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The Cherry Blossom and its Influence on Japanese Culture

Gilberto Mejía Salazar*

Abstract

The following research is of a documentary approach, and its objective is to analyze the cherry blossom from a social and cultural perspective, to know the importance and influence that this flower has on society and the environment. Thus, the Shinjuku Gyoen Park and Chidorigafuchi Park were taken as a reference, in this sense, it is understood that within the city of Tokyo there are parks and areas whose purpose is to provide various activities to citizens to contemplate nature, and therefore giving a great show to witness the cherry blossom in its maximum splendor. The influence of the cherry blossom is a unique symbol of Japan, however, this element has gained such popularity in other western countries that it is reflected as a symbol of universal beauty.

Keywords: Culture, Chidorigafuchi, Cherry Blossom, Hanami, Shinjuku Gyoen, Tokyo

Introduction

In the contrasts of Japanese culture, we can find a myriad of characteristics that stand out within society, such as the variety of stereotypes shown throughout historically and at present. Although the culture of the rising sun is deeply rooted in its customs, traditions, religions, and own beliefs, culturally speaking, all of them combined stem from a disciplined society. Similarly, nature and social contrast initiate a very close relationship between nature and humankind, resulting in the admiration of Japanese society for the natural world that surrounds them. This bond between social and environmental wellness has been found in Japanese cities since ancient times.

The Japanese feel a mysterious attraction toward nature that can be represented by a simple daisy born on the roadside. This is why the fusion between the natural and the traditional results in the enriched customs of culture and art (Takanashi, 2013). In this way, identification based on the comprehension and appreciation of the transitoriness of both humankind and nature is grounded in the immediate attraction of people toward those elements that will not remain the same forever, such as cherry blossoms (Farré, 2019). Therefore, this research is based on studying how cherry blossom trees influence society, how people celebrate the arrival of such an important moment, and how it influences people's lives in Japan and other countries. Moreover, it discusses two of the most popular places for people to see cherry blossoms in the city of Tokyo.

The Cherry Blossom Tree (*Sakura*)

The flowering of cherry blossom trees marks the beginning of spring in Japanese culture. The cherry blossom tree or *Sakura* (Figure 1) is associated with changes in nature, as well as with the transitoriness of life. In addition, it is a symbol for the Japanese appreciation for ephemeral beauty (Gomez, 2007).

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In the poetry of the Heian period (794–1185), the *Sakuras* are described as a symbol of the delicacy of nature and human beings (Lorea, 2015).



Figure 1. Cherry blossom trees

The *Sakura* trees are sacred plants for the Japanese, to such an extent that they have been integrated into the daily lives of Japanese citizens. For example, there is a *Sakura* bank in Tokyo and *Sakura* is the name selected for many Japanese girls. The 100 yen coin has a cherry motif on the obverse, and the first song that many Japanese children learn is called *Sakura, Sakura* (Paz, n.d.).

The Hanami Festival

The word *hanami* means 'look blossoms' where the word 'Hana' (花) means 'blossom', and the word 'Mi' (見) comes from the verb 'to look'. Today, when the Japanese refer to *Hanami*, it is understood that it means looking at cherry blossom trees (Ferber, 2016). The cherry blossom tree, *Sakura*, is the national blossom of Japan. Spending a spring day with friends and family and strolling or having a picnic under the pretty trees is a custom known as *Hanami*. Illustrations of this custom date back to the 17th century (Asociación de la Comunidad Japanese de Madrid, 2018). *Hanami* is an activity that can be performed both during the day and at night. At night it is considered completely different because the cherry blossom trees harmonize with the chiaroscuro of the night (Forbes Staff, 2019).

Thus, Japanese words compounded by the word 'hana' reveal the degree of feeling of the Japanese for this natural phenomenon. In the classic literature of Japan, it is a pre-established understanding that the word 'hana' refers to, par excellence, the cherry blossom. We know that the technique of abbreviating expressions to a few words is an important characteristic of the Japanese language and literature (Takagi n.d.). *Hanami* is dedicated to the cherry blossoms, a celebration that is conducted by the end of March or the beginning of April. During this time, there are excursions to places where the cherry blossom trees flower, where people not only meet with their family or friends but also gaze at nature and reflect on the ephemeral character of life (Significados, 2019).

Cultural Aspects

Clearly, Japanese society is greatly influenced by nature, and from a cultural perspective, there are different activities that involve the cherry blossom trees. Spring brings with it the benefits of social

cohesion, creating a unique identity with which Japan is distinguished, offering to the world spectacular landscapes in its cities. This refers to the cherry blossom trees that tinge the urban landscape pink. The *Sakura*, a national symbol, is the representation of a country rich in culture, that is, customs and ideologies that mark an entire ancient generation. The cherry blossom is an expression of the total beauty that signals the onset of spring and, with it, new opportunities and matters of great importance in life.

