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# More Than a Bath: An Examination of Japanese Bathing Culture

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**MORE THAN A BATH:**

**AN EXAMINATION OF JAPANESE BATHING CULTURE**

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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BY

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FOR

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## **Abstract**

Steeped in tradition for over a thousand years, bathing culture in Japan remains relevant due to the preservation of the traditional, innovative modernization of existing bathing structures, and the diversification therein. This thesis will examine the significance of bathing culture, focusing largely on *onsen* and *sentō*, account for its historical evolution, analyze how it functions in modern society and forecast its future viability. More specifically, the concept that Japan's vibrant bathing culture was able to flourish due to mythological creation stories, politically motivated access to baths, propagated therapeutic value, and scientific reinforcement of the benefits of a hot bath will be explored.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Japanese bathing culture is a phenomenon remarkably different from most traditions in the modern Western world. To many, the concept of stripping off one's clothes and bathing communally is foreign. However, in Japan, this accepted and loved convention permeates society, transcending generational, social, economic, and geographic barriers. The sheer number of hot springs and baths in Japan attests to their cultural significance and importance. Due to the great degree of variance in the types of baths and the rituals surrounding them, an understanding of their distinctions is critical to interpreting their individual societal functions and implications. After traveling to Japan several times to study, I became enamored with hot springs, mainly for their therapeutic qualities. However, as my knowledge of bathing culture increased, I grew curious about the differences between the various types of baths and why such a practice had not been adopted in America. Although the ritual of bathing in the nude in the company of others might seem foreign to some, I thought the welcoming, communal environment and steaming hot waters of the hot spring could be appreciated and enjoyed more universally. This realization is what originally prompted me to research Japanese baths.

There are three main types of Japanese baths: *onsen*, *furo*, and *senjo* (within which exist such subcategories as the sand bath, timed bath, devotion baths, etc.). *Onsen* in Japanese means hot spring. However, it is important to keep in mind that foreigners often conflate the names of all three main types to mean hot spring. Precipitated largely in part by widespread commercialization, which necessitated a legal definition for hot springs, the term *onsen* was created. According to the Law of Hot Springs that dates back to 1948, "*onsen* is [constituted by] any spring of water gushing out from the underground as warm water, mineral water, vapour or gas with an average temperature of 25° [Celsius] or more. It must also possess at least one of a

set of specified minerals...at a given percentage."<sup>1</sup> These criteria must be met for a business to officially declare themselves an *onsen* and have been monitored since the law's inception.

Without a doubt, the most common form of bathing in modern Japan is conducted in the *furo*: a bath which is located in an individual home. Historically, the *furo* was constructed out of the aromatic *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) wood, which is considered sacred. The wooden tub was left unvarnished and became smooth to the touch over time.<sup>2</sup> However, the modern manifestation of such a tub is quite different. Today, a typical *furo* consists of a plastic tub covered by a plastic top to keep the water warm. Often, there are digital screens to program when the water will pour and how hot it will be. These baths can be found in almost every modern Japanese house.

Finally, the *sentō* or public bath exists today as a relic from a time when neighborhoods would bathe together because individual houses were not built with *furo* inside them. The traditional versions of these establishments are disappearing from towns now that new homes come equipped with baths.<sup>3</sup> However, a highly modernized version of *sentō*, known as super-*sentō*, has become popular among native Japanese and foreigners alike. These super-*sentō* usually boast between fifteen to twenty different types of baths, ranging from jacuzzi tubs to dry saunas. They are housed in monolithic concrete buildings, which are needed to accommodate the large demographic required to support such an expensive business.<sup>4</sup> The waters of *sentō* differ from those of *onsen* in that they are not naturally heated and, instead of originating from a

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<sup>1</sup>Joy Hendry and Massimo Raveri, "From Curing and Playing, to Leisure: Two Japanese Hot Springs: Arima and Kinohaki *Onsen*," in *Japan at Play: The Ludic and Logic of Power* (London: Routledge, 2002), 246.

<sup>2</sup>Alexia Brue, "Japan: The Story of Yu," in *Cathedrals of the Flesh: My Search for the Perfect Bath* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 172.

<sup>3</sup>Lisa Cullen, "Soaking and Steaming in Japan," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2001, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/travel/soaking-and-steaming-in-japan.html>.

