipling, and John Griffiths, a South Kensington graduate who had been engaged in teaching indigenous Indian art from 1865, modified this policy in order to restrain Western elements. Griffiths began teaching the Ajanta cave murals as decoration, and one of his pupils produced a vase inspired by their lotus motif. A photograph of the blue vase held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, reproduced in Partha Mitter's *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, shows—unlike the natural lotus floating on water—flowers adapted among tall grasses. This indicates how seriously Birdwood's criticism had taken effect, for the design most likely followed his doctrine that the Indian lotus motif derived from the ancient Egyptian or Greek palmette or anthemion.

Against this, a great change was spreading from Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1901 Okakura Kakuzō (Tenshin) travelled to India and, on the basis of that experience and those exchanges, published *The Ideals of the East* (1903) with John Murray. The book opens with its much-quoted line, “Asia is one.” Okakura emphasized the spiritual elements common to Asia, which he held would heal the serious rupture between art and craft, and he presented Japan as the exemplar of that unity, declaring it a “museum of Asiatic civilization” (p.7). He argued, for example, that the Buddhist art depicted in the Ajanta caves had been transmitted through China and Korea to Hōryū-ji in Japan. Thus, in his words, it became “our mission” “not only to return to our own past ideals, but also to feel and revivify the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity” (p.223).

In the preface to *The Ideals of the East*, the Irish-born Nivedita (Margaret Noble) regarded Okakura as “the William Morris of his country” (xi). Just as Morris had presented the Middle Ages as the embodiment of craftsmanship, Okakura presented

Asia “not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life” (xx). E. B. Havell praised the spirituality of Indian art in his *The Ideals of Indian Art* (1911), and Ananda Coomaraswamy appraised Indian craftwork in his *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (1913).

At the intersection of these intellectual currents stood the protagonist of this paper, Gurcharan Singh. The Ajanta lotus that Birdwood had interpreted as an “Aryan palmette,” Singh reinterpreted as a pan-Asian symbol, inscribing it into his work as a mark of a solidarity that had spread from India to East Asia. This paper follows how this Indian potter—born in 1896 in present-day Pakistan and living until 1995—established, through his exchanges with Japan and the Korean Peninsula, a practice of border-crossing Asian ceramics. In doing so, it shows how the two symbols of the lotus and the swan came to form the central axis running through his art and thought.

2. Singh’s Life History and the Circumstances of His Coming to Japan (1896–1919)

Gurcharan Singh was born in 1896—seven years younger than Yanagi Sōetsu—and died in 1995. Born into a Sikh family, he was a native of the city of Gujranwala in present-day Pakistan. Singh studied geology at the Prince of Wales College and graduated with honours in 1918. The college bore the name of the British Crown Prince, having been founded to commemorate the visit to India in 1905 of the prince who would later become George V. Singh’s teacher in geology was Professor D. N. Wadia. Though still in his early twenties, having only just taken his degree at Baroda College in India, Wadia soon distinguished himself; he is known for later succeeding, at the request of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1948, in discovering uranium and thereby laying the foundations for nuclear power generation and, by extension, for the development of nuclear weapons. Had Singh continued to study geology, he would surely have walked an entirely different path. He chose instead to put his geological knowledge to use in ceramics. When the established and celebrated Singh published his only book, *Pottery in India* (1979), the culmination of his knowledge and technique, he cited one of Wadia’s works—doubtless in gratitude to the teacher who had passed away a decade earlier.

After graduating, Singh trained in tile-making and the like in Delhi, on the introduction of Ram Singh Kabuli, a friend of his father who ran a pottery business there. His master was a man named Abdullah, of Pashtun descent, said to have come from Persia to India around the tenth century. It was after roughly a year of such training that, with Ram Singh Kabuli’s support, Singh came to Japan to study ceramics in earnest.

Singh came to Japan in the summer of 1919. Although specialized schools run by the British had already been operating in India since the latter half of the nineteenth century, he apparently wished to acquire more industrial techniques in Japan. By his own account in *Pottery in India*, he came to Japan in the summer of 1919, entered the ceramics department of the Tokyo Higher Technical School (now Institute of

Science Tokyo), and completed the course in two years. The Delhi Blue Pottery Trust holds Singh's graduation album of 1921, which confirms that this was indeed the ceramics department of the Tokyo Higher Technical School. Records of the institution's successor likewise confirm that a student named "G. C. Singh" was enrolled in the special course of the ceramics department between 1920 and 1921.

In India at the time, ceramics occupied a low status close to that of disposable ware. Singh became a pioneer among Indian ceramic artists and a figure who would establish a culture of using handmade ceramics in daily life—akin to the Arts and Crafts movement and the Mingei (folk-craft) movement. The turning point was his study abroad in Japan. Considering the timing of his arrival, one important context comes into view. Since Singh came to Japan in the summer of 1919, this was immediately after the Amritsar incident of 13 April that same year—the infamous event in which Indian citizens protesting the draconian Rowlatt Act were fired upon at a Sikh holy site. After the incident, the momentum of the independence movement rose in India. It is therefore intelligible, in terms of timing, to suppose that Singh deliberately came to study ceramics not in Britain but at the Tokyo Higher Technical School in Japan because he wished to make a genuine domestic product rather than the semi-Westernized souvenir-like wares that flattered Britain. No source explicitly states whether he chose Japan because of its flourishing ceramics industry, or shunned Britain because of the bloodshed at the Sikh holy site of Amritsar; but this background cannot be left out of account.

3. The Formation of a Human Network in Japan (1919–1920)

The turning point came when, in Tokyo, he went to hear the singing of Yanagi Kaneko, which was well regarded among his friends. Kaneko probably gave a solo recital, sponsored by the *Shirakaba* coterie, on 9 October 1919; thereafter, in April 1920, she and her husband jointly distributed a "Prospectus for a Concert" to raise funds for the establishment of the "Korean Folk Art Museum," gave a concert tour of Korea in May, and toured domestic performances in Japan as well, displaying the prospectus. It is therefore entirely conceivable that Singh came to know Yanagi Sōetsu at the October recital and was thereby drawn to the Korean Peninsula and its ceramics. In this way Singh came to know her husband Yanagi Sōetsu and, further, Leach, Hamada Shōji, and Tomimoto Kenkichi and their works. Because this is an anecdote recorded as hearsay in *Pottery and the Legacy of Sardar Gurcharan Singh* (1998)—a book published with the full cooperation of those concerned through interviews and the provision of materials—it lacks documentary corroboration, yet the circumstantial evidence makes it more than plausible.

Around 1919 Singh also became acquainted with Antonin Raymond, the celebrated Czech architect and Theosophist. Probably through Raymond's introduction, Singh met the Irish poet James H. Cousins and subsequently joined as one of the first members of the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society. Cousins, invited by the poet Noguchi Yonejirō, taught English literature at Keiō University in Tokyo from 1919 to 1920. During his brief stay of ten months, Cousins encountered, and recorded, a fascinating network of artists struggling to harmonize East and West. His diary-like travelogue *New Japan* (1923) shows that the inspiration originally

came from a small “Indo-Japo-Chinese vase by Gurcharn (sic) Singh.” When he met Bernard Leach through the poet E. E. Speight, he found himself in agreement with this pioneer of British studio pottery in their criticism of the blind imitation of tradition, because the root of tradition lies within. Probably through Speight’s or Leach’s introduction, Cousins also met Yanagi Sōetsu, Leach’s lifelong friend and the founder of the Mingei movement. Yet the figure who most impressed Cousins may well have been the Indian potter Gurcharan Singh.

The pan-Asianist and ultranationalist Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) published an English-language magazine, the *Asian Review*, from 1920 to 1921, propagating the necessity of the political unification of Asia on the basis of cultural unity. The magazine supported the Indian independence movement and broadly welcomed many articles on Indian culture. Coomaraswamy contributed a short article on his first impressions when he visited Japan on a lecture tour in 1920. Cousins, too, who was promoting the independence of a distinctively Indian painting, contributed several articles from India. One of his articles, “The Cultural Unity of Asia,” begins from the “Asia is one” of Okakura’s *The Ideals of the East*. While Cousins fully agreed with this idea, he presented India—rather than Japan—as the secret key to unifying Asia, and indeed East and West.

It was rumored that Cousins’s all-too-early return home was due to his open involvement with the *Asian Review* and his sympathy for the Indian people. The wary British authorities secretly investigated the revolutionary movement for Indian independence, including the Theosophists in Japan, and then pressed the Japanese authorities to repatriate this “radical” to India without delay. Ironically, it was on his journey home in March 1920 that he came to feel the cultural unity of Asia for himself. Guided by Singh, he went to see the murals of Hōryū-ji in Nara, where—exactly as Okakura had pointed out—he conceived of the integration of the Indian model at Ajanta, the strength of China and Korea, and the delicacy of Japan. He further confirmed that the same tradition still lived within Singh. From a photograph of Leach-style pottery (Figure 1), Cousins discerned “the cultural unity of Asia in the shape of a vase, Chinese in model, Japanese in substance, Indian in craftsmanship” (p. 322).

In parallel with this network-building, the political surveillance surrounding Singh was also intensifying. In the India of the time, with the independence movement gaining momentum, British agents were dispatched from India to spy out the relations between the Indian community in Tokyo and the Japanese pan-Asianists. Foremost among them was H. P. Shastri. With his rich learning and high linguistic ability, Shastri made contact with people who were to be watched, such as Ōkawa Shūmei and Rash Behari Bose, and continued to send detailed reports to the British Embassy. According to Shastri’s reports, he was especially on bad terms with an Indian named Hariharnath Thulal Atal. Atal, who had taken up the post of lecturer in Hindustani at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages, was a friend of Gurcharan Singh. Their association can be glimpsed from a photograph taken of H. S. Govinda Rao (left) together with Atal (right) and Singh (Figure 2).

Atal committed suicide in June 1921. According to reports in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and elsewhere, this was because he had been pressed—by the British

government and, it seems, by certain fellow Indians drawn into that same system of surveillance—to provide information and to inform on others. Atal wrote in his suicide note the names of those who had forced such betrayal upon him, greatly shaking the Indian community in Tokyo, since the pressure had come from within their own ranks as much as from the colonial authorities. This surveillant gaze was directed at Singh as well. Around 1921, when Singh was making pottery at a kiln in Seto, he was reported on—as a man “currently under observation of his conduct” and under the heading “Concerning the Residence of an Indian”—in a report dated 11 November 1921 from the Governor of Aichi Prefecture to the Home Minister and the Superintendent-General of the Metropolitan Police. Indians at the time were often regarded as persons requiring caution, and this, contrary to Cousins’s innocent pan-Asianism, would inevitably cast a shadow over Singh’s work as well.

That said, owing in part to his broad network of Japanese friends, Singh himself seems not to have come under any serious suspicion from the authorities. He became intimate with Yanagi and deepened his exchanges with Tomimoto Kenkichi and Hamada Shōji as well. In *The Illustrated Letters of Tomimoto Kenkichi* (2007), for example, there is a letter—written about a year after Yanagi’s letter, on the night of 16 November 1921, from the village of Andō in Nara to Leach—on which Singh added a joint inscription alongside the Yanagis and the Tomimotos (p. 130). Around the straw-stack design that Tomimoto had drawn, Yanagi wrote that it was a most delightful evening, talking of Leach as though he were there with them, and Singh wrote that, together with Yanagi and Tomimoto, it was as if Leach too were with them, and that he was reminded with fondness of all sorts of things from those days.

4. The Journey to the Korean Peninsula and Colonial Solidarity (Summer 1920)

In the summer of 1920, Gurcharan Singh visited the Korean Peninsula for the first time and was utterly captivated by it. In a letter to Leach dated 31 October 1920, Yanagi reported as follows:

Singh has become one of my nice friends. He comes to [see me at] Abiko very often & I see him in Tokyo frequently. He had a good journey to Korea in this summer. (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 21, part 1, p. 639).

As Yanagi wrote in “His Journey to Korea” (1920), Singh, following Bernard Leach, also went “to meet the Korea of art.” Urged by Yanagi, he went to Korea in the summer to see its ceramics. For this journey, Yanagi seems to have introduced Singh to Asakawa Takumi, who had long resided in Korea and devoted himself to preserving and studying its ceramics and crafts. Kaesong (now in North Korea, close to the Demilitarized Zone), where ceramics dating from the Goryeo period could readily be seen, had drawn many people. Singh too visited the Korean Peninsula as one such person and toured various places under Asakawa Takumi’s guidance.

An investigation of the letters addressed to Leach held by the Crafts Study Centre (CSC) on the outskirts of London turned up several letters from a man named Gurcharan Singh. One of them, dated 25 August 1920, vividly records the deep feeling of this journey:

Dear Leach

I came here to stay for a week, three weeks have already passed and I don't want to leave this place. I am staying in a Korean inn, the beautiful furniture, ondol, pillows and food, indeed everything I have begun to love. How shall I tear myself from these? Koreans resemble so much Indians in dress, custom and art that I have begun to love it next to my motherland.

I have made some collection of the old pottery and other old things which I would very much like you to see.

I visited also Kongo San, Diamond mountain, its grotesque peaks, strong, silent and sublime beauty made me cry when I was leaving it. Same was the case when I stood before the cave hermitage of Sei Kutsuan.

Certain Congressmen have come to visit Keijo for a day. Owing to some tension they (Govt.) have put much police in the city. Shops are closed and the city looks gloomy. As yet there has been no serious trouble, but it is very sad.

Compliments from Mr. Asagawa [sic]. You are always present in my thoughts.

I wish to tell you many things just as a child would tell his adventures to his elder brother. Well some day—I hope you have started your great work. How do you find it? May He give you all success, and always crown you with laurels.

Give my best wishes to Mrs. Leach and love to children.

Tokio is rather lonely. I shall be in Tokio next month when the school reopens.

Yours very sincerely, G. C. Singh

The “Sei Kutsuan” in the letter refers to Seokguram. Singh was deeply moved by Seokguram as well, and it may be supposed that he, too, experienced for himself the continuity of Buddhist art reaching from India to Japan. Yanagi likewise, in his essay “On the Sculpture of Sekibutsu-ji” (1919)—written when he visited Seokguram in Gyeongju in 1916—emphasized that Seokguram was a nodal point of a “golden age of the East” that originated in Indian Buddhist art and ran through Silla, Tang, and the Japan of the Asuka period. Here, too, Singh and Yanagi seem to have shared something of Okakura's vision—though refracted through the concrete experience of Seokguram itself, rather than as an abstract slogan.

In “His Journey to Korea,” Yanagi describes an Indian friend named “S” who went to see a white jar with a lotus motif and was photographed together with a Mr. “A.” The following is a passage that Yanagi, in “His Journey to Korea,” quoted as a letter from Singh:

Yesterday evening, on your [Yanagi's] advice, I went to see that astonishing Joseon-dynasty jar at Mr. A.'s. It is truly a representative masterpiece of the lonely, grand, beautiful art of Korea. We took a photograph of it. It is an utterly rare work. It set my heart trembling and led me to the very depths of Korean religion. My heart is so full of all manner of things that I can write nothing more than this (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 6, p. 73).

The photograph Singh took here is very likely to be the one Asakawa later gave him (Figure 3). Singh further said that he had “begun to feel love for everything,” including “the people of Korea,” so much so that when he died he “would wish to

be buried on a quiet hill, here among these people”; and he wrote that when he returned to Japan he wished to have “endless talks about Korea” with Yanagi.

Among the documentary materials donated to the Delhi Blue Pottery Trust there remains a photograph—probably in Asakawa Takumi’s own hand—inscribed in Japanese, “Presented to elder brother Singh. 31 August 1920. Takumi” (Figure 3). It was taken at the Iwata Photographic Studio in the “Keijō” (Seoul) of the time, and, given the dating, Singh probably left the Korean Peninsula around this period and received it from Asakawa as a parting gift.

Among the photographs formerly owned by Singh is one taken in Kaesong, which conveys not only the beauty of the scenery but probably also the sorrow of parting from the Korean friends with whom he had travelled the peninsula. According to Singh’s letter, he had met “Mr. Asagawa [sic]” and, loving Korea “next to his motherland,” wished to extend his stay. Yanagi, too, in his above-quoted letter to Leach, reported on his friendship with Singh, who had a good journey in Korea this summer. According to Yanagi, Singh “loved Korea & was loved by the Koreans very deeply,” and “saw most of the Koreans whom I saw in this Spring, so we have had much talk about them & also of ‘the Korean Questions’.”

“Coreans resemble so much Indians in dress, custom and art,” Singh wrote to Leach. The expression is restrained—doubtless out of regard for the censorship—but it is not hard to imagine the sympathy of one who came from a colony himself. There, despite the difference between British and Japanese dominions, there must have been a point of communion between them as fellow members of peoples whose countries had been taken from them and whose independence movements were on the verge of being crushed.

What the phrase “the Korean question” points to is surely the independence movement on the Korean Peninsula that began on 1 March 1919. In Korea, Japan’s suppression of this movement carried a similar weight to the Amritsar massacre in India, in that both have come to be seen as turning points in anti-colonial mobilization as independence movements intensified under the post-Versailles principle of national self-determination. Yanagi was, needless to say, critical of its being treated as a “so-called disturbance” to be suppressed. This is clear from “Thinking of the Koreans,” which he wrote “on seeing that there was no one to defend the unfortunate Korean people in public.” There Yanagi cites the question of “a certain Korean”—“Does Japan give us education for our sake, or does it educate us for Japan’s sake? Which is it?”—and asks whether there is any Japanese who can assert that it is the former.

Concerning this “Korean question,” Yanagi recorded the following dialogue with “a certain Indian” in “On Education in Korea” (1923) (Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū, vol. 6, p. 233). According to that Indian, the British government had established excellent universities in India but, by withholding opportunities for ordinary education, allowed only a small wealthy minority to receive higher education. To this Yanagi replied that, just the opposite of India, on the Korean Peninsula ordinary education was pursued zealously but higher schools were not permitted. Whereupon the Indian, indignant, replied: “In either case the conqueror does as he pleases.

Somewhere or other they want to keep the conquered foolish.” There is, of course, no proof that this Indian was Singh; but although it is not explicitly stated, since Singh returned to India in the spring of 1922, it is highly likely, from both the timing and the content, that the two exchanged such an argument.

Meanwhile, Asakawa Takumi and his elder brother Asakawa Noritaka played important roles in the re-evaluation of Korean art. During their residence in Korea from 1914 onward, the Asakawa brothers were deeply moved by Korean art, and were especially captivated by the white porcelain that had been forgotten and neglected even among Koreans themselves, in the history of traditional ceramics. Thanks to donations from readers and supporters, their efforts in this direction bore fruit in the Korean Folk Art Museum, which opened in 1924. In issue no. 3 of *Shirakaba* (1921), where most of the donation figures are in single digits, one finds the name “Singh (India),” who donated one hundred yen—virtually the highest amount for an individual. This may have been not only out of respect for Yanagi and for ceramics, but also out of Singh’s grief and indignation at a state of affairs in which they sought “to keep the conquered foolish.”

5. Theosophy, Kabir, and the Symbol of the Swan

Such a yearning for a humanity that transcends borders was by no means unrelated to the Versailles order that gave birth to the League of Nations. Europe, which had styled itself the representative of civilization and of humankind, greatly lost its prestige by bringing about the mass slaughter and destruction of the First World War. For this reason—or rather, all the more so, even while withholding self-government from the colonies—the need and the momentum to think about the fraternity of humankind and the harmony of Eastern and Western civilizations rose ever higher. One of the bodies of thought that laid the groundwork for this was precisely the Theosophical Society, of which Singh too was a member.

The Theosophical Society was born in 1875, centred on Madame Blavatsky. The esoteric teachings she claimed to have studied in Tibet, and their accompanying writings, were criticized as forgeries from the time of their announcement; yet the movement to build a fraternal community on the basis that the religions and mystical philosophies of East and West coincide at their root exerted a great influence. Because it especially valued Buddhism and had its headquarters in India, it came to have close connections with the anti-British and self-government movements there. Even Gandhi records in his *Autobiography* (1929) that, when he went to study in London at the end of the nineteenth century, his participation in its meetings opened his eyes to an Indian culture he had hitherto ignored.

Theosophy took a keen interest in pan-Asian culture and art, and it was perhaps only natural that Singh—who was to become a bridge between India and East Asia—should be drawn to it. As noted above, Singh joined the Tokyo lodge of the Theosophical Society around 1920 through his acquaintance with Cousins, who—alongside his teaching post at Keiō—energetically devoted himself to propagating Theosophy. Partly because he was Irish, Cousins’s antipathy toward Britain was so strong that he even took up the post of editorial adviser to the *Asian Review*, the English-language magazine published by the Kokuryūkai. D. T. Suzuki and his wife

were members of the Tokyo branch of the Theosophical Society, to which Cousins devoted his efforts, and Singh too was one of its members. Since there were said to be members from the Korean Peninsula as well, it is conceivable, given the timing, that among the friends Singh photographed there were people connected with the society.

Cousins met Leach, on the introduction of the poet Speight, on 25 June 1919—just before Leach left Japan—at the venue of a solo exhibition at Ryūitsu-sō. Cousins was impressed, and made special note of, Leach's words that in making ceramics one returns to a child's heart, seeks simple things, and follows the tradition within one's own heart. Soon afterward Cousins contributed a poem, "Lines," to the *Japan Advertiser* of 6 July. The potter, he wrote, who unconsciously reiterates a kind of transmigration—God forming man from earth and returning him to earth in death—is sublime beyond measure. In interpreting the words "dust to dust," originally derived from Genesis, as a Buddhist transmigration by intimating that the earth is the soul, and in depicting the religions of East and West as though they coincided, his thoroughly Theosophical cast of thought is plainly evident.

In a letter to Leach dated 6 August 1919, Yanagi expresses his pleasure that Cousins was a friend not only of Leach but also of Speight, and states, "I like Mr. Cousins's 'Lines.'" Leach himself seems to have taken an interest in Theosophy from around the spring of 1919, and a letter survives in which his friend Reginald Turvey, doubtless at Leach's request, expounded on it. By 1926, when he became Turvey's neighbour, Leach had read a fair number of related books and wrote to Yanagi that, likening himself to the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, he was at last beginning to grasp the tail of the ox, that is, of the self. After they left Japan, however, the exchange between Leach and Cousins seems to have lapsed, and there is no trace of Singh, Yanagi, or others discussing Theosophy.

Singh himself, according to the *Japan Advertiser* of 18 January 1921, lectured on the Indian mystic poet Kabir at a regular meeting in Tokyo. Kabir, a fifteenth-century Indian poet and saint, was highly valued in the Theosophical Society for having asserted that Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism were fundamentally identical. Since Singh was born into a Sikh family in the city of Gujranwala in present-day Pakistan, the conciliatory claims of Theosophy may have been urgently meaningful to him.

A symbol that bears a special significance in Kabir's poetry is the "swan." In Hindu and Vedic thought the swan (hamsa) is a word denoting the supreme soul, a sacred being; in Kabir's poetry it often appears as a symbol of the pure soul that, while dwelling in the mire of a defiled world, soars transcendent above it. The lotus, which blooms purely from the muddy slime without being stained by it, and the swan, which skims over the pond without being wetted by the water, form, in Kabir's poetry, an inseparable poetic image. Both indicate a mode of the soul that preserves truth and purity without being tainted by the grime of the secular world.

This symbol of the swan also resonates deeply with the history of partition. For Singh, of a Sikh family born in what is now Pakistani territory, the partition of India and Pakistan (1947) meant the loss of his homeland. The division of the Korean Peninsula into North and South occurred at almost the same time. The swan, as a

being capable of flying across the lands and peoples thus torn asunder, takes on a deeper connotation. The 2023 documentary film *The Lotus and the Swan* follows the ceramic careers of Gurcharan Singh and his son Mansimran, while seeking to capture, through these two symbols of the lotus and the swan, the trajectory of Singh's ever-border-crossing art and life. The "lotus and swan" of the title is no mere design, but a symbolic expression of the ethical practice of Singh, who lived through an age of colonialism and partition.

6. Participation in the Garakuta-shū and the Appropriation of the Lotus Motif (1920–1922)

It was in Japan that Singh took his first step as a ceramic artist. Although he had studied ceramics in India as well, this had been confined to practical fields such as tile-making. His coming to Japan in 1919, entering the Tokyo Higher Technical School, and graduating from its ceramics department had likewise been chiefly in order to learn techniques such as glazing and firing. As he records in his autobiographical work *Pottery in India* (1979), it was through meeting Leach and Yanagi—and, further, Tomimoto Kenkichi and Hamada Shōji, the latter a senior in the ceramics department—that he came to aspire to be a ceramic artist. The masters he privately revered were the sixth-generation Kenzan and Leach.

