

Alfred Tan

2025 JCCI x Waseda Scholar



JCCI の皆様へのメッセージ

“皆様、こんにちは！JCCIのおかげで素晴らしい留学経験をすることができ、日本の友達や先生たちとの絆を深め、日本とシンガポールのより良い両国関係に少しでも貢献できたような気がした。これは千載一遇の機会と言えるだろう。1年弱の留学は最初は長いと思っていたが、あっという間に終わった。日本にいた間に、日常生活や自然の中で、様々な見たことがないお花や樹木を見たり、日本ならではの伝統的な文化の華道を体験したり、旅行する時にもお花のモチーフを何度も発見したりしたので、お花と樹木は日本文化と深く関わっているのではないだろうかと考えた。これをきっかけに、日本の文化とお花及び樹木の関係性についてレポートを書きたいと思う。このレポートを読んでもらった後で、もしかすると今度日本に行ったら、桜にせよ紅葉にせよ、新たな視点でこの素敵な花や木々が見られる。”

日本文化における植物や花の意義

日本で見られるお花

はじめに

日本でお花といえばきっと桜だと考えがちだ。日本人が最も愛するお花だからだ。毎年日本人にせよ、観光客にせよ、大勢の人が集まって日本伝統文化であるお花見を楽しむ。しかし、どうして桜はそんな強い印象を残しているのか、春の象徴になったのか、気にならないのではないだろうか。

実は、お花見の起源は奈良時代からだった。しかし、そのときに桜ではなく、中国より伝わった梅の花が貴族に好まれた。花といえば、桜より梅のほうを指していた。奈良時代の「万葉集」という有名な和歌集では、梅を詠んだ歌のほうが多く、梅を眺めながら、宴を開き、お酒を飲んだり、歌を詠んだりする文化があった(関沢

& 国立歴史民俗博物館, 2022)。その後、平安時代になり、お花見の中心は梅から桜に移っていった。宮中の花見の宴といえば、嵯峨天皇が 812 年に神泉苑で観桜の宴を開いたのが最初とされている（『日本後紀』）。貴族たちも桜を眺めながら、和歌を詠み、宴会を楽しんだ。ただし、この時代のお花見は主に宮廷や貴族などの文化であり、庶民たちはお花見をしていなかった。それでは、いつ頃から今のように桜の下でお弁当やお酒を楽しむお花見が庶民の間に定着したのだろうか。それは、江戸時代からだった。江戸幕府の第 3 代征夷大将軍、徳川家光は奈良吉野の桜を上野に移植し、また、第 8 代将軍の徳川吉宗は飛鳥山、向島、御殿山などに桜を植樹したため、桜の移植がその普及に大きく貢献した。武士や町人などの庶民がお花見できるようになり、春を楽しむ娯楽になっていった。明治時代になって、公園や学校、その上、川沿いにも桜の木が移植され、現在は日本各地のお花見の名所になっている（“人と植物の文化史,” 2023）。

また、日本には「物の哀れ」という言葉がある。「物の哀れ」は日本最古の長編小説『源氏物語』の重要なテーマの一つである。「物の哀れ」とは美しいものがやがて終わってしまうことを知り、しみじみとを感じる気持ちのことである（徳志育舎株式会社, 2025）。特に桜は長い冬が終わった後、満開の儂い美しさを眺められるのはたった 2 週間弱である。桜が咲いている短い期間を「もっと長く咲いてくれたらいいのに」と惜しまなく、この貴重な瞬間に儂い美しさが見られることに感謝するべきである。春の到来を楽しみにして家族や友人と一緒に桜の下で食事したり、酒を飲んだりするという明るく娯楽の側面もある。だからこそ、春といえば、さくらの印象が強いと言われている。このように見ると、日本人にとって桜は大切な日本文化の一つだと言える。



写真1 お花見（アルフレッド、2026年4月）

国花

桜が日本の国花だと言われても、不思議には思わないだろう。むしろ自然なことだと思うのではないだろうか。桜以外では、菊の花も日本人にとって非常に馴染みの深い紋章である。皇室の紋章と日本のパスポートの表紙に菊の花が使われているので、菊の花が日本の国花だと考える人もいると思う。しかし、さくらも菊も日本で法定の国花ではない。実は日本では法律で明確に定められた公式の国花がないのだ。とはいえ、どちらも日本を代表として広く扱われている。桜は春の花の代表として日本人に愛され、菊は国家や皇室の象徴として、国内外で認識されている。

では、菊はいつごろから認識されているのだろうか。古墳時代に大陸から菊が伝わり、長寿の薬効があるとされていた。奈良時代になり、観賞するために大陸より持ち込まれ、菊の美しさがますます知られるようになった。平安時代になると、菊については梅や桜のように様々な和歌や詩歌が詠まれた。『古今和歌集』や『源氏物語』の中には、菊を読んだ詩歌が多く見られる。同時に宮中では行事として菊を観賞する宴が始まり、菊花紋章の基となる縁起のいい紋様が流行した。鎌倉時代には、後鳥羽上皇が菊の印を非常に好み、衣服や刀剣など、様々な日用品にまで菊の印を用いた。その後、菊の紋は公家でも使われるようになった。江戸時代において菊の紋が複数の大名や神社の紋として用いられるようになった(中島, 2026)。さらに、公共の場でも、日本のパスポートの表紙にも菊の紋が採用された。これにより、海外に向けても日本の国家を代表するシンボルとして機能している。

県のお花

日本の国花は定まっていないが、日本の各都道府県には、それぞれ定められた木とお花があることを知っているだろうか。例えば茨城県の木はうめで、お花はバラである。また、福井県の木は松で、お花は水仙である。特に、広島県の木とお花はどちらももみじであり、県の象徴やアイデンティティにまでになっており、県の特徴と言えるほどである。広島県の名物の1つはもみじの形をした饅頭であり、もみじ饅頭という全国的に有名なお菓子である。しかも、広島県を中心に営業する地方銀行の名前も「もみじ銀行」である。県内には宮島をはじめとして、三段峡、帝釈峡などのもみじの紅葉が美しい名所がたくさんある(広島県のシンボル - 広島県, 2018)。

紅葉狩り

春といえば桜とお花見、秋といえば紅葉と紅葉狩りである。山野に行って紅葉を觀賞することを紅葉狩りという。秋になると気温が下がり、木の葉が赤く色づき始め、紅葉を愛でることができるようになる。山野や公園や溪谷などに行って木々の紅葉し始めた葉を眺めることが多く、秋ならではの行楽である。



写真2 国営昭和記念公園の紅葉 (アルフレッド 2025 年 11 月)

日本の伝統的な文化の意義

お花は日本の伝統的な文化にとっても大切である。日本伝統文化の中には、草木、お花などの植物を切り取り、花器に美しく生けて、空間を飾る文化がある。それを生け花という。生け花は豊かで長い歴史を持ち、日本最古の華道家元である池坊がいけばなの根源とされ、時代の変化と生活の移り変わりにより、様々なお花の表現方法が生まれ、現在 300 以上の流派がある。池坊の理念は先枯れの葉や枯枝までも、みずみずしい若葉や色鮮やかな花と同じ草木の命の姿ととらえ、美を見出すことが池坊の花をいける心である(いけばなの根源 華道家元池坊, 2021)。時代とともに、人々の暮らし方や空間が変化し、それぞれの時代に対応するため、立花、生花、自由花の3つの様式が生まれてきた。室町時代に成立した最も古い様式は立花である。多種多様な草木により大自然の風景を表現することができ、草木の調和の美に注目する。時代によって変化し、近年は二つの型があり、伝統的な型を持つ「立花正風体」と既成の型を持たない「立花新風体」である。立花正風体の特徴は多様なお花で構成により、自然の面影や草木の風格を表することである。一方、立花新風体の特徴は表現の内容を重視し、伝統的な構造を基本としつつ、花材の伸びやかさ、新鮮さを備えていることである(いけばなの根源 華道家元池坊, 2020b)。



写真3 立花(アルフレッド 2026 年5月)

また、生花は江戸時代中期に成立した様式で、1～3種類の花材を利用し、草木が地に根を張り生きる姿を表現する。立花に対して、生花は草木の調和に美を求め

ず、草木の命が現れる出生の美に注目する。立花の同じく二つの型もあり、「生花正風体」と「生花新風体」である(いけばなの根源 華道家元池坊, 2020a)。



写真4 生花 (アルフレッド 2026 年5 月)