The *Sakura* (cherry blossom tree), whose beauty has long been an inspiration for Japanese artists, is the most famous Japanese blossom. A cherry blossom sketchbook (*Ōka-fu*), created in the mid-19th century, contains the names and illustrations of 29 varieties of *Sakura* (Figure 2) painted on silk with delicate brushstrokes. The artist Sakamoto Kōnen (1800–1853) is presumed to have dedicated it to Lord Kishū (Biblioteca Digital Mundial, 2017).



Figure 2. Cherry blossom sketches. Artist: Sakamoto Kōnen (1800–1853)

Source: Biblioteca Digital Mundial (2017)

The cherry blossom is undoubtedly a source of timeless inspiration for both men and women in the general culture and the traditions and customs of a Japan. The way this singular blossom is represented can be thought of as the seal that marks a generation that will continue to teach others of the beauty of admiring nature. A clear example can be seen in the following image of blossoms (Figure 3). It should be noted that the presence of the cherry blossom consolidates the representative icon of Tokyo and its culture.



Figure 3. Cherry blossoms in the city of Tokyo.

In Japanese society, the *Sakuras* represent the ephemeral part of human life because the blossoms disappear within one or two weeks (Lorea, 2015). Thus, in these places, we can appreciate how the

Japanese practice Hanami, a cultural aspect of social movements. Historically, an important part of Hanami is the consumption of food and beverages; some individuals and groups bring their own food to outdoor places (Moriuchi and Basil, 2019).

Since Man'yōshū's time, the oldest poetic anthology of Japan, cherry trees with blossoms have been portrayed in poetry as an emotive point of reference. Reunion under cherry blossom trees or Hanami is an important custom that has been passed down through generations. This is due to a fascination with the mystic appearance that these trees take on at night as well as with the way their petals fall to the ground. The Japanese's appreciation of cherry blossoms betrays a special kind of sensitivity (Niponica, 2016).

Social Aspects

In the large metropolitan area of Tokyo, there are spaces or green areas of great importance to society that have social and environmental benefits. These spaces are considered true comfort islands and are home to remarkable cherry blossom trees, which are true generators of social cohesion. Thus, making the most of the little time in which this gift of nature presents itself, the Japanese coordinate their Hanami festivals. Under the shadows of cherry blossom trees, the Japanese celebrate life (Gil, 2015), sharing food with their friends and family (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Families next to cherry trees

If we travel and see cherry blossom trees and experience and participate in the beliefs and traditions of the Japanese, we can realize the tone of enjoyment and social interaction in the city set by a healthy landscape. The experience allows one to take a brief pause from daily life and reflect on the exclusive landscape and the admirable Japanese.

The Role and Japanese Tradition of Cherry Blossom Trees

Within the Hanami tradition, there are references to Sakura. During ancient times in Japan, 'Sa' referred to the god of rice fields, and 'kura' meant a seat for god, which could literally be understood as 'a sacred place for the god of the rice fields to inhabit' (Geeraert, 2020).

Cherry blossoms were, therefore, a favorable sign of the god coming to the village. The god would then return to the mountain with the people's gratitude for a full harvest in the fall. However, one of the reasons that cherry blossoms are so important to the Japanese is that they simultaneously express life

and transience, echoing a concept in Buddhist philosophy that all worldly things are transitory (Geeraert, 2020).

Therefore, traditions are accompanied by unique religious transcriptions, whose cultural value differs according to regions in Japan. It should be noted that traditions are of great cultural value and essential within Japanese society, thus achieving the attention of traditions and customs that reflect a strong historical bond, expressed as a symbol of unity.

Simply put, we can say that within the social and generational status, some examples of the importance of cherry trees are cited.

Rikugien is a perfect example of a Japanese garden from the Edo period. It was built in 1702 by Yanagisawa Yoshiyasu, a feudal lord and vassal of the shogun, a military commander, who was inspired by picturesque scenes from Waka poetry. In the plains of the ancient Musashino region, Yanagisawa dug ponds and built hills to create a classic example of a luxurious garden (Figure 5) fit for a feudal lord (gotokyo.org, 2021).



Figure 5. Cherry trees in the garden of a feudal lord

Source: <https://www.gotokyo.org/es/story/guide/yozakura/index.html>

Another characteristic place where you can see cherry trees is in the Iwashimizu Hachimangu shrine in Yawata city in Kyoto, which shows that these religious traditions place importance on this type of cherry tree, creating a mixture of cultural and religious beliefs (Figure 6). The Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine is known to greatly exhibit the influence of the syncretic fusion of foreign-imported Buddhism and the ancient indigenous religion of Shintoism (Yawata City Tourism Association, 2021).



