

REDISCOVERING THE MULTIFACETED ATTRACTIONS OF JAPANESE BATHING CULTURE

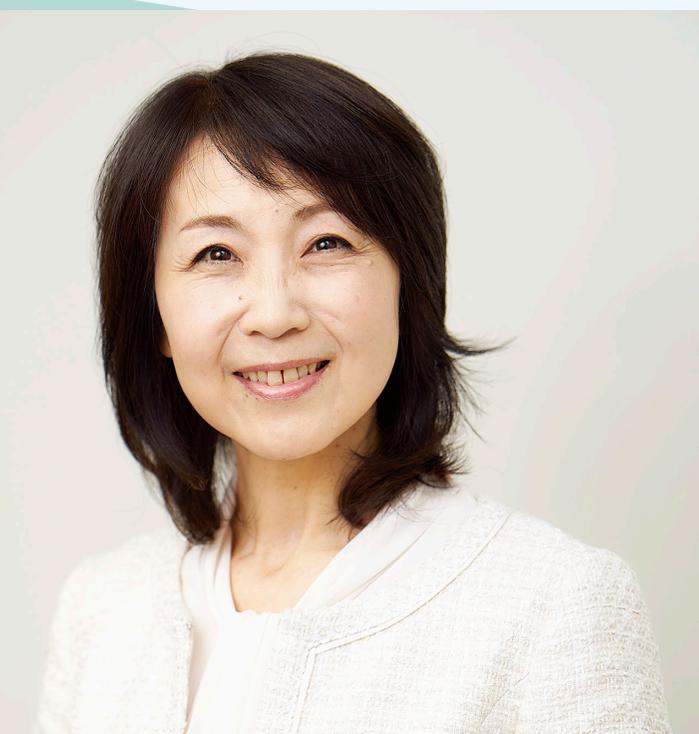
Besides writing essays and books about everyday topics such as food and lifestyles, essayist Yoko Kishimoto is also a board member of the Japan Sento Culture Association. Kishimoto shares her thoughts on how bathing and sento public baths are integral to life in Japan.

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What role does bathing play in Japan?

Bathing has been a norm in Japanese daily living because of the country's hot, humid climate and the dust from volcanic ash. Bathing is said to have two roles: maintaining cleanliness, which is also linked to the idea of religious purification, and promoting health.

The history of bathing in Japan is deeply connected to Shinto and Buddhism. Starting with the preexisting Shinto concept of *misogi*, or purification, the subsequent Buddhist practice of ritual bathing—



Yoko Kishimoto, essayist and board member of the Japan Sento Culture Association



known as *saikaimokuyoku*—made cleansing the body part of religious practice. Temples provided bathing facilities for the public. While the original intent was not to rid the body of dirt, through this practice people discovered the physical and preventative benefits of cleanliness.

From ancient times to the Middle Ages, the mainstream form of bathing was the steam bath, somewhat like the bathing facilities widely seen in Europe such as the sauna-style public bathhouses, spas for recuperation, and herbal baths. *Onsen*, or hot springs, had a long history as places for farmers to rest their tired bodies. In mountainous or seaside areas the natural environment dictated the local bathing culture; people would bathe in rivers, lakes, or make steam baths using raw wood and seaweed.

During the Edo Period (1603-1867) *senjo*, or public bathhouses, developed in urban areas. Initially, a *senjo* was something between steam bathing and bathing in hot water, in which steam came off a shallow basin of hot water. Eventually the amount of hot water used for bathing increased and evolved into today's bathing style, in which people immerse their bodies in plenty of hot water.

Japanese-style bathing is defined by frequency, water temperature and duration. Immersing your body in hot water—approximately 41 to 43 degrees Celsius—for a long time on a daily basis is considered particularly effective. Busy contemporary Japanese people's tendency to watch TV or read books

while taking a long bath at home seems to indicate that they are destressing through bathing, and instinctively feel that it soothes their nerves.

What are your thoughts on *senjo* and *onsen*?

Japanese *senjo* and *onsen* have great cultural significance. Not only the facilities but also how people behave at these places manifests a culture that expresses the Japanese spirit. It is not an overstatement to say that the entire experience is a type of cultural heritage. Japanese baths are places for communication among family members and local communities, and also places to learn manners. Thinking about the person who will use the bath next encourages people to keep it clean and orderly. In public bathhouses open to everyone, people experience *hadaka no tsukiai*, or “naked communication,” with other bathers of all ages. This is also the world of good old Japanese *giri to ninjo*, or “heart and conscience.” *Senjo* still function as places that encourage communication within local communities, even though homes started to come equipped with their own baths in the late 1960s.

The public bath facilities also offer opportunities to enjoy the arts. Roofs in the Chinese cusped-gable style with coffered ceilings became popular after shrine carpenters applied their building techniques to *senjo* construction following the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. Nearly a hundred years of Japanese art is concentrated in *senjo* buildings. Patrons can experience a mix of varying artistic styles in *senjo*, from small Japanese-style gardens and verandas to tile art, sculptures and woven-bamboo clothes baskets. Each craft shows the skills and playfulness of the artisans, housed in buildings that vary from a traditional shrine architectural style all the way to art deco style structures.

The number of *senjo* are slowly declining due to the spread of home baths, soaring fuel prices and a lack of successors to take over existing facilities. However, the attractions and value of *senjo* are being rediscovered, and these institutions are regaining customers. I would love to have visitors to Japan go to a *senjo* to experience firsthand the above-mentioned art and architecture, as well as the Japanese spirit and behavioral culture of caring for and giving way to each other. These tangible and intangible aspects are at the heart of *senjo* culture. **7**