最後に、自由花は定まった型がなく、幅広い表現ができ、草木の形状を自由に生けるという様式である。伝統の制約に限らず異なる空間で草木の美を見出すため、生け花の活躍の範囲を広げ、イベント空間、ステージなどを演出するディスプレイとしても活用されるようになった。自由に草木を生けるため、草木の美を様々な観点から見出し、床の間の空間だけでなく、あらゆる空間で表現できるのは自由花の特徴である(いけばなの根源 華道家元池坊, 2020c)。



写真5 自由花 (アルフレッド 2026 年5 月)

このように見ると、様式は時代の空間や価値観に応じて変化し、それぞれの空間に合った形で、自然や草木の美を見出してきた。要するに、生け花には人間と自然の関わりを表現できるという魅力があり、日本の伝統文化において大切なものである。

希望の象徴

ここまでで、お花には様々な機能がわかるようになった。大切な日本文化として家族や友人と一緒に鑑賞したり、食事をしたり、酒を飲んだりして楽しめる機能もあり、県の象徴とアイデンティティの機能もあり、日本の伝統的な文化の中で大事な役割を果たしているが、広島県と長崎県にとってはさらに深い意義もある。第二次世界大戦の後、広島と長崎が大きな被害を受け、戦争の犠牲者も多く、重苦しかった。原爆投下後、甚大な被害を受け、「75 年間は草木も生えない」と言われた。しかし、予想に反して数週間には雑草が生え、広島で鮮やかなカンナの花が咲き、人々に生きる希望を与えた。同時に、樹木が原子爆弾からの激しい熱線や爆風を受けながらも、枯れずに生き残った木々は被爆樹木と呼ばれ、生き残った被爆者は、樹木が再び生えていくのを見て、生命の力強さに勇気づけられた。被爆樹木を保護するため、2020 年 10 月に長崎市が「長崎クスノキプロジェクト」という平和発信事業を立ち上げた。被爆樹木の存在を広く知らせ、戦争の記憶や被爆の実相を伝

え、平和への願いを次世代へとつないでいくプロジェクトである(長崎クスノキプロジェクト, 2020)。現在、保存対象になっている被爆樹木は 50 本ある。このように見ると、再び生えた花や被爆樹木は、人々の希望の象徴であるだけでなく、永遠の平和への誓いという極めて深い意義も持っている。



写真6 山王神社にある被爆樹木 (アルフレッド 2026 年3 月)

神社と神木

最後に、日本の神社に行ったことがあれば、しめ縄を巻かれ、大切に祀られている木や古木を見たことがあるかもしれない。それは、ご神木である。古代から、木、滝、岩などの巨大な自然物に神霊が宿っていると信じ、崇拝の対象するようになった。このような神木にしめ縄を巻き、神霊が宿る神聖な領域と私たちの世界を区別されると言われる。神木はそれぞれ異なる由来を持ち、その由来に応じた様々な願いを人々にもたらしてくれると信じられている。例えば、熱海の来宮神社の大楠は国の天然記念物に選定され、樹齢が 2,100 年を超え、圧倒的な生命力を有すると信じられ、不老長寿と無病息災の象徴とされている。願い事がある方は、願い事を心に秘め幹を一周すると願いが叶うと言い伝えられている(大楠 | 熱海 来宮神社(きのみやじんじゃ) | 熱海 来宮神社-きのみやじんじゃ, 2021)。



写真7 来宮神社の大楠、熱海 （アルフレッド 2026 年2 月）

まとめ

このように、お花や植物は日本文化と深く結びついており、お花見をはじめ、国や県のアイデンティティ、紅葉狩り、日本伝統文化である華道、希望の象徴、神社の神木など、様々な形で人々の暮らしと繋がっている。お花や植物は自然の美を見出す対象だけではなく、自然と人間を結ぶ精神的な媒体でもある。今後、家族、または友人と一緒にお花見をするときも、神社にお参りしても、周りの草木の目に見えない意義を考えながら観賞してみよう。

(～4854 字)

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Cheryl Lim
2025 JCCI x Waseda Scholar



Message for JCCI members

“Thank you to everyone at JCCI for your continuous support. My name is Cheryl Lim, and I am one of the 2025 JCCI scholarship recipients who had the privilege of studying at Waseda University for a year.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to JCCI for this invaluable scholarship opportunity, which allowed me to immerse myself in Japan, broaden my horizons through learning, and create many wonderful memories that I will cherish for years to come.

During my time in Japan, I had the opportunity to explore its rich architectural landscape, from the historic temples and gardens of Kyoto to the contemporary buildings that shape its modern cities. These experiences sparked my curiosity about how Japanese architecture has evolved over time, and how traditional architectural principles continue to find new expressions in contemporary design.

This report documents my observations of Japanese architecture, beginning with my visits to Kyoto’s historic sites before examining selected contemporary buildings across Japan. Through these comparisons, I hope to explore the continuity and transformation of Japanese architecture, particularly in the ways structure, light, movement, landscape and the human experience are shaped across different periods and contexts.

Beyond the architectural analysis, this journey has taught me the importance of looking closely, questioning assumptions and learning from different cultural perspectives. I hope my report offers a glimpse into the architectural beauty and complexity of Japan, and that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed discovering it.”

Japanese Architecture Continuity and Transformation

Kyoto Field Study and Comparative Analysis of Modern and Contemporary Works

Research Question	How have traditional Japanese architectural operations been transformed in selected modern and contemporary works, and what are the limits of claiming continuity across different periods, programmes and authors?
Thesis	The selected works do not preserve a fixed national style. They rework architectural operations - framing landscape, sequencing movement, modulating light and creating degrees of enclosure - through different materials, technologies and social programmes. Kyoto provides field-study evidence for these operations; Tange, Hara, Ando, Kuma and Vinoly demonstrate transformation, not direct stylistic inheritance.

Abstract

This report investigates how selected modern and contemporary works in Japan transform, rather than simply preserve, architectural concerns visible at four Kyoto field-study sites: Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Kiyomizu-dera and Ryoan-ji. It compares timber construction, landscape composition, light, movement, scale and interior-exterior relationships with Kenzo Tange's Yoyogi National Gymnasium, Hiroshi Hara's Umeda Sky Building, Tadao Ando's Water Temple, Kengo Kuma's Japan National Stadium and Starbucks Coffee at Dazaifu, and Rafael Vinoly's Tokyo International Forum. The report argues that continuity is most credible when treated as an architectural operation rather than as a permanent visual identity. Its method combines carefully bounded field-study reflection with published institutional and architectural sources, and recognises that global exchange, different building programmes and different technologies prevent a simple lineage from Kyoto to the present.

1 Introduction

Japanese architecture is often described through a misleading opposition: an ancient, timber-based tradition on one side and a technologically advanced modern nation on the other. This report argues that the opposition obscures the more interesting architectural history. Japan's most consequential twentieth- and twenty-first-century buildings do not merely retain traditional motifs, nor do they simply import a universal modernism. They transform inherited ways of arranging bodies, landscape, light and thresholds under new technical and social conditions. The result is an architecture of continuity through transformation.

The study uses four Kyoto visits—Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Kiyomizu-dera and Ryoan-ji—as field-study anchors for the pre-modern side of the comparison. These sites are treated as evidence of spatial and material systems, not as a claim that a single temple represents all Japanese architecture. UNESCO identifies Kyoto's historic monuments as an unusually broad record of the development of

Japanese wooden religious architecture and garden design; its account also stresses that authenticity has been maintained through rigorously documented repair and renewal, rather than through the survival of untouched fabric (UNESCO, n.d.). That distinction is crucial: continuity in Japan has long involved skilled reconstruction, adaptation and maintenance.

The subsequent case studies are Kenzo Tange's Yoyogi National Gymnasium (1964), Hiroshi Hara's Umeda Sky Building (1993), Tadao Ando's Water Temple at Honpukuji (1991), and Kengo Kuma's Japan National Stadium (completed 2019). Together they cover postwar reconstruction, late-modern high-rise urbanism, contemporary sacred space, and a national-scale public building. The comparison examines materials and technology, nature and light, spatial organisation, scale, and interior-exterior relationships. This report therefore asks: how has Japanese architecture evolved from traditional timber structures and landscape compositions to modern and contemporary works, and which spatial principles remain meaningful when transformed by new materials, technologies and programmes?