<sup>4</sup>John Dodd, "Piping Hot Business," *J@pan Inc. Maganize*, January – February 2006, accessed February 19, 2013, [http://www.japaninc.com/mgz\\_winter\\_2005\\_piping\\_hot\\_business](http://www.japaninc.com/mgz_winter_2005_piping_hot_business).

spring, are sourced from municipal taps. This more industrialized iteration of a bath has become popular within both the local Japanese and foreign tourist circles.

Geographically, Japan is the mecca of the world's hot spring activity. There are over 25,565 mineral hot springs with an average temperature of 107°F year-round.<sup>5</sup> The cultural proliferation of bathing in Japan as well as the diversity of application (therapeutic, religious, entertainment, etc.) is distinct. While the Japanese archipelago is hot spring rich and a case can be made that any developing civilization would have been geographically predisposed to integrate hot springs into their culture in some way, the degree to which bathing permeated Japanese culture is remarkable. And as has been recently discussed internationally, the word "hot springs" in fact does not fully encapsulate the *onsen* culture in Japan. Rather, "*Onsen*-ism" includes both the bath and the experience surrounding it (the inn where you stay to the food that you eat) in its definition.<sup>6</sup> The body of my research will detail the commonly known distinctions of mainly *onsen* and *sentō* culture, explore some of their more idiosyncratic rituals, present both the historic and contemporary statuses of bathing culture, and illustrate why bathing culture in Japan has always been about much more than simply cleansing oneself of exterior dirt and grime through an analysis of the existing literature.

### **Literature Pertaining to Historic and Contemporary Japanese Bathing Culture**

The textual sources available in English surrounding bathing culture in Japan can be broadly grouped into those which delineate the history of the practice and those which discuss the positionality and the state of *onsen*, *sentō* and bathing culture in modern and contemporary times. The sources within the historical category encapsulate Japanese bathing culture from medieval to mid-twentieth century. One of the main reasons that the historical contextualization

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Talmadge, *Getting Wet: Adventures in the Japanese Bath* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



within this paper will begin in medieval Japan is the fact that previous records and journals make little to no mention of bathing culture because it appears to have been considered a mundanity not worthy of mention. The modern sources range in scope of author perspective and cover from the twentieth century until the present. Within the modern category the literature can be further separated into categories such as economic, religious, anecdotal, scientific, etc. Of my selected sources, the historical works help to understand when Japanese bathing culture originated and how it grew over the centuries into its contemporary form. Thus, this review of literature will begin with four central historical texts.

### **Historical Sources: *Onsen* and *Sento***

Of the works that provide historical documentation of bathing, the most central of these sources is Lee Butler's "'Washing off the Dust': Baths and Bathing in Medieval Japan." It provides a comprehensive historical account of bathing in medieval Japan and delineates that it spread, early on, both socially and geographically throughout Japan. Butler also highlights the lack of historical analysis of baths and deconstructs long periods of time during which social and cultural changes have been conflated and ignored by other historians. Additionally, he explores the origins of different types of baths and their relations to social class. The content of Butler's historical research and analysis will serve as one of the main pillars of my historical contextualization of Japanese bathing culture. Sources that chronicle the evolution of medieval Japanese bathing culture as completely as Butler's are few and far between. The breadth of Butler's research provides an excellent foundation with which to ground the historical portion of my thesis.

The remaining three works are not as complete as Butler's but are valuable as peripheral historical sources. Kōichi Fujinami's "Hot Springs in Japan"<sup>7</sup> is the most useful of the three and, although initially created as a modern guide to *onsen* and *senjo* culture in Japan, it examines the Japanese love of bathing, the distribution of hot springs, and the various benefits and folklore surrounding bathing culture. The book is not a historic-retrospection and thus provides unique insight into the way bathing culture was perceived and marketed by the Japanese Board of Tourist Industry almost eighty years ago. Fujinami's book also provides useful geographic validation for the success of hot springs in Japan and provides a broad description of many famous hot springs. This source is relatively devoid of commentary regarding Japanese hot springs.

The remaining two sources are of similar relevance and importance to my research. Joy Hendry and Raveri Massimo's "From Curing and Playing, to Leisure: Two Japanese Hot Springs: Arima and Kinosaki *onsen*"<sup>8</sup> examines how two famous hot springs each evolve under a flux of urban consumer preferences and modernization. Some of their more interesting insight lies in an analysis of how hot springs are advertised today versus how they were marketed historically. This source serves as a case study of how *onsen* in Japan have changed to accommodate their patrons over time. Fumiko Miyazaki and Duncan Williams' "The Intersection of the Local and the Translocal at a Sacred Site: The Case of Osorezan in Tokugawa Japan"<sup>9</sup> delve into the religious connections between hot springs and Buddhism. The Jizō motif in particular receives special attention and analysis. The mythological and religious accounts presented in this source help to analyze *onsen* culture through a different perceptual lens.