Moreover, at the end of 1920, Singh joined the Garakuta-shū as well. The Garakuta-shū was a peculiar group of collectors centred on Mita Heibonji. Members were given monastic-style sobriquets, and Singh's was "Jūryūji Shishi Bonsetsu Singh." Singh soon invited Raymond into the Garakuta-shū. A photograph dated 25 December 1920, in which Raymond, Heibonji, and the others are all costumed in turbans, was published in *Shumi to Heibon*, the group's newsletter, and the original photograph from which it derived also survives among Singh's effects. The combined issue nos. 14, 15, and 16 of *Shumi to Heibon* (1922) records how, on 10 March 1921, Singh took the lead in holding a costume party, serving Indian dishes such as shorba, keema, chutney, and papadum. The Garakuta-shū provided occasions for members to exhibit their collections, and according to issue no. 7 of *Shumi to Heibon* (1921), on 13 March, a few days after the costume party, Singh exhibited his own ceramics. Although it was an in-house affair and only a few pieces, this must have been the first time Singh's ceramics were displayed.

In January 1922 Singh held his first solo exhibition at Hoshi Pharmaceutical in Tokyo. According to Speight's exhibition review in the *Japan Advertiser* of 22 January 1922, Heibonji, and Raymond exerted themselves to bring the solo exhibition about. Raymond had been commissioned by Hoshi Hajime to design the Hoshi Pharmaceutical Commercial School (now Hoshi University), which opened in 1922, and this connection probably played a part. Speight, after noting that Singh's ceramics were an homage to the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula, praised the way that—despite having been produced in a mere two months—Indian decorative designs combine with an archaic charm. The short period was probably because Singh, unable to borrow a kiln in Tokyo, had to go to Seto to make his work. Although he had secured a promise to borrow a kiln from Naka Shōgo of Ryūitsu-sō in place of Leach, he was obstructed and could not use it. In the end, in

April 1921, Singh turned to Gokan Bunnosuke—his university alumnus, a teacher at the Seto Ceramics School and a geology specialist—and was at last able to make pottery at a Seto kiln. The friend “Gokan” to whom Singh refers in *The Lotus and the Swan* is probably this man.

Issue no. 381 of *Kokka* (“Flower of the Nation”), an influential Japanese art journal on East Asian art, published in February 1922, carries a short unsigned article, “Ceramics Made by Mr. Singh, an Indian.” Although it judges the ten-odd pieces to be “unable to escape the realm of unfinished work,” it appraises them as looking up to the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula in a Goryeo style or a brushed-slip Mishima style, while at times displaying individuality. It especially notes that Singh privately revered Kenzan, and says that from this it feels “a pleasure and a reassurance” that Indian pottery should be born. It is suggestive that the article begins from a survey of the Ajanta cave paintings. This is probably because, contrary to Okakura Kakuzō’s thesis that Indian murals flowed through the Chinese continent and the Korean Peninsula into Hōryū-ji on the Japanese archipelago, it seemed as though ceramics were now being transmitted from Japan to India.

This carries a special significance when viewed from the standpoint of the lotus motif. For the lotus motif—which offered him suggestions in the harmony of ceramic technique and beauty—was precisely what Singh chose as a symbol of Asian solidarity. To be sure, it was through his stay in Japan that Singh discovered the beauty possessed by the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula. Among them, the “white jar with lotus design in underglaze blue and copper-red” seems to have left a particularly strong impression, and among Singh’s representative works from his Japanese period there is one that clearly imitates this masterpiece (Figure 4). It is a work in which white glaze is applied to a maebyeong (plum-vase) form, but—unlike the lotus-design jar—the lotus flowers, in almost the same design, are not drawn with a brush but incised with a spatula-like tool. Singh went on to depict this same lotus-flower design repeatedly in his works thereafter.

The lotus, native to India, appears as a motif and ornament across nearly the whole of Asia, mediated by Buddhism. The most fundamental characteristic of the lotus is that it raises its stem from the mud and, repelling the muddy water entirely, blooms in purity. This flower has been widely shared throughout India, China, Korea, and Japan as a symbol of truth and transcendence—of preserving purity while existing within a defiled world. At both Ajanta and Hōryū-ji, the Buddha holds the lotus. Singh’s fondness for taking up the lotus was probably because it embodies the trans-Asian spread of ceramics and his own peregrination in tracing it. Singh wrote that the Korean Peninsula, which had produced the ceramics he idealized, resembled India; and his love of the lotus must surely have been one of those points of commonality. One can readily imagine that he used an arrangement of the lotus from the lotus-design jar precisely because he found in it such a connection with India.

However, the design of depicting five or so large lotus petals scattered separately, while often seen on Joseon-dynasty or Song-dynasty porcelain, was in fact an unusual expression in the India of the time. Partly because the lotus in the Ajanta cave paintings overlaps slender petals, the lotus was often depicted like a thistle or

an acanthus. This is related to Birdwood's doctrine. Birdwood maintained that, through the eastward migration of the Aryans, the palmette motif had been transmitted to Egypt and India and there rendered as the lotus—and this thesis wielded enormous power.

On the other hand, in *Pottery in India*, Singh quoted from Birdwood's book only a single passage praising the ancient Indian ceramics—to the effect that the European has far more to learn than to teach—thereby presenting Indian ceramics as though they had developed entirely apart from British influence. On reflection, Singh's whole career as a potter ran utterly counter to Birdwood's view of ceramic history, which held Indian ceramics to be the inheritors of the “tradition” of an Aryan civilization continuous with Greece. That Singh depicted the lotus with designs of the kind found in Song-dynasty and Joseon-dynasty ceramics meant nothing other than an attempt to grasp the lotus within the connections of Asia rather than of the Aryans. It is possible to read in this an echo of Okakura Kakuzō, who linked the Ajanta cave paintings to Hōryū-ji.

For Birdwood, the lotus of Ajanta was no more than a transformation of an Aryan palmette (of palm, Egyptian, and Greek origin). But Singh re-read that very lotus as a pan-Asian symbol that had spread from India across the whole of East Asia, and incised it with his own hand. This was a quiet rebuttal of Birdwood's colonial view of art history, conducted through the practice of ceramics.

Notwithstanding Cousins's appraisal, the two seem to have had no further contact thereafter, and no mention of Singh appears in Cousins's writings after *New Japan*. Singh, on the other hand, built intimate relations with the circle of Mingei and studio potters such as Yanagi, Leach, Hamada Shōji, and Tomimoto Kenkichi.

In a letter to Leach dated 8 November 1922, moreover, Singh wrote as follows:

I have heard from Yanagi that you held an exhibition in London which was quite a success and that you now intend sending your exhibits to Japan. I am extremely glad at it. Yanagi sent the beautiful handbook of Korean art a few days ago. I have seen its photographs over and over again at least hundred and fifty times. Ah, the Corean line, I see it in my vision running in the pictures drawn across my memory—

of a Corean walking

A Shiragi spoon

A Korai vase

The Diamond mountain

The folds of a Corean dress

And in fact everywhere where the delicacy of the line and its sharpness predominate in Eastern art.

Tomimoto had a successful exhibition in Osaka and is now preparing things for Tokyo.

Where is Hamada? Is he returning to his country? If he is still there? please ask him to pay me a visit in India while on his way to his country.

As this letter eloquently shows, even after his return home the beauty of the Korean “line” was deeply engraved in Singh's heart. The Silla spoon, the Goryeo vase, the Diamond Mountains, the folds of Korean dress—the delicate yet sharp line

that connected them was, for Singh, a symbol of a visual unity running through the whole of Eastern art.

7. Activities after His Return: The Revival of Delhi Blue (1922–)

After concluding his solo exhibition at Hoshi Pharmaceutical in 1922, Singh returned to India. According to *Pottery in India*, on the occasion of his return Singh and Tomimoto realized that each had presented the other with an item that he had known the other wanted but had until then never handed over. Yanagi, for his part, seems to have given Singh a photograph of himself; a photograph inscribed in Yanagi's hand "March 1922" remains among Singh's effects. And in a letter to Leach dated 21 July, Yanagi reported, "Singh has gone home. In Delhi, he has his own kiln." With this, Singh's figure disappears from Yanagi's writings. Although Singh continued to associate with Leach for a long time, the letters he sent to Yanagi reportedly went unanswered. It therefore seems likely that he never learned of the opening of the Korean Folk Art Museum or of Asakawa Takumi's death.

It was precisely the pride in his homeland and the attachment to craft that he had learned on the Korean Peninsula that enabled Singh, after his return, to revive "Delhi Blue" in his native India. Singh too was to pass a long period of hardship and patient obscurity in an India where ceramics were used chiefly as disposable tableware and seldom prized as ceramic art.

Just as Yanagi and Asakawa re-evaluated the white porcelain of the Korean Peninsula, so Singh sought to re-evaluate and "revive" India's ancient, so to speak, "celadon." In 1952 Singh established Delhi Blue Pottery. Indeed, the lotus motif that Singh had reproduced on white jars during his time in Japan he now brought back—this time not in white, but in works of Delhi Blue. The works included in *Sekai tōji zenshū* (Catalogue of World Ceramics), vol. 16, Contemporary volume (1958), show one part of these results. In that volume Mikami Tsugio reproduced two plates and wrote that Gurcharan Singh, who had studied in Japan, "built a kiln on the outskirts of Delhi and, skillfully using iron-oxide and copper-red, painted neat plants and flowers in a Mingei style, as well as firing wares that add new elements to traditional Indian pottery," a description that reflects Mikami's role as a leading specialist on East–West ceramic exchanges and suggests he probably met Singh during his research trip to India. To the best of my knowledge, there is no trace of Singh being properly taken up in Japan thereafter.

Singh's activity might be regarded as an appropriation of the Arts and Crafts movement, or a ceramic version of the Swadeshi ("use domestic products") or "Buy Indian" movement; but the fact that he discovered the value of craftsmanship through a movement, in Japan and Korea, in which Europe and Asia were fused must not be overlooked. Apart from Bernard Leach, he had no further contact with the circles of Japan or Korea, yet he developed and refined the lotus-motif design he had seen in Korea and left it in his later works, such as the Delhi Blue jars and plates of the 1970s.

His thought came to fruition in his representative work of the 1970s, the "Three-Symbol Jar" (Figure 5). The jar, with its three faces inscribed respectively with sacred verses of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, may be regarded, in an age of

religious and political division, as a symbol of a trinity-like reconciliation. It was a work in which the idea of the “fundamental unity of all religions” preached by Kabir was literally inscribed upon the vessel. In this sense, Singh’s practice also invites a quiet recollection of another image from Okakura Kakuzō’s *The Book of Tea* (1906), whose opening chapter, “The Cup of Humanity,” presents the vessel—not tea alone—as the site where an everyday cup becomes a locus of aesthetic and ethical harmony among those who share it. Singh’s “Three-Symbol Jar,” with its triadic iconography, may even be read as a distant echo of the East Asian motif of the Three Vinegar Tasters—Sakyamuni, Confucius, and Lao Tzu gathered around a single vat—which Okakura himself invokes (pp. 58-59) as a parable not only of doctrinal difference but of the underlying unity and harmonious coexistence beneath that difference, transforming doctrinal difference into a shared act of tasting.

To be sure, Singh’s involvement with Japan was brief. According to his family, he harbored complicated feelings toward a Japan that had fallen into a state of war with the Korean Peninsula and the Chinese continent. Yet the beauty of the ceramics of the Korean Peninsula—above all the lotus-design jar to which Yanagi and Asakawa had opened his eyes—and the importance of reviving and producing them seem to have remained long in Singh’s heart thereafter.

Furthermore, exactly like his beloved lotus design, Singh kept his distance from the opacity of politics, while embracing the muddy clay itself—kneading it with his own hands and turning the wheel to shape beautiful vessels amid the upheavals of colonial rule and partition.

8. Conclusion: The Border-Crossing Vessel—As a Critique of Nationalism

What the life and works of Gurcharan Singh demonstrate is the fact that ceramics are a multinational, powerful cultural medium capable of binding people together across borders and religions. Morris preached the revival of handicraft against mechanized production; Birdwood interpreted Indian craft within the framework of an Aryan lineage; Okakura proclaimed that “Asia is one.” At the crossroads of these three lineages stood Singh the practitioner. Yet his work was neither a simple following of, nor a critical rejection of, any one of them. Singh was a potter who sought to surpass all three on a different plane.

Against Birdwood, he re-read the lotus not as a transformation of an Aryan palmette but as a pan-Asian symbol that had spread from India across the whole of East Asia. The lotus that blooms purely from the mud was inscribed upon the vessel not as a palmette derived from Greece and Egypt, but as a symbol of the very spirituality of Asia. Against Okakura, he converted the ideal of “Asia is one” from a political slogan into the concrete practice of carving by hand the lotus motif drawn on a Korean jar and firing clay that imitated Joseon-dynasty white porcelain. He sought to give substance, in the form of a vessel, to the continuity of art from Ajanta to Hōryū-ji. Against Morris, he did not subsume the revival of handicraft within the framework of nationalism. Singh’s ceramics, while running in common with the Swadeshi movement, embodied a border-crossing quality that deliberately could not be reduced to the “tradition” of any single nation, by freely combining Indian, Japanese, and Korean elements.

This border-crossing quality also corresponds to the essential character of ceramics as a material. The vessel includes. It receives liquids and food, and fuses the techniques and motifs of different civilizations into a single form. The vessel preserves integrity. However diverse the elements it incorporates, by being fired it becomes one unshakable form. Singh's wager on the lotus motif came, it seems, from just such an insight into the essential mode of being of ceramics—their "inclusion and integrity."

The partition of British India in 1947 and the entry of India and Pakistan into a relationship of tension overlap, in their timing, with the division of the Korean Peninsula. As religious and political antagonism intensified, the wish for reconciliation that Singh entrusted to the making of beautiful vessels may be said to have been an ethical practice surpassing a merely artistic endeavor. Just as the swan in Kabir's poetry skims undefiled over the muddy water, so Singh's lotus jars may be called the expression of a soul seeking to rise purely from the mud of political antagonism and division. The "Three-Symbol Jar," which inscribed the sacred verses of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism upon a single vessel, is in this sense no mere work of art. It is a vessel that refuses division—an ethical object presented as a container that binds people together beyond religious and political antagonism. The 2023 documentary film *The Lotus and the Swan* captured the ceramic journey of Gurcharan Singh and Mansimran through the imagery of the "lotus and the swan." As noted above, both symbols share the same ethical core: the preservation of purity within a defiled world. Here, however, the swan takes on a deeper political connotation—as a being capable of flying across both a divided homeland (India and Pakistan) and a divided peninsula (North and South Korea). However politically opposed people may be, the very act of continuing to make vessels that accompany people's daily lives and bring them moisture and repose constitutes a powerful critique of division. The state that Singh attained in ceramics, by way of Japan and the Korean Peninsula, may be interpreted as a quiet but unshakable rebuttal of narrow nationalism. Birdwood read Indian craft as an extension of Aryan civilization, and Okakura read the art of Asia as the unity of an Asiatic civilization. But Singh, by kneading the clay with his own hands, turning the wheel, and carving the lotus, placed the vessel in a site beyond the magnetic field of civilizational discourse. It may be called a "border-crossing vessel" that contains every civilizational framework while fitting wholly within none.

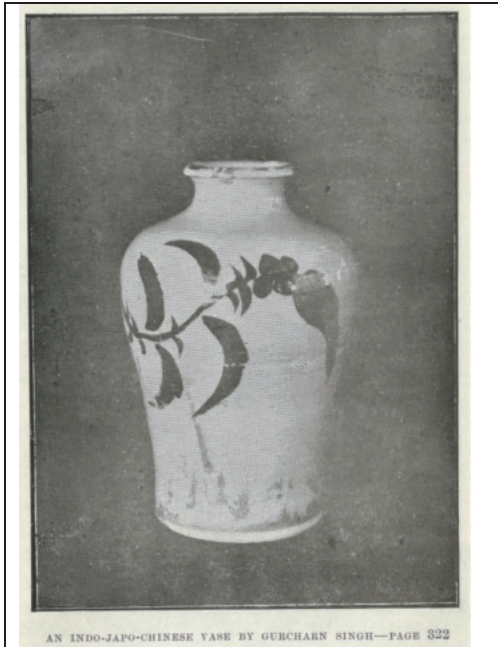


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Principal Sources and References

- Birdwood, G. C. M. (1880). *The Industrial Arts of India*. Chapman and Hall.
- Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1913). *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*. T. N. Foulis.
- Cousins, J. H. (1923). *New Japan: Impressions and Reflections*. Ganesh & Co.
- Havell, E. B. (1911). *The Ideals of Indian Art*. John Murray.
- “Indojin Shingu-shi no seisaku tōki” [Ceramics Made by Mr. Singh, an Indian]. (1922, February). *Kokka*, no. 381.
- Letters to Bernard Leach (Crafts Study Centre collection).
- Mitter, P. (1994). *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Okakura, K. (1903). *The Ideals of the East, with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. John Murray.
- Okakura, K. (1906). *The Book of Tea, with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. Putman's sons.
- Pottery and the legacy of Sardar Gurcharan Singh* (1998). Delhi Blue Pottery Trust. Records and documents relating to Asakawa Takumi and Asakawa Noritaka (Delhi Blue Pottery Trust collection).
- Sekai tōji zenshū* [Catalogue of World Ceramics], Vol. 16, Contemporary volume. (1958). Kawade Shobō.
- Singh, G. (1979). *Pottery in India*. Vikas Publishing House.
- The Lotus and the Swan* [Documentary film]. (2023).
- Tomimoto Kenkichi no e-tegami* [The Illustrated Letters of Tomimoto Kenkichi]. (2007). Nigensha.
- Yanagi, S. (1919). “Chōsenjin o omou” [Thinking of the Koreans]. In *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* [Collected Works of Yanagi Sōetsu], Vol. 6.
- Yanagi, S. (1920). “Kare no Chōsen-yuki” [His Journey to Korea]. In *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* [Collected Works of Yanagi Sōetsu], Vol. 6.
- Yanagi, S. (1923). “Chōsen ni okeru kyōiku ni tsuite” [On Education in Korea]. In *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* [Collected Works of Yanagi Sōetsu], Vol. 6.
- Yanagi, S. Correspondence between Yanagi Sōetsu and Bernard Leach. In *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* [Collected Works of Yanagi Sōetsu], Vol. 21, Part 1.

“Japan in Thailand”: Japanese-Themed Establishments and the Tourist Image of Japan among Thai People

HORSIRIMANONT, Issara

Abstract: This study investigates how Thai people imagine Japan as a tourist destination through the lens of six Japanese-themed establishments in Thailand (JTET), combined with questionnaires and interviews with visitors and creators. Frequently recurring motifs include Japanese garden elements (bamboo, rock lanterns, stepping stones, and water features), red lanterns, torii gates, and such iconic symbols such as cherry blossoms, red maple leaves, Mount Fuji, the good fortune cat, ema votive plaques, daruma dolls, and sunshine dolls. The survey responses of 105 participants show that these establishments are viewed as offering a limited but meaningful substitute for actual travel to Japan, with those who have never visited Japan assigning slightly higher scores. The findings demonstrate that the Thai image of Japan is not a simple reflection of Japanese self-presentation but is actively coproduced by Thai consumers, entrepreneurs, and religious institutions. Japanese-themed establishments operate simultaneously as commercial entertainment venues and informal learning spaces, generating localized meanings of Japanese symbols that are embedded within Thai cultural and religious contexts.

1. Introduction

This study explores how Thai people conceptualize Japan as a tourist destination by examining Japanese-themed establishments in Thailand (JTET). The central research question is: *What is the image of Japan as a tourist attraction through the lens of the Thai people?*

Japanese-themed spaces have gained increasing popularity in Thailand since the early 2010s, particularly community malls and cultural parks. These spaces are closely linked to the Thai boom in Japanese food and a broader Japanization in Thai consumer culture. Concurrently, Japanese tourism authorities and government institutions have systematically promoted the image of Japan abroad, including in Thailand.

By combining a historical overview, literature review, thematic framework, and empirical analysis of sites and visitor perceptions, this paper demonstrates how Japan-themed spaces in Thailand reflect and reshape Thai images of Japan.

2. Background: Japanese-Themed Establishments in Thailand

In this study, “Japanese-themed establishments” are defined as cultural parks centered on Japanese culture or establishments that feature a Japanese-themed park as a major component. Previous research on Thai theme parks notes that many are modeled after well-known international cities, particularly European ones. Commonly serving as shopping and dining complexes, zoos, and venues for shows, they are situated near major domestic tourist destinations such as Khao Yai, Hua Hin, Cha-am, and Pattaya. In Bangkok, community malls evoke a foreign

atmosphere that evokes the experience of “traveling abroad while remaining in Thailand” (Chiratiwatawat, 2017).

While European-themed parks dominate this landscape, Japanese-themed cultural spaces have emerged since the early 2010s, coinciding with a marked expansion of Japanese food culture in Thailand (Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2013). Community malls like J-Park (built in 2015) and The Paseo Park (built in 2014) exemplify this trend. Notably, The Paseo Park followed The Paseo Town, a European-themed mall built by the same franchise, indicating an extension of the cultural park model to Japanese theming.

Japanese-themed establishments show a distinctive pattern from other foreign-themed parks. Whereas Venice-themed spaces, for example, are largely controlled by a single operator (“Siam Venezia” in Hua Hin and Cha-am), several companies have entered the Japanese-themed market and new competitors continue to appear, such as Hinoki Land (built in 2018).

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Harajuku Thailand (built in 2022) was established, and Japanese-style features began to be incorporated into hotels, cafés, and, notably, Thai temples. Social media trends during and after the pandemic amplified the visibility of these sites, presenting J-Park, Hinoki Land, Harajuku Thailand, and others as spaces that resemble Japan or symbolically function as “Japan in Thailand.”

3. Literature Review

Research on the image of Japan in Thailand remains limited in both quantity and thematic scope, and has tended to focus on Japonisme in literature and film (Hiramatsu, 2021). Tanshinmankon (2023) examines the historical transformation of Japan’s image in Thailand from wartime anti-Japanese sentiment to widespread acceptance and Japanization in the 1990s. The present study examines a more recent period and approaches the topic from the perspective of tourism and themed spaces.

The most representative materials on the image of Japan as a travel destination for Thai people are produced by the JNTO. For a preliminary investigation, this study consulted the *Visitor Travel Market Marketing Manual* series (*Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō’nichi ryo’kōsha yūchi no tame no handobukku*) and its successor, the *JNTO Handbook for Promoting Tourism to Japan* (*JNTO Hō’nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku*), published since the 2000s.

3.1 JNTO Findings on Japan as a Travel Destination

JNTO first highlighted sakura (cherry blossoms) as an iconic attraction in the 2003 edition. By 2004, it noted that Thai people were more interested in sakura than the Japanese might expect, and the 2005/2006 edition records strong interest in viewing, rather than climbing, Mount Fuji. Thus, in the 2000s, Thai tourists’ image of Japan was largely limited to sakura and Mount Fuji.

In the 2010s, the range of attractions expanded. The Hokkaido snow festival and lavender fields triggered a “Hokkaido boom” in 2011, and autumn foliage became prominent in 2013, while hot springs began to gain popularity among Thai tourists from 2016.

During the 2000s, Japan's image as a travel destination remained relatively narrow, centered on natural icons such as sakura and Mount Fuji and technological symbols like the Shinkansen (2005/2006) and Tokyo (2013). By contrast, the 2010s saw the diversification of representative travel experiences to include Japanese cuisine, shopping in Tokyo and Osaka, and theme parks.

3.2 Popular Tourist Destinations

Starting with the 2007/2008 edition, JNTO reports the rankings of popular destinations among Thai visitors. Tokyo, Osaka, Hokkaido, Mount Fuji, Kyoto, and the Chubu region appear consistently, although their relative positions vary.

Hokkaido's rise is particularly striking, from 5th place in 2007/2008 to 2nd in 2011, and 1st from 2016 onward. Tokyo remained highly ranked in all years but fell to 2nd place after Hokkaido overtook it, while Osaka gradually declined from 2nd to 5th by 2019. Mount Fuji has remained in the upper ranks throughout, and Kyoto also stayed consistently within the top five. This suggests that Thai images of Japan as a travel destination combine nature, technological modernity, and iconic urban centers and that these images have diversified over time.

4. Theoretical Framework

JTET are treated in this study as a form of cultural park. Following the theoretical framework presented in *Theming: Modes of Representation in Theme Parks* (Anton et al., 2023), theme parks are defined not simply by possessing rides or entertainment facilities but by the consistent application of a coherent theme.

Japanese-themed establishments capitalize upon the appeal of a distant culture whose attractiveness derives from its perceived difference, novelty, and distinctiveness. This exoticism is grounded in the "geological imagination": the cultural representation of faraway places through simplified, homogeneous images of cities, countries, or entire regions.