2 Method and Scope

The Kyoto visits supplied the historical field-study component. They are used as evidence for questions of material, route, view and edge, not as proof of a timeless national character. I do not claim personal observations that were not recorded. Instead, I identify what the visits enabled me to study - for example, Kiyomizu-dera's projecting stage, Ryoan-ji's viewing edge and the relationship of Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji to their designed settings - and test those readings against published institutional sources.

This is a comparative study, not a complete chronology. It does not claim that every modern Japanese architect consciously derives from Kyoto temple architecture, or that a national style has remained unchanged. Such claims would flatten differences of religion, patronage, urbanisation and global exchange. Instead, the report identifies recurring design questions: how does a building meet a larger setting? How is movement edited into a sequence? How can structure make space rather than merely support it? How do material and light produce an interior condition? These questions permit comparison without denying historical discontinuity.

2.1 Analytical Approach and Limits

The comparison distinguishes continuity of operation from continuity of style. A deep eave, a stadium roof and a glazed public hall do not belong to a single formal family, but each may be assessed for how it frames climate, light, movement or a larger setting. This avoids treating "Japanese architecture" as a stable essence. It also acknowledges that the cases differ in patronage, religion, programme, author nationality and construction technology. The Tokyo International Forum is particularly important in this respect: it is a Tokyo civic work designed by Rafael Vinoly, an Uruguayan architect, and it demonstrates the importance of international collaboration rather than a closed national lineage.

The report is therefore an interpretive comparative study, not a claim of direct influence. Similar spatial effects can arise from different constraints. The argument is strongest where an institutional source confirms a material or spatial fact, and where the comparison specifies the transformation rather than claiming that a contemporary building is "traditional".

The evidence base combines site visits with official heritage and architectural sources, supplemented by architectural-historical scholarship. Bognar (1990) cautions against treating postwar Japanese architecture as a derivative version of Western modernism, while Isozaki (2006) shows why “Japan-ness” itself must be treated as a contested architectural discourse rather than a stable essence. These perspectives sharpen the report’s central distinction: resemblance is not proof of inheritance, and national identity is not a fixed design formula.

3 Kyoto as Evidence of a Spatial Tradition

3.1 Timber, repair and the architectural frame

The Kyoto field sites demonstrate that pre-modern Japanese architecture is not reducible to decorative woodwork. Timber enabled post-and-beam construction, deep eaves, raised floors and layered roofs, but its larger importance was spatial. Structural bays and overhanging roofs establish a legible frame that mediates between protected interior and weather, ground and sky. At Kiyomizudera, the main hall’s celebrated projecting stage gives this logic a dramatic topographic role: the building is both a religious enclosure and a platform from which the hillside and city become part of the experience. The Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto nomination material records that the present complex largely dates from the 1630s after repeated fires and rebuilding (UNESCO, 1994). Its architectural significance therefore includes the capability of a timber tradition to be renewed.

Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji make a related but different point. Their settings prevent the building from being understood as a self-contained object. At Kinkaku-ji, the pavilion’s form is inseparable from its reflection and from the pond landscape. At Ginkaku-ji, the relation among pavilion, paths, garden and borrowed views produces a slower, more oblique spatial reading. Nitschke (1993) similarly treats the Japanese garden as a constructed relationship of form, view and movement. Neither site should be romanticised as “natural” in a simple sense: each is highly designed. Nature here is selected, framed and given temporal meaning through route, distance and viewpoint. This is a useful precursor to modern architects’ frequent concern with site, though it is not a ready-made formal recipe.

3.2 Thresholds, sequence and the interior as relation

The four visits also demonstrate that interior design in Japanese architecture historically extends beyond furniture or finishes. The threshold is an architectural instrument. Verandas, eaves, steps, screens and openings establish degrees of enclosure rather than a single abrupt line between inside and outside. Ryoan-ji is particularly instructive: the dry garden is encountered from a seated or standing position along a veranda, so the experience depends on an edge that is simultaneously an interior viewing place and exterior-facing platform. The garden is not background decoration; it is a spatial counterpart that structures attention.

This relational interior has consequences for light. Deep eaves and filtered openings do not maximize illumination uniformly. They produce gradients—bright exterior, moderated threshold, shadowed interior—that make material texture and depth perceptible. The historical lesson is not that darkness is inherently Japanese or that all later buildings must be subdued. Rather, light operates as a medium for orientation and atmosphere. Modern Japanese architects would deploy that operation with concrete, glass, steel and artificial systems as well as timber and paper.

3.3 Abstraction and disciplined viewing

Ryoan-ji's rock garden also challenges the assumption that tradition means ornate representation. Its compressed composition abstracts landscape into rock, raked gravel, wall and limited view. Ginkaku-ji similarly directs attention through measured sequence rather than monumental mass. These sites help explain why abstraction became a productive bridge to twentieth-century modernism: an architect could embrace new construction while valuing restraint, controlled perception and the removal of the unnecessary. The bridge, however, is conceptual rather than a matter of copying a roof profile or placing timber slats on a façade.

3.4 Kyoto Field Study Evidence

3.4.1 Kinkaku ji Building Water and Landscape

Kinkaku-ji provides a clear example of relational composition. My field-study visit provided a specific example of relational composition: the pavilion is organised with pond, reflection, vegetation and sky, rather than experienced as an isolated façade. The designed landscape doubles the building and makes the viewer position part of the work. This supports the report's argument that architectural aesthetics may be produced between building and setting, not contained in the building alone.



Figure 1. Kinkaku-ji, Kyoto: pavilion and landscape composition. Photograph by Bernard Gagnon, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

3.4.2 Ginkaku ji Restraint and Sequence

Ginkaku-ji provides an equally important contrast. Kyoto City describes its Kannonnden, or Silver Pavilion, as a combination of shoin and Zen hall styles within the refined Higashiyama culture (Kyoto City, n.d.-b). In comparison with Kinkaku-ji, its effect is more restrained: paths, garden surfaces, rocks and vegetation distribute attention across a sequence rather than concentrating it in a gleaming exterior. The contrast is important because it prevents Japanese architecture from being reduced to a single idea of minimalism. Architectural culture here includes both visual richness and

controlled restraint; in each case, composition and movement determine how the building is understood.



Figure 2. Ginkaku-ji, Kyoto: Silver Pavilion, sand forms and garden setting. Photograph by Fg2, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

3.4.3 Ryoan-ji Abstraction and the Viewing Edge

At Ryoan-ji, the field-study evidence is less a building-object than a precisely constructed act of viewing. Kyoto City identifies the dry garden as a karesansui composition of fifteen rocks in five groups and raked white gravel, an abstract representation of nature within a confined space (Kyoto City, n.d.-c). From the veranda, the gravel is not empty background: it creates distance, pause and a surface against which the rocks gain weight. The garden makes absence architectural. By withholding literal scenery and fixing a measured viewing edge, it asks visitors to interpret rather than consume an image immediately. This is a useful precursor to later Japanese modernism, where reduction often becomes a way to intensify attention rather than merely remove decoration.



Figure 3. Ryoan-ji, Kyoto: dry rock garden and enclosing wall. Photograph by Fg2, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

3.4.4 Kiyomizu dera Structure Landscape and Skill

Kiyomizu-dera makes the relation between craftsmanship and landscape technically visible. The main hall uses kakezukuri, or overhang construction: tall timber columns and cross-bracing support the projecting stage. Kyoto City also identifies the adjoining Joju-in garden as an example of shakkei, or borrowed scenery (Kyoto City, n.d.-a). During my visit, this provided a concrete basis for analysing what can otherwise become a vague claim about harmony with nature. The stage is an engineered threshold that projects the visitor toward the landscape, while the framed surroundings become part of the architectural composition. Its apparent visual lightness depends on accumulated knowledge of timber, joinery, proportion and maintenance. Architecture, in this case, is craftsmanship at the scale of a building.