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<sup>7</sup> Kōichi Fujinami, *Hot Springs in Japan* (Tokyo: Board of Tourist Industry, Japanese Govt. Railways, 1936).

<sup>8</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs."

<sup>9</sup> Fumiko Miyazaki and Duncan Williams, "The Intersection of the Local and the Translocal at a Sacred Site: The Case of Osorezan in Tokugawa Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 28.3/4 (2001): accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30234472>.

## Contemporary Japanese Bathing Culture Literature

The literature surrounding Japanese bathing culture in its more modern and contemporary iteration adheres to a variety of topics such as health benefits, authenticity issues, experiential accounts, analysis of the economic viability of *onsen* and *sentō*, and website descriptions of Kinohaki and Arima *onsen*. I will begin with personal, what we might term, experiential accounts of *onsen* which comprise the greatest number of my sources. Many of these sources are anecdotal in nature and provide useful insight into the ritualistic practices engaged in by *onsen*-goers. The most central of the five such texts is “Getting Wet: Adventures in the Japanese Bath”<sup>10</sup> by Eric Talmadge. His work, while written from an analytical narrative perspective, is extremely comprehensive; his chapters deal with topics that range from the science behind hot springs and their cuisine, to the more fetishized iterations of a bath (e.g. Soapland). Talmadge details his experiences in different hot springs while interweaving historical contextualization and modern factual data. The amount of hard numbers relating to hot springs (i.e. how many gallons per year gush forth, the number of *sentō* that have atrophied from urban areas, etc.) is the aspect of this book that renders it distinct. Talmadge's work mostly pertains to contemporary *onsen* cultural. However, there are historical and scientific data artifacts interspersed throughout the piece, which lend themselves to interdisciplinary analysis.

While Talmadge's book can be viewed as an anthology of Japanese bathing cultural practices, the remaining four sources are less substantive in both content and length. That being said, Alexia Brue's “Cathedrals of the Flesh”<sup>11</sup> takes a more functional, novel-like approach and chronicles her international search for the perfect bath against a backdrop of her introspective struggles with the conclusion of a long-term relationship. The chapter that pertains to Japanese

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<sup>10</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*.

<sup>11</sup> Alexia Brue, “Japan: The Story of Yu,” in *Cathedrals of the Flesh: My Search for the Perfect Bath* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003).

bathing culture (titled "The Story of Yu") mostly covers traditional and modern *sentō*. However, Brue does discuss the modern *onsen* resort experience. Overall, Brue's work is primarily a narrative, within which information relating to the current usage of *onsen* and *sentō* as well as descriptions of types of subcategorical baths can be found.

At first glance, Koren Leonard's book "How to Take a Japanese Bath"<sup>12</sup> appears to be nothing more than a procedural guide on how to correctly take a Japanese bath. However, in the afterword section, Leonard provides several pages filled with primarily historical information on the genesis of the Japanese bathing culture. Leonard also analyzes some of the implications that may exist between the current bathing culture and modern urban familial trends. His historical contextualization largely echoes the more comprehensive research done on Japanese bathing culture in a simpler manner. However, some of Leonard's analysis of modern bathing culture and the sociological relationships therein are insightful and can be applied in creating a more complete depiction of modern Japanese bathing culture.

The next three sources are newspaper or magazine articles. Lisa Cullen's "Soaking and Steaming in Japan"<sup>13</sup> is written in an anecdotal narrative style and explains cultural norms and *onsen* behavior. Cullen also briefly explains the various types of bath tub and outlines some of the differences between *onsen* and *sentō*. Taken at face value, Cullen's work is only useful in typing the different Japanese baths. However, some of Cullen's comments can be interpreted to indicate the demystification of baths that has occurred among Japanese and foreign visitors. In contrast, Loren Edelson's article "Shaking Up the Bathhouse"<sup>14</sup> focuses mainly on the current economic status of *sentō* in Tokyo. Edelson provides pricing of the average *sentō* and, while

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<sup>12</sup> Leonard Koren and Suehiro Maruo, *How to Take a Japanese Bath* (Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Cullen, "Soaking and Steaming."