Because most JTET are operated by private enterprises, their theming must rely upon easily recognizable symbols. Their commercial success depends on evoking immediate associations with Japan. Failure to establish a clear thematic link risks diminishing visitor enjoyment and disrupting an immersive experience.

To achieve recognizability, these spaces simplify and stylize "Japan" through familiar visual references, sounds, colors, and other cues that draw upon stereotypes and widely shared expectations of Japanese culture—what can be termed the Thai audience's "horizon of expectations."

In this way, Japanese-themed establishments adopt and strengthen existing notions of Japan. By carefully curating recognizable images and symbols, they reflect and reinforce the preconceived expectations that Thai tourists hold of Japan as a destination. Studying these spaces to identify which cultural symbols are repeatedly selected, how they resonate with visitor expectations, and the extent to which they are perceived as authentic thus offers researchers insight into the "Thai tourist gaze": the values, interests, and aspirations that shape the Thai imaginaries of Japan.

5. Methodology

Based on the above framework, this study analyzes Japanese-themed establishments as a lens to observe the Thai people's image of Japan. Two main methods were employed: (1) the analysis of objects and spaces within selected establishments, and (2) the elicitation of visitor and creator perspectives through questionnaires.

5.1 Site Selection and Observation

On-site investigations were conducted at six JTET:

1. J-Park
2. Hinoki Land
3. Harajuku Thailand
4. Wat Khao Din
5. Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan
6. Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa

The first three sites represent different types of Japanese-themed parks: a commercial community mall (J-Park), a pre-COVID cultural park (Hinoki Land), and a post-COVID cultural park (Harajuku Thailand). The three temples were selected because they feature Japanese motifs integrated into Thai Buddhist spaces, a trend that gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. The observations focused on the objects, spatial arrangements, and experiences that the creators themselves regarded as typically or recognizably Japanese.

5.2 Questionnaires and Interviews

Questionnaires were administered in person at the six sites and online via social media. Respondents accessed the questionnaires through Google Forms, primarily via URLs and QR codes. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended questions regarding visitors' perceptions of Japanese culture, their impressions during and after their visits, and their previous experiences with Japan, including whether they had ever traveled there.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with designers and entrepreneurs responsible for the six establishments to explore their motivations, design philosophies, and business strategies, particularly regarding the selection and arrangement of Japanese motifs.

6. Results

6.1 Observation Results

The analysis focuses on elements that appeared in more than half of the investigated establishments. Frequently observed features included:

Table 1: Observation Results

	J-Park	Hinoki Land	Harajuku Thailand	Wat Khao Din	Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan	Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa
Red Lanterns	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tori'i	○	○	○	○	○	○
Bamboo	○	○	○	○	○	○

Rock Lanterns	○	○	○	×	○	○
Sakura	○	○	○	○	×	○
Stepping Stones	○	○	○	○	×	○
Daruma Dolls	○	○	○	○	×	×
Good Fortune Cats (Maneki Neko)	×	○	○	○	×	○
Wall Paintings of Tourist Attractions	○	○	○	○	×	×
Red Maple Leaves (Momiji)	○	○	○	○	×	×
Mt. Fuji	○	○	○	○	×	×
Bamboo Fences	×	×	○	○	○	○
Waterscapes	○	○	○	○	×	×
Rock Groups	○	×	×	○	○	○
Ema Votive Plaques	○	×	○	○	○	×
Sunshine Dolls (Teru Teru Bōzu)	○	×	○	○	○	×

6.1.1 Japanese Garden Elements

These findings complement JNTO data by highlighting additional symbols that are not strongly emphasized in JNTO publications, particularly ones drawn from Japanese landscape gardens. Rock lanterns and stepping stones appeared in five locations, while rock arrangements, water features, and bamboo fences appeared in four.

Some sites (Wat Khao Din, Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, and J-Park) featured dedicated garden zones combining these elements with sakura, momiji, bamboo, statues, and red-arched bridges. Others, such as Hinoki Land and Harajuku Thailand, integrated garden motifs throughout their sites to create a pervasive atmosphere.

Bamboo was present at all six locations and used in two main ways. In Hinoki Land and Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, bamboo forests modeled after Arashiyama were created, while in the others, bamboo appeared as decorative elements, for example alongside bridges in Harajuku Thailand.

6.1.2 Red Lanterns and Tori'i Gates

Red lanterns and red tori'i gates emerged as signature motifs across all establishments, despite not being highlighted in JNTO analyses. Interviews with the creators confirmed that they consciously prioritize tori'i and red lanterns when designing Japanese-themed spaces.

Lanterns appeared in multiple styles, often combining long-shaped (*nagagata*) and round-shaped (*marugata*) forms. Some were illuminated, while others were not. Regardless of budget, lanterns were consistently selected as decorations, though budgetary factors influenced whether secondhand lanterns (Wat Khao Din) or customized ones (J-Park) were used. Their designs included sakura motifs, the name of the establishment, and inscriptions like "Izakaya," particularly when lanterns were purchased secondhand. At J-Park, a giant red lantern modeled on the Asakusa lantern served as a striking landmark.

Tori'i gates were commonly modeled after the thousand gates at Fushimi Inari Shrine. At Hinoki Land, Wat Khao Din, and Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, sequences of tori'i led to major landmarks, such as a Kinkakuji replica, the main temple structures, or Guan Yin statues. At J-Park and Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, tori'i primarily served as visual attractions, inviting visitors to walk under multiple gates. At Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, the tori'i motif was also incorporated into the signage, reinforcing its association with Japanese culture.

Red lanterns, tori'i gates, and red fences together produced a consistent red theme that contributed strongly to the perception of a "Japanese" atmosphere.

6.1.3 Ema

Ema boards appeared in four sites, with considerable variation in design and function. At Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, the ema featured the image of a Great Buddha rather than traditional motifs like horses or zodiac signs. Some establishments allowed visitors to purchase ema and write wishes in Thai and other languages (e.g., Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, J-Park). Others, such as Harajuku Thailand, used ema purely as decorative elements with prewritten messages and no writing facilities. Thus, ema functioned both as interactive cultural artifacts and static decorative motifs.

6.1.4 Maneki Neko

White Maneki Neko statues were found at four locations, and images also appeared on flags at Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan. In some places, notably Hinoki Land, Wat Khao Din (also known as "Maneki Neko Land"), and Harajuku Thailand, large Maneki Neko statues served as major landmarks distinct from other attractions like Kinkakuji replicas or shrine areas. At Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, large Maneki Neko statues were placed within the Japanese garden area, though not as the main landmark.

The frequent use of white Maneki Neko suggests that they have become powerful cultural icons of "Japan" in Thailand, comparable to landmark tourist attractions. Two factors appear to underlie their prominence: the influence of Hinoki Land, which inspired subsequent sites, including Wat Khao Din, and the long-standing

familiarity of Maneki Neko in Thai restaurants and shops as symbols of good fortune and prosperity.

6.1.5 Daruma and Teru Teru Bōzu

Daruma figures were found in four facilities, differing in size, color, and function. At Wat Khao Din, a large red daruma with the inscription 良衆 and only its left eye filled is surrounded by smaller daruma in various colors. Teru teru bōzu are widely used as hanging decorations in Harajuku Thailand and J-Park, contributing to the visual atmosphere. At Wat Khao Din, some teru teru bōzu serve a functional role as objects on which visitors can write wishes. In sum, the observations confirm JNTO's emphasis on symbols such as Mount Fuji, sakura, and famous destinations, while also revealing additional motifs, especially garden elements, red lanterns, and torii, that strongly evoke Japaneseness for Thai audiences.

6.2 Survey Results

A total of 156 questionnaire responses were collected. When asked whether they knew of or had visited Japanese-styled establishments in Thailand, 63 respondents (38.9%) reported that they knew of or had visited such places, 57 (35.2%) reported neither knowing of nor visiting them, and 42 (25.9%) knew of them but had never visited. Those who answered "I know or have visited an establishment" or "I know but have never visited" proceeded to the main questionnaire, yielding 105 complete responses (64.8%).

Respondents ranged from primary school children to people over 60 years old: 1% were primary school students, 35.2% were secondary school students, 21% were university students, 15.2% were under 40 years old (non-students), 21.9% between 40 and 60, and 5.7% were over 60.

Regarding familiarity with Japan, 48 respondents (45.7%) had visited Japan, whereas 57 (54.3%) had never been. This relatively even division allows comparison between those with and without first-hand experience.

6.2.1 Substitutability of Japanese-Themed Establishments

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) how much visiting Japanese-themed attractions in Thailand could replace going to Japan. The overall average score was 5.16, with 5 the most frequent response. The distribution indicates diverse opinions on authenticity and cultural satisfaction.

Visitors Who Have Been to Japan

The average of the scores given by the 48 respondents who had visited Japan was 4.61, and the most frequent rating was 5 (24%). Scores of 3 (18%) and 2 (16%) were also common, suggesting a tendency toward lower substitutability. Higher scores like 7 (13%) and 8 (7%) were present but less frequent. Extremely low (1, 2%) and extremely high (10, 4%) scores were rare.

The reasons given for lower ratings included cultural differences (32%), differences in weather and climate (24%), and differences in scale (18%). More detailed comments noted that Thailand is much hotter than Japan, that Japanese-themed establishments are cheaper but cannot fully replace actual travel, that the

services and hospitality are perceived as inferior to Japanese standards, and that the experience feels inauthentic. Some respondents added that such establishments may be suitable substitutes for those who cannot travel to Japan or that they can temporarily ease the desire to visit Japan but cannot replicate the country's uniqueness.

Visitors Who Have Not Been to Japan

Among respondents who had never visited Japan, the average score was 5.27, with 5 being the most frequent rating (27%), followed by 4 (18%) and 7 (15%). Lower scores such as 3 (4%) and 2 (5%) were relatively rare, whereas higher scores such as 8 (11%) and 10 (5%) appeared more often than among those who had visited Japan. Extremely low (1, 2%) and extremely high (10, 5%) scores remained relatively uncommon.

The reasons given for their evaluations included: "people who have never been to Japan can experience Japan" (26.2%), weather and climate differences (13.9%), and cultural differences (15.4%). Additional comments emphasized variety and enjoyment, affordability for those with limited budgets, the distinctive pleasures of imitation, and the opportunities that these spaces afford Thai people to learn about Japan.

6.2.2 Interpretation

Criticism of the visual quality of the establishments was not particularly frequent. Respondents who evaluated the spaces positively often regarded them as convenient ways to experience "Japan," and some felt that they offered opportunities to learn about Japanese culture.

However, many comments highlighted aspects of Japan that were considered unique and difficult to replicate, notably Japanese service/hospitality and the weather and climate in Japan. For those who had visited Japan, Japanese-themed establishments tended to function as nostalgic reminders rather than full substitutes, while for those who had never visited Japan, they offered enjoyable and meaningful opportunities to encounter "Japan" within Thailand.

7. Discussion

The discussion is organized into three themes: (1) the image of Japan and its cultural signifiers, (2) how this image is produced, and (3) how it is received.

7.1 Cultural Signifiers and the Image of Japan

The results align with JNTO data regarding key cultural signifiers such as sakura, Mount Fuji, trains, and other iconic images. However, the JNTO documents mainly discuss symbols located within Japan itself. This study shows that in Thailand, certain Japanese motifs have acquired new meanings through local use.

Tori'i, for example, are not restricted to religious contexts but serve as gates to an "exotic" world, often marking landmarks or central attractions. The Maneki Neko has likewise undergone a transformation into oversized landmarks and central visual icons. Thus, while the basic repertoire of Japanese symbols overlaps with

those used in Japanese tourism promotion, their functions and meanings in Thailand have been partially reconfigured.

7.2 Production: The Role of Creators and Marketing

The image of Japan in Thailand is shaped not only by Japanese institutions but also by Thai consumers and producers. Entrepreneurs and temple authorities play a central role in selecting and arranging Japanese motifs, with marketing a key driving force. The need to attract visitors and sell products encourages the curation of a limited yet visually strong set of cultural elements that then inform how Japanese culture is perceived.

This process is consistent with broader trends of Japanization in the food and retail industries in Thailand, where selective aspects of Japanese culture are repeatedly highlighted and commodified.

7.3 Reception: Learning, Aspiration, and Religion

Regarding reception, two points are particularly important.

First, many respondents who have never been to Japan view Japanese-themed establishments as affording opportunities to learn about the country, even though these spaces are primarily designed for entertainment. This blurring of entertainment and education helps explain why the image of Japan in Thailand may differ from that in Japan's intended self-presentation, including the JNTO and Cool Japan initiatives.

Second, there is a strong desire among Thai people to connect with Japan, including through religious symbols. Although Thai Buddhist temples are traditionally regarded as sacred spaces not to be freely altered, Japanese religious motifs like the Maneki Neko and Shinto-inspired imagery are readily incorporated into temple grounds.

This relative openness is plausibly enabled by a widely shared interpretive frame that emphasizes cultural proximity through Buddhism, which lowers the perceived boundary between "Thai" and "non-Thai" religious elements. Luo's (2016) interviews regarding Guanyin worship in Thailand illustrate this inclusive orientation: Respondents described reverence for diverse Buddhas and deities (including those associated with Indian and Chinese traditions) and stress that merit-making is comparable across Chinese and Thai temples, implying that perceived contradictions with Thai Theravāda practice are limited. Within this logic of compatibility, Japanese-origin objects can be domesticated rather than merely displayed. In some cases, Japanese Buddhist figures are physically modified to better align with Thai aesthetic and devotional conventions. For example, a supervising monk at Wat Phrathat Doi Prachan reportedly altered the features of the Great Buddha statue, such as hair curls and hand gestures, to more closely approximate Thai Buddha-image styles. The Maneki Neko provides a parallel case at the level of everyday religiosity and commercial practice. While it functions in Japan as a conventional emblem of good fortune, it has been readily adopted in Thailand, where small statues are commonly placed in shops and restaurants and are

often interpreted as functionally equivalent to Nang Kwak, a Thai talisman associated with attracting customers and prosperity.

Conclusion

This study examined how Thai people imagine Japan as a tourist destination through the analysis of JTET. By combining site observations, questionnaires, and interviews, we have shown that the image of Japan is constructed through a recurring set of visual and spatial motifs (garden elements, red lanterns, tori'i, Maneki Neko, ema, daruma, and others) that are selected, adapted, and sometimes enlarged or recontextualized.

While these motifs overlap with the tourism image of Japan promoted by JNTO, especially in relation to nature and iconic landmarks, their meanings in Thailand have been shaped by commercial strategies, local religious practices, and the expectations of Thai consumers. Japanese-themed establishments operate simultaneously as entertainment venues and informal sites of cultural learning, especially for those who have never visited Japan.

Overall, the findings suggest that the image of Japan in Thailand is coproduced by Japanese and Thai actors and has diverged somewhat from Japan's self-representation, even as it remains anchored in a shared repertoire of recognizable symbols. Future research could examine how these localized images of Japan influence actual travel decisions and how they have evolved alongside changes in Thai consumer culture and Japanese tourism promotion.

References

- Arizzoli, L., Horowitz, M. C., (2020). *Bodies and Maps: Early Modern Personifications of the Continents*. Brill.
- Anton Clavé, S., Carlà-Uhink, F., Freitag, F. (2023). Theming: Modes of Representation in Theme Parks and Themed Environments. *Key Concepts in Theme Park Studies*. Springer, Cham.
- Chiratiwatawat K. จิรทิราวัช ญ. (2017). Theme Park in Thailand: Development and Key Success Factors. *Journal of Liberal Arts*, Ubon Ratchathani University, 13(2), 269–305. retrieved from https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/jla_ubu/article/view/242580.
- Ederuman Dēta & Interijensu-sha エデルマン・データ&インテリジェンス社. (2020). *Rēwa gannen-do kaigai ta'nichi yoron chōsa* 令和元年度海外対日世論調査. Gaimushō 外務省. Retrieved December 1, 2024, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4_008370.html.
- Hiramatsu Hideki 平松秀樹. (2021). Tai ni okeru Nihon bungaku bunka oyobi poppu karuchā juyō no genjō to kenkyū: “Mikado” “Chōchō fujin” kara ‘Buraisu’ ningyō made タイにおける日本文学・文化及びポップカルチャー受容の現状と研究: 「ミカド」「蝶々夫人」から「ブライス」人形まで. *Ritsumeikan gengo bunka kenkyū* 立命館言語文化研究, 21(3), 17–28.

- Ipusosu-sha イプソス社. (2022). *Rēwa 3 nendo kaigai tai'nichi yoron chōsa* 令和3年度海外対日世論調査. Gaimushō 外務省. Retrieved December 1, 2024, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press6_001135.html.
- Ipusosu-sha イプソス社. (2024). *Rēwa 5 nendo kaigai tai'nichi yoron chōsa* 令和5年度海外対日世論調査. Gaimushō 外務省. Retrieved December 1, 2024, from https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/culture/pr/pagew_000001_00422.html.
- Kokusai kankō shinkōkai Sōmubu Kikaku Chōsa-ka 国際観光振興会総務部企画調査課. (1997). *Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō'nichi ryo'kōsha yūchi no tame no dēta-shū: Sekai 24-kakoku chiiki: Hō'nichi ryokō māketto 1997–1998* マーケティング・マニュアル: 訪日旅客者誘致のためのデータ集: 世界24カ国・地域・訪日旅行マーケット 1997-1998. Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Kokusai kankō shinkōkai Sōmubu Kikaku Chōsa-ka 国際観光振興会総務部企画調査課. (1999). *Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō'nichi ryo'kōsha yūchi no tame no handobukku: Sekai 20-kakoku chiiki Hō'nichi ryokō māketto 1999–2000* マーケティング・マニュアル: 訪日旅行者誘致のためのハンドブック: 世界20カ国・地域訪日旅行マーケット 1999-2000. Kokusai kankō shinkōkai 国際観光振興会.
- Kokusai kankō shinkōkai Sōmubu Kikaku Chōsa-ka 国際観光振興会総務部企画調査課. (2003). *Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō'nichi ryo'kōsha yūchi no tame no handobukku: Sekai 12-kakoku chiiki Hō'nichi ryokō māketto 2003* マーケティング・マニュアル: 訪日旅行者誘致のためのハンドブック: 世界12カ国・地域訪日旅行マーケット 2003. Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Kokusai kankō shinkō kikō (JNTO) Jigyō Kaihatsu-bu 国際観光振興機構 (JNTO) 事業開発部. (2004). *Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō'nichi ryo'kōsha yūchi no tame no handobukku: Sekai 12-kakoku chiiki Hō'nichi ryokō māketto 2004* マーケティング・マニュアル: 訪日旅行者誘致のためのハンドブック: 世界12カ国・地域訪日旅行マーケット 2004. Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Kokusai kankō shinkō kikō Jigyō Kaihatsu-bu 国際観光振興機構事業開発部. (2006). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku: 2005–2006-nenban (sōgōhen: kakukokuhen)* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2005-2006年版(総合編・各国編). Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Kokusai kankō shinkō kikō Kikaku-bu 国際観光振興機構企画部. (2008). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku 2007–2008-nenban (sōgōhen)* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2007-2008年版(総合編). Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Luo, Y. (2016). *Guanyin worship among Thai-Chinese: Merit making and salvation*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2789369

- Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku Kikaku-bu 日本政府観光局企画部. (2011). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku 2011: Shuyō 12-shijōhen* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2011 主要 12 市場編. Kokusai kankō sābisu sentā 国際観光サービスセンター.
- Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku Kaigai Mākettingu-bu 日本政府観光局海外マーケティング部. (2013). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku 2013: Ajia 6-shijōhen* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2013 アジア 6 市場編. Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku 日本政府観光局.
- Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku 日本政府観光局. (2016). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku 2016: Ajia 6-shijōhen* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2016 アジア 6 市場編. Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku 日本政府観光局.
- Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku 日本政府観光局. (2019). *JNTO Hō'nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku 2019-nen: Ajia 6-shijōhen* JNTO 訪日旅行誘致ハンドブック 2019 年 アジア 6 市場編. Nihon sēfu kankōkyoku 日本政府観光局.
- Tanshinmankon Pattajitto タンシンマンコン・パッタジット. (2023). Hannichi undō kara japanai zēshon e: 1970–1990 nendai no Tai ni okeru ta'nichi ninshiki tenkan no saikentō 反日運動からジャパナイゼーションへ: 1970～1990 年代のタイにおける対日認識転換の再検討. *Tōnan Ajia kenkyū* 東南アジア研究, 61(1), 3–34.

Sacred Flames Across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Fire Festivals in India and Japan

KAUR, Manmeet, Ph.D.

Abstract: The current research is a cultural anthropological study of community fire festivals celebrated in India and Japan that highlights fire as a symbolic medium of renewal, protection, and communal solidarity in both cultures. It primarily focuses on fire festivals in India and Japan, such as the *Hālḍā Utsava* or the Hālḍā Festival observed in the villages of Lahaul and Spiti region in Himachal Pradesh, India and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* (鞍馬の火まつり) or the Kurama Fire Festival observed in Kurama village, Kyoto, Japan. These festivals mark a significant shift in the season, where community members march together holding fire torches at night as these torches are believed to avert the presence of malevolent forces. Both *Hālḍā Utsava* and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* are associated with Buddhism, yet they are characterised by the distinct cultural and religious frameworks in India and Japan. This paper is a qualitative, comparative study based on a cross-cultural approach that uses textual-visual analysis and oral history as its primary methods of research. Also, while both festivals exhibit fire as a symbol of transition, safeguard and cohesion, the methodology allows comparing these geographically distinct traditions and accentuates the shared human reliance on elemental symbolism, i.e., how distinct communities revere fire in a similar way; however, it assigns an indigenous cultural meaning to it. The analysis also suggests that cross-cultural understanding of ritual traditions between cultures is a rich material for intercultural research and collaboration that fosters joint learning between societies.

Introduction

“The world ... was, is, and shall be ever-living fire.”

Heraclitus, Fragment 30, in *The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature*, trans. G. T. W. Patrick (1889)

Fire has long captured the human imagination and is not seen as a trivial, inert element of nature but a thriving, living force that has shaped human life since time immemorial. While fire is a dynamic process that does not belong to a single state of matter, it transforms whatever it touches. As also reiterated in the famous lines,

“The power of *Fire*, or *Flame*, for instance, which we designate by some trivial chemical name, thereby hiding from ourselves the essential character of wonder that dwells in it as in all things” (Carlyle, 1872)

It can be understood that reducing fire to scientific terminology hinders its primal, powerful, and mysterious nature that people in older cultures felt. Visible to the naked eye, it is both intangible and dangerous, but also life-giving at the same time. This duality makes it an appropriate natural metaphor for change, renewal and purification that has been recognised by ancient civilisations across cultures that consider it a sacred element of nature. However, it was not until the last two million years that the genus *Homo* could learn the prowess of igniting and preserving fires.

As a result, fire has deep symbolic meanings attached to it across cultures and civilisations that have witnessed it warming, protecting, purifying, and even transforming or destroying their surroundings.

Cross-cultural studies have highlighted the ritual use of fire in purification, protection and social regeneration because across cultures, fire has functioned as a medium to achieve these goals to avert the fear of pollution, vulnerability and social decay (Eliade, 1958; Turner 1969; Van Gennep, 1960/2019). It includes practices such as walking on burning coals, sacrificial burning, ritual flaming of old ritual objects, apart from torch procession and smoke cleansing, which form the focal point of the current paper. Fire in these rituals turns into a force that restores balance by marking boundaries that demarcate sacred time and space from the profane and mundane life. Ethnographic studies also mention that the intense collective nature of fire festivals observes a coordinated participation, processions and embodied engagement with heat, light and risk that gives birth to social cohesion and shared emotional intensity (Yanagita, 1989; Turner, 1969). Most Asian scholarship on fire rituals emphasises that although fire rituals display broadly comparable symbolic logics across cultures, their social organisation, spatial choreography, and ritual intensity vary according to various factors, including local demographic composition, ecological constraints, and economic organisation. As a result, the existing discourse on fire festivals suggests that they share several defining characteristics. They are symbolic of an array of meanings that range from ritual purification and protection to boundary-making between sacred and ordinary domains, as well as collective embodiment and sensory intensity. Moreover, the symbolic plurality of these festivals is rooted in religious syncretism as well as strong association with the ecology and season of the regions where they are celebrated (Fang, 2026; Arumugam, 2025; Yanagita, 1989).

In Iran and Central Asia, Chaharshanbe Suri, also known as the Persian New Year, involves jumping over bonfires as a seasonal rite of renewal. Also, European traditions include Beltane fire festivals in Celtic regions and Bonfire Night in Britain, which observes communal fires. These traditions also mark calendrical transitions. Moreover, in Greece, the fire-walking ritual of Anastenaria that is observed even today survives as a remnant of older ecstatic practices. In ancient Athens, torch races known as Lampadedromia were a form of sacred fire rituals in ancient times.