Figure 4. Kiyomizu-dera Main Hall, Kyoto: timber structure and hillside setting. Photograph by Suicasmo, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

4 Modernisation as Transformation

4.1 Kenzo Tange and the public monument

Yoyogi National Gymnasium was designed by Kenzo Tange for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the first Olympic Games held in Asia. Reynolds (2001) shows that Japanese modernism developed through active negotiation between international modernism, technology and the question of tradition; Yoyogi belongs to this broader context rather than to a simple break with the past. Its sweeping suspended roof and exposed structural logic made it an international emblem of postwar Japanese modernity. The Getty Foundation notes that the state commissioned Tange for this pivotal Olympic venue and that it remains part of the 1964 legacy landscape (Getty Foundation, 2017). The building's concrete forms, steel cables and large-span engineering are far removed from Kyoto's timber halls. Its programme is also radically different: a mass sporting and civic interior rather than a temple precinct.



Figure 5. Yoyogi National Gymnasium, Tokyo: Tange's suspension roof makes structure spatially expressive. Photograph by Rs1421, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Yet Yoyogi's difference is precisely what clarifies continuity. The roof does more than cover a large room; its curving geometry choreographs perception and gathers a collective interior around a central volume. Instead of an historic eave, a vast suspended canopy mediates atmosphere, structure and public ceremony. Tange does not reproduce a temple. He translates the older proposition that roof, structure and spatial hierarchy should be inseparable. The gymnasium's monumentality is technological and national, whereas Kyoto's is religious and landscape-based, but both make construction an active generator of experience. This is transformation, not stylistic survival.

4.2 Hiroshi Hara and vertical public space

Umeda Sky Building in Osaka, designed by Hiroshi Hara and completed in 1993, shifts the comparison from the Kyoto precinct to the experience of the megastructure. Two forty-storey towers are joined at their upper levels by the Floating Garden Observatory, while external glass elevators and elevated circulation make ascent a visible part of the architecture (Fujitec, n.d.). The building was built at a radically larger scale than Kyoto's temple precincts, with steel, glass and high-rise construction defining a new material and technical context.



Figure 6. Umeda Sky Building, Osaka: twin towers, central void and elevated observatory. Photograph by Suisui, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

This is not an example of traditional form being reproduced. Its paired towers, suspended connections and vast central void are overtly late-modern and metropolitan. Yet the project reworks a familiar Japanese architectural operation: it turns movement into a carefully staged sequence of thresholds. Approaching, rising through the open gap between the towers and arriving at the observatory gives the sky and city a framed role comparable in principle, though not in form or meaning, to the measured viewpoints at Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji and Kiyomizu-dera. The building makes the city itself a landscape to be viewed.

Umeda therefore makes interior and exterior unusually difficult to separate. Its dramatic circulation is partially exposed to weather and distant views, while the observatory is an inhabitable edge rather than a sealed room. This is a significant transformation of the veranda or viewing platform: a small-scale architectural threshold becomes a high-altitude public experience. The case demonstrates that continuity can operate through sequence, framing and the construction of a viewing position even where materials, programme and scale have changed completely.

5 Contemporary Reinterpretation

5.1 Tadao Ando and the Water Temple

Tadao Ando's Water Temple, formally the Mizumido main hall at Honpukuji on Awaji Island, offers a direct contemporary counterpart to the Kyoto field sites. In 1991, Ando rebuilt the main hall of this Shingon temple with reinforced concrete rather than reproducing a conventional timber hall. The Japan National Tourism Organization describes a composition in which a large reflecting pond sits above the main hall, while the sacred interior is reached through a labyrinthine sequence and descent (JNTO, n.d.).

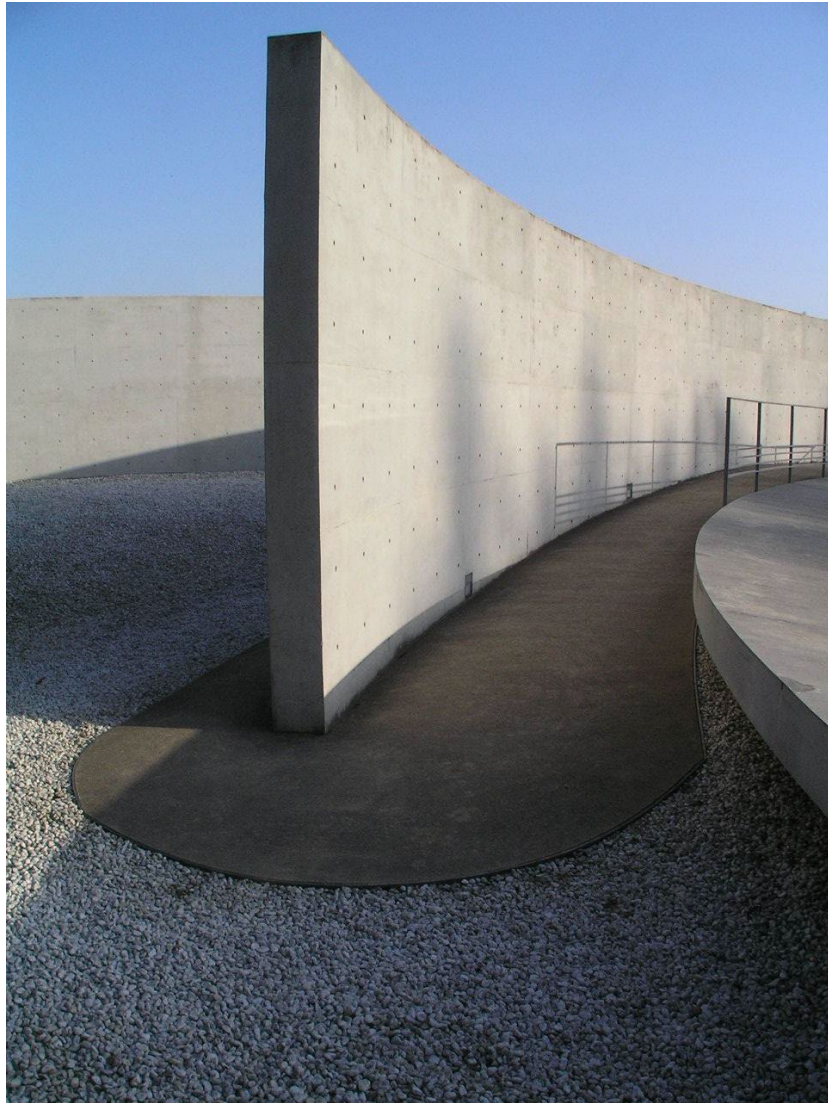


Figure 7. Honpukuji Water Temple, Awaji Island: Ando's curving concrete approach wall. Photograph by Autumn Snake, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.5.

The project reinterprets tradition through route rather than through imitation. Visitors first encounter a high concrete wall, then move around it toward an elliptical water surface planted with lotuses, before descending a central stair below the pond. The approach therefore turns water, sky, concrete and bodily movement into successive stages. Google Arts and Culture, drawing on Tadao Ando Architect and Associates, explains that Ando deliberately replaced the emblematic grand temple roof

with a flat plane of water that reflects the setting (Tadao Ando Architect and Associates, n.d.). The design is modern in technique and abstract in form, but it remains legible as a sacred architectural sequence.

Water Temple strengthens the report's argument about interior and exterior relationships. In Kyoto, verandas, gardens and eaves organise gradual transitions. At Mizumido, the transition is more forceful: the exterior is not simply viewed from within but crossed, descended beneath and remembered as reflected light. The interior's religious atmosphere is created by the contrast between the open pond above and the enclosed hall below. Rather than preserving temple architecture as a visual language, Ando transforms its ritual progression, relation to nature and controlled light through concrete construction.

5.2 Kengo Kuma and the national stadium as landscape

Kengo Kuma's Japan National Stadium, completed in 2019 for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic cycle, returns the comparison to public scale. It is a 60,000-seat building formed through contemporary structural, services and crowd-management systems; it cannot be mistaken for a traditional wooden building. Yet its layered eaves and planting explicitly seek a relationship with the adjacent Jingu forest. The Japan Institute of Architects records that the eaves use Japanese timber sourced from all forty-seven prefectures, with planters above them, and describes the intended harmony with the forest (JIA, 2022). Kengo Kuma and Associates also presents the project as an attempt to connect a national stadium to the surrounding natural environment (Kengo Kuma and Associates, n.d.-b). The project is thus national in both programme and material narrative.