Figure 6. The Iwashimizu Hachimangu Shrine and cherry blossoms

Once again it is confirmed that religious beliefs are entwined with nature; that is, the sanctuary still imparts the importance of peace and friendship while transmitting the distinctive religious culture of Japan, where it is believed that gods such as Buddha accept all things and appreciate all forms of life (Yawata City Tourism Association, 2021). From there, it follows that people live tied to what they perceive. This is called reality, but it is nothing more than a term. Reality can be an illusion of each person who lives according to their own assumption of what they consider to be the admiration of their own life.

Main Objective

The objective of this research is to analyze the cherry blossom from a cultural and social perspective and understand the importance and influence that this blossom has on society and the environment, as well as being a representative icon of the nation as a whole.

Methodology

This research has a documentary focus based on a review of texts, articles, bibliographies, videos, films, and so forth to begin or resume inquiry into a subject (Alfonso, 1995). Documentary research is a scientific procedure: a systematic process of inquiry, recollection, organization, analysis, and the interpretation of information or data on a subject (Alfonso, 1995).

Thus, the documentary research process is made possible by documents that are the result of other research, such as reflections of theorists, which represent the theoretical basis of object-area research. Knowledge is built from the reading, analysis, reflection, and interpretation of these documents (Maradiaga, 2015).

Therefore, we should try to systematize and pass on produced knowledge with precedence to what is meant to be built now. In other words, some of the proposals and systematic results obtained during previous knowledge procedures to the research that is now attempting to read them and understand them (Gómez, 2011).

The characteristics of documentary research are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of documentary research

It is common to all kinds of research with a theoretical foundation or that is referential. Either natural sciences or social sciences.
It obtains data from the review of documents from a different tenor.
It organizes the recollected data in a consistent manner.
It allows us to rediscover or re-interpret the different aspects of a subject.
It helps to identify voids, omissions, and misrepresentations in the previous reference sources.
It suggests new perspectives and/or analysis theories from the obtained information.
It requires synthesis capacity, inference, and analysis.
It provides solidity to the conclusions of the researcher.

Source: Own elaboration from Significados (2021)

Finally, the necessity of documenting this has to do with the cumulative tradition of science; while we do it, we research exhaustively, avoiding blackouts and omissions, and apply rigorous methods for the organization and utilization of the obtained information (Gómez-Hernández, 2004).

Field of Sstudy

First, we took the Shinjuku Gyoen Park as a reference. This park is a green oasis in the heart of Tokyo between important towers that form the skyline of the busy Shinjuku district (Figure 7).

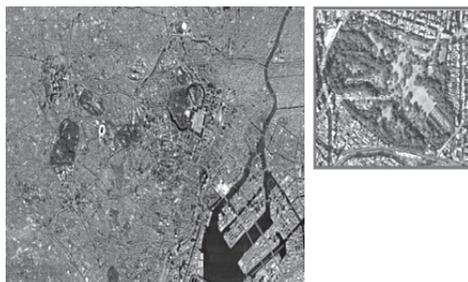


Figure 7. Geographical location of the Shinjuku Gyoen Park.

Source: Preparation from Google maps (2021a)

The contrast between the peacefulness of the garden and the unstoppable rhythm of the city is amazing (Japan Rail Pass, 2019). The garden consists of 58.3 hectares of green spaces, and it is very important to the urban zone of Tokyo (Kobayashi and Kai, 2005). The vegetation provides shelter from the sun's rays, resulting in a decrease of the surface temperature. Thus, the park and its green spaces with trees and grass regulate the temperature in the surrounding urban areas (Kobayashi and Kai, 2005).

Similarly, the Chidorigafuchi Park, located in the northeastern part of the Imperial Palace, is a ditch whose name is attributed to its unusual shape. The structure of the walls recalls the picture of chorlitos or chidori in Japanese. The route to Chidorigafuchi is the most visually appealing and pretty part of the ditch, with a 700-meter-long tunnel full of cherry trees with spring blossoms (Figure 8) (Japan National Tourism Organization, n.d.).

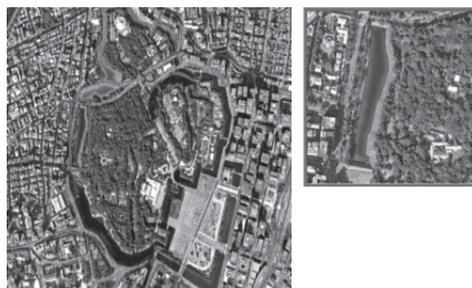


Figure 8. Geographical location of the Chidorigafuchi Park.