India and Japan are no exceptions to such cultures that have recognised the versatility of fire and hence, revere it in both ritual and belief. Fire is deeply embedded in the cosmology of these two traditions, which also finds expression in their communal festivals. The primary objective of the current paper is to explore the fire festivals of India and Japan and highlight how fire acts as a shared symbolic medium of renewal, protection, and communal solidarity in these celebrations. It also attempts to understand cultural distinctiveness within this shared symbolism. The study is significant to understand how communities express universal human concerns such as safety, purity, and continuity in their respective unique ways. Moreover, the study also contributes to intercultural understanding that serves as a thread that connects various disciplines such as anthropology, religious studies, and

comparative research. Consequently, the study promotes a global collaborative understanding through its cross-cultural study of rituals. The scope of the current paper primarily focuses on the *Hālḍā Utsava* or Hālḍā Fire Festival in India and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* (鞍馬の火祭り) or the Kurama Fire Festival in Japan, while briefly referring to similar regional practices of fire rituals, including local fire festivals in India and Japan. Therefore, the study adopts a comparative, cross-cultural approach to study fire rituals in India and Japan and uses the following research methods:

- A) Textual-visual analysis: studying images, rituals, and local narratives in books, newspapers, articles and journals.
- B) Oral history: collecting local interpretations, folk stories, and community memories through published interviews and research materials.

The theoretical framework is based on symbolic anthropology as suggested by Clifford Geertz, which becomes central to interpreting *how fire functions symbolically* in each of these respective traditions. In other words, the study applies a cross-cultural comparative framework inspired by symbolic anthropology that views *rituals as cultural texts* (Schneider, 1993). In an attempt to do so, the festivals in focus are interpreted first within their own socio-religious background. This is followed by a comparative analysis to identify shared symbolic meanings and cultural functions.

1. Fire Symbolism in India

Fire has held a great significance in Indian culture. Since the Vedic times, it has been revered as a sacred element of nature and deified as *Agni Deva* where *Agni* is the Sanskrit word for fire, and *Deva* is the term used to denote divine beings. In the Vedas, particularly the *R̥gveda*, *Agni* is referred to as *Purohita* or the high priest who acts as a “sacerdotal” messenger between the Vedic gods and men that made its presence inevitable during a *Yajña*, a Vedic tradition of making *ritual offerings (into the fire) accompanied by chanting of Vedic mantras* for it was believed to carry the offerings made into it (the holy fire) to the heavenly gods (Skorupski, 2016). In other words, when people performed *Yajña*, offerings such as *ghī* (or clarified butter) and other grains into the fire were conveyed to the gods. As a result, fire or *Agni* is considered the bridge between heaven (where the gods reside) and earth (where the men reside).

Moreover, fire is said to be a purifying agent as it burns away impurities and transforms into smoke and light that is considered a higher and subtler state of being. For this reason, it plays a crucial role in the three major rites among others in Hinduism such as *Yajña*, *Vivāha* or marriage, which involves seven rounds around the fire and *Antyeṣṭi* or cremation, where the funeral pyre is lit. Therefore, it can be said that fire accompanies a person from the beginning to the end of life. Buddhism and the Buddhist path to *Nirvāṇa*, on the other hand, also emphasises fire as an inner metaphor for desire, craving, attachment, and ignorance since the term *Nirvāṇa* literally means “blowing out”. The word goes beyond the description of a physical flame to mean the cessation of inner defilements. The extinguishing of

these “fires” leads to liberation from suffering and eventually, the end of cyclic rebirth (Kuan, 2020). Together, both Hinduism and Buddhism accentuate the ideas of external, ritual flame as well as internal, spiritual fire that carries a deep symbolic meaning in its respective philosophies, where fire acts as a sacred medium of consecration and divine communion (as seen in Hindu rituals) and also as a metaphorical symbol for inner purification and spiritual liberation (as seen in Buddhist philosophy).

Fire festivals are observed throughout India from the northern tip of Kashmir to the southern end of Tamil Nadu. These festivals are marked by dramatic displays of fire torches besides ritual processions, symbolic offerings, and community participation. The festivals express themes of purification, protection, renewal, and the triumph of light (or good) over darkness (or evil) (Sen Gupta, 1984). Most of these festivals are celebrated at crucial stages of the year, such as harvesting season, or the beginning of a year as per regional calendars. Some of these festivals include *Holikā Dahana*, a bonfire kindled during the celebration of Holi and *Thootedara* or *Agni Keli* celebrated in Karnataka every year. *Holikā Dahana* includes a bonfire in the evening of the day before Holi, a festival that marks spring and the end of gloomy winters. The bonfire on this occasion is also symbolic of marking the end of malevolent forces as fire purifies the region. Similarly, *Thootedara* or *Agni Keli* is celebrated in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka in the month of April by devotees throwing burning palm fronds at each other that marks a period crucial for devotion towards the local deity.

2. *Hāḷḍā Utsava* or the *Hāḷḍā* Festival

Hāḷḍā Utsava is celebrated every year in the Gahar, Chandra, and Pattan valleys of Himachal Pradesh in India. The region lies in the northern Indian Himalayas at a high altitude and is bordered by the Chandra and Bhaga rivers that form the Chenab River downstream. It experiences extreme cold winters. Since the economy is largely agrarian and pastoral, the heavy winter every year offers a short period of growing seasons. The region has a sparse population with a few thousand people, including ethnic groups such as Bodh people, also known as Khas Bodhi, who follow Buddhism along with local tribal or animistic traditions, yet Hinduism is also prevalent.

Hāḷḍā or torches made of cedarwood are lit, and the cries of *Hāḷḍā Ho! Hāḷḍā Ho!* (or its *Hāḷḍā! Its Hāḷḍā!*) echoes the mountains. In many areas of Lahaul-Spiti, people practice both Hinduism and Buddhism so *Hāḷḍā* is rooted in the local Lamaistic culture (a form of Tibetan Buddhism that is a unique form of Mahayana Buddhism blended with Indian Buddhist traditions and the indigenous belief system) of the district. This tradition has been prevalent for centuries and is also reflected in the local culture and festivals. A Lama, an honorary title conferred to a spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism, determines the date of *Hāḷḍā Utsava* for each region based on the Buddhist calendar, and the festival is celebrated accordingly. The festival is celebrated based on an ancient belief that due to the extreme snow and cold in the mountains during this time, their folk deities have ascended to heaven, leaving their region unattended and taking advantage of their absence,

demons and negative spirits have taken control over their region. On this day, local deities are worshipped through various rituals that are typically carried out late at night (Manta, 2025). Also, since the festival is celebrated at the beginning of the year, it is also believed to be a way of welcoming the new year; however, some people equate the festival with another significant festival, *Dīpāvalī*. *Dīpāvalī* is usually celebrated sometime between October and November as per the Gregorian calendar. It commemorates a mythological episode mentioned in the Hindu epic, *Rāmāyaṇa* that marks the return of the Hindu deity, Lord Rāma, from Lanka after rescuing his wife Goddess Sītā. *Dīpāvalī* as a festival in India also marks the victory of Lord Rāma (the truth), defeating Rāvaṇa (the evil), king of Lanka, who had abducted Goddess Sītā. The people of Lahaul believe that the news about Lord Rāma's homecoming reached them late; therefore, they celebrate *Dīpāvalī* sometime between January and mid-February by lighting torches on this day.

While the *Hālḍā Utsava* is originally based on Buddhist beliefs and dedicated to *Shiskar Apa* who is the Goddess of Wealth as per the Lamaistic Pantheon, however, the rituals of the festival incorporate various elements from Hinduism. People dress in their traditional costumes and hats. All members of the community residing in the valley gather at a temple dedicated to their local deity to pray for their return to provide protection to the community. Moreover, in some villages such as Goshal village in Lahaul, a host family is decided in advance whose house becomes the meeting-place for the community on the day of the festival every year. Everyone gathers there for midnight rituals where they sing and dance on spiritual songs remembering Hindu deities such as Lord Rāma, Lord Śiva, Lord Kṛṣṇa, and Lord Gaṇeśa etc. The whole community comes together on this festival with full enthusiasm, often singing folk songs. Therefore, the festival promotes tribal culture and has kept the traditions of the community alive.

Each male member of the community possesses an unlit stick of *Hālḍā* that they carry along with them to the host family's house when they visit them. They leave them outside the house of the host family and after the singing and dancing at the host's family is over, they all come out and light their *Hālḍā(s)*. Then, they all start marching towards their local deity's temple, loudly shouting *Hālḍā Ho! Hālḍā Ho!* The purpose behind such loud noise is to drive away the evil spirits. In the Goshal village, it is said that in ancient times, a Buddhist Lama of the nearby temple who lived on the top of the mountain and could be seen from the village signalled the community to march with their *Hālḍā(s)*. Also, the smoke that emerges out of *Hālḍā(s)* are believed to restore warmth and purify the village, ousting all negativity. Once the community reaches the local temple, outside the temple, they all throw their *Hālḍā(s)* in one place at the centre, forming a bonfire. They again sing and dance around it for some time. Then, they enter the temple, pray to the local deity and finally take the remaining charred pieces of wood of *Hālḍā* back home as a talisman to protect their families from evil eye and inauspiciousness.

Fire Symbolism in Japan

Fire or *Hi* (火) in Japanese is a revered *kami* in Japan, a culture where dwellings were classically made up of wood and paper that could catch fire. As a result, fire

was viewed as a force that required appeasement from time to time. The *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* name the *kami* as *Kagutsuchi-no-kami*. Fire is one of the first eight gods born to Izanami and Izanagi, the *kami*-couple believed to have created the Japanese islands and, by extension, the entire archipelago. The fierce power of fire makes it both a constructive and destructive force in Japan. Consequently, fire carries deep symbolic meaning in the Japanese religious thoughts of both Shintoism and Buddhism.

In Shintoism, fire is believed to dispel *kegare* (穢れ) or impurities through *harai* (祓い) or ritual purification and further protect the community from any harm or misfortune they could bring. Later, fire symbolism was further strengthened with the advent of Buddhism in Japan, especially Esoteric Shingon practices, where fire was considered a force that “burns away” ignorance and karmic defilements (Nitta, 2016). Moreover, the symbolism reaches its most elaborate form in the *Goma* (護摩) ritual. The *Goma* ritual finds its roots in *Homa* rituals (as they are referred in Sanskrit) that are a form of fire ceremony with ancient Indian origins, which became central to practices like Japanese Shingon Buddhism. During a *Goma* ritual, wooden sticks that represent obstacles and impurities known as *gomagi* (護摩木) are kindled, and the sacred flames consume them, thus signifying the conquest of purity (Maku, 1974).

Most fire festivals in Japan exhibit an amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs where fire is seen as a cleansing, protective and transformative force. Some of these festivals include the annual *Shuni-e* (*Omizutori* or water-drawing) ritual at Todaiji temple in Nara that involves massive fire torches as a *rite of purification for people and repentance to Eleven-headed Kannon*, and the *Gozan no Okuribi* (五山送り火) Festival in Kyoto, an annual summer bonfire ritual where massive fires are lit on mountains to guide the ancestral spirits back to the other world after Obon, a festival that invites ancestral spirits to descend to earth and meet their loved ones. These fire festivals are rooted in the belief that fire purifies the entire community, wards off harmful spirits, and renews the spiritual environment, especially before important times such as before a new season or year begins.

***Kurama no Hi Matsuri* or Kurama Fire Festival**

Kurama no Hi Matsuri, or the Kurama Fire Festival, is the annual grand festival celebrated at the Yuki Shrine (由岐神社) located in the town of Kurama in Kyoto. The festival illuminates the mountain village of Kurama, which lies on the rural yet accessible slopes of Mount Kurama, which possesses a forest and mountainous geography. The socio-economic life of the people of the region revolves around forestry, mountain resources and local trade, along with seasonal tourism that peaks in October when the festival is celebrated. The festival is celebrated annually on 22nd October and is also popularly called *Kuramasai* (鞍馬祭) and rooted in Shinto tradition and local history. The original population of the village is small with a few hundred to couple thousand people living within the larger area as there are only a few permanent residents who are joined by people across Japan and abroad, especially during the festival to witness the fiery and sacred procession.

Kurama no Hi Matsuri is believed to have originated in the year 940 in the Heian Period. The festival features many fire torches or *Taimatsu* (松明) in the present time; however, in its most ancient form, two *Mikoshi* (神輿) or portable shrines, eight *Kenhoko* (剣鉾) or sword spears, and numerous *Taimatsu* were seen together during the festival. Today, only the *Taimatsu* is the highlight of the festival, unlike in the past when the *Mikoshi* and *Kenhoko* were the main attractions of the festival, and the *Taimatsu* were probably not as important. This origin and augmentation in significance of the *Taimatsu* is believed to have come from the incident that occurred on the night of September 9th in 940. It was the reign of Emperor Suzaku (朱雀天皇) when Yuki Daimyōjin (由岐大明神), who had been enshrined at the Imperial Palace until then, was enshrined at Kuramadera (鞍馬寺) or Kurama Temple. The villagers came together to welcome him with the local deity, Hachishō Myōjin (八所明神), in a *Mikoshi* carrying countless *Taimatsu*. The reason behind the two *Mikoshi*(s) being still carried out today is that the two deities, Hachishō Myōjin and Yuki Daimyōjin, are enshrined there.

As dusk approaches, the sound of clappers and the voices calling out *Shinji ni Mairasshare* (神事に参らっしゃれ), which means come and join the ritual, echoes throughout the town, and bonfires begin to light under the eaves of houses. These small bonfires are made up of wood along with few branches of *Matsu* and *Sakaki* which are soon lit. Children dressed in their best festival attire and carrying *Shōtaimatsu* (小松明) or small *Taimatsu* appear from all over the place, and parade through the town. Gradually, the young male volunteers known as *Wakamono* (若者) join in, and they parade down the Kurama Highway carrying about two hundred *Taimatsu* of varied sizes. As they do so, they continue to chant *Saireiya Sairyō!* (サイレイヤサイリョウ) which is both a boast of the quality of the Kurama Fire Festival and an invitation for the *kami* to come and join (Swinger, 2024). All gather at the stone steps of the Niomon gate of Kuramadera. Thereafter, a drumbeat signals the cutting of a *shimenawa* (しめ縄) rope that is already set up at the bottom of the stony steps. As soon as the *shimenawa* is cut, *Wakamono* rush towards the *Mikoshi* of Yuki Shrine.

At the Yuki Shrine, the divine spirits are transferred to the two *Mikoshi*(s), which are then carried to the temporary shrine. Both of these *Mikoshi*(s) are carried down the stone steps by the *Wakamono* in one go. They are paraded across the town, being pushed around by the crowd of people, eventually shaking them. At the end of these *Mikoshi* that are being violently shaken, two *Wakamono* who have just reached adulthood hang from a pole in an upside-down position, and both their legs are extended high. The act is symbolic of a coming-of-age ritual known as *Choppen no Gi* (チョッペンの儀) or simply *Choppen*. People with *Taimatsu* in their hands run back and forth, and the entire mountain seems to have transformed into a sea of fire. The festival continues till late at night.

Comparative Analysis of Fire Festivals of India and Japan: *Hālqā Utsava* and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri*

An analysis of the role of fire in the religious traditions of India and Japan provides deep insight into the rationale behind communities turning towards it during crucial stages of transition and renewal. Especially, when these are viewed in parallel, striking convergences in their meanings are revealed besides distinctive cultural expressions that stem from indigenous local history, belief systems and surroundings.

In the world of shared cultural values, *Hālqā Utsava* and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri*, though practiced in geographically distant regions, reveal the following notable parallels concerned with the utility and significance of fire during their respective celebrations:

- A. Socio-Religious Origin: While the *Hālqā Utsava* is a blend of Buddhist and local Himalayan traditions with Hinduism and animistic beliefs, the *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* stems from deep-seated Shinto-Buddhist syncretism in Japan and is closely tied to Yuki-jinja Shrine and mountain deities. Therefore, despite differences in the manner these festivals are celebrated, both traditions reflect a fusion of indigenous and Buddhist belief systems (in the case of India, Hinduism and animistic beliefs and in Japan, Shinto beliefs) wherein fire as a ritual instrument connects humans with protective forces that they believe are present in the form of the divine, especially local deities.
- B. Socio-Religious Symbolism: The fire torches in *Hālqā Utsava* are symbolic of purity as the legend behind its celebration accentuates the return of their guardian deity to their homeland which also marks the end of malevolence. Moreover, people start marching from their houses with individual family flames, and they are all merged into a single, shared bonfire at the end of the festival. It represents communal unity and solidarity, and the idea resonates with the Mahayana Buddhism philosophy of *Sangha* or community. In a similar vein, fire in the *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* celebrated in autumn represents purification and divine protection in gratitude for the seasonal harvest and upcoming winter, as the torches are carried through the town in a procession that is meant to cleanse the community. Therefore, across both festivals, fire functions as a unifying and protective force that reflects the shared human need for safety, order, and predictability. Also, fire in both these festivals marks seasonal transition and communal renewal that also serves as a ritual response to the cyclical rhythms of nature.
- C. Ritual Performance and Spatial Meaning: *Hālqā Utsava* involves a procession with fire torches in hands where movement takes place from private hearths to a central community temple. Also, each male member of a household participating in the festival carries an individual torch for themselves. Similarly, *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* also features a procession with fire torches in hand, from homes to the shrine, led by men known as *Wakamono* and priests of the shrine where they act according to their structured ritual roles. Therefore, in both festivals, as men take the lead of the fire torches, a deeper cultural psychology is observed where the responsibility to carry fire torches is

entrusted to those who are also socially designated as guardians of communal well-being in the respective cultures. Also, during the ritual enactment of the journey from domestic spaces to sacred spaces, fire becomes an element that charges the profane environment into a divine one.

D. Seasonal Association: The seasonal background of these festivals adds another layer of meaning to the significance of fire where *Hālḍā Utsava*, celebrated in the harsh Himalayan winter, typically in January or February, marks new beginnings and symbolises the community's endurance and survival. The communal fire sustains warmth, solidarity and hope. Similarly, the *Taimatsu* of *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* held in autumn, on 22nd October precisely, besides marking harvest gratitude and ritual purification in the agrarian landscape of Kyoto also seeks the similar merits.

Some common points of cultural distinctiveness were also observed during the discourse:

A. Regional Names: In India, fire torches have regional names because of language variation such as *Hālḍā* during *Hālḍā Utsava*, and *Thootedara* during *Agni Keli* festival of Karnataka, where “*Thoote*” means dried leaves bundles and “*Dhara*” means fight. On the other hand, fire torches are generally called *Taimatsu* all over Japan, with little variation in their name depending on the sizes. The massive torches are known as *Ōtatsu* (大松明) while the small ones are called *Shōtatsu* (小松明).

B. Aesthetic Expressions: While fire torches are handmade from local wood and are simple and organic in their forms, in India. *Taimatsu* of Japan is not only visually striking but also symmetrical and ritually standardised.

C. Ecological Influence: Also, the fire of *Hālḍā Utsava* is a part of a ritual that emerges from a survivalist ecology amid the cold Himalayan winters while the fire of *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* is more closely associated with the seasonal ecology that expresses gratitude for harvests and the protection of natural balance.

Nevertheless, the flames of fire festivals in India and Japan, especially in association with the *Hālḍā Utsava* and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* carry a shared human impulse that marks transitions, endows protection, unites communities, and creates a bond not only between all humans but also man, nature and the divine. Therefore, these festivals turn into compelling examples of elemental symbols transcending into regional boundaries where fire, in its many cultural permutations, continues to anchor human communities in ritual, belief, and collective identity.

Conclusion

Together, the selected fire festivals, *Hālḍā Utsava* of India and *Kurama no Hi Matsuri* of Japan reveal fire as one of the universal symbols for purification, transformation, connection and protection. Although varied cultures make use of fire based on their respective cultural and geographical setting, similar expressions of human concerns, such as that of safety, continuity and communal well-being, emerge as the rationale behind these fire festivals. As a result, the comparison

observed in the current paper supports the theoretical idea that reads rituals as cultural text. This is because even when traditions are not literally jotted down in writing, their meanings are preserved and transmitted through repeated performance and continuous observation. In this way, they leave a strong impression on the collective memory of the whole community, who are reminded of the significance of these rituals, especially in relation to shaping their social values and identity. Also, the persistence of fire festivals indicates how different cultures may similarly respond to their fundamental needs that reflect shared symbolic patterns, often described as the collective unconscious. In this sense, the study of fire and its role in religious tradition across cultures also becomes a discourse for global collaborative learning that delves into how distinct traditions illuminate shared human essence and fire, in this sense, becomes a metaphor for collaboration itself, a flame that is carried between cultures.

References

- Arumugam, I. (2025). Domesticating the Cosmic: Elemental Fire and the Tamil Festival of Lights. *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 11(1), 7-27.
- Carlyle, T. (1872). *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History*: (1840). Chapman & Hall.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation Of Cultures*. United Kingdom: Basic Books.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*. Spring Publ., 2003.
- Fang, W. T., Hassan, A. A., & Horng, M. (2026). From Ritual to Celebration: Folk Festivals and Festival-Making. In *Celebrating Culture: Folk Tourism Through Festivals and Traditions* (pp. 133-189). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Kuan, T. F. (2020). Conscious of everything or consciousness without objects? A paradox of nirvana. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 48(3), 329-351.
- Schneider, M. A. (1993). *Culture and Enchantment*. United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press.
- Sen Gupta, S., Krishnaswamy, K. (1984). *Fire Festival of India: A New Search of South and North Indian Fire Rites, Rituals, and Festivals, with Special Reference to Tamilnadu & Bengal*. India: Indian Publications.
- Skorupski, T. (2016). Buddhist Permutations and Symbolism of Fire. *Homa Variations. The Study of Ritual Change across the Longue Durée*, 67-125.
- Sushrutha, S., Nagendra, H., & Bhat, R. G. (2014). The significance of fire offering in Hindu society. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, 3(7), 3.
- Turner, Victor. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. (2019). *The Rites of Passage*. United States: University of Chicago Press.

Japanese Sources

- 笠松, 直. (2008). 祭火の礼拝 (Doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University).
Kasamatsu, Tadashi. (2008). *Saika no reihai* (Doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University).
- 小川, 豊子. (2015). 「鞍馬の火祭り」における音の風景 —火祭りの音楽・音, 人の動き, 祭りへの人々の営み—. *京都造形芸術大学紀要*, (19), 155–173.
Ogawa, Toyoko. (2015). “Kurama no Himatsuri” ni okeru oto no fūkei: Himatsuri no ongaku/oto, hito no ugoki, matsuri e no hitobito no itonami. *Kyōto Zōkei Geijutsu Daigaku Kiyō*, (19), 155–173.
- 新田, 章. (2016). 日本仏教における因果応報の研究 (Doctoral dissertation, 立正大学).
- Nitta, Akira. (2016). *Nihon Bukkyō ni okeru inga ōhō no kenkyū* (Doctoral dissertation, Risshō University).
- 満久, 崇麿. (1974). 仏典の中の樹木: その性質と意義 (3)(護摩の樹木). *木材研究資料*, 8, 16–37.
Maku, Takamaro. (1974). Butten no naka no jumoku: Sono seishitsu to igi (3) (Goma no jumoku). *Mokuzai Kenkyū Shiryō*, 8, 16–37.
- 笹本, 正治 (監修). いいやま博物館友の会 (編). (2002). 奥信濃飯山発 火祭り—火祭り文化考. ほおずき書籍.
- Sasamoto, Masaharu (Kanshū). Iyama Hakubutsukan Tomonokai (Hen). (2002). *Okushinano Iyama-hatsu Hi Matsuri — Hi Matsuri Bunka Kō*. Hōzuki Shoseki.
- 柳田, 国男. (2014). 日本の祭. グーテンベルク.
Yanagita, Kunio. (2014). *Nihon no matsuri*. Gūtenberuku.
- 柳田國男. (1989). 先祖の話. ちくま文庫.
Yanagita Kunio. (1989). *Senzo no Hanashi*. Chikumabunkō.

Newspaper Article

- Manta, D. (2025, January 13). *Lahaul-Spiti residents celebrate Halda for luck and, abundant harvest. The Tribune*.
<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/himachal/lahaul-spiti-residents-celebrate-halda-for-luck-abundant-harvest/> Accessed 27 November 2025.
- Swinger, S. B. (2024, November 2). *At Japan's hottest festival, crowds threaten to smother Kyoto's Kurama Fire Festival. The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2024/11/02/travel/kurama-fire-festival-kyoto/> Accessed 27 November 2025.

Comparative Literary Gerontology: Portrayals of Aging and Care Giving in Japanese and Hindi Literature

KUMAR, Pankaj, Ph.D.

Abstract: This study investigates literary representations of aging in Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* and Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* through a comparative narratological framework based on the concept of the *petit récit* (Little narratives). As global demographic shifts, aging is perceived as a crucial social issue and literature provides insight into its emotional and existential dimensions. Kawakami's novel explores late-life intimacy through a quiet, introspective narrative shaped by seasonal temporality and an aesthetic of impermanence. However, Sobti presents a dialogic and philosophically rich portrayal of aging that emboldens feminist autonomy and resistance. Through close textual analysis, this study explores how both authors challenge cultural master narratives that perceive old age as resignation or decline. Instead, they depict it as a dynamic process of self-discovery and relational renewal. By reading these works as *petits récits*, the paper argues that they function as counter-narratives that humanize aging and reshape its cultural meanings in Japan and India (Hindi literature). The comparative approach highlights shared ethical concerns as well as culturally distinct ways of representing emotional life in later years.

Introduction

“Old age should not be accepted as a passive decline but confronted as a phase of life with its own authenticity and meaning” (Beauvoir, 1972). Simon De Beauvoir's critique of the cultural marginalization of the elderly resonates even today as global populations witness unexpected phase of demographic change. According to the United Nations World Population Prospects (2022) by the year 2050 one out of every six people will be above sixty-five. Japan has already crossed the threshold into what demographers call a “super-aged society,” as it has nearly twenty-nine percent of its citizens above that age. India, although still demographically a young nation, is undergoing rapid demographic aging. Its elderly population recorded at 8.6% in 2011, is projected to rise approximately 19-20% by mid-century. These numbers not only simply describe population structure, they also reflect social realities that challenge conventional perceptions of care, autonomy, and the meaning of later life.

On one hand, demographic and sociological research show quantitative data into this shift, on the other hand, literature provides a more intimate description into the experience of aging. Literary narratives show inner negotiations of later life and experiences that number is incapable of incapsulating. Stories not only reflect aging; they interpret it, delves deeper into social anxieties, cultural expectations, and emotional turmoil in the form of narratives. Japan and India, two societies have evolved by deep-rooted ethical traditions and presently they are undergoing rapid modernization. In this context, literary narrations of aging portray the conflict between convention and change. The erosion of joint families, the tendency of

individualism, and developing ideas of dignity, desire, and relevance in later life are reflected.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of two major works that portray aging through close narrative forms. Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* (2001), translated as *Strange Weather in Tokyo* by Allison Markin Powell in 2013, and Hindi author Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* (2000). Despite their distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, both texts place aging at the center of their narrative worlds. Kawakami portrays the subtle development of a relationship between Tsukiko, an unmarried woman in her late thirties, and her retired former teacher, Sensei. Sobti portrays the relationship between Aranya, a seventy-year-old unmarried woman, and Ishan, a widower, as they try to overcome the solitude and sociocultural expectations of later life in urban India. These works resemble each other in their intentions of reflecting aging not as a static biological process but as a dynamic process of emotional rediscovery and ethical negotiation. Lyotard (1979)'s idea of *petit récit* or, "little narratives" challenge the "grand narratives" which claim the totalizing truth. Instead of universal accounts of human experience, *petits récit* lays emphasis on situated, embodied, and local truths. From this perspective, both *Strange Weather in Tokyo* and *Samay Sargam* function as *petits récit* of aging. It challenges universal models of decline and instead puts forth localized, emotionally situated stories that emphasize aging as an ongoing struggle to redefine identity, intimacy, and social meaning.

Depicting Old Age in Japanese and Indian Literary Traditions

Japanese literary studies increasingly represent aging and caregiving through *kaigo bungaku* and *rōkyō bungaku*, subfields within *rōjin bungaku*. As Ueno (2003) notes, these narratives offer a multidimensional view of late life, highlighting the emotional, social, and structural realities of aging and care. Together, they reveal how contemporary literature critically reimagines old age beyond sentimental or single sided portrayals. With these categories, a large part of literary scholars study how modern Japanese literature represents aging through the lenses of solitude, impermanence, and interpersonal restraint.

Allison (2013) outlines how demographic decline, economic instability, and the breakdown of traditional family systems have recreated ideas of care and dependency in contemporary Japan. Literary portrayals of elderly characters often described as the "social anxieties of late modernity," in which older adults must negotiate loneliness, marginality, and the emotional demands of intergenerational bonds. To this line, Traphagan (2005) observes that a notable sense of disconnection from younger generations is commonly reported by older adults, including those residing in multi-generational homes.

Apart from narratives from elderly's perspective, there are major notable works which focus on the perspective of caregiver for elderly. In this context, Ariyoshi Sawako's *Kōkotsu no hito* (1972) is one of the earliest major works on caregiving (*kaigo bungaku*) that portrays the emotional and ethical dilemmas of caring for elderly parents in modern Japan. The novel brought public attention to the burdens

of caregiving, including *rōrō kaigo*, the phenomenon of the elderly caring for the elderly.

Indian literature on aging, as HONGEKAR (2018) observes, has expanded in response to demographic and social transformation. In Hindi literature, the discourse on aging (*vridhdha vimarsh*) has gained prominence, depicting themes of familial decline, loss of dignity, autonomy, loneliness, and identity reconstruction. Modern Hindi narratives increasingly portray elderly individuals as autonomous subjects rather than passive dependents.

Traditional Hindu frameworks, such as the *āśrama dharma* (four stages of life), conceptualize old age (*Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa*) as periods of withdrawal and spiritual focus. However, contemporary literary works challenge these expectations, claiming personal agency and emotional vitality in later life. SHARMA (2023) emphasizes that due to rapid social change, such as family fragmentation and rising materialism, Hindi literature is re-examining the lived realities of older adults.

Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban*: A Petit Récit of Emotional Awakening

Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* originally published in 2001, examines aging through understated scenes of companionship between Tsukiko and her retired former teacher. The narrative unfolds through meetings at a small bar, shared meals, seasonal walks, and quiet exchanges, moments that together form a *petit récit* of emotional rediscovery in later life.

Kawakami bases the novel around seasonal transitions i.e., cherry blossoms, humid summers, autumn mushrooms, winter snow. This cyclical temporality structures the narrative with Japanese aesthetic traditions, particularly *mono no aware*, the bittersweet awareness of impermanence. Aging is depicted not as linear decline but as part of a natural rhythm, suggesting continuity between human life and ecological cycles. While the *chronos* (sequential time) of seasonal time anchors the narrative, the emotional turning points follow *kairos* (moments of heightened meaning). This resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the chronotope, where time-space configurations shape lived experience.

Kawakami's narrative style is minimalist with sparse dialogues and emotional restraint. The story employs introspective narration where Tsukiko's voice invites us inward. Their love takes shape through memory, season, and occasional silence or *ma*. Yet this minimalism is precisely what allows the novel to function as a *petit récit*. Lyotard (1984) argues *petits récits* gain their force through the specificity of lived experience rather than universal claims. Kawakami refuses grand declarations about aging, love, or purpose. Instead, she explores meaning through small gestures. Sensei adjusting umbrella with Tsukiko, sharing warm sake on a cold evening, walking silently through a market are some of examples of the non-dialogic explorations of meaning. A seemingly ordinary moment such as touching the worn leather of the teacher's bag triggers reflection on life's impermanence, capturing a sense *mono no aware*.

These micro-moments provide the novel a *ma* (space) in which the characters come to understand themselves and one another. The absence of grand narrative resolution such as dramatic confession, marriage or social recognition, underscores

Lyotard's insistence that truth resides in local, embodied experience. Even the emotional climax, Sensei's quiet admission of affection unfolds not as spectacle but as modest vulnerability. Kawakami expresses aging from the inside, not by focussing on wrinkles or illness. We see aging through Tsukiko's feelings and observations. Sensei's stiff movements, polite behaviour and love for old traditions show he is getting older. But the narrative does not reduce it to an "older body." Instead, it shows aging is revealed through how the characters notice and care for each other.

Sensei's gradual willingness to express affection is a form of late-life emotional growth that challenges Japanese cultural expectations of elderly stoicism or *inkyō* (retirement and seclusion). "You're much older than she is but still, you're all cozy together. It's perverted, really. Act your age!" Sensei nodded magnanimously, as if to say, "ah, yes", and looked straight before him." (Kawakami, 2013). This encounter with a young drunk boy in a bar and his comments on Sensei and Tsukiko hint on the grand narratives that dictate how the elderly should behave. Sensei's calm dismissal of this remark reflects his quiet resistance to conventional societal expectations of *inkyō*.

In this cyclical temporality, Kawakami underlines certain moments as "Kairos". The most striking description is the moment when sensei quietly holds Tsukiko's hand. Nothing dramatic happens, yet time seems to deepen and pause, becoming a *kairotic* moment of emotional truth that changes their relationship. This temporality constructs *Sensei no kaban* work as a *petit récit* of quiet resilience. "Sensei, even if you were to die very soon, it would be all right for me. I could handle it." (Kawakami, 2013, p.166). The narrator's confession captures a *kairotic* instant in which acceptance of mortality becomes an act of profound emotional clarity.

In Kawakami's world, *kairos* outweighs *chronos*, as these moments redefine aging not through the accumulation of years but through emotionally transformative instants.

Sobti's *Samay Sargam*: Dialogic Construction of the Aging Experience

Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* (2000) provides a polyphonic narrative of aging in modern Hindi literature. The story is set on intellectual and existential lives of elderly individuals within an urban Indian context. In contrast to Kawakami's quiet minimalism, Sobti uses bold prose and dialogic structure to articulate the autonomy and vitality of later life. The protagonist asserts a bold feminist interrogation of cultural norms. Sobti constructs the narrative through conversations that bridge memory and present, interiority and social reality. This dialogism finds its resonance in Bakhtin's (1981) idea that meaning arises through the interaction of multiple voices, not through monologic authority. Aging, therefore, becomes a process of interpretive and relational negotiation rather than passive endurance.

Aranya's declaration to Ishan; "You have scriptures; we have weapons." (Sobti, 2000), is a bold statement of her resistance to patriarchal moralizing. Here, Sobti uses wordplay between *shastra* (scripture) and *shastra* (weapon) to critique the cultural tendency to use scriptural authority to check women's desires, especially in later life. Aranya's statement asserts agency as a weapon of interpretation,

destabilizing patriarchal control over the emotional lives of elderly women.

The recurring line “Time is both outside of us and beyond. Seize the moment that is yours” (Sobti, 2000) presents time as both *chronos* (external, inevitable, fear-inducing) and *kairos* (an opportunity for action, meaning, and agency). This dual temporal vision reframes aging as a site of philosophical and emotional decision-making. Ishan, for example, reads Jiddu Krishnamurti and brings philosophical insights into their conversations. On the other hand, Aranya engages with the world through sensory experience, irony, and emotional clarity. Their contrasting modes of engagement create a rhythm of intellectual exchange that underscores the novel’s vision of aging as dialogic self-renewal.

Through voices, Aranya and Ishan resist cultural expectations that older people should retreat into silence or spiritual withdrawal. Their conversations restore intellectual agency and self-fashioning to late life. Mohanty (1989, cited in Siva Raju, 2011) notes, older adults often confront social isolation, loss of status, and generational gaps in India. In this context, the novel portrays debates and philosophical reflection as tools for navigating these challenges.

Their relationship serves as a microcosm of the broader ethical issues surrounding aging in India. Sobti’s narrative presents companionship not as a deviation from social norms, but as an ethical right. She informs the society for human need for emotional connection as a form of dignity. Especially, in a society which is witnessing the erosion of the joint family system and rising urban isolation among the elderly.

Convergences and Divergences: Two Narratives of Aging

Kawakami’s *Sensei no kaban* and Sobti’s *Samay Sargam* contrasting narrative styles, but converge thematically in their reimagining of aging. Kawakami employs quiet, introspective internal focalization, emphasizing cyclical time and impermanence. She reflects emotional subtlety and attunement to natural rhythms. Sobti employs polyphonic dialogue to place relationality, intellectual vigor, and resistance to marginalization.

Despite stylistic and cultural differences, both works reclaim aging as a meaningful, embodied, and narratively rich experience that challenge universalized notions of decline. Both novels converge in representing aging not as withdrawal but as a space for discovering new dimensions of life. In *Sensei no kaban*, aging becomes a *ma* (space) of emotional rediscovery, attuned to the sensibility of *mono no aware*, while in *Samay Sargam*, Aranya and Ishan find companionship, philosophical insight, and self-affirmation. In each case, aging acts as a catalyst for relational and existential exploration.

These portrayals demonstrate the power of the *petit récit*. By focusing on small, everyday moments such as a shared cup of sake, balcony conversations, seasonal walks, or philosophical debates, the novels throw light on the ethical significance of recognizing aging as an active process of becoming. As Kumar (2022, p. 450) notes in his readings on Indian literature, literary representations of aging create space for the “personal” experience of later life, allowing older characters to creatively define their existence rather than merely adhering to traditional norms.

Together, Kawakami and Sobti show that the stories we tell about aging shape the dignity, autonomy, and emotional possibilities available to older adults. Their novels remind us that the elderly, whether in Tokyo or Delhi, continue to search, feel, desire, and interpret their worlds with curiosity and vulnerability.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Hiromi Kawakami's *Sensei no kaban* and Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* shows how little, mundane stories can question the usual ways aging is understood in Japan and India. Both authors use intimate, personal moments to portray later life not as decline, but as a time filled with reflection and continued growth. Kawakami's narrative draws attention to gentle emotional nuances and the sensibility of impermanence, whereas Sobti's work emphasizes bold self-expression, dialogic strength, and reflective independence. Together, their works reveal how aging can look very different across cultures yet remain deeply human everywhere. Drawing on Lyotard's idea of *petits récits*, the study highlights how these simple, personal narratives give space to older characters who think, feel, and make choices. They call upon us that empathy, dignity, and thoughtful representation are essential for understanding the realities of older adulthood.

References

- Allison, A. (2013). *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press.
- Ariyoshi, S. (1972). *Kōkotsu no hito*. Kōdansha.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University of Texas Press.
- Bal, M. (2009). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (3rd ed.). University of Toronto Press.
- Bidī, R. I. (2023). Hindī sāhitya kī racanāoṃ meṃ 'vṛddha vimarś' kā citraṇ [Depiction of aging discourse in Hindi literary works]. *Apni Maati*, 46(January–March).
- Cole, T. R., Ray, R. E., & Kastenbaum, R. (Eds.). (2010). *A guide to humanistic studies in aging*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Crossley, A. (2023). The aesthetics of aging: Visual strategies and narrative form in Tanizaki's *Diary of a Mad Old Man*. *Poetics Today*, 44(1–2), 231–255. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-10342183>
- Gebhardt, L. (2008). Age and ageing in contemporary Japanese literature. In W. Weitz & C. Breuer (Eds.), *The demographic challenge: A handbook about Japan* (pp. 491–511). Brill.
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse* (J. E. Lewin, Trans.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1972)
- Gymnich, M. (2020). The value of literature in an aging society. *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 36(1), 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.2357/REAL-2021-0010>
- Haye, A., & Torres-Sahli, M. (2025). Laughter as ideological symptom: Dialogical analysis of older adults' discourse. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1606683. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1606683>

- Hongekar, S. Y. (Ed.). (2018). *21vīṇ sadī kā Hindī sāhitya: Nav vimarś*. ABS Publication.
- Jamuna, D. (2011). Studies on aging in India. *Journal of Aging Research*, 2011, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4061/2011/184378>
- Kawakami, H. (2001). *Sensei no kaban*. Shinchōsha.
- Kumar, S. (2022). Experiences of old age in Indian fiction: A study of two Indian short stories. *The Gerontologist*, 62(3), 445–450.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Sharma, G. (2023). Samkālin hindī kathā sāhitya meṃ vṛddha vimarś. *Apni Maati*, 49(October–December).
- Skord, V. (1989). Withered blossoms: Aging in Japanese literature. In *Perceptions of aging in literature: A cross-cultural study* (pp. 131–143).
- Sobti, K. (2000). *Samay Sargam*. Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Takahashi, R. (2018). Welfare issues learned from the past and moving toward the future: A study from the history of Funaoka. *Grassroots Welfare*, 48, 11–21.
- Traphagan, J. W. (2005). Heroes of the antimodern: “Respect for the Elderly Day” and writing the narrative of the elder generation in Japan. *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 19(2), 99–113.
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2022). *World population prospects 2022*. United Nations.
- Ueno, C. (2003). *Ueno Chizuko ga bungaku o shakaigaku suru*. Asahi Shimbunsha.
- 上野千鶴子 (2003) 『上野千鶴子が文学を社会学する』 朝日新聞社
- Siva Raju, S. (2011). *Studies on ageing in India: A review* (BKPAI Working Paper No. 2). United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Murakami Haruki and the Making of Japanese Cool Literature

MOKHTAR, Moin

Abstract: This paper examines Murakami Haruki's fiction through the theoretical framework of "literary cool," drawing upon Pountain and Robins' concept of cool as emotional detachment, affective restraint, and quiet rebellion. It argues that Murakami develops a distinctive cool aesthetic that blends Japanese cultural sensibilities with a cosmopolitan openness, creating a narrative world that is both locally grounded and globally legible. Through analysis of his narrative voice, character detachment, recurring motifs of ambiguity, and hybridized cultural references, the study shows how Murakami constructs a form of cool that resonates across diverse readerships. Additionally, the paper demonstrates how this aesthetic contributes to his enduring international popularity by offering readers a mode of emotional navigation suited to contemporary experiences of uncertainty, mobility, and identity negotiation.

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, the global imagination of Japanese literature—often categorized domestically as *junbungaku* or "pure literature"—was inextricably bound to an exotic image of Japan". Literary giants like Kawabata Yasunari and Tanizaki Junichiro has also reinforced a cultural brand defined by hyper-traditional symbols: the stoic samurai, the delicate geisha, and the melancholic beauty of the cherry blossom. This "high" literature operated within strictures that prioritized a uniquely Japanese sensibility, often positioning the subject as culturally impenetrable to the outside world (Suter, 2008). However, the late 1970s marked a seismic disruption in this artistic lineage with the arrival of Murakami Haruki, a writer who conspicuously rejected the "wet", emotional density of the Japanese "I-novel" in favor of a "cool", detached "cosmopolitanism".

Murakami's emergence was not merely a stylistic evolution but a direct response to a profound socio-political shift: the collapse of the *Zenkyōtō* (All-Campus Joint Struggle Committee) student movement in the late 1960s. As the radical political idealism of the 1960s dissolved into the apolitical, advanced consumer capitalism of the 1970s and 80s, the Japanese subject "turned inward," replacing collective action with individual isolation. Into this void stepped Murakami's *boku* (detached first-person narrator), an isolated urban protagonist who navigated a world not of traditional duty, but of American jazz, Western literature, and existential ennui. This was a literature of the "cool"—emotionally guarded, stylishly weary, and stripped of the heavy historical baggage that defined his predecessors.

This paper argues that Murakami Haruki's work established a distinct literary category that can be termed "Cool literature." This becomes important because most scholarship on "cool" in Japan has focused on the state-sponsored cultural export project known as Cool Japan, which frames cool as a soft-power commodity. By contrast, Critics like Kawamoto Saburō (2002) and Jay Rubin (2005) point out elements of "cool" in Murakami's work, but they do not explore the idea in detail. There is thus a gap in the literature: while Murakami's work is often described as

“cool,” few studies have systematically analyzed what constitutes this coolness as a literary category.

To address this gap, this study applies the framework proposed by Dick Pountain and David Robins in *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (2000), which defines cool as a historically contingent attitude rooted in emotional detachment, ironic self-presentation, and resistance to authority. By situating Murakami’s boku within this genealogy of cool, the paper demonstrates how his fiction articulates a specifically Japanese yet globally resonant form of literary cool—one that emerges from the ruins of political radicalism and reconfigures identity through style, irony, and cosmopolitan hybridity.

The Concept of Cool

Over the past 20–30 years, cool has become one of the most frequently used terms in youth vernacular, particularly within popular culture (Pountain & Robins, 2000). Dictionaries broadly define it as calmness, restraint, or stylishness: Merriam-Webster emphasizes “steady dispassionate calmness and self-control” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), while the Cambridge Dictionary highlights “slightly cold,” “calm and not worried,” and “stylish or fashionable” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In Japanese, クール (kūru) similarly denotes “涼しい” (cool in temperature), “冷静な” (calm), and colloquially “かっこいい” (stylish, attractive) (Kotobank, n.d.).

Yet Pountain & Robins (2000) argue that these surface meanings obscure the essence of cool. They define cool as an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals or small groups to express defiance toward authority—whether parental, institutional, or societal. In their words, cool is “a permanent state of private rebellion.” Historically, cool emerged in African American jazz culture of the 1940s, characterized by emotional restraint, aesthetic detachment, and subtle resistance to authority. Joel Dinerstein (2017) situates cool within the postwar cultural zeitgeist, describing it as the aestheticization of detachment—a quiet rebellion marked by authenticity, consistency, and resistance to commodification.

Today, cool operates at the intersection of psychology, aesthetics, and social behavior. It functions both as a personal strategy of self-expression and as a linguistic marker of youth identity, reflecting generational values of individuality, resistance, and style.

Application to Murakami Haruki

This theoretical foundation provides the basis for analyzing Murakami Haruki’s fiction. By applying Pountain & Robins’ framework alongside Dinerstein’s refinement, this study demonstrates how Murakami’s works embody a distinctly literary form of cool—one that emerges from Japan’s post-1960s cultural shifts and resonates globally through style, irony, and hybridity.

Murakami Haruki and the Metroethnic Cool

Murakami Haruki has long faced criticism from the Japanese literary establishment (Bundan) for being “un-Japanese” (Suter, 2008). This charge stems from his distinctive literary style, saturated with references to Western popular culture: his

characters listen to jazz and rock music (often The Beatles or American musicians), drink whiskey, wear Levi's jeans, and read Western authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Carver. Because of this cosmopolitan orientation, critics frequently dismissed his work as mere "imitation," employing the pejorative term *bata-kusai* (literally, "reeking of butter") to describe writing perceived as excessively Westernized (Ichikawa, 2010). This suspicion of Murakami's literary authenticity persisted despite his considerable success in Japan, where he won numerous prestigious awards, including the Gunzō Prize (1979), the Noma Prize (1982), the Tanizaki Prize (1985), and the Yomiuri Prize (1995). Notably, however, he was not awarded the Akutagawa Prize—widely regarded as the marker of a "serious" writer—underscoring the establishment's ambivalence toward his hybrid, globally oriented style.

The treatment of Murakami is fundamentally a reaction rooted in the discourse of *Nihonjinron* ("Theories of the Japanese"). *Nihonjinron* is a popular, quasi-academic discourse that has long promoted the idea of Japanese cultural and ethnic uniqueness (Sugimoto, 1999). Scholars critique this discourse because it functions as an "imaginary construct" by relying on the $N=E=C$ equation (Nationality = Ethnicity = Culture), which assumes that the Japanese nation, its ethnic makeup, and its culture are inherently synonymous and singular (Sugimoto, 1999). This creates the myth of a *tanitsu minzoku* (single nation, single ethnicity). Much of the discourse has historically been reactionary and West-conscious, defining Japaneseness only in opposition to "the West as the Other" (Aoki, 1999). By promoting a narrow, homogeneous, and conformist ideal of identity, this ideology effectively excludes those who do not comply or those who embrace global/Western elements, branding them as "un-Japanese" (Sugimoto, 1999). The very existence of a phenomenon like Haruki Murakami—a global literary icon who is undeniably Japanese yet whose work challenges the *Nihonjinron*-defined cultural boundary—raises question on the fictional nature of this singular "Japaneseness".

Murakami's work subverts this established narrative by refusing to depict the exotic, traditional Japan preferred by both external Orientalist expectations and internal *Nihonjinron*-driven national pride (Rebecca Suter, 2008). His central technique is not a denial of Japanese culture, but rather a realistic depiction of modern Japanese life as a hybrid reality. His Japan is a product of the post-war era, profoundly shaped by Americanization and global consumerism (Strecher, 2002). His characters listen to jazz not because they are rejecting Japan, but because jazz, rock, and Western literature are integral parts of the cultural environment for post-war, postmodern Japanese society. Rather than focusing on a parochial, isolated identity, Murakami presents a version of Japan that is a gateway to a cosmopolitan self, where individuals hold "multiple allegiances" and meaningful attachments that lie beyond national borders (Wakatsuki, 2018). By normalizing the presence of Western elements—showing them as mundane, everyday objects of consumption rather than foreign imports—Murakami reverses the exotic image and forces the reader (both Japanese and international) to confront the modern, Western-influenced self that actually exists in Japan. In doing so, Murakami creates a cosmopolitan cool that destabilizes essentialist notions of identity.

Murakami Haruki's literary practice can be read as a paradigmatic enactment of metroethnic cool, a concept developed by John C. Maher to describe the hybridized "street ethnicity" of contemporary Japan (Maher, 2005). Metroethnicity rejects heroic ethnicity and the logocentric duty to preserve ethnic language or culture, instead treating ethnicity as a flexible, aesthetic resource to be deployed selectively and playfully. Murakami's fiction embodies this ethos by dismantling the Nihonjinron equation of nationality, ethnicity, and culture. Similarly, Murakami's characters navigate cosmopolitan landscapes marked by cultural hybridity and disaffiliation, embracing "lightly worn" identities that prioritize personal agency.

In this way Murakami represents a paradigm shift in Japanese literature, breaking away from the exoticized framework of his predecessors. Writers like Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Yasunari Kawabata, and Yukio Mishima were often celebrated internationally for their portrayals of quintessentially "Japanese" themes—geisha, samurai, and the mysteries surrounding Japan's traditions and psyche (Suter, 2008). These works, while impactful, positioned Japanese literature as something exotic and inaccessible to a broader, global audience. Murakami disrupts this model by presenting narratives that are simultaneously rooted in Japan and yet universal in their appeal. His novels eschew the overtly "Japanese" tropes that once defined the nation's literary export. Instead of immersing his readers in the insular aestheticism of Nihonjinron ("theory of Japaneseness"), Murakami embraces cultural fluidity. His characters navigate worlds that are neither distinctly Japanese nor exclusively Western, allowing readers from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with his narratives on their own terms.

Murakami's cosmopolitan approach has broken down cultural walls by making Japanese literature accessible to a global audience. His plain, straightforward prose—a stark contrast to the ornate style of earlier Japanese authors—allows his works to be effectively translated into multiple languages without losing their essence (Wakatsuki, 2018). This accessibility, coupled with universal themes of love, loss, identity, and existential search, cements Murakami's place as a global literary figure. Murakami's global success also highlights the evolving nature of Japanese identity. This shift reflects broader societal changes, where young Japanese increasingly embrace multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in their everyday lives (Wakatsuki, 2018). Murakami's literature mirrors and amplifies this transition, offering a vision of Japan that is both deeply rooted and globally engaged. Ultimately, his works exemplify a literary cool that is cosmopolitan, hybrid, and resistant to essentialist notions of identity.

History and Romantic Irony

Murakami Haruki's engagement with Japanese history has been a persistent point of contention among critics. Katō Norihiro, while sympathetic to Murakami's literary project, observes that his accessible prose and surreal humor resonate strongly with younger readers but risk estranging his fiction from the aesthetic sensibilities of the established literary world by weakening its historical grounding (Katō 2020). In a similar vein, Kuroko Kazuo critiques Murakami's treatment of the 1960s student movement and the Zenkyōtō era, arguing that his early novels tend to seal these

events within a self-contained narrative of “youth.” By presenting the protests as a closed generational episode, Murakami detaches them from their broader social and political legacies, thereby reducing their historical continuity (Kuroko 2007). Building on these critiques, Karatani Kōjin frames Murakami’s abstraction of history as emblematic of a shift from modernist engagement to postmodern estrangement. For Karatani, this abstraction is not merely stylistic but reflects a deeper cultural logic: Murakami’s narratives embody Romantic irony, simultaneously acknowledging historical trauma while distancing themselves from its ideological weight (Karatani, 2012).

Romantic irony plays a pivotal role in the genealogy of Cool. Pountain and Robins (2000) describe it as a profound skepticism that questions the validity of everything, a mode of detachment that destabilizes sincerity and transforms irony into a protective persona. They emphasize that this ironic stance functions both as aggression and defence, allowing meaning to be acknowledged while simultaneously undermined. Murakami’s treatment of Japanese history resonates strongly with this framework, as his narratives consistently balance recognition of historical trauma with a refusal to grant it ideological solemnity.

A striking example appears in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, where Murakami alludes to Yukio Mishima’s suicide but refuses to give it the expected weight:

We walked through the woods to the ICU campus, sat down in the student lounge, and munched on hot dogs. It was two in the afternoon, and Yukio Mishima's picture kept flashing on the lounge TV. The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it didn't matter to us one way or the other. A student got up on a chair and tried fooling with the volume, but eventually he gave up and wandered off. "I want you," I said. "Okay," she said. So we thrust our hands back into our coat pockets and slowly walked back to the apartment (Murakami, 1989, p.9-10).

Mishima’s death, a sensational and ideologically charged event, appears here as flickering images on a broken television while the narrator and his companion casually eat hot dogs and turn to intimacy. The gravity of national trauma is acknowledged but immediately muted, transformed into background noise. This juxtaposition dramatizes Romantic irony: history is present yet estranged, serious yet trivialized, destabilized by its placement alongside everyday banality. In reframing Mishima’s act as spectacle rather than solemnity, Murakami resists ideological weight and subtly challenges state-sponsored narratives. It is precisely this detachment—this refusal to anchor his fiction in heavy political or cultural baggage—that defines Murakami’s cool, sustaining a tension between acknowledgment and denial that gives his work its distinctive cultural logic.

Boku (I) the Cool Narrator

Detachment, both stylistic and thematic, is central to Haruki Murakami’s construction of “cool.” At the heart of this detachment lies *boku*, a narrator whose casual, unpretentious voice shapes the tone of much of Murakami’s fiction. As a first person pronoun, *boku* functions as a bridge between characters and readers, embodying a calm, democratic perspective that resists the weight of social

hierarchies.

Jay Rubin (2002) observes that Murakami's choice of *boku* marks a significant departure from the conventions of Japanese "I novels," which traditionally employ the more formal *watakushi* or *watashi*. Unlike these hierarchical pronouns, *boku* is casual and intimate, closer to the neutral English "I." In his early career, Murakami expressed discomfort with adopting the role of an all-knowing, god-like narrator who assigns names and directs characters from a detached third-person perspective. Instead, he instinctively chose the first-person voice of *boku*, a stance that avoids any suggestion of narrative authority. Through *boku*, unusual events are conveyed in a tone that feels conversational and familiar—almost as if a friend were recounting personal experiences—while still maintaining a subtle distance from the story itself. Commenting on this aspect of the narrator, Ming Chu Lai (2015) remarks that what first drew her to Murakami's writing was the solitary yet sincere quality of his narrators, sentiments that seemed to emerge directly from the heart and carried the intimacy of "letters from a close friend". This approachable, intimate use of *boku* became a defining feature of Murakami's narrative style (Rubin, 2005).

The paradox of *boku* lies in its balance of intimacy and detachment. Murakami's narrators are ordinary in their interests—baseball, jazz, beer—yet extraordinary in their perceptiveness. Their passivity and lack of overt ambition make them ideal listeners, figures who absorb the stories of others while remaining fundamentally unattached. This measured distance shifts the focus from plot to perception, where the intrigue lies less in events than in the narrator's reflections.

This usage becomes especially explicit in *Hard Boiled Wonderland* and *the End of the World* (1985), where Murakami dramatizes the split between two narrative selves through pronoun choice. In the *Hard Boiled Wonderland* chapters, the protagonist speaks as *watashi*, a formal and bureaucratic "I" that reflects his role as a Calcutec operating within a rigid system of control. By contrast, the *End of the World* chapters are narrated by *boku*, the shadow of the same protagonist, whose voice is intimate, neutral, and stripped of the social hierarchies that bind his other self. For Japanese readers, this linguistic distinction immediately signals the tension between rational and authentic selfhood—a nuance flattened in English translation, where both narrators appear simply as "I." By juxtaposing *watashi* and *boku*, Murakami makes visible the very detachment that defines his cool: a refusal to anchor identity in a single authoritative voice, instead sustaining a dynamic tension between bureaucratic formality and personal intimacy.

Magical Realism

Magical realism is a genre where fantastical elements intrude upon realistic settings, seamlessly integrated into everyday life and accepted as ordinary (Strecher, 1999). Unlike pure fantasy, it remains grounded in reality, using the interplay of the mundane and the extraordinary to illuminate deeper truths.

Kato(2020) likens Murakami Haruki's surreal techniques to Picasso's distortions and Kafka's allegories, arguing that they expose the dissonances of contemporary life. For Kato, Murakami's magical realism highlights alienation and unreality,

though he critiques it for obscuring deeper historical and political engagement.

From the perspective of cool, however, this detachment is precisely Murakami's aim—especially in early works like *A Wild Sheep Chase*. His magical realism diverges from its Latin American roots: rather than resisting colonialism or foregrounding cultural traditions, Murakami uses it to interrogate individuality within systems that suppress personal identity (Strecher, 1999).

In *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982) the sheep becomes a symbol of collective identity and societal control, critiquing the pressures of conformity in contemporary Japan. Murakami's use of this symbol is deliberately indirect, reflecting his preference for subtle rebellion over overt confrontation. By avoiding explicit political references, he ensures that his works resonate across diverse contexts: the sheep may represent conformity in Japan, but its implications extend to any society where individuality is threatened.

By avoiding direct references to specific political or cultural struggles, Murakami ensures that his works resonate with readers across diverse contexts. The sheep in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, for instance, may symbolize societal control in Japan, but its implications extend to any context where individuality is threatened by collective conformity. Murakami's magical realism is deeply intertwined with the concept of cool. The surreal elements in his works do not overwhelm the narrative but are integrated in a way that mirrors the detached yet engaged stance of cool. These elements allow Murakami's characters—and his readers—to confront life's absurdities without succumbing to despair.

The Beat Generation and Murakami

Pountain and Robins identify authors of the Beat Generation such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs as central literary embodiments of “cool” (Pountain & Robins, 2000). For the Beats, coolness was inseparable from rebellion. Their lives and works were steeped in resistance to conformity, expressed through drugs, alcohol, and sexual freedom. These practices were not merely indulgences but deliberate strategies to distance themselves from the chaos of modern society (Gair, 2008). In Kerouac's *On the Road*, the bohemian lifestyle is depicted through scenes of intoxication and restless wandering, while Burroughs's *Junky* foregrounds narcotics as a recurring motif. Ginsberg's *Howl* goes further, opening with the famous lament of “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...looking for an angry fix,” a confessional account of instability and the turn to drugs, jazz, alcohol, and sex as alternatives to the oppressive structures of academia and the workplace (Ginsberg, 1956). For the Beats, self-destruction and excess became paradoxical routes to liberation, a way of confronting existential disorder head-on and transcending the ordinary (Gair, 2008).

Murakami Haruki's version of “cool,” however, operates through an entirely different set of strategies. His protagonists also seek detachment from external pressures, but they achieve it through meticulous self-management and immersion in everyday routines. Instead of turning to intoxication or excess, they find solace in ordinary acts—cooking, cleaning, ironing—that are rendered with ritualistic precision. These seemingly mundane tasks become stabilizing practices, offering

order amid unpredictability and cultivating a quiet resilience(Shukla, 2024).

In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, for instance, the protagonist responds to personal loss not by escaping into drugs or hedonism but by adhering to a steady rhythm of daily life. His routines—waking early, preparing meals, maintaining the household—are depicted as a form of meditative acts that anchors him against emotional turbulence (Murakami, 1982).

The contrast between the Beats and Murakami lies in method rather than purpose. Both aim to distance themselves from societal constraints and existential confusion. Yet while the Beats embrace destruction and excess—drugs, alcohol, sexual transgression—as a path to transcendence, Murakami’s characters cultivate stability and inner peace through attentiveness to the ordinary. The Beats’ coolness is outwardly rebellious, marked by confrontation, risk, and self-destructive intensity, whereas Murakami’s coolness is inwardly focused, marked by restraint, ritual, and quiet endurance.

Moreover, Murakami’s cool carries a subtle critique of Japanese gender norms. In a society where domestic tasks have traditionally been coded as feminine, his male protagonists embrace cooking, cleaning, and ironing not as household duties but as acts of self-sufficiency and self-care. This reconfiguration of domestic labor becomes a quiet rejection of conventional masculinity (Nihei, 2013). By reframing these tasks as sources of dignity and autonomy, Murakami’s characters enact a form of resistance that is understated yet profound. Their coolness lies not in flamboyant rebellion or intoxicated excess but in the discovery of individuality and purpose through the beauty of everyday life.

Conclusion

This study argued that Murakami Haruki’s fiction embodies a distinctive form of literary cool, grounded in emotional detachment, ironic distance, and a refusal to anchor identity in any fixed cultural or ideological framework. Drawing on Pountain and Robins’ definition of cool as a sustained stance of private rebellion, this paper has shown that Murakami’s protagonists, narrative voice, and cosmopolitan sensibility articulate an aesthetic that responds to the cultural disillusionment of modern Japan while resonating with global readers navigating their own uncertainties.

A central reason for Murakami’s enduring popularity, as Wakatsuki (2018) notes, is the continued relevance of the themes that underpin his fiction—identity, dislocation, and belonging—in an era marked by increased mobility and the blurring of national boundaries. Murakami himself observes that readership in various regions expanded during moments of social upheaval, suggesting that audiences turn to his fiction when established systems of meaning falter. His protagonists—calm, introspective, and persistently detached—mirror the emotional landscapes of readers confronting similar conditions. In this way, Murakami’s cool offers not merely a stylistic effect but an effective strategy for contemporary life.

His global appeal is strengthened by what critics identify as a de-Orientalized narrative world. As Zielinska-Elliott argues, Murakami’s fiction does not ask readers to decode a culturally “exotic” Japan; instead, it presents a hybrid modernity

of jazz bars, small apartments, Western literature, and quiet routines. Yet this does not mean the work lacks Japanese sensibility. As Lai (2016) notes, Murakami's style embodies a unique cultural synthesis—a “Japanese spirit in Western clothing”—allowing everyday Japanese experiences to circulate globally in an accessible form.

For this reason, Murakami Haruki has become both a national and transnational figure. His literature avoids essentialist markers of Japaneseness, yet it has become one of the principal windows through which millions of readers encounter contemporary Japan. In doing so, his global reception operates as a form of cultural soft power, shaping international perceptions of Japan through literature rather than state-driven cultural diplomacy. Through this combination of cultural specificity, cosmopolitan clarity, and emotional restraint, Murakami's fiction sustains its broad appeal. His cool—composed, resistant to ideological weight, and attuned to global cultural flows—remains central to why his work continues to resonate in Japan and far beyond it.

References

- Aoki, T. (1999). *Nihonbunka-ron no henyō: Sengo Nihon no bunka to identity* [The transformation of discourse on Japanese culture: Culture and identity of post-war Japan]. Tokyo: Chuokoronshinsha.
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). Cool. In Cambridge English Dictionary. Retrieved December 4, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cool>
- Caponi, G. D. (Ed.). (1999). *Slam-dunking*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Cihan University–Erbil Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. (2023). Ernest Hemingway's iceberg narrative method in *The Old Man and the Sea*.
- Connor, M. K. (1995). *What is cool? Understanding Black manhood in America*. Crown Publishers.
- Dinerstein, J. (2008). “Emergent noir”: Film noir and the Great Depression in *High Sierra* (1941) and *This Gun for Hire* (1942). *Journal of American Studies*, 42(3), 415–448.
- Dinerstein, J. (2017). *The origins of cool in postwar America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Erbe, G. (2009). Der moderne Dandy: Zur Herkunft einer dekadenten Figur. In A. Tacke & B. Weyand (Eds.), *Depressive Dandys: Spielformen der Dekadenz in der Pop-Moderne* (pp. 17–38). Böhlau Verlag.
- Gair, C. (2008). *The Beat Generation: A beginner's guide*. Oneworld Publications.
- Gerstle, C. A. (2000). *18th century Japan: Culture and society*. Curzon.
- Giannoulis, E. (2013). Iki: A Japanese concept of coolness? In U. Haselstein, I. Hijiya-Kirschner, C. Gersdorf, & E. Giannoulis (Eds.), *The cultural career of coolness* (pp. 215–236). Lexington Books.
- Gitlin, T. (1987). *The sixties: Years of hope, days of rage*. Bantam.
- Gray, J. (2020). *John Lennon and Yoko Ono: Year of peace*. James Lorimer & Company.
- Groemer, G., & Nishiyama, M. (Eds.). (1997). *Edo culture: Daily life and diversions in urban Japan, 1600–1868*. University of Hawai'i Press.

- Haselstein, U. (2013). The cultural career of coolness. In U. Haselstein, I. Hijiya-Kirschnereit, C. Gersdorf, & E. Giannoulis (Eds.), *The cultural career of coolness* (pp. 61–80). Lexington Books.
- Hasegawa, Y. (2010). What's Japanese cool? In H. Katō (Ed.), *Trans-cool Tokyo: Contemporary Japanese art from MOT collection* (pp. 49–56). Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Heise, J. (Ed.). (1990). *Die kühle Seele: Selbstinterpretationen der japanischen Kultur*. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Hijiya-Kirschnereit, I. (2013). Is Japan cool? In U. Haselstein, I. Hijiya-Kirschnereit, C. Gersdorf, & E. Giannoulis (Eds.), *The cultural career of coolness* (pp. 155–181). Lexington Books.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Karatani, K. (1999). Edo exegesis and the present. In M. F. Marra (Ed.), *Modern Japanese aesthetics: A reader* (pp. 270–299). University of Hawai'i Press.
- Karatani, K. (2012). *History and repetition*. Columbia University Press.
- Kelts, R. (2007). *Japanamerica: How Japanese pop culture has invaded the U.S.* Palgrave
- Kotobank. (n.d.). クール [Cool]. In Kotobank: The Dictionary. Retrieved December 4, 2025, from <https://kotobank.jp/word/%E3%81%8F%E3%83%BC%E3%82%8B-1528945#w-1942305>
- Kuroko, K. (1989). *Murakami Haruki: Za rosuto warudo*. Rikkō Shuppan.
- Lai, M. C. (2015). Translating Cunshang Chunshu: Murakami Haruki in Chinese. *Japanese Language and Literature*, 49(1), 143–161.
- Lai, M. C. (2016). How is Murakami Haruki being read in Taiwan? 60th International Conference of Japanese Studies.
- Lethen, H. (2002). *Cool conduct: The culture of distance in Weimar Germany* (D. Jenckes, Trans.). University of California Press.
- Maher, J. C. (2005). Metroethnicity, language, and the principle of cool. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 175–176, 83–102.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Cool. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved December 4, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cool>
- Murakami, H. (1979). *Kaze no uta o kike*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (1982). *Hitsuji o meguru bōken*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (1987). *Noruwei no mori*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (1988). *Dance Dance Dance*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (1992). *Kokkyō no minami, taiyō no nishi*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (1994–1995). *Nejimaki-dori kuronikuru*. Shinchosha.
- Murakami, H. (1999). *Supūtoniku no koibito*. Bungeishunjū.
- Murakami, H. (2002). *Umibe no Kafuka*. Shinchosha.
- Murakami, H. (2004). *After Dark*. Kodansha.
- Murakami, H. (2009–2010). *1Q84*. Shinchosha.
- Murakami, H. (2013). *Shikisai o motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to kare no junrei no toshi*. Bungeishunjū.
- Murakami, H. (2017). *Kishidanchō-goroshi*. Shinchosha.

- Murakami, H. (2023). *Machi to sono fukashina kabe*. Shinchosha.
- Nara, H. (Ed.). (2004). *The structure of detachment: The aesthetic vision of Kuki Shūzō*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Nihei, C. (2013). Resistance and negotiation: "Herbivorous men" and Murakami Haruki's gender and political ambiguity. *Asian Studies Review*, 37(1), 62–79.
- Nitobe, I. (1905). *Bushido: The soul of Japan*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Odin, S. (2001). *Artistic detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic distance in comparative aesthetics*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ōe, K., & Ishiguro, K. (1993). The novelist in today's world: A conversation. In M. Miyoshi & H. D. Harootunian (Eds.), *Japan in the world* (pp. 163–176). Duke University Press.
- Pountain, D., & Robins, D. (2000). *Cool rules: Anatomy of an attitude*. Reaktion Books.
- Rubin, J. (2005). *Haruki Murakami and the music of words*. Harvill Press.
- Strecher, M. C. (1999). Magical realism and the search for identity in the fiction of Murakami Haruki. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 25(2), 263–298.
- Strecher, M. C. (2002). *Dances with sheep: The quest for identity in the fiction of Murakami Haruki*. University of Michigan, Center for Japanese Studies.
- Strecher, M. C. (2011). At the critical stage: A report on the state of Murakami Haruki studies. *Literature Compass*, 8(11), 856–869.
- Susman, W. (1973). *Culture as history*. Pantheon.
- Thomson, D. (1996). *Rosebud: The story of Orson Welles*. Vintage.
- Tsurumi, K. (1970). Some comments on the Japanese student movement in the sixties. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5(1), 104–112.
- Wakatsuki, T. (2018). Haruki Murakami as a cosmopolitan phenomenon: From "ordinary" to "celebrity." *Celebrity Studies*, 9(1), 84–98.
- Zielinska-Elliott, A. (2015). Murakami international: The translation of a literary phenomenon. *Japanese Language and Literature*, 49(1), 93–107.

Toward the Establishment of Cosmopolitan Norms: Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib

MORISHIMA, Atsuki

Abstract: This paper examines the establishment of cosmopolitan norms from a theoretical perspective. Section 1 responds to criticisms of such norms as being vulnerable to serving the particular interests of powerful states under the guise of universalistic claims. While accepting this criticism, this paper nevertheless argues for the continued importance of cosmopolitan norms. The following two sections focus on the global learning processes that such norms require. Section 2, following Jürgen Habermas, examines intercultural or cross-cultural discourse. Section 3 highlights Seyla Benhabib's concept of "democratic iterations" as complementing Habermas's framework. Accordingly, this paper seeks to demonstrate the significance of cosmopolitan norms and to theorize possible pathways for their establishment.

Introduction

In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant introduces a third type of law—cosmopolitan law—alongside domestic and international law (cf. Kant, 1964 [1795], pp. 125–126). Unlike domestic law, which regulates relations among individuals within a state, and international law, which regulates relations among states, cosmopolitan law aims to establish legal conditions that transcend state boundaries. According to Jürgen Habermas, this conceptual expansion in Kant's legal theory constituted "a consequential innovation" (Habermas, 1996, p. 192).¹ More than two centuries later, however, the very idea of cosmopolitan norms has become rather familiar. The notion of human rights commonly accepted worldwide exemplifies such cosmopolitan norms: It refers to standards that apply to all human beings irrespective of national borders.

At the same time, difficulties in the establishment of cosmopolitan norms are well recognized today. By their very nature, cosmopolitan norms "limit the sovereignty of states and their representatives and oblige them to treat their citizens and residents in accordance with certain human rights standards" (Benhabib, 2011, p. 124). That is, the universalistic demands of cosmopolitan norms often constrain the sovereignty claims of states, which both constitutes the distinctiveness of cosmopolitanism and impedes its realization. Contemporary wars, conflicts, and their associated arbitrary interventions testify to the simple fact that norms overriding state sovereignty have yet to be fully institutionalized. The establishment of cosmopolitan norms remains a project in progress; this task has confronted humanity from Kant's era to our own.²

¹ All translations from German in this paper are the author's own.

² Borrowing from Kant, we can frame this task as follows: "If it is a duty, and if there is at the same time a well-grounded hope, to make real a state of public law—

However, the lofty slogan of undertaking a task for humanity inevitably encounters Carl Schmitt's pointed warning: "Whoever invokes 'humanity' intends to deceive" (Schmitt, 1963, p. 55). Schmitt's incisive critique of efforts to limit state sovereignty must be reconsidered if we wish to construct cosmopolitan norms (Section 1), but does not bring that project to a halt. Even in the face of Schmitt's challenge, Habermas defends the pursuit of cosmopolitan normativity; his attempt merits systematic examination (Section 2). Finally, drawing on Seyla Benhabib—who stands in the tradition of discourse theory associated with Habermas—and her notion of "democratic iterations," I focus on the global learning processes involved in the establishment of cosmopolitan norms (Section 3).

1. Critiques of Cosmopolitan Norms

In this section, I examine the major critiques of cosmopolitan norms. By their very nature of acting to limit states' sovereignty, cosmopolitan norms are inherently contentious. Precisely because they may entail unwarranted intrusions into the affairs of sovereign states, cosmopolitan norms pose a certain risk. Examples of failed "humanitarian interventions" authorized by the UN Security Council in the name of the international community—Somalia, Rwanda, Darfur, and Kosovo, among others—illustrate the precariousness of such cosmopolitan norms as human rights, lending weight to the criticism that cosmopolitan norms can ultimately serve to justify imperialist or colonial ambitions.³ Any defense of cosmopolitan normativity must therefore begin by addressing such critiques.

Habermas responds to these concerns in his engagement with Carl Schmitt's critique of moral universalism in 1932, when there were far fewer historical examples of the instrumentalization of human rights than we have today. Nevertheless, his argument retains some contemporary relevance.

When a state, in the name of humanity, fights its political enemy, this is not a war of humanity. Instead, it is a war in which a particular state seeks to appropriate a universal concept for itself in order to identify with it (at the expense of its enemy), just as one may misuse the ideas of peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim them for oneself and deny them to one's enemies. "Humanity" is an especially beneficial ideological instrument for imperialist expansion, and, in its ethical-humane form, a specific vehicle of economic imperialism. [...] Whoever invokes "humanity" intends to deceive. (Schmitt, 1963, p. 55)

Schmitt here articulates a sharp critique of counterfeit universality: "Humanity as such cannot wage war" (*ibid.*, p. 54), for there can be no enemy of "humanity" as a

even if only through an approximation that advances infinitely—then *perpetual peace* is not an empty idea, but rather a task that, being solved bit by bit, continuously comes closer to its goal [...]."

³ For a discussion of the arbitrary use of human rights to legitimize military intervention in other countries, see Maus (1999).

whole⁴—unless one introduces science-fictional scenarios of extraterrestrial beings. This is, in a sense, a simple logical point: “The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy” (*ibid.*, p. 55). No matter who is designated an enemy of humanity, such an enemy does not thereby cease to be human. Thus, when an actor “fights its political enemy in the name of humanity,” the enemy, properly included within the very concept invoked, is excluded. Such a conflict then is not, strictly speaking, a “war of humanity.” In such cases, the term “humanity” is nothing more than a label falsely claimed and monopolized by a particular group. Schmitt adds:

The bearing of the name “humanity,” the appeal to humanity, and the appropriation of this term could [...] only express the terrible claim that the enemy is to be denied the quality of being human, declared outside the law and outside humanity (*hors-la-loi* and *hors l’humanité*), thereby driving war to the extreme of inhumanity. (*ibid.*)

How might one respond to Schmitt’s challenge? One must acknowledge that cosmopolitan norms like human rights can never be entirely protected from use as ideological tools concealing the arbitrary aims of powerful states. However, it would be premature to conclude that we must then abandon concepts like human rights or cosmopolitan norms altogether. This is my first response to Schmitt and to other critics who discern colonial or imperialistic motives in cosmopolitanism. In a sense, Schmitt’s critique is accurate. As Benhabib observes, “it would be foolish to deny, therefore, the ambivalences, contradictions, and treacherous double meanings of the current world situation, which often transform cosmopolitan intents into hegemonic nightmares” (Benhabib, 2011, p. 123). Still, “the hermeneutics of suspicion in the face of these new developments will only take us so far” (*ibid.*). The dangers inherent in cosmopolitan projects do not invalidate the very idea of cosmopolitan norms.

Indeed, cosmopolitan norms are needed precisely to restrain the arbitrary aims of particular states by enabling challenges to unjustifiable state actions. Unlike international law, cosmopolitan law possesses the authority—at least in principle—to hold states accountable even against their will. Thus, even if cosmopolitan norms can be invoked to conceal the arbitrary behavior of dominant states, the very condemnation of such arbitrariness presupposes a cosmopolitan normative standpoint. Only once cosmopolitan norms have been properly established can the legitimacy of actions globally be evaluated impartially and appropriate responsibility assigned.

To summarize, this section examined the critical view that cosmopolitan norms merely serve to cloak particularistic and arbitrary interests. On the one hand, I acknowledge the force of such critiques. As Habermas notes, the “shameless

⁴ The concept of the “enemy” holds particular significance in Schmitt’s political theory, where the defining criterion of the political lies in the distinction between friend and enemy (cf. Schmitt, 1963). In other words, under Schmitt’s definition, there can be no politics in the absence of a distinction between friend and enemy.

instrumentalizations of human rights for a universalistic concealment of particular interests” (Habermas, 1999, p. 227) must indeed be condemned. On the other hand, I reject the extreme Schmittian conclusion that cosmopolitan normativity should therefore be dismissed, for if, as the critics insist, the arbitrary actions of states are to be prevented, then it is precisely cosmopolitan norms that are needed to make such prevention possible.

2. Intercultural Discourse: Habermas

The next question regarding cosmopolitan norms is how they can be effectively established. In doing so, one must, of course, carefully navigate the critiques discussed above. In other words, cosmopolitan norms must not be established solely with reference to particular interests. How then can the universalistic demands inherent in cosmopolitan norms be adequately addressed? This section and the next examine the responses of Habermas and Benhabib to this question.

In this section, I focus on the position Habermas articulated in “The Intercultural Discourse on Human Rights” (1999). Habermas seeks to promote the establishment of cosmopolitan law while resisting the instrumentalization of human rights discussed in Section 1. Central to this endeavor is what he calls “intercultural discourse.” It is instructive first to consider the discourse that this is contrasted with—the “discourse of the West with itself,” which represents the West’s critical self-reflection. Considering the ability to “gain distance from their own traditions and to broaden their limited perspectives” as “the advantages of Occidental rationalism,” Habermas characterizes the Western history of human rights as follows:

The history of the interpretation and realization of human rights is the history of such a *decentering* of our perspective. The allegedly equal rights were extended to oppressed, marginalized, and excluded groups only gradually. Only after arduous political struggles were workers, women, Jews, Romani people, homosexuals, and asylum seekers recognized as “humans” entitled to full equality. In retrospect, each wave of emancipation also reveals the ideological function that human rights had served *up to that point*. (Habermas, 1999, p. 217–218)

Modern human rights can be traced back to the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776), and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789). However, the rights declared in these documents were in fact minimal, applying primarily to property-owning adult men and silently excluding many people under the universalistic claim of human rights. This façade of universality, however, was gradually exposed through persistent political struggle. Western actors, by critically distancing themselves from the concepts of human rights woven into their own traditions, expanded the meaning of “human” and the normative scope of human rights. In this context, the history of the concept of human rights illustrates the advantages of “Occidental rationalism in gaining distance from one’s own traditions and broadening limited perspectives.”

Such Western critical self-reflection on human rights has developed further in a more radical direction, as skepticism has emerged within the Western context itself:

“Have they [=human rights] not always served as a shield for a false universality—an imaginary humanity behind which an imperialist West could hide its particular character and own interests?” (*ibid.*, p. 218). This skepticism overlaps with the critiques of cosmopolitan norms discussed in Section 1. As I noted regarding Carl Schmitt, sharp critiques of human rights as a Western legacy first arise within the West’s own intellectual traditions. Habermas cites, for example, the critiques of Martin Heidegger and Schmitt, against which he seeks to defend human rights. Nevertheless, the emphasis of his argument goes beyond mere counter-argumentation.

Habermas stresses that interpretations of human rights rooted in the West—no matter how critically self-reflective—cannot be confined solely to the West’s discourse with itself. “Western intellectuals should not confuse their discourse on their own Eurocentric biases with the debates that others conduct with them” (*ibid.*, p. 219). In other words, those situated within the Western tradition must distinguish between their own reflective self-criticism and criticism of the West by external actors. The concept of human rights can only be expanded through discourse with those who recognize its inherent Eurocentric bias and position themselves outside of it, for it is precisely through such an “intercultural discourse on human rights” that universalistic cosmopolitan norms capable of transcending particularistic interests can be realized.

Habermas then participates in the intercultural discourse on human rights as a defender of the Western participants by responding to human rights critiques emerging from Asian values. For reasons of space, I will not examine these exchanges in detail. What is important, however, is that Habermas demonstrates the significance of intercultural discourse in practice, rather than limiting himself to self-critical reflection within the Western cultural context. Of course, such a discourse cannot be completed by Habermas alone. At the conclusion of the debate, he adds, “the answer the West has found is neither singular nor the best. In this sense, the current debate offers us an opportunity to become more aware of our blind spots” (*ibid.*, p. 226). Thus, the intercultural discourse on human rights remains ongoing and will continue to evolve.

3. Democratic Iterations: Benhabib

We must now consider how cosmopolitan norms can be established without serving merely as a cloak for particularistic interests by focusing on Benhabib’s proposal. Benhabib’s view is broadly consistent with the lineage of discourse theory advanced by Habermas and others. Here, I focus on a global learning process for cosmopolitan norms that she formulates through the concept of “democratic iterations.”

Benhabib first highlights the tension between the universalistic demands of cosmopolitan norms and the territorially limited claims of state sovereignty that lies at the heart of the issues discussed in this paper. Cosmopolitan norms aim to guarantee the rights of all human beings beyond the boundaries of a state, while states seek to bind their populations to decisions made within their own national framework. These two demands often conflict, giving rise to the criticism that

cosmopolitan norms are merely the imposition of powerful states' arbitrary will (as discussed in Section 1). Benhabib's response is unique in treating this tension positively. She emphasizes the importance of interpreting and applying universalistic claims within the sovereignty of individual states, with the key mechanism being what she calls "democratic iterations."

By *democratic iterations* I mean complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned, throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society. (Benhabib, 2004, p. 179)⁵

Universalistic rights claims are thus "iterated" in concrete contexts, whereby the content of norms that may initially appear authoritative is gradually transformed. When universalistic rights claims "are appropriated by people as their own, they lose their parochialism as well as the suspicion of Western paternalism often associated with them" (*ibid.*, p. 88). In other words, when the citizens of a given state reappropriate and reinterpret universalistic legal norms, they become not merely subjects of the law but also its authors. Only through this achievement of autonomy via democratic iterations can cosmopolitan norms be legitimately established.⁶

To review: Sections 2 and 3 both focus on practices aimed at establishing cosmopolitan norms, the former Habermas's concept of "intercultural discourse" and the latter Benhabib's notion of "democratic iterations." Although these approaches share a common direction, their emphases subtly differ. Habermas stresses the importance of engaging in discourse with others rather than confining the discussion of universalistic norms like human rights to one's own cultural context. Benhabib, while acknowledging the significance of such intercultural discourse, also emphasizes the importance of citizens' reinterpreting universalistic rights claims within their own cultural context. These two perspectives are not in opposition; rather, it is through these twin mechanisms that the legitimate establishment of cosmopolitan norms becomes conceivable in practice.

⁵ Benhabib (2011) responds to a range of criticisms of the concept of "democratic iterations" as formulated in Benhabib (2004) and introduces several revisions (cf. pp. 138–165). Nevertheless, since these revisions do not fundamentally alter the core idea, this paper follows the definition presented in Benhabib (2004).

⁶ Benhabib refers, as examples of such democratic iterations, the so-called French headscarf affair (cf. Benhabib, 2004, pp. 183–198) and the practices of reappropriating and reinterpreting the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by women living under Islamic law (Benhabib, 2011, pp. 132–135).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of cosmopolitan norms that apply beyond national borders, focusing on human rights as a central example. In Section 1, I responded to criticisms of cosmopolitan norms; in Sections 2 and 3, I outlined two approaches to establishing them. The paths conceptualized as “intercultural discourse” (Habermas) and “democratic iterations” (Benhabib) represent processes of legitimization that can eliminate the imperialistic or colonialist character often associated with cosmopolitan norms.

Within these conceptual frameworks, one can also appreciate the significance of this paper’s own contribution. In addressing cosmopolitan norms, I have drawn upon and engaged with the arguments of thinkers situated in Western contexts—first Schmitt, then Habermas and Benhabib. Is this ultimately mere repetition? The answer is no: “The iteration and interpretation of norms and of every aspect of the universe of value, however, is never merely an act of repetition” (Benhabib, 2011, p. 129). Such approaches as “intercultural discourse” and “democratic iterations” themselves, when repeated in different contexts, are bound to transform and deepen in substance. In this sense, this paper participates in a global project of establishing cosmopolitan norms.

References

- Benhabib, S. (2004). *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2011). *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Turbulent Times*. Polity.
- Habermas, J. (1996). Kants Idee des ewigen Friedens: aus dem historischen Abstand von 200 Jahren. In *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zur politischen Theorie* (S. 192–236). Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, J. (1999). Der interkulturelle Diskurs über Menschenrechte. In H. Brunkhorst, W. R. Köhler & M. Lutz-Bachmann (Hrsg.), *Recht auf Menschenrechte: Menschenrechte, Demokratie und internationale Politik* (S. 216–245). Suhrkamp.
- Kant, I. (1964). Zum Ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf (1795). In K. Vorländer (Hrsg.), *Kleinere Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie, Ethik und Politik* (S. 115–169). Felix Meiner.
- Maus, I. (1999). „Menschenrechte als Ermächtigungsnormen internationaler Politik oder: der zerstörte Zusammenhang von Menschenrechten und Demokratie.“ In H. Brunkhorst, W. R. Köhler & M. Lutz-Bachmann (Hrsg.), *Recht auf Menschenrechte: Menschenrechte, Demokratie und internationale Politik* (S. 276–292). Suhrkamp.
- Schmitt, C. (1963). *Der Begriff des Politischen : Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien*. Duncker & Humblot.

Preserving Culture under Occupation: Individual and Collective Agency in Postwar Japan

TAKENAKA, Wakako

Abstract: After World War II, Japan faced not only political and economic reconstruction but also the dismantling of its cultural foundations under the Allied Occupation. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance by the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers threatened the continuity of practices closely tied to national identity. This paper examines how cultural continuity nonetheless survived through individual and collective agency. It highlights Emperor Shōwa's decision to continue the Niiname-sai (Harvest Festival) ritual as a deliberate assertion of cultural continuity, despite the loss of legal foundations. It also analyzes the public's spontaneous participation in his postwar nationwide tours, which functioned as a form of cultural negotiation with the occupying authorities. These cases illustrate that culture endures not primarily through institutional protection but through the intentional choices of its bearers. Drawing on Arnold J. Toynbee's theory of civilizational decline, this paper interprets postwar Japan as a case of cultural resilience, where preservation became an ethical stance rather than a legal requirement. It concludes that this "stance of care"—embodied in both imperial practice and popular participation—offers a valuable perspective for rethinking cultural responsibility in contemporary Japan.

1. Introduction: Significance of the Theme and Research Question

What does it mean to preserve culture under Occupation? Following World War II, Japan faced a severe crisis involving not only political and economic restructuring but also the systematic dismantling of its cultural foundations.¹ The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance² by the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers (GHQ) critically threatened the continuity of traditional practices deeply tied to the nation's spiritual basis. However, unlike post-Nazi Germany, which underwent a thorough negation of its past, Japan managed to maintain its cultural anchor—the Imperial Institution—albeit in symbolic form. This continuity was not accidental; it was sustained by the intentional choices (agency) of multiple actors. The central question of this paper is as follows: What personal and collective choices underpinned this cultural continuity during the Occupation period? The survival of culture is not solely dependent on legal frameworks but is also strongly governed by

¹ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten. P1~2

² Regulations concerning various ceremonies performed at the Three Imperial Shrines (Kenjo, Koryoden, and Shinden). Promulgated by Imperial Household Ordinance No. 1 in September 1908 (Meiji 41) and amended by Imperial Household Ordinance No. 12 in October 1927 (Showa 2). It remained in effect until May 1946 (Showa 21) but is now abolished.

(English translation following a quotation from the *Kokushi Daijiten*
“Koushitusaishirei”(Dictionary of Japanese History)

the continuous choice of its bearers to carry it forward. This paper aims to clarify how the Imperial Institution, the cultural core of Japan, was inherited, transformed, and ultimately survived the GHQ Occupation. We will first detail the process of institutional dismantling during the Occupation (Section 2), then examine the subjective agency of Emperor Shōwa and the populace (Sections 3 and 4), theorize their significance using Toynbee's Civilization Theory (Section 5), examine the legal status of Imperial rituals in the postwar and modern eras (Section 6), and finally conclude by defining the ethical stance and responsibility required for cultural inheritance (Section 7).

2. Historical Context and the Depth of the Crisis

In 1946, the Imperial Ritual Ordinance was abolished, eliminating the legal basis for the Tenno (Emperor) to perform state rituals.³ This measure was part of the GHQ's broader policy to reorganize the religious and ideological foundations of prewar Japan.⁴ Records from the GHQ's Civil Information and Education Section and the Legal Section confirm that the abolition of the institutional basis for Imperial rituals was a central pillar of the Occupation policy.⁵ Thus, the abolition was not merely a technical legal amendment but a structural reform targeting the core of Japan's spiritual culture. A key focus of the Occupation policy was the dismantling of State Shinto. In addition to the institutional abolition of Imperial rituals, this involved comprehensive measures to sever the ties between state and religion, such as ceasing Shinto ceremonies in public schools and abolishing state subsidies to shrines.⁶ Furthermore, the temporary suspension of Ethics, Geography, and Japanese History classes, along with the censorship of textbooks, was an attempt to reconstruct the national and historical memory of the prewar period. These reforms severely shook the cultural memory and spiritual foundation shared by the Japanese society. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance was, therefore, part of the attempted institutional dismantling of Japan's spiritual center. Nevertheless, cultural practices did not vanish. Imperial rituals and related ceremonies, though losing their legal framework, continued in altered forms, quietly protected within society. This highlights a critical characteristic of cultural inheritance in occupied Japan.

³ Cabinet. (1946). *Abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance* (Imperial Ordinance No. 219). *Official Gazette*, 5833, 1. (Accessed November 2025, from the National Diet Library Digital Collections)

⁴ Ara, T. (Ed.). (1993). *GHQ/SCAP top secret records: Gyōsei-hōritsu kankei monjo* [Administrative and legal documents]. Kashiwashobō. Number8.P388~389

⁵ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten.

⁶ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten. p.289

3. Individual Agency: Emperor Shōwa's Quiet Assertion

Amidst the cultural crisis of the Occupation, Emperor Shōwa demonstrated the first active instance of cultural agency. Despite the loss of the legal basis for the Tenno to officially perform state rituals following the abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance in 1946, Emperor Shōwa continued to perform the Niiname-sai (Harvest Festival) as a customary practice.⁷

The Niiname-sai is the most critical Imperial rite, in which the Tenno harvests the new grain with his own hands, offers it to the deities, and partakes of it himself, thereby praying for the nation's peace and abundant harvests.⁸ Following the abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance, the Niiname-sai could no longer be designated as a "state ceremony." Yet, Emperor Shōwa chose to continue this ritual as a "private act" (*shiteki kōi*).⁹

This "shift from public rite to private practice" holds critical importance for cultural inheritance. Specifically, the Tenno's choice to continue the ritual, even when divorced from its legal framework, can be interpreted as an expression of intent not to allow the cultural continuity of the Imperial rituals to be severed. The act of maintaining the ritual itself, despite the loss of institutional grounds, demonstrates that culture can be sustained not solely by institutions but by memory and practice.

Emperor Shōwa's response indicates that the Tenno acted not merely as a symbolic presence but as an active cultural agent engaged in the continuation of cultural practices.¹⁰ The continuity of culture, sustained not by the maintenance of external institutions but by the accumulation of subjective acts, is a crucial finding regarding cultural inheritance during the Occupation period. Examining the postwar Imperial rituals is crucial for understanding the influence this subjective choice during the Occupation had on subsequent Japanese culture.

4. Collective Agency: People's Cultural Negotiation

The survival of the Imperial Institution was not solely a top-down decision; many people in occupied Japan actively chose not to abandon their cultural anchor. Individual choice, coupled with the collective's active engagement, played a significant role in maintaining cultural continuity during the Occupation. Emperor Shōwa's nationwide tours (*Junkō*) from 1946 to 1954 serve as a symbolic example. Some officers in GHQ approved the Emperor's nationwide tours, partly under the assumption that public reverence for the Emperor had already collapsed.

As documented in *The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa*, certain officials believed the Emperor's presence would not generate widespread respect and even

⁷ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

⁸ Nihiname Kenkyūkai. (1953–1967). *Niiname no kenkyū* [Studies on the Niiname-sai]. Sōgensha.

⁹ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten.

¹⁰ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

predicted he might face open hostility from citizens who had lost family members in the war. This reveals that the tours were, at least for some within GHQ, expected to diminish the Emperor's symbolic authority rather than reinforce it.

However, the actual outcome was the reverse: large crowds gathered across the country, demonstrating that the cultural bond between the Emperor and the populace remained intact. The tours provided a rare opportunity for the Tenno and the populace to meet directly amidst the postwar turmoil, serving as a catalyst for restructuring the relationship between the state and society under Occupation. It is known that initial considerations within the GHQ included the abolition of the Tenno system or the Tenno's exile. However, the populace's response during the tours significantly altered these policies. Large numbers of people spontaneously gathered to catch a glimpse of the Tenno. For instance, in front of the Osaka Prefectural Government Building, approximately 40,000 citizens gathered, forcing the U.S. military police providing security to fire warning shots.¹¹ This phenomenon, occurring independently of state mobilization or organized support, can be understood as an expression of the cultural and emotional bond the populace continued to hold toward the symbol of the Tenno amidst social devastation. Dower (1999) described this popular reaction as the "emotional restoration of the emperor's aura," pointing out that the tours contributed to the reconstruction of the Tenno's symbolic authority. Furthermore, the public sentiment is considered to have significantly influenced the decision to maintain the Tenno system, as the GHQ recognized that abolition risked massive social unrest. Thus, the populace's spontaneous participation in the nationwide tours was not merely an emotional reaction but a collective act of negotiating cultural continuity with the occupying authorities.¹² The people did not passively accept the symbolic Emperor system but actively participated as subjects in maintaining their cultural foundation.

5. Theoretical Reflection: Toynbee's Civilization Theory and Modern Japan

In his magnum opus, *A Study of History*, historian Arnold J. Toynbee proposed three conditions leading to the decline of a civilization: the "loss of tradition," "excessive imitation of others," and the "erosion of self-confidence" (Toynbee, 1934–1961).¹³ These points not only serve as a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural crisis in occupied Japan but also offer insights when considering the cultural challenges facing contemporary Japan.

1) Loss of Tradition and Internal Cultural Collapse: In contemporary Japanese society, population decline and rapid aging have reduced the bearers of local communities, making the continuation of traditional events and festivals difficult.

¹¹ Suzuki Masao. (1992). The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa. Ten-ten-sha.P110~P111

¹² Suzuki Masao. (1992). The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa. Ten-ten-sha.

¹³Toynbee, A. J. (1949–1952). *Rekishi no kenkyū* [*A study of history*] (M. Hasegawa, Trans.). Social Thought Research Association Publishing Department.

This decline stems not from external compulsion but from internal structural change, leading to the gradual severing of cultural memory. This clearly aligns with Toynbee's "loss of tradition."¹⁴

2) Excessive Imitation and the Dilution of Cultural Autonomy: Furthermore, with the advancement of globalization, as Anglophone cultural norms penetrate various sectors of society, recognition of Japan's own cultural uniqueness and autonomy is weakening. Scholars warn that this "uncritical imitation" leads to a cultural hollowing-out¹⁵, which corresponds to Toynbee's second condition.

3) Loss of Self-Confidence and the Transformation of Cultural Stance: According to Toynbee, active trust and creative adaptation to one's own culture are essential for a civilization to endure. However, in modern Japan, the intentional stance to maintain culture seen during the Occupation is weakening, and the social and psychological foundations supporting cultural inheritance are wavering. Consequently, cultural decline appears to be proceeding not from external pressure but from internal apathy and the dilution of value awareness. Therefore, the experience of the Occupation period demonstrates that cultural survival is decided not by legal institutions but by the "attitude" and "responsibility" of individuals and the collective. Even today, the challenge of cultural preservation must be approached not as a nostalgic look at the past but as an ethical question concerning the stance we take toward culture.

6. Postwar and Modern Legal Status of Imperial Rituals

The postwar continuation of Imperial rituals in Japan is characterized by their existence outside any formal legal framework. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance in 1946 led to the Tenno losing the legal basis for performing state rites.¹⁶ Furthermore, the 1947 Constitution of Japan clearly established the separation of state and religion, prohibiting the state from supporting Imperial rituals as public ceremonies¹⁷.

In practice, no law in contemporary Japan regulates the Tenno's ritual acts.¹⁸ Neither the Imperial House Law, the Imperial Household Economy Law, nor the

¹⁴ Iguchi, S. (2019). *Kasochiiki ni okeru matsuri no shūryō to saisei no mekanizumu* [Mechanisms of the decline and revitalization of festivals in depopulated areas]. Kyoto University.

¹⁵ Mizumura, M. (2015). *Nihongo ga horobiru toki: Eigo no seiki no naka de* [The fall of Japanese: In the age of English]. Tokyo, Japan: Chikuma Shobō.

Inoue, T. (Ed.). (2000). *Globalization and indigenous culture*. Tokyo, Japan: Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University.

¹⁶ Jumin Lawsuit Case (Daijosai Attendance Case). (2002, July 11). Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.
<https://www.courts.go.jp/hanrei/52273/detail2/index.html> Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Imperial Household Agency Law contains provisions mandating the performance of the Niiname-sai or the Daijō-sai (Great Thanksgiving Festival).¹⁹ Instead, the Imperial Household Agency has consistently maintained that these rituals are neither “acts in matters of state” nor “public acts” but rather the Tenno’s *private acts*.²⁰

A particularly symbolic case involves the constitutional litigation surrounding the 1990 **Heisei Daijō-sai**. The plaintiffs argued that because the Daijō-sai possesses a religious character, state funding for the ceremony violated Articles 20 and 89 of the Constitution. The Tokyo District Court and the Tokyo High Court, however, both ruled that the ritual constituted a “traditional ceremony of the Imperial Household,” and therefore did not constitute a violation of the principle of separation of state and religion. Notably, the courts avoided making a definitive judgment regarding the ritual’s religious nature, emphasizing its aspect as a cultural tradition. This indicates that, despite its uncertain legal position, the Daijō-sai continues to be practiced through a deliberate commitment to preserving tradition.²¹

Despite the absence of legal regulation, rituals at the Three Shrines of the Palace have continued without interruption.²² This demonstrates that postwar Imperial rituals have survived not through institutional guarantees but through the internal customs of the Imperial Household Agency and, most importantly, the will of the actors involved—particularly the Tenno—to sustain them. The persistence of these rituals, despite the disappearance of the institutional framework that once supported them, symbolizes an important feature of Japanese culture since the Occupation: cultural practices can endure even in the absence of formal institutions. Ultimately, the survival of culture is determined not by the legal system but by the *agency* and intentional choices of those who seek to inherit and sustain it.

7. Conclusion

The case of occupied Japan demonstrates that cultural survival depends on the intentional choices (agency) of individuals and the collective, rather than on legal institutions. As symbolized by the continuation of Imperial rituals and the nationwide tours, the attitude to uphold cultural values played a decisive role, perhaps more so than institutional guarantees. As examined in this paper, cultural inheritance should be understood not as a passive preservation of tradition but as a responsible practice that resists external pressure and internal apathy, connecting the culture to the future. This perspective aligns with Toynbee’s civilization theory, especially his point that the loss of tradition and self-confidence leads to a civilizational decline. The Occupation experience revealed that the root of cultural support lies in the attitude of “care,” that is, the conscious choice to recognize the

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

²² *ibid.*

value of one's own culture and to continually act for its continuation. This stance is not limited to historical examples but remains a crucial issue in contemporary Japan, where the cultural foundation is being shaken by demographic decline and globalization. While this paper analyzed how Imperial rituals and the symbolic Emperor system—the core of Japanese culture—were maintained through the Occupation period, the experience also serves as an opportunity to reconsider the ethical and practical significance of cultural inheritance in modern society. The survival of culture is not certain but is constantly supported by accumulating choices. Therefore, the inheritance of culture is not a reproduction of the past but depends on our own stance concerning our attitude toward culture today.

References

- Ara, T. (Ed.). (1993). *GHQ/SCAP top secret records: Gyōsei-hōritsu kankei monjo* [Administrative and legal documents]. Kashiwashobō.
- Cabinet. (1946). *Abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance* (Imperial Ordinance No. 219). *Official Gazette*, 5833, 1. (Accessed November 2025, from the National Diet Library Digital Collections)
- Dower, J. W. (1999). *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II*. W. W. Norton.
- Iguchi, S. (2019). *Kasochiiki ni okeru matsuri no shūryō to saisei no mekanizumu* [Mechanisms of the decline and revitalization of festivals in depopulated areas]. Kyoto University.
- Jumin Lawsuit Case (Daijosai Attendance Case). (2002, July 11). Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.
<https://www.courts.go.jp/hanrei/52273/detail2/index.html> Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.
- Nihiname Kenkyūkai. (1953–1967). *Niiname no kenkyū* [Studies on the Niiname-sai]. Sōgensha.
- Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.
- Sebata, G. (2020). *Shōwa Tennō “Sengo Junkō” ni okeru Tennō hōdō no ronri: Chihō shinbun no hōdō o tegakari to shite* [The logic of emperor coverage during Emperor Shōwa's postwar tours: A study of regional newspaper reporting].
- Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench. (2002, July 11). Jumin Lawsuit Case (Daijosai Attendance Case).
<https://www.courts.go.jp/hanrei/52273/detail2/index.html>
- Suzuki Masao. (1992). The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa. Ten-ten-sha.
- Takemae, E. (2002). *GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku* [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten.
- Toynbee, A. J. (1949–1952). *Rekishi no kenkyū* [A study of history] (M. Hasegawa, Trans.). Social Thought Research Association Publishing Department.
- Toyoshita, N. (2015). *Shōwa Tennō no sengo Nihon: “Kenpō-Anpo taisei” ni itaru michi* [Emperor Showa's postwar Japan: The path toward the constitutional and security treaty regime]. Iwanami Shoten.

Japan and China's View on Ethical, Legal and Social Implications of Neuroscience

HAO, Zhechen, Ph.D.

Abstract: Neuroscience is rapidly expanding beyond clinical medicine into fields such as robotics, AI, education, and consumer technologies, raising complex ethical, legal, and social implications (ELSI). This article examines how Japan and China understand and address ELSI around neuroscience by analyzing both science and technology policy and media coverage. First, I review policy documents to clarify how each country positions neuroscience and whether ethics and social issues are explicitly incorporated. Second, I conduct quantitative text analysis of major national newspapers in Japan (1980–2022) and China (2000–2022) using *KH Coder*, applying correspondence analysis and coding analysis. The results show that Japanese newspapers shifted from basic and medical research in the 1990s to education and “brain boom” topics after 2000, and to AI/robotics collaboration after 2010, while sustained attention to ethical issues—especially privacy—emerged from the mid-2000s. In China, coverage of basic, domestic, and overseas research remained relatively stable, but references to robotics, AI, and policy themes increased markedly after the launch of the China Brain Project in 2016, with ethics (e.g. privacy violations, personality rights, health risks, animal ethics) becoming more salient thereafter. The comparison highlights contrasting policy–media dynamics and offers insights for developing context-sensitive ELSI governance for neuroscience.

Introduction

Neuroscience has rapidly expanded beyond hospitals and clinics into many areas of everyday life. Today, brain research is closely connected with robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), education, and even consumer products such as games, wellness apps, and wearable devices. Because the brain is so deeply tied to who we are as people, this expansion does not only raise technical questions (what can technology do?) but also social and moral questions (what should we do with it?). These broader questions are often discussed under the label ELSI, which stands for Ethical, Legal and Social Implications. In simple terms, ELSI refers to the ways in which new science and technology may affect people's rights, daily lives, and social values. In the case of neuroscience and neurotechnology, typical questions include: Can others read my thoughts if brain activity can be measured in detail? Could our thoughts or emotions be influenced or manipulated by brain technologies? Should there be limits on using neuroscience to enhance memory, attention, or other abilities? Who is responsible if a brain–computer interface affects a person's decisions or behavior?

These are not just abstract philosophical questions. They have very practical consequences for law, medicine, education, and everyday life. For example, if brain data are used in schools or workplaces, rules are needed to decide who can access this data, how it can be stored, and how to prevent discrimination. If companies sell devices that claim to improve children's brains, there must be ways to check their safety and to avoid misleading advertisements.

Because of this, policymakers around the world face growing pressure to create “governance frameworks” for neuroscience and neurotechnology. Governance

frameworks are the laws, guidelines, and institutions that help society decide how to use new technologies in a fair and responsible way. They include, for example, research ethics guidelines, data protection rules, and standards for medical devices. However, making good rules is not easy. It is not enough to copy regulations from other countries or to rely only on expert opinion. As Inui (1982) points out, policy always reflects each country's own history, culture, and national priorities. In addition, the way people think about neuroscience is strongly shaped by the media, such as newspapers and television. As Nisbet et al. (2003) argue, media do more than simply "deliver information." They select which stories to cover, decide how to frame them (for example, as a "breakthrough," a "risk," or a "controversy"), and choose which voices to highlight. In this sense, media plays a central role in shaping public opinion about science and technology.

This article aims to provide practical insights for developing ethical guidelines for neuroscience by focusing on how two important countries, Japan and China, deal with ELSI issues. Rather than treating neuroscience as a purely scientific topic, I view it as part of a broader social process in which policy, media, and public debate interact with each other.

Japan and China are chosen as comparative cases for several reasons. Both are major actors in neuroscience and related technologies such as AI and robotics. Both have national strategies that highlight brain research as a key area for future innovation. At the same time, they differ in political systems, media environments, and cultural traditions, for example, in how individual rights and the role of the state are understood. Comparing these two countries therefore makes it possible to see how different social and political contexts shape the way ELSI is discussed and addressed. In addition, this case selection is methodologically practical: I have the language proficiency to analyze policy and media materials in both Japanese and Chinese in the original languages, which enables systematic and comparable data collection across the two countries.

From a social-science perspective, analyzing both policy and media is an appropriate and necessary approach. Policies help determine what kinds of research are promoted, what funding is provided, and which areas are defined as socially important (Inui1982). Media, on the other hand, help determine how the public understands those policy choices and scientific developments (Nisbet et al. 2003). When we look at them together, we can see not only what governments and experts intend, but also how these intentions are translated, simplified, or sometimes distorted as they enter public debate. Based on this approach, the article asks the following questions:

- 1) How do Japanese and Chinese science and technology policies position neuroscience and its ELSI?
- 2) How do major newspapers in Japan and China report on neuroscience and its ELSI, and how have these reporting patterns changed over time?

By answering these questions, this article makes three contributions to research on neuroscience governance and ELSI. First, it provides comparative empirical evidence showing that ELSI concerns do not emerge simply as a direct reaction to scientific advances, they become salient through the interaction between state policy

priorities and media discourse. Second, the Japan–China comparison demonstrates that this interaction varies systematically across political and media environments, identifying differences in the timing, dominant themes, and public visibility of ELSI issues. Third, by specifying the conditions under which ELSI becomes prominent, the findings offer a framework for anticipating when and how ethical debates are likely to surface in different national contexts. These results have practical implications for policymakers and professional communities: they support the design of context-sensitive ethical guidelines and communication strategies that are aligned with each country’s institutional and cultural settings.

Literature Review

Neuroscience is the scientific study of the brain and the nervous system, and how they produce our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and illnesses. As neuroscience has developed, many people have begun to worry not only about what science can do, but also about its wider consequences for society. These concerns are often discussed under the heading of “ELSI”.

One way to understand how societies think about these issues is to look at newspapers and other media. Newspapers do not just report scientific facts; they also choose which topics to highlight, what kind of language to use, and which worries or expectations to emphasize. In this sense, media coverage helps shape how the public understands neuroscience and its risks and benefits. For this reason, many previous studies on neuroscience and ELSI have used newspaper articles as their main data source. A common method in this area is “coding analysis.” In simple terms, researchers first collect a large number of articles, then read them and assign “codes” to each one according to what kind of content it contains. For example, if an article mentions privacy, it might be given the code “privacy” ; if it talks about discrimination or fairness, it might be given the code “justice” and so on. By counting how often each code appears, and in what kinds of articles, researchers can see which ELSI topics are most visible in the media and how they change over time.

Racine (2010) is one of the representative studies in this field. Racine collected 1,256 newspaper articles related to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) that were published in the United States and the United Kingdom between 1995 and 2004. The articles were obtained from the LexisNexis Academic database using search terms such as “neuro” and “imaging,” as well as “functional magnetic resonance imaging” and “fMRI.” fMRI is a technology that measures changes in blood flow in the brain, and it has often been presented in the media as something that can “read the mind” or make invisible mental states visible. Racine wanted to know how often ethical, legal, and social issues appeared in these articles and what kinds of concerns were mentioned. To do this, the study used a systematic coding analysis. Each article was examined and given codes related to different ELSI themes. The results showed that 28% of all sampled articles referred to at least one ELSI topic. At first glance, this may seem like a relatively high proportion, but it also means that more than 70% of articles did not mention ethical or social concerns at all, even though fMRI is a powerful technology with many potential impacts.

Looking more closely at the distribution of specific topics, Racine reported the following frequencies: discrimination (4.8%), privacy (3.3%), informed consent (2.6%), justice (1.4%), duty and responsibility (1.0%), dignity (0.6%), enhancement (0.5%), eugenics (0.5%), and animal rights (0.4%). In other words, only a small fraction of the total sample dealt with each individual concern. For example, articles that discussed discrimination or privacy were clearly in the minority. This suggests that, during the period studied, media coverage tended to focus more on the scientific and technical aspects of fMRI than on its possible social risks.

A later study by Gilbert et al. (2019) examined media coverage of another important field: brain-computer interfaces (BCIs) and brain-machine interfaces (BMIs). These technologies connect the brain directly with computers or machines, for example to allow a person with paralysis to move a robotic arm or to control a computer cursor using brain activity. Gilbert and colleagues used the FACTIVA database to collect 4,064 English-language articles published between 1993 and 2017. The sample included not only newspapers, but also academic journals, general magazines, blogs and other media. The search terms were “brain-computer interface” and “brain-machine interface.”

Like Racine, Gilbert et al. used coding analysis to investigate how these articles framed BCIs and what kinds of ethical issues were mentioned. They created several coding categories to describe the tone and content of the coverage. For example, articles were coded as “positive,” “overly positive,” “negative,” “overly negative,” “neutral,” “medical applications,” “enhancement,” “future prospects of the technology,” “urgency due to technological progress,” and “ethical issues.” The overall distribution was as follows: “positive” (76.91%), “overly positive” (25.27%), “negative” (1.6%), “overly negative” (0.5%), “ethical issues” (2.7%), “neutral” (12.6%), “medical applications” (61.16%), “enhancement” (26.64%), “future prospects of the technology” (70.64%), and “urgency due to technological progress” (2.8%). These numbers show that most articles talked about BCIs in a positive or even overly positive manner, and that many reports stressed the future potential and medical usefulness of technology. However, only 2.7% of all articles directly referred to ethical issues.

Gilbert et al. also used their coding results to point out problems in media communication. In many articles, especially those coded under “future prospects of the technology” and “medical applications,” the language went beyond what was supported by scientific evidence. Some reports included science-fiction-like predictions or exaggerated expectations, such as dramatic scenarios of human enhancement through BCIs. These narratives can create a gap between what technology can actually do at present and what the public believes it might soon achieve.

Taken together, these prior studies show three important points that are relevant for the present research. First, newspapers and other media play a key role in shaping how people understand neuroscience and its ELSI. They do not simply mirror scientific facts but actively construct optimistic or pessimistic stories around new technologies. Second, even in English-speaking countries where ELSI debates are relatively advanced, explicit discussion of ethical and social issues often appears

only in a minority of articles, while a large share of coverage focuses on scientific progress or technological promise. Third, when the media do talk about ethics, they tend to highlight a fairly similar set of concerns: privacy, discrimination, informed consent, misuse, dignity, and enhancement.

Building on these insights, my study examines how neuroscience and its ELSI are reported not in English-language media, but in Japanese and Chinese newspapers. By comparing the patterns identified in Japan and China with the trends found in previous English-language studies, it becomes possible to see how different media systems and policy environments shape public discussions of neuroscience and its ethical, legal, and social implications.

Method and Conclusion

This study examines two primary objects of analysis—science and technology policy and the media. The policy documents analyzed in this study are publicly available online, and I collected all such documents available by 2025. For the policy analysis, I systematically review Japanese science and technology policies since the 1980s, and Chinese science and technology policy since 2000s to clarify how broader policy trends have shaped neuroscience research and how ELSI has been addressed within these frameworks. In Japan, from the 1980s through the early 2000s, the central priorities of national science and technology policy were the strengthening of basic research and the improvement of research environments. Consistent with this orientation, policies for neuroscience between 1980 and 2006 emphasized the promotion of fundamental research and the expansion of research-support systems. From the late 2000s onward, as national policy increasingly prioritized innovation, brain research was reoriented toward a more comprehensive, strategically coordinated agenda. This shift was marked by the launch of the “Strategic Research Program for Brain Sciences” in 2008, which signaled a transition to a new policy phase. Moreover, *the Third Science and Technology Basic Plan* (2006) explicitly articulated the need to respond to ELSI, which stimulated the establishment of neuroethics research projects and the expansion of related workshops in Japan. In the *First Recommendation* issued in 2009, ELSI was discussed in a more systematic manner alongside the promotion of neuroscience research and development, and its anticipated social applications. After 2010, Japanese brain research entered an era of intensified international competition. In response to the emergence of large-scale brain initiatives in Europe and the United States, Japan adopted a more proactive strategy, culminating in the launch of “Brain/MINDS” (2014) and “Brain/MINDS Beyond” (2018). These programs built on Japan’s comparative strength in primate research while simultaneously positioning the country within global scientific competition.

In contrast, China has positioned science and technology as a driving force of economic development since the 1980s. With the growing emphasis on promoting scientific research in the 1990s, national policy attention increasingly extended to the advancement of neuroscience. Beginning in 1995, the “Revitalizing the Nation through Science and Education” strategy explicitly framed national development through science and technology, setting the enhancement of “indigenous innovation

capacity” as a core objective and accelerating the construction of research infrastructure. Within this policy orientation, public support for neuroscience expanded and policy interest deepened. The *2006 National Medium- and Long-Term Science and Technology Development Plan* designated neuroscience as one of the frontier science and technology fields and outlined future research directions. Since 2016, neuroscience has been continuously incorporated as a priority area in the 13th and 14th *Five-Year Plans*, with institutional arrangements consolidated under a national key-project framework. Responding to the global wave of large-scale brain initiatives, China launched the “China Brain Project” in 2016, aiming not only to strengthen basic research but also to promote applications in disease treatment and AI-related fields.

In China, current neuroscience-related policy documents do not yet articulate a comprehensive response to the ethical, legal, and social implications of brain research. Instead, ethical issues arising in clinical neuroscience research are primarily addressed through the direct incorporation of international ethical guidelines, which are cited and applied within the domestic regulatory framework. While this approach anchors Chinese practice in globally recognized bioethical standards, it also suggests that context-specific ethical concerns related to neuroscience have not yet been fully translated into dedicated national policy provisions.

For the media analysis, this study examines major national newspapers in Japan (Asahi Shimbun, Yomiuri Shimbun, Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Mainichi Shimbun) and representative newspapers in China (People’s Daily, Xinhua News, China News Service, and Guangming Daily). Articles related to neuroscience published between 1980 and 2022 were collected, and a content analysis was conducted to identify the main focal points of neuroscience reporting and ELSI, as well as their historical shifts. The corpus consists of 6,500 Japanese articles and 8,803 Chinese articles. Due to database limitations, however, the Chinese dataset is available only from 2000 onward. Firstly, I conducted a quantitative analysis to examine the yearly trend in the number of articles. A descriptive examination of article volume revealed sharp increases in coverage during periods in both countries: Japanese reporting underwent a significant increase from 2003 to 2009, whereas Chinese reporting grew rapidly after 2016. In each country, the period during which the number of newspaper articles increased sharply corresponded to specific developments in society. In Japan, from around 2000 onward, a so-called “brain boom” led to the widespread dissemination of information related to neuroscience. In China, a similar surge occurred after the launch of the “China Brain Project” in 2016.

Next, I used the quantitative text-analysis software *KH Coder* to carry out two types of analysis: correspondence analysis and coding analysis. In simple terms, the correspondence analysis identified which keywords were associated with each year, and how these associations changed over time. The coding analysis examined what kinds of ELSI-related topics appeared in newspaper coverage. The codes used in the analysis are shown in Table 1.

Coding categories for Japan and China' media (Table 1)	
1. Basic research	7. Applications to education
2. Overseas research	8. Applications to robots/ artificial intelligence
3. Domestic research	9. Applications to medical
4. Celebrity	10. Policy-related
5. Researchers	11. Pseudoscience
6. Politicians	12. ELSI (Ethical, Legal and Social Issues)

For Japanese newspapers, articles from around 1990 to 2000 focused mainly on basic brain science and medical research. After 2000, the topics became more varied. As the total number of articles increased, words such as “games,” “children,” and “education” began to stand out, suggesting that the media increasingly linked brain science to issues involving young people and schools. From 2010 onward, keywords related to putting neuroscience into practice in society, especially in connection with AI and robotics—became more prominent.

In Chinese newspapers, articles from 2008 to 2015 mainly reported on “overseas research developments” and “information about scientific projects.” From 2016 to 2019, words such as “applied development,” “robots and artificial intelligence,” “medical applications,” and “education” appeared more often, showing growing interest in how neuroscience could be used in practice. From 2020 onward, newspapers continued to cover the “China Brain Project”, while also paying more attention to social systems and government policy. In particular, information related to the government’s white paper on building a “moderately prosperous society in all respects” became an important theme from around 2011. When the number of articles increased sharply in 2016, at the time of the official announcement of the “China Brain Project”, the media strongly reflected the project’s goals and priorities.

Overall, these results suggest a clear difference in media logic: Japanese newspapers tend to choose topics in response to social problems and events, while Chinese newspapers report on neuroscience in closer connection with national policies and state-led projects.

Coding analysis gives a more detailed picture of how the media in each country talked about neuroscience. In Japanese newspapers, the 1990s mainly stressed “basic research.” After 2000, there was more reporting on “celebrity” (especially Kenichiro Mogi) and on how brain science could be used in education. Since around 2010, the main focus has shifted toward links with robotics and AI, showing strong interest in how neuroscience can be combined with new technologies in society.

In China, by contrast, the share of articles on “basic research,” “domestic research,” and “overseas research” stayed fairly stable over time, without big changes. However, after the China Brain Project started in 2016, mentions of applications in robotics and AI clearly increased. Terms related to government policy and politicians appeared especially often in 2021 and 2022, suggesting that policy agendas were becoming more visible in media coverage.

Overall, the proportion of ELSI-related coverage remains relatively low in both Japan and China's media, compared with coverage focused on basic research and applications. About ELSI, Japanese newspapers began to report continuously on ethics-related issues tied to neuroscience from around 2005, with "privacy" emerging as the central concern. In Chinese newspapers, ethical topics became more prominent after 2016, and discussions referred to privacy violations, personality rights, health risks related to AI, robot, biology and animal ethics.

ELSI appeared in Japan and China's policy and media		
	Japan	China
Policy	2009～ a more systematic manner relate to application	not yet
Media	2006～ pay more attention to "privacy"	2016～ various issues in the fields of AI, robot and biology

References

- Gilbert, F., Connie P., Jan V., & Wendy G. (2019). Increasing Brain-Computer Interface Media Depictions: Pressing Ethical Concerns, *Brain-Computer Interfaces*, 6(3), 49-70.
- Nisbet, M. C., Dominique, B. and Adrianne, K. (2003). Framing Science: The stem cell controversy in an age of press/politics, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 8(2), 36-70.
- Racine, E. (2010). Public understanding of neuroscience innovation and interpretations of neuroscience research. In *Pragmatic neuroethics*, MIT Press, 97-109.
- Inui, S. (1982). 『科学技術政策－その体系化の試み』 . 東海大学出版会, 1-2.

※ This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation.

List of Contributors

(In alphabetical order)

HASHIMOTO, Yorimitsu, Ph.D.

Research on Japanese cultural and transnational history, particularly the history of Japanese-British relations
Professor, Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan.

HORSIRIMANONT, Issara

Major in Humanities
BA, School of Letters, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan

KAUR, Manmeet, Ph.D.

Research on Japanese Studies
Researcher, Centre for Japanese Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.

KOKADO, Minori, Ph.D.

Research on Bioethics and STS (Science, Technology and Society)
Associate Professor, Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan.

KUMAR, Pankaj, Ph.D.

Research on translation studies, comparative literature, and modern Japanese literature
Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Manipur University, Manipur, India.

MOINUDDIN, Mohammad, Ph.D.

Research on Japanese Studies and International Exchange at HEIs
Associate Professor, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Sciences and Global Education, Osaka Metropolitan University, Osaka, Japan.

MOKHTAR, Moin

Research on Comparative Civilization
Completed MA, Graduate School of Human Sciences, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan.

MORISHIMA, Atsuki

Research on Philosophy, Thought and Culture
MA, Graduate School of Humanities, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan.

TAKENAKA, Wakako

Major in Humanities
BA, School of Letters, The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan

HAO, Zhechen, Ph.D.

Research on the Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications (ELSI) of neuroscience
Researcher, Graduate School of Media Design, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan.

ISBN
978-4-908326-14-1

International Affairs Office
School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities
The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan
 (+81)-6-6850-6409
 inter@let.osaka-u.ac.jp

Published by International Affairs Office, School of Letters/Graduate School of Humanities The University of Osaka

Printed in Japan by Noto Printing

Cover page designed by Yutaka MINEKURA



The University of
Osaka