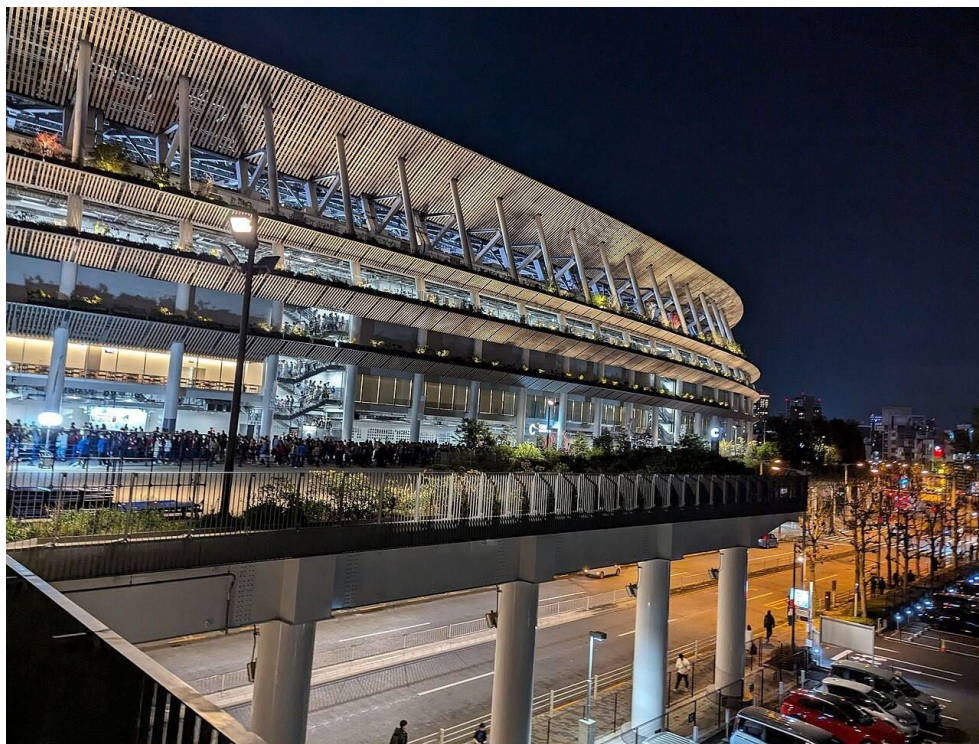


Figure 8. Japan National Stadium, Tokyo: a contemporary civic structure whose layered roofline and planting reinterpret the architecture-landscape relationship. Photograph by Syced, Wikimedia Commons, CC0.

Kuma's stadium is most persuasive when read as an environmental interface rather than as a timber costume. The repeated horizontal layers break down a vast bowl into intermediate scales, creating

shade, ventilation and a visible edge between event interior and city landscape. This is comparable to the functional work of deep eaves at Kyoto sites: the eave is not a symbol added after the building is designed, but a climatic and perceptual device. However, the contemporary stakes are different. The stadium must accommodate global broadcasting, large crowds, engineered seating decks and an Olympic legacy. Timber appears within a hybrid system of steel, concrete and precast construction, not as the sole structural language.

This hybrid condition matters. It prevents the building from being read as simple preservation. The stadium's reference to wood, greenery and layered rooflines works at metropolitan scale, supported by modern supply chains and technology. It transforms the older building-landscape relationship into a public image of environmental coexistence. The critical question is not whether the reference is authentic in a purist sense, but whether material provenance, climatic performance and spatial experience substantiate it. The documented use of timber and planting supports that reading, while the building's enormous scale remains a clear departure from Kyoto's intimate precincts.

5.3 Kengo Kuma at Dazaifu Timber Interior and Everyday Life

Kengo Kuma and Associates completed the Starbucks Coffee Dazaifu Tenmangu Omotesando store in 2011 on a narrow approach to Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine. The office describes a site only 7.5 metres wide and 40 metres long, crossed by roughly 2,000 cedar members woven diagonally through the shop (Kengo Kuma and Associates, n.d.-a). This modest commercial commission is relevant precisely because it works at the scale of everyday occupation. The timber is neither a historic replica nor simply a finish applied to a standard interior: it becomes a spatial lattice that compresses, directs and energises the long room.

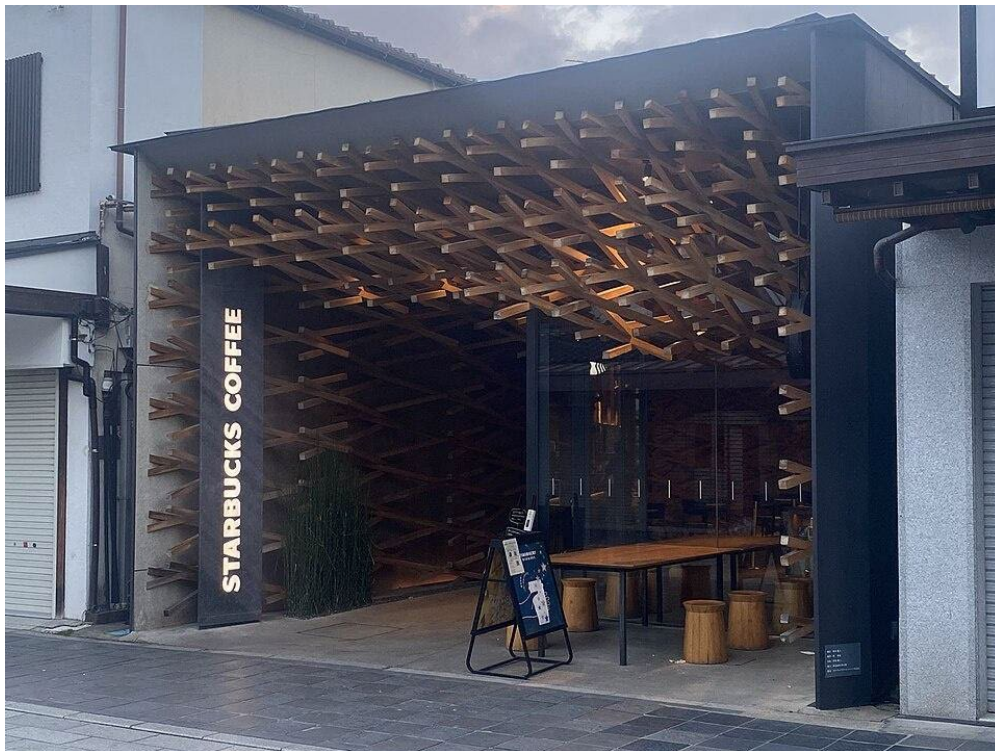


Figure 9. Starbucks Coffee Dazaifu Tenmangu Omotesando, Fukuoka: intersecting cedar structure at the shop frontage. Photograph by Immanuelle, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0.

The project complicates any assumption that continuity only belongs to sacred or national buildings. Its material language responds to the shrine approach without reproducing a shrine. Repetition, diagonal rhythm and the visible grain of cedar turn circulation into an interior experience, while the street-facing threshold remains porous. The case is useful as a small-scale test of the report thesis: inherited attention to timber, sequence and edge can be reworked for contemporary retail without pretending that commercial space is traditional architecture.

5.4 Tokyo International Forum Global Exchange and Public Interior

Tokyo International Forum, designed by Rafael Vinoly and completed in 1996, adds a deliberately different form of contemporary practice. Vinoly was an Uruguayan architect, so the building should not be presented as the work of a Japanese architect. It is nevertheless central to Tokyo's architectural culture: its convention and cultural programme is organised around a vast free-standing glass hall whose ship-like volume, bridges and internal streets make public circulation visible (Rafael Vinoly Architects, n.d.; Tokyo International Forum, n.d.). The forum demonstrates that Japanese architecture after 1945 was shaped not only by inherited local principles but also by international exchange, procurement and technical expertise.



Figure 10. Tokyo International Forum Glass Hall: steel trusses, glass enclosure and public bridges. Photograph by Basile Morin, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Its importance to this comparison lies in interior scale. The Forum does not reinterpret timber or a temple roof; its glass and steel enclosure creates an urban interior in which movement, light and

orientation are the principal media. This difference sharpens rather than weakens the argument. Continuity need not mean a shared visual vocabulary. Across Kyoto, Umeda and the Forum, architecture repeatedly treats circulation and framed perception as design problems, but the available technology, program and cultural authorship change the answer.

Across the cases, the most durable continuity is relational. Kyoto's temples and gardens organise architecture as a field of frames, routes, roofs, views and thresholds. Tange transfers this principle to a national civic interior, where suspension structure and roof movement organise collective attention. Hara turns it vertical at Umeda; Ando condenses it into a concrete sacred route; Kuma tests it at both stadium and commercial scales. The Tokyo International Forum makes a complementary point: an internationally authored glass public interior can share the concern with movement and framing without claiming a traditional Japanese visual language.

Material change is equally decisive. Timber permits repair, joinery and light framed enclosure; reinforced concrete permits Tange's sculptural mass and Ando's precisely controlled descent; steel and glass make Hara's high-rise connections and exposed circulation possible; contemporary composites and building services support Kuma's high-capacity venue. The transformation of material is not superficial. It redistributes what is possible in structure, scale, durability and maintenance. Consequently, a serious account of continuity must not claim that all modern work is traditional because it values light or simplicity. The cases demonstrate that inherited principles only become meaningful through the specific material and social conditions of each building.

Scale produces another major difference. The Kyoto sites work through precinct, path and relatively close bodily encounter. Yoyogi and the Japan National Stadium address thousands of spectators and the city as a collective. Their interiors must manage visibility, circulation, safety and spectacle. Yet scale does not eliminate spatial subtlety. Yoyogi uses roof form to give a vast hall directional coherence; Kuma uses layers to make a stadium legible at several distances. Contemporary Japanese architecture therefore often translates the small-scale logic of threshold into sectional and infrastructural terms.

Finally, the comparison changes the meaning of preservation. Kyoto's built heritage survives through carefully regulated repair, sometimes involving replacement of damaged material while respecting form, techniques and setting (UNESCO, n.d.). Water Temple presents another model: it retains a temple's ritual function while rebuilding its main hall through a radically contemporary spatial language. Umeda Sky Building and Tokyo International Forum, by contrast, depend on the maintenance of high-rise and long-span infrastructure. These differences make a useful critical point: continuity cannot be judged from appearance alone. It must be assessed through material practice, use, environmental performance and the changing institutions that support a building over time.

6 Comparative Discussion

The comparison below summarises the report's analytical framework. It is not a claim that every case derives from Kyoto; it identifies the architectural questions that make the cases comparable.

Analytical Lens	Kyoto Field-Study Evidence	Modern & Contemporary Translation
Material and construction	Timber frame, repair, bracing and deep roof edges	Concrete, steel, glass, engineered timber and complex services expand structural scale
Nature and climate	Pond, garden, borrowed scenery, eaves and seasonal light organise perception	Landscape is reframed through stadium planting, water, ventilation, public plazas and controlled enclosures
Movement and threshold	Paths, verandas and viewing edges sequence approach and pause	Ramps, elevators, bridges, stairs and concourses make circulation a primary public experience
Interior and exterior	Degrees of enclosure connect room, edge and landscape	Public interiors become larger and more technical, but remain legible through views, layers and routes

6.1 Counterargument and Critical Test

The continuity argument has limits. A layered stadium roof, an exposed cedar lattice or a reflecting pond can be presented as a contemporary reworking of historical principles, but such readings can become selective branding if they ignore programme, capital, technology and audience. Yoyogi National Gymnasium was an Olympic national project; Umeda is a commercial high-rise destination; Dazaifu is a global retail outlet; and Tokyo International Forum is an internationally authored civic complex. Their differences matter as much as their formal correspondences. As Bognar (1990) argues more broadly, modern Japanese architecture developed through a complex engagement with international modernism, not through the simple survival of a pre-modern vocabulary.

For this reason, the report does not claim that contemporary works are “Japanese” because they contain wood, water or a garden-like image. The more defensible claim is narrower: selected architects repeatedly make landscape, climate, light, bodily route and structure active parts of spatial experience. This analytical focus avoids a museum-like view of tradition. It also makes room for disagreement: a reader may conclude that a case is better explained by global modernism, commercial identity or engineering innovation than by continuity with Kyoto. The comparison remains valuable because it states precisely what is being compared and why.

7 Implications for Singapore Japan Architectural Exchange

This study suggests that the value of Japanese architecture for an international audience does not lie in copying recognisable forms such as timber screens, gardens or layered roofs. Its more useful lesson is an approach to design: treating climate, movement, landscape and material as connected parts of spatial experience. My Kyoto field-study visits made this argument more precise. They shifted my attention from whether a building merely looks Japanese to how a route directs movement, how a roof mediates weather, and how water, vegetation and light shape degrees of enclosure.

This has relevance for Singapore, although the two contexts are fundamentally different. Singapore's tropical climate, density and multicultural public life require their own architectural responses. However, the Kyoto sites and contemporary case studies raise productive questions for public architecture in both places: how can buildings create shade and gradual thresholds; how can circulation become legible and meaningful; and how can landscape contribute to daily urban experience rather than remain decorative? The comparison therefore supports exchange through critical adaptation rather than imitation.

Creating this report from my scholarship experience also prepares me to share the study with a non-specialist audience. Its central claim is clear: Japanese architecture is not simply a collection of recognisable forms. Across historic and contemporary buildings, its most productive legacy lies in the design of relationships between structure and space, interior and exterior, visitor and route, and building and setting. The scholarship made it possible to test that claim through field-study sites and to connect those observations to contemporary architectural debates.

8 Conclusion

Japanese architecture's evolution is best understood neither as a clean break from tradition nor as the survival of a fixed cultural essence. The Kyoto field sites establish historical evidence for an architecture of timber, landscape composition, controlled light, gradual threshold and disciplined viewing. The later case studies show that these concerns can be transformed rather than simply preserved: Yoyogi National Gymnasium uses long-span engineering to organise collective attention; Umeda Sky Building turns a viewing threshold into vertical public space; Water Temple creates a contemporary sacred route through concrete and water; and Japan National Stadium recasts the relation between roof, climate and landscape at civic scale.

The comparison does not mean that every modern building derives directly from Kyoto. Tokyo International Forum, for example, demonstrates the importance of international authorship, technical exchange and global modernism. Nor does the presence of timber, greenery or a reflecting surface automatically make a building traditional. The stronger argument is architectural: across the selected buildings, structure, route, light and setting are used to shape experience. Material and technological change alter the scale, construction and social role of this work, but they do not make questions of threshold, framed perception and environmental relation irrelevant.

This distinction is also the principal value of the scholarship experience. Visiting Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, Kiyomizu-dera and Ryoan-ji provided a disciplined starting point for asking sharper questions of later buildings, while published sources helped separate direct observation from broader historical claims. For Singapore-Japan architectural exchange, the lesson is not to import Japanese forms wholesale. It is to compare closely, adapt critically and ask how public architecture can make climate, movement, landscape and human scale active parts of everyday life.

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Clare Lin
2025 JCCI x ICU Scholar



JCCI の皆様へのメッセージ

“皆様、いつもお世話になっております。2025 年に国際基督教大学へ留学させていただいた、クレア・リンと申します。このような貴重で忘れられない経験をさせていただき、ありがとうございます。このレポートでは、日本の山登りを通じた経験を振り返りながら、日本の山々が持つ自然的、歴史的、文化的な魅力について考察いたします。以前から訪れたいと思っていた上高地の美しい景観に心を惹かれ、山登りを通じて、山々は単なる自然の景勝地ではなく、日本の歴史や宗教、文化、人々の生活とも深く結びついていることに気づきました。歴史を専攻する学生として、文献から得た知識と実際に山を訪れた経験の両方を通じて、山々が時代や地域によってどのような意味を持ち、人々の信仰や価値観をどのように表してきたのかを考察します。このレポートが、日本の山々への理解を深め、その歴史や文化、自然の魅力をより多くの方々に知っていただくきっかけとなれば幸いです。なお、こうした魅力をより幅広い読者に伝えるため、このレポートは英語で執筆いたしました。”

日本百名山 // Japan's 100 Famous Mountains

山へ // Into the mountains

A pitch-black sky stretched endlessly into the darkness. Stars dotted Kamikochi's night sky in an endless flurry. I just had to capture it. 2 hours on, the stars left their trails in the dark: it was like the song 怪獣 (Kaiju) by sakanaction had come alive. It



was absolutely breathtaking. What a blessing to have seen this with my own eyes.

Long before my year-long study in Japan, I wanted to explore more of its quieter sides. The mountains. The countryside. But I never thought I would find myself out camping. In November of all things, either. However, this first trip unlocked a burning curiosity for the mountains. Not just for the beautiful sights, but for the rich culture behind it, and the customs and practices unique to mountain climbing in Japan. To me, 登山 (tozan) was just hiking. To my Japanese friends, however, it was a serious activity. Much more than wearing boots, and going for a walk. Sometimes it was religiously tied. Sometimes, it was culturally so. Perhaps it was both, and different mountains always had something different to offer.

After my first trip into the mountains of Nagano and Toyama, I discovered the book, 「日本百名山」 (Nihon Hyakumeizan) or 100 Famous Japanese Mountains by Fukuda Kyuya. Later, I learned that the book was so influential that it transformed a once niche pursuit into the boom we see today: it is estimated that 3 million people hike at least 3 times a year in Japan (Lowe, 2015). Fukuda's 100 mountains had transformed into a checklist for many that claim 登山 was their hobby. I must admit that crossing off this checklist did cross my mind, and I initially used his book to discover new places to hike in Japan. Yet, as I travelled further, I began to realise that the mountains were much more than a collection of peaks to be crossed off a list. Each mountain revealed something different about Japan: its communities, traditions, and its relationship with nature. The mountains allowed me to slow down, grow, and learn about the wealth of culture and history even nature revealed. This is my report.

山の文化 // Mountain Culture in Japan

While we often associate Japan with the hustle and bustle of Tokyo, Osaka, and cultural allure of Kyoto, much more of Japan's culture and history can be uncovered in the mountains. More than 70% of Japan's land area is covered by mountains, and it has almost 13,000 named peaks. As such, the mountains deeply affect Japan's climate, geography, history, religion, and even culture.

Mountain climbing in Japan can be traced back to the practice of 修験道 (Shugendo), or syncretic religion that combined elements of Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanistic practices in sacred sites which were often mountains and forests (Miyake,

2009, p.74). 修験者 (shugenja), also known as 山伏 (yamabushi), or practitioners of shugendo often practised asceticism in many well known mountains in the prefectures in central Japan (Miyake, 2009, p.78). These mountains were associated with sacred geography based on the Mandala of the Two Realms, or the Diamond and Womb mandalas, a pair of sacred cosmic maps that represented the cosmic Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai (Miyake, 2009, p.79).

The Omine mountain range in Kansai, for instance stretching from Yoshino to Kumano divides into the Diamond and Womb realms on the Yoshino and Kumano side respectively. Likewise, twenty-eight chapters of the Lotus Sutra—one of the most influential sacred texts in Buddhism in Japan—were buried among the peaks in mountain ranges in Nara prefecture and the Kii peninsula (especially in Wakayama and Mie prefecture) (Miyake, 2009, p.78). Between the eleventh and thirteenth

century, pilgrimage sites in similar mountain ranges gained in popularity, particularly pilgrimage to the three Kumano shrines of Hongu Taisha, Hayama Taisha and Nachi Taisha. Collectively, they are known as Kumano Sanzan. Kumano pilgrimage, or Kumano Kodo with Kumano Sanzan at its centre has since become entrenched as the holiest sites of pilgrimage routes and spirituality in Japan. In 2004, some of the roads of the Kumano Kodo and the shrines of Kumano Sanzan were registered under UNESCO as World Heritage Sites under the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range”. Today, both pilgrims and tourists embark on the Kumano Kodo, where they travel from Kyoto, to Koyasan, to Yoshino and to Omine and finally to Ise in Mie prefecture where Japan’s most important shrine can be found.





From left to right: Nachi waterfall, Kongobu-ji Danjo Garan, Ise Jingu

Major mountain summits such as Mount Fuji, Mount Aso and Mount Chokai have also been popularised, and made accessible through Shugendo. It is said that En no Gyoja, the founder of Shugendo, climbed Mount Fuji in 633AD (Nakata and Momsen, 2010, p. 67). Modern mountain climbing as we know it was introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century by a few British mountaineers but remained quite the niche sport until the 1980s (Nakata and Momsen, 2010, p. 67). However, mountain climbing exploded in popularity when then Crown Prince Naruhito (now Emperor Naruhito) mentioned his goal to climb all the peaks featured in Fukuda's *Nihon Hyakumeizan*. Learning about this history changed the way I understood the mountains I visited. Before this year-long journey, I had seen nature and religion and two distinct categories. A mountain was a natural landscape, while shrines and temples were cultural and religious sites. In Japan, however, these distinctions blurred. The mountains could be in itself part of the religious experience.

三靈山 // Three Holy Mountains

Many of the sacred mountains in Shugendo are included in Fukuda's list. Undoubtedly, the way mountain tourism has diffused appears to be analogous to the pattern of the pilgrimages to Buddhist and Shinto temples (Nakata and Momsen, 2010, p. 67). From day hikes accessible from big cities to technical climbs in the Japanese Alps, gentle trails through forests, and extended trails like the Kumano Kodo, religion has long intertwined with hiking culture in Japan.

Hakusan, Tateyama, and Fujisan are known as 三霊山 (sanreizan), or the “Three Holy Mountains” and are considered to have special powers. Hakusan is associated with the power of water, Fujisan is associated with volcanic power and Tateyama is known as the mountain of spiritual practices. Tateyama is located in the northern half of the Japanese Alps, in Toyama prefecture and was once a site of spiritual training for Buddhist monks in the pre-Meiji period (Fukada, 2015, p.141-142). Tateyama is said to be a physical site where the Buddhist cosmology of hell, earth, and heaven existed in vertical alignment. According to Shugendo, pilgrims physically walked through hell (the volcanic region of Tateyama), across earth (the meadows), and into “heaven” (the climb to the summit) in a single journey.

Between July to September, Oyama shrine, Japan’s highest-altitude shrine at 3,003 meters at the summit of Tateyama, is open for shrine visitations. However, the summit shrine is inaccessible from October through June due to snow accumulation that can reach as high as 6 metres.



During my year in Japan, I had the privilege of visiting Tateyama twice. My first visit was a combined trip with my visit to Kamikochi in November, and my second visit was in May. Indeed, just as Fukada described in his book, it was absolutely beautiful.



In November, Mikuri-ga-ike, the largest body of water on Tateyama, had the bluest water. The landscape had just begun to transform into shades of red and orange. In

May, the winter locked landscape looked like a whole other world. I had never had the chance to see something like that in my life—it was truly a sight for sore eyes.

Fukada noted in 1964 that Tateyama might slowly become but another tourist trap,



and he criticised that pilgrims and mountaineers would eventually vanish (Fukada, 2015, 143). It is sad, but it is true. The mountain is everyone's to enjoy: who are we to stop another from taking in its beauty? Tateyama was the first mountain I summited in Japan, so perhaps like Fukada, I desire to hide it, and protect it from further damage for as long as possible. Yet, experiencing Japan's mountains was not always about "seeing" the landscape. Another memorable climb was Tsurugisan in Tokushima. Ironically, I could barely see the mountain at all.

見えない景色 // When there was nothing to

see

My experience hiking Tsurugisan was vastly different from Tateyama. I went to the mountain anticipating (as one normally would) reaching the summit and being rewarded with a beautiful view. However, the summit (and most of my ascent) was

covered in a dense fog. Admittedly, I was initially extremely frustrated having come such a long way, only to see nothing.

However, it was this experience that enabled me to rethink what it meant to experience a mountain. Rather than its stunning scenery, my memories of Tsurugisan became tied to the things around the mountain. One of the most striking was my stop at Kakashi no Sato (Village of Scarecrows) which was near the trailhead of Tsurugisan. The scarecrows were scattered all over the village wearing different expressions and outfits—there was even a scarecrow in a NUS T-shirt. In a way, this village represented a different side of rural Japan.



The environment was shaped not only by nature, but also by the lived experiences of the people within it. In a place where there are currently more scarecrows than people (370:27 as of October 2025), the scarecrows seemed to fill some of the spaces left behind by a declining population. The mountain landscape was also a lived landscape, at the mercy of its lived communities.

“Seeing” a place did not necessarily mean seeing its most obvious attraction. While I could not see the view from Tsurugisan, I had the chance to pay attention to the things around me instead: the village, the people who had created it, and the relationship between the mountain and the communities living around it.

Perhaps, the value of a mountain did not necessarily lie in what I could see from the summit, or even whether I could reach it at all. Its significance could lie in the stories, practices and communities that had developed around it.

登山の行儀// Japanese hiking quirks

「こんにちは！」

「お疲れ様です！」

「先にどうぞ～」

These were some common phrases I would hear on any trail. While it is unusual to strike up a conversation with a stranger in Japan, I quickly came to realise doing so in the mountains was quite normal. Saying こんにちは (konnichiwa) to every person I met on the mountain soon became a habit after it was said to me a few times. It became part of the ritual, and it was always nice when someone said it back. Admittedly, it was quite the surprise to be able to talk to so many people and even forge new friendships on my hikes.



During one of my solo hikes in Unzendake, Nagasaki, the loveliest family reached the summit shortly after me. We



chatted for a while, and while it was just a simple exchange like 「一人来たの？」 and 「きおつけて帰ってね！」 where they told me to get back safely—the chain section of the hike was a little steep—my heart was really warmed. Perhaps it was really the little moments, the small interactions that made each hike

so memorable. I often associated Japan with a certain reserve towards strangers but the mountain appeared to create a space where the distance was closed.

Another thing that really struck me during my year in Japan was that hobbies were things that most people did and stuck to. Most of the time, with a great degree of dedication. Perhaps that is why hiking in Japan is often not simply “hiking” in the same way many in Singapore envision it as being. Most Japanese hikers I saw while hiking truly looked the part: long pants, good hiking boots, lengths of rope, pick axes when it was icy, portable stoves, you name it, they had it. Even small children hiking with their parents were almost always fully decked out in the latest gear. To me, it was over the top. Unnecessary. But perhaps to



them that was the bare minimum: the baseline where they dressed for what they were doing, and where they dressed the part, that is, the idea of 形から入る (katachi kara hairu). Most interesting of all, many Japanese hikers had a portable camp stove for boiling water on hand. I often saw many hikers eating instant noodles from steaming cups even on shorter hikes. It almost made me want to get one myself.

安全第一 // Safety First

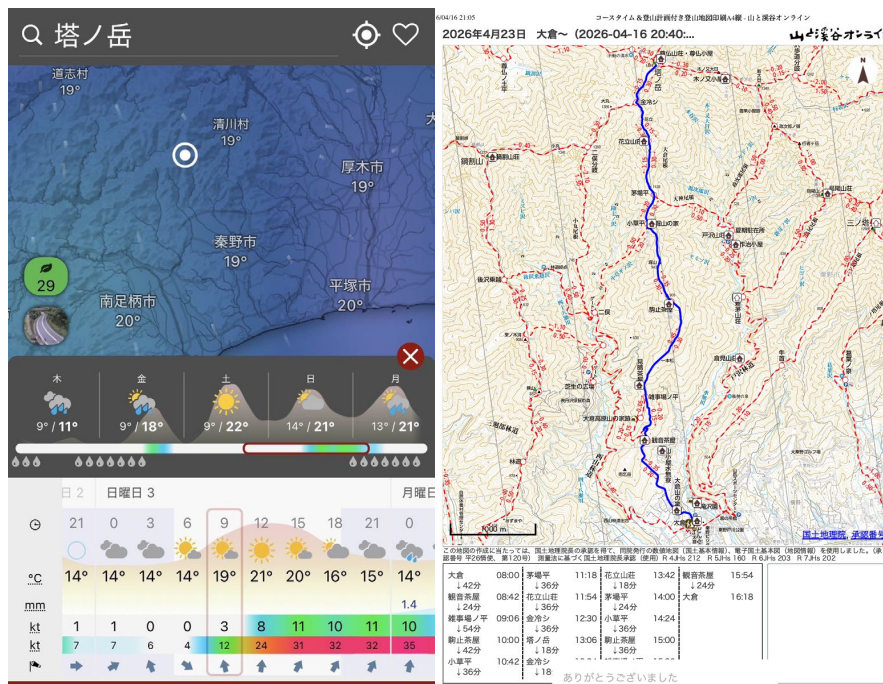
Beyond hiking etiquette, many mountains require hikers to fill in a hiking report sheet at the base of the mountain to keep hikers safe, or 登山届 (tozan todoke). Most of the



sheets are only in Japanese, but they seemed to allow people to fill the forms in English as well. This allows rescuers to have more information about the whereabouts of hikers, and facilitate swift rescues in areas like Asahidake (pictured left) where there were frequent cases of missing persons.

Beyond tozan todoke, many hikers (myself included) use Yamap for trail navigation in Japan. The app's name is a play on words using yama (mountain) and map, and has information on almost every trail in Japan. It also provides summarised weather information and volcanic activity information to guide hikers on whether it would be

safe to attempt to summit a particular mountain. The app rates the difficulty of different routes and allows users to share their hiking activity and even live location to ensure safe hiking. Weather apps like Windy to check weather patterns, and preparing physical maps through providers like Yamakei can also be useful to ensure safe hiking.



一番低い山 // The shortest mountain

Yet, while I was busy chasing peaks, I chanced upon Hiyoriyama in Sendai prefecture in April. Hiyoriyama is also known as Japan's shortest mountain standing at 3 metres, or just 6 steps high.

Unlike any of the mountains I had previously hiked, Hiyoriyama did not have a rich history, or particularly strong spirituality. However, its short height of 3 metres and humorous signage made it a site worth visiting in itself. The approach to the “summit” of Hiyoriyama is littered with warning signs such as those that say “be careful of bears”, “be careful of falling rocks” and “mind the slope”. An opening ceremony was even held for Hiyoriyama’s climbing season in July 2026.



In retrospect, perhaps Hiyoriyama was the perfect mountain to encounter towards the end of my exchange. After finding out about Fukada's list, I had spent far too much time dwelling on which mountain I should climb next. Hiyoriyama was truly quite comical compared to the peaks I had spent hours climbing. Yet it was still interesting enough to visit. Somewhere along the way, I had stopped asking whether a mountain was impressive enough to be worth climbing. I had become more interested in what made each place distinctive.

結び // Conclusion

Looking back, exploring Japan through its many mountains was one of the most exciting and unique experiences I had during my one year.

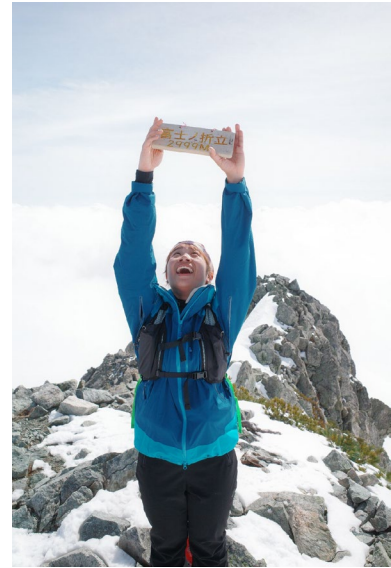
While it started off as a checklist of sorts to climb a few interesting mountains in Fukada's Hyakumeizan, it allowed me to explore new sides of Japanese culture, and marvel at the beauty that Japan had to offer beyond typical tourist attractions.

More importantly, however, the mountains changed the way I understood Japan. Previously, I tended to think of Japanese culture as something I could encounter in obvious places: temples, shrines, museums, festivals and historical sites. However, the mountains taught me that culture could also be embedded in landscapes and in everyday practices. The sacred histories of Tateyama and Tsurugisan showed me how closely religion could be tied to the natural environment. The simple greetings exchanged between hikers revealed how community could emerge between strangers. Even the hiking equipment, safety practices and portable stoves I initially found excessive became small windows into how people approached a life differently from me.

Perhaps the greatest lesson was that I did not always need to see what I had expected to see. My year in Japan taught me that experiencing a place was not necessarily about finding the view I had come looking for. Sometimes, it was about paying attention to what I had not expected.

I came to Japan wanting to explore its quieter side. While I never got to climb Fujisan, the mountains I did visit taught me much more than I had expected: about religion, community, cultural difference, independence, and even my own expectations.

Perhaps that is what I will remember most about the mountains: not the number of peaks I climbed, but the different ways in which each mountain taught me to look at Japan—and at myself.



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