Source: Preparation from Google maps (2021b)

Results and Discussion

The cherry blossom appears not only in Japanese territory but also in the West. That is how elements of Japanese culture are seen in almost everything today, such as in local businesses, commercials, advertising schemes, clothing designs, flower vases, animation, toys, and so forth (Tramón, 2000). Similarly, it is clear that the influence of the cherry blossom is a unique symbol in Japan. However, this element has gained popularity in other countries, and it is viewed as a universal symbol of beauty (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Representation of cherry blossoms in various articles of daily life

The cherry blossom, seen from a social and cultural viewpoint, has an immense impact on Japanese social life and is represented in diverse articles of daily life. Therefore, we discuss two places in Tokyo due to their representative spaces of *Sakura* trees, the Shinjuku Gyoen Park. This huge green area, which was part of the home of a feudal lord during the Edo period (1603–1867), became a public park in 1949. Since then, it has been a highly valued refuge by the *Tokyoites* that try to find a little joy from nature in the downtown area (gotokyo.org, n.d.). The Shinjuku Gyoen Park is three gardens in one, containing English-, French-, and Japanese-style gardens (Table 2).

Table 2. Types of gardens at Shinjuku Gyoen Park

French Area	It is considered the most romantic d. Due to the abundance of blossoms, especially the pink ones.
English Garden	It contains wide-open meadows surrounded by cherry blossom trees.
Japanese Garden	It is an integral part of the park 's origins, with big ponds full of islands and bridges. Neat bushes and trees, along with several pavilions, surround the water.

Source: Own preparation from japa.travel (n.d.)

Thus, in Tokyo, there are parks whose purpose is to provide diverse activities to the citizens to gaze at nature and witness the cherry blossoms in their utmost splendor. During spring, one can gaze at more than 1,000 cherry blossom trees that color the park pink with their delicate blossoms (Figure 10). In the autumn, you can gaze at one of the best autumnal shows of color in Tokyo's downtown area. However, the great variety of plants in the gardens and greenhouses make the Shinjuku Gyoen National Park a destination that deserves to be visited throughout the year (gotokyo.org, n.d.).



Figure 10. The Shinjuku Gyoen Park with its delicate blossoms
Source: Kakidai (2017)

In this way, we can see that the park plays an important role in society and the environment, contributing to its diverse fauna, accomplishing a balance between nature and humankind, counteracting the busy day-to-day life of the big city, and allowing residents to obtain healthy social benefits such as distraction, recreation, or simply relaxation.

The Chidorigafuchi Park is a narrow path that extends next to a ditch of the city's Imperial Palace. Numerous locals and tourists come to the area at the beginning of the spring for blossom gazing, i.e., to witness the flowering of the spectacular cherry trees during the brief season of Hanami (LEGO Architecture, 2020). It is precisely in the promenade area, which is approximately 700 meters long, where there are around 260 cherry blossom trees of different kinds (Figure 11). When they flower by the end of March and the beginning of April, they create a beautiful cherry blossom tree tunnel that is worth seeing and enjoying. However, there are also more people during this time of year (Laura, 2020).



Figure 11. Cherry blossom trees at the Chidorigafuchi ditch
Source: Luis Rodríguez (2020)

Conclusion

The tree that best represents Japan is the *Sakura* (cherry blossom tree), which has been preferred by the Japanese since ancient times. The Japanese make the most of the chance that the blossoming cherry trees give them during the spring to organize Hanami (a party to gaze at the blossoms), celebrating many festivities, such as the beginning of the school year and personnel incorporation into companies (Web Japan, n.d.).

Thus, it can be concluded that the representation of the blossoming cherry tree is a visual show that contributes to the social aspects of the lives of the people. Similarly, it has a significant environmental impact in that it guarantees a landscape of wellness and calm in a very busy city. In the spring, more

than 1,000 flowering cherry blossom trees color the city, creating a splendid sight. In turn, the Japanese welcome it with their characteristic Hanami, being devoted to the relevance of such an important blossom that stems from ancient times, bringing with it rituals, festivities, and very important and unique religious beliefs from the country of the rising sun. This is why the cherry blossom is unique and has influenced countries.

Finally, Hanami and the cherry blossoms is the perfect combination for the social and environmental relationships of a country that is constantly growing. It is the perfect representation for the spiritual and environmental relationship between humankind and nature, and the best way is to carry forward these kinds of customs that, with time, create bonds with future generations. It is a glimpse of what nature can offer to residents and tourists and the impact of this blossom on people's daily lives.

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