



## **Western Influence on Japanese Culture**

Yuumi Nikuma

Los Angeles, CA, USA

## **Western Influence on Japanese Culture**

Japan has a homogeneous population; around 95% share the same ethnicity and culture. Japan's census reports that almost 97% of the Japanese population are nationals, another strong marker of a homogeneous country (A. K. M. A. et al. 2024). However, Japan is only partially Japanese. Japanese culture has mixed aspects of Western culture. Japanese society acknowledges Western holidays or incorporates foreign words. Its food has foreign ingredients, and Western ideas are seeping in. This paper examines how the Japanese have accepted some, but not all, characteristics of Western culture.

### **Background**

Japan was an isolated country for many years, allowing only minor trading with the Dutch. Its culture and language grew from its Chinese origin and blossomed into Japanese culture. Religion and beliefs differed between each prefecture and its people, making their religion exclusive to the Japanese.

In the first half of the 19th century, European and American ships were weak and needed more power in Japan (Tasevska. 2021). However, Western culture seeped into Japan as more

foreigners moved products in and out of Japan. By the latter half of the 19th century and through the 20th century, much of Japan had already been in contact with Western ideas. The Japanese were forced to adopt Western ideals in the Meiji era (1868-1912) after Emperor Mutsuhito reconstructed Japan to more greatly reflect Western ideals (Tasevska. 2021).

Most Japanese were not initially pleased with changing much of their lifestyle to fit the emperor's Western ideals, but they listened to him. While the Japanese population began to accept some foreign ideas, it kept its independence by mixing tradition and modernism to preserve its culture (Tasevska. 2021).

### **Guiding Questions**

1. How does culture from Western countries benefit Japan?
2. How much is Western culture affecting the younger generation?

### **The Rise of Individualism in Japanese Culture**

Western countries, especially the United States, have individualism ingrained into their culture. Individualism is a recent addition to Japanese culture, but is being adopted quickly. Tracking changes in family matters can gauge how independence influences Japanese culture. For example, divorce rates have risen from 8.5 divorces out of 100 couples in 1965 to 35.6 divorces out of 100 in 2015. Individuality in societies causes family structure to be looser and more accessible. Giving each family member more freedom in their love lives leads to divorce. The rise in divorce rates indicates that individualism is growing in Japanese culture (Ogihara, 2017).

Moreover, Japanese names have also begun to be more unique, taking cues from Western culture—Japanese parents' desire for their children to be more independent manifests in how they name them. Japanese names are created with written Chinese characters and portions for

pronunciation. Over time, common pronunciation of Japanese names has decreased for both boys and girls. Intrecurite written Chinese characters and pronunciation of those characters portions have begun to show up much more. The individualism in name selection started growing in popularity in the 1980s but has begun showing itself more in the 2000s (Ogihara, 2017)

Similarly, pet names are becoming more individualized. Traditionally, Japanese pet names had common names. However, unique pet names have increased. Historically, pets in Japan were not considered family; they were thought of as guards. Western ideas seeping into Japan changed how Japanese people viewed their pets. The Japanese are more likely to build emotional bonds with pets, considering them more as a child than tools. (Su et al., 2018). Japanese people's growing beliefs in individualism are shown by how they choose names for those they care for.

### **The Westernization of the Japanese Diet**

A major study of the amount of nutrients in a typical Japanese person's diet was conducted from 2003 to 2015 (K. Murakami, M. B. E. Livingstone, & S. Sasaki 2018). The study recorded the average food ingredients consumed by 88,527 Japanese adults. With this data, the study's authors created a list of food that a Japanese person eats on average (See Appendix). Many crops on the list did not exist then in Japan; they were introduced when the West raided or sold their crops to Japan. As Western influences spread across Japan, the Japanese people began to eat more items in the "Animal food and Oil" category in the chart, with 0.85 percent of people eating red meat or processed meat. (Murakami, et al. 2018) Meat eating was inherently Western as Buddhist adherents did not recommend the consumption of meat unless it was medicinal.

The Meiji Emperor decided to lift the ban on meat because he believed the Japanese were physically feebler than Westerners, who were taller and heavier. The emperor concluded that

meat consumption was causing Westerners to be larger so he revoked the ban on eating meat to gain a stronger army and population. Meat quickly became a staple in many Japanese meals (Nakamura, et al. 2021). The typical Japanese meal is classified as “one soup and three dishes,” a combination of a soup, two side dishes, and a main dish, typically containing fish or meat. (Tomoko, et al) This type of Japanese-style meal has been prevalent for years, so to the younger generation, having no meat in their typical Japanese-style meals would be a huge change.

### **Western Music's Impact on Japanese Culture**

After the end of World War II, an allied commander played American pop music over Japanese radio for the first time. This began the Westernization of Japanese music culture. The Japanese people welcomed Western music as they were tired of the war, and Western songs were said to be “Bright and cheerful” (Mitsui, 2015). Western songs covered by Japanese singers became popular in the 1960s. Along with these Western song covers, songs with strong Western influence, such as Kyu Sakamoto's "Ue o Muite Arukou", became tremendous hits in Japan (N. Mitsui, 2015). Rock and roll found its way early into Japanese culture in the Westernization of Japan. In the late 1960s a Japanese band, "Happy End," caused a debate all over Japan with their music. Happy End created songs based on folk rock, a genre that had arrived with Westernization. (Boles, 2022) Many Japanese have wondered if rock and roll should be sung entirely in English since the genre originated in the United States. Also in question was whether the Japanese were ready to incorporate Western influences into their music culture. This cultural acceptance of Western music created more variety in the music today; younger generations would even listen to genres such as J-pop, which is heavily influenced by Western music (Boles, 2022).

## **Discussion**

Japan has become very Westernized since the Meiji era. The culture and ideals of foreign Western countries have embedded themselves into Japanese culture. Japanese ideas have begun to reflect American culture, which includes seeking more individual freedom. Much of the younger generation has grown up with Western culture without realizing it. Songs heard on television screens or radio almost always have a Western origin. Pop or the rock genres have been a large part of the Japanese music industry since its popularity in the late 1960s (Boles, 2022).

Meat has also been a part of Japan's younger generations' lives; it is a staple of Japanese meals. Japan's main dish, Washoku, is a Japanese meal containing either meat or fish. When asked to think of a typical Japanese meal, the younger generation will think of meals with meat. Western culture has affected the younger generation without their realization since they were raised with it.

Western culturizing has benefited Japan. The Western culture of individualism has modified Japanese culture in areas such as family relations. Divorce rates have increased as people choose the happiness of themselves over their partner. Children are given many more unique names or pronunciations, building a child's self-identity. Pet names have also begun to show more individuality. Dog names have become much more unique. These ideas of self-importance were not new to the Japanese; however, the belief in these ideas of self-importance has grown much more robust due to outside Western influences (Ogihara, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Western cultural influences have greatly helped Japan's population become less parochial. For most of its history, Japan was an island that had little contact with the outside world and was

very monocultural in its beliefs and practices. Foreign countries then pressured it to open their tight doors and allow access to those of the West. Opening the gates to Western culture has helped Japan grow its own unique culture alongside its old culture. Many great things, such as music and food, have come into Japanese culture from Westernization.

## References

- Arisaka, Y. (2014, June 30). Yoko Arisaka, modern Japanese philosophy: Historical contexts and cultural implications. PhilPapers. <https://philpapers.org/rec/ARIMJP>
- Boles, C. (2022). Westernization and its effects on the sound of Japan. *Global Insight: A Journal of Critical Human Science and Culture*.  
<https://globalinsight.journal.library.uta.edu/index.php/globalinsight/article/view/63>
- Etzrodt, C., Ronald Hrebenar, R., Lacktorin, M., & Nilson, D. (2016). The Application of a Western-Style Liberal Arts Education Model in a Non-Western Environment: The Case of Japan. *Sage Journals*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1163/22125868-12340061>
- Karlin, J. G. (2014). Gender and nation in Meiji Japan: Modernity, loss, and the doing of history on JSTOR. *Gender and Nation in Meiji Japan: Modernity, Loss, and the Doing of History*.
- Milica Golubović Tasevska. 2021  
<https://teme2.junis.ni.ac.rs/index.php/TEME/article/download/1370/546>
- Murakami, K., Livingstone, M. B. E., & Sasaki, S. (2018, July 30). Thirteen-year trends in dietary patterns among Japanese adults in the National Health and Nutrition Survey 2003–2015: Continuous westernization of the Japanese diet. *Nutrients*.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6115850/>
- Margaret Mehl. Music and the making of Modern Japan: Joining the Global Concert. (2024).  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380982073\\_Music\\_and\\_the\\_Making\\_of\\_Modern\\_Japan\\_Joining\\_the\\_Global\\_Concert](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380982073_Music_and_the_Making_of_Modern_Japan_Joining_the_Global_Concert)
- Kazuko Y. Behrens Reconsidering attachment in context of culture. (2016).  
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1140&context=orpc>

- Ogihara, Y. (2017, April 21). *Temporal changes in individualism and their ramification in Japan: Rising individualism and conflicts with persisting collectivism*. *Frontiers*.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00695/full>
- Su, B., Koda, N., & Martens, P. (2018). How Japanese companion dog and cat owners' degree of attachment relates to the attribution of emotions to their animals. *PLOS ONE*, 13(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190781>
- Tomoko Imai, et al (2017) Traditional Japanese Diet Score — Association with Obesity, Incidence of Ischemic Heart Disease, and Healthy Life Expectancy in a Global Comparative Study  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1279770723011739>
- Ullah, A. K. M. A., Chatteraj, D., & Zulkifili, S. N. (2024). Shades of Homogeneity: Redefining Japan's Narrative Through Refugee Acceptance. *Migration and Development*, 0(0).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21632324231220445>
- 欧米のポップ音楽が日本のポップ音楽に与えたもの ~1960年代欧米ポップ音楽の日本語カバー・ヴァージョンからグループ・サウンズまで~. jmta. (2015).  
<https://www.jmta.jp/abstract/pdf/z19-020.pdf>

## Appendix

The chart shows the daily average percent of ingredients consumed in Japan.

	Factor 1 "Plant Food and Fish" Pattern	Factor 2 "Bread and Dairy" Pattern	Factor 3 "Animal Food and Oil" Pattern
Rice	<b>0.34</b>	−0.55	0.16
Bread	−0.19	<b>0.64</b>	0.16
Noodles	−0.21	0.04	0.02
Other grains	0.00	0.06	0.25
Potatoes	<b>0.36</b>	0.00	0.16
Sugar	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.34</b>	0.09
Pulses	<b>0.41</b>	−0.03	−0.07
Nuts	0.18	0.17	−0.03
Green and yellow vegetables	<b>0.50</b>	0.19	0.07
Other vegetables	<b>0.48</b>	0.01	<b>0.33</b>
Vegetable and fruit juice	−0.03	0.15	0.04
Pickled vegetables	<b>0.30</b>	−0.14	−0.09
Fruit	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.40</b>	−0.22
Mushrooms	<b>0.30</b>	0.04	0.08
Seaweeds	<b>0.30</b>	−0.01	−0.04
Fish	<b>0.31</b>	−0.04	−0.15
Shellfish	0.08	−0.06	0.17
Sea products	0.27	−0.12	−0.04
Red meat	0.02	−0.10	<b>0.48</b>
Processed meat	−0.09	0.12	<b>0.37</b>
Chicken	−0.01	−0.05	0.24
Eggs	0.12	−0.03	<b>0.39</b>
Dairy products	0.15	<b>0.54</b>	−0.08
Animal fat	−0.09	0.29	0.25
Vegetable oil	0.00	0.11	<b>0.64</b>
Confectioneries	−0.01	0.23	−0.08
Alcoholic beverages	−0.03	−0.24	0.28
Tea	<b>0.34</b>	0.05	−0.22
Coffee	−0.12	0.23	0.28
Soft drinks	−0.12	0.00	0.21
Salt-based seasonings	<b>0.60</b>	−0.22	0.16
Variability explained (%)	7.43	5.64	5.57

<sup>a</sup> Dietary patterns were identified using principal component analysis based on intakes of the 31 food groups (g/day). Absolute factor loading values  $\geq 0.30$  are presented in bold. Total variability explained was 18.63%.