<sup>14</sup> Edelson, "The Bathhouse."

advocating for an increase in *sentō* patronage, explains some of the harsh economic viability realities facing *sentō* owners. Edelson's article brings meaningful insight regarding contemporary *sentō* profitability and the shift in how Tokyo *sentō* market themselves. Finally, Shinobu Machida's "Paradise and Super Paradise,"<sup>15</sup> details some of the differing types of baths and forms of entertainment within super-*sentō*. Machida's article is useful in describing the entertainment diversity that super-*sentō* offers its patrons. Although the marketing schemes of *sentō* and super-*sentō* have focused on their low-cost entertainment value, the healing and therapeutic properties of bathing culture remain an incentive for some Japanese and many tourists.

The following sources pertain to the health benefits surrounding Japanese bathing culture. Given that the healing properties of hot spring waters are what originally peaked my interest in Japanese bathing culture, these sources are of special interest. The majority of the literature pertaining to the therapeutic benefits of bathing is focused on *onsen* in particular, although information about the healing efficacy of bathing in general also appears in some of the sources.

The most comprehensive of the sources on the therapeutic benefits is Mihaela Serbulea's article "Onsen (hot springs) in Japan—Transforming Terrain into Healing Landscapes."<sup>16</sup> Serbulea describes legal policies and ritual practices related to *onsen* and talks about the healing properties of *onsen* waters. She also contextualizes *onsen* within the Japanese healthcare system and provides a twentieth century assessment of *onsen* and balneology in general. Serbulea's article also provides insightful analysis of the effects that modernization have had on cultural bathing traditions. This source also reveals current scientific and Japanese perceptions of *onsen*. Serbulea's work on the healing powers of *onsen* is successful in describing

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<sup>15</sup> Shinobu Machida, "Paradise and Super Paradise," *Look Japan*, January – February 2003, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-95844654.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Mihaela Serbulea, "Onsen (hot springs) in Japan – Transforming Terrain into Healing Landscapes," *Health and Place* 18.6 (2011): accessed February 25, 2013, doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.06.020.

how an institutionalized practice such as communal bathing has been so dramatically affected by urban modernization.

Of a slightly more scientific ilk than Serbulea's article, Hiroko Nakata 's research, entitled "Japan's Hot Springs part of Social, Geologic, Historic Fabric,"<sup>17</sup> provides survey-based data of Japanese vacationing tendencies and explains how *onsen* health benefits fit into that scheme. The article explains the relationship between *onsen* proximity to magma and the presence mineral content. Nakata also corroborates some historical information presented in other sources. The information contained in this article, while providing some historical and scientific data, is most useful in further understanding the contemporary Japanese view of *onsen*.

Similarly themed, Pamela Winfield's article "Curing with Kaji: Healing and Esoteric Empowerment in Japan,"<sup>18</sup> discusses religious esoteric elements of *onsen* providing information of historical and therapeutic importance. Winfield describes the mysticism surrounding *onsen* in ancient Japan and draws connections between the monk Kūkai and hot springs. The historical analysis present in Winfield's work successfully elucidates the connections between mysticism and hot springs in Japan.

The final source pertaining to the health benefits of Japanese hot springs is Yasuaki Goto's "Psychophysiological Effects of Bathing in Hot Springs Evaluated by EEG."<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, only the abstract of the study was available. However, the results of Goto's experiment presents scientific evidence for the benefits of bathing on one's mood. Additionally, the study indicated increases in blood flow and other physiological benefits that stemmed from

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<sup>17</sup> Hiroko Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs part of Social, Geologic, Historic Fabric," *The Japan Times*, January 22, 2008, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/01/22/reference/japans-hot-springs-part-of-social-geologic-historic-fabric/#.UXtfB7WG18F>.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Winfield, "Curing with Kaji: Healing and Esoteric Empowerment in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32.1 (2005): accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233779>.

<sup>19</sup> Yasuaki Goto, "Psychophysiological Effects of Bathing in Hot Springs Evaluated by EEG," *Annals of General Psychiatry* 7 (2008): accessed February 23, 2013, doi:10.1186/1744-859X-7-S1-S140.

bathing in hot water. Goto's research is useful in two ways: it provides scientific validation of the therapeutic power of hot springs and, as a study, is indicative of the contemporary Japanese need to seek for alternate ways to market and legitimize hot springs and bathing in general. However, while science has been applied to bolster the economic success of contemporary bathing culture in Japan, there have also been scientific studies that have revealed controversial issues and health concerns surrounding these once-sacred steaming waters.

In recent years, the cleanliness of communal bathing waters and some of the authenticity of the therapeutic claims of many *onsen* have been called into question. Although there have been cases of bacterial outbreaks such as Legionnaires which have resulted in the deaths of hot spring-goers, the following sources focus mainly on the authenticity of the mineral content and temperatures of hot springs.<sup>20</sup> Both of these sources reference the same controversy surrounding the illegal augmentation of the supposedly natural waters of hot springs throughout Japan.

Author of the more comprehensive of the two articles, Anthony Faiola's "Exposed, Japan's Hot Springs Come Clean; Tainted Spas Spoil a Beloved Bathing Ritual"<sup>21</sup> details how *onsen* owners had been deceiving their customers. Faiola explains that the proprietors of a Shirahone *onsen* was found to have been adding dye to their waters, which precipitated a national investigation of hot spring businesses across Japan. He also discusses how the controversy surrounding *onsen* not only affects hot spring owners but is also detrimental to the local towns that rely on onsen-based tourism to generate income. Faiola's article accurately portrays some of the current issues facing *onsen* owners and illustrates a significant obstacle that impedes the overall success of the hot spring economy.

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<sup>20</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Faiola, "Exposed, Japan's Hot Springs Come Clean; Tainted Spas Spoil a Beloved Bathing Ritual," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 2004, accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A40566-2004Oct17.html>.

The content of the Wen Kwan's "Hot Springs that are just Plain Tap Water; Japanese Spas Admit to Diluting their 'Therapeutic' Baths"<sup>22</sup> is similar to Fariola's in that it gives an overview of the scandals within the *onsen* industry. However, Kwan also introduces an additional component to the dishonest actions of *onsen* owners, explaining how some businesses were found to have been tapping municipal water wells to cut costs and meet demands of high-volume tourism. Kwan's article creates a more complete image of the deception among hot spring business owners and reinforces the economic repercussions faced by a now untrustworthy industry that has relied upon mystic and scientifically proven therapeutic properties in garnering patrons from both local and foreign demographics.

Japanese bathing culture, however glorified, mystified, or scandalized, is ultimately driven by its economic viability. There are three central texts that address the economics behind the markets of both *senjo* and *onsen*. Arguably the broadest in scope, John Dodd's "Piping Hot Business"<sup>23</sup> provides the reader with a concrete understanding of the economics of Japanese bathing culture via numerical data. Dodd's article gives a breakdown of the different types of Japanese baths, from super-*senjo* to *higaeri* or resort *onsen*. He also talks about the grouping of *onsen* in thermally active areas and some of the economic analytics of large bathing businesses. Dodd touches on how an architect approaches tailoring *onsen* to the Japanese, both aesthetically and functionally. This article also provides hard numbers that indicate the investment required to develop and maintain successful *onsen* or *senjo*. It is distinct from other sources in that it contains interviews with prominent *senjo* and *onsen* corporation owners which lend valuable insight into the economic incentives behind certain design choices or implementation strategies.

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<sup>22</sup> Wen Kim Kwan, "Hot Springs that are just Plain Tap Water; Japanese Spas Admit to Diluting their 'Therapeutic' Baths," *The Straits Times*, August 14, 2004, accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/lnacui2api/api/version1/getDocCui?oc=00240&hl=t&hns=t&hnsd=f&perra=true&lni=4D34-9VC0-0058-X1CS&hv=t&csi=144965&hgn=t&secondRedirectIndicator=true>.

<sup>23</sup> Dodd, "Piping Hot."



Although not as thorough as Dodd, Claire Stewart's "The Healing Power of Water; Hotel Special Feature"<sup>24</sup> does make mention of some economic figures such as the annual revenue generated by the hot spring industry. Stewart discusses some of the historical mythology surrounding bathing cultures internationally. Ultimately, this article is only useful from an economic perspective in that it provides the approximate worth of the Japanese hot spring industry. However, Stewart's work can be used to draw conclusions about bathing culture on a global scale.

The economic application of the final article by Chris McMorran, entitled "Understanding the 'Heritage' in Heritage Tourism: Ideological Tool or Economic Tool for a Japanese Hot Springs Resort?"<sup>25</sup> is slightly more niched than that of Dodd's in that it targets the relationship between amenities and hot springs and the "heritage" element of *onsen* marketing schemes. McMorran explains that the adoption of the "heritage" marketing model has allowed the locale surrounding the *onsen* to maintain its identity and uniqueness while simultaneously increasing economic development. He uses the region of Kurokawa as a case study for his theory. McMorran's article provides an example of how contemporary *onsen* businesses have had to adapt to appeal to the changing needs and interests of Japanese consumers. A current assessment of economic strategies behind Japanese bathing culture can also be gleaned from other sources such as websites.

The following two websites are diametric opposites in appearance and layout when viewed in English. The more visually appealing and comprehensive of the two, as of April 17,

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<sup>24</sup> Claire Stewart, "The Healing Power of Water; Hotel Special Feature," *Australian Financial Review*, September 3, 2012, accessed February 21, 2012, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/lncui2api/api/version1/getDocCui?oc=00240&hl=t&hns=t&hnsd=f&pema=true&lni=567V-DG21-F0J6-J3WX&hv=t&csi=390780&hgn=t&secondRedirectIndicator=true>.

<sup>25</sup> Chris McMorran, "Understanding the 'Heritage' in Heritage Tourism: Ideological Tool or Economic Tool for a Japanese Hot Springs Resort?" *Tourism Geographies* 10.3 (2008): accessed February 14, 2013, doi:10.1080/14616680802236329.

2013 Kinosaki *Onsen's* website<sup>26</sup> presents information on the curative benefits of its hot springs and describes the customs of the village. The quality of design and content impart the pride that the village of Kinosaki has for its *onsen* and is useful in creating a case study. Although more drab and primitive, Arima *onsen's* website as of April 17, 2013 provides lists of the entertainment available in the city as well as a brief description of the curative properties of its waters. There is not an abundance of information regarding the quality or history of the springs of Arima. However, the presentation of the website and the long lists of restaurants and shopping indicate the focus of the experience when visiting Arima. The design and content of both websites reveal useful data for constructing case studies and assessing the current state of each famous *onsen* area.

### **Contribution to Existing Literature**

The research conducted on bathing culture in Japan is relatively diverse. However, the fragmented nature of the existing literature and research necessitates interdisciplinary synthesis. To the Japanese, a bath is more than just the physical act of cleaning oneself. Historically, bathing culture was popularized via Buddhism and consequently manipulated to leverage political power. In a modern context, bathing culture has flourished through the widespread commercialization of *onsen* and super-*sentō* and diversification of entertainment forms. For *onsen*, this diversification, which arose out of a change in consumer interests that necessitated shifting the focus away from the spring waters, has led to an increase in economic prosperity and secured their financial longevity. However, traditional *sentō* have not been able to diversify due to their water-centric nature, a lack of funding and a direct formidable competitor, the super-*sentō*, which has siphoned many of the remaining customers away from an already emaciated

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<sup>26</sup> “The Seven Hot Springs of Kinosaki,” accessed April 17, 2013, <http://www.kinosaki-spa.gr.jp/global/hotspring/hotspring.html>.

*seno* industry. To this end, my thesis will produce a new reading of the existing literature and research relating to Japanese bathing culture and, after a historical contextualization, provide focused insight as to how *onsen* and *seno* function in religious, entertainment, and social capacities.

## Chapter Two: Historicizing the *Onsen* and *Sento* Experience

In Japan, a distinct bathing culture has existed for hundreds of years. The *onsen*, *sento*, and *furo* are all firmly grounded in Japanese history. However, as commercialized or publicized entities, the cultural and ritual practices surrounding the *onsen* are the oldest. This is not to discount the significance of either *sento* or *furo*, which are both cultural mainstays, but *onsen* were believed from their inception to have both secularly and non-secularly curative properties. The result is that a large amount of the literature surrounding bathing culture pertains to the religious, therapeutic, and practical applications of only *onsen*, rather than the *sento* and *furo*. Therefore, the majority of my historical contextualization is rooted in the world of *onsen*, with a nod to some of the major historical events of *sento*. Despite its cultural relevance, the history of the *furo* will be brief in light of the lack of records surrounding what was considered a mundane, private, and strictly hygienic affair.

Historically, there were two words that described the different types of baths within the greater bathing culture: *yu* and *furo*. The word *yu* would equate to what we understand in modern culture as the *onsen* and, literally translated, means hot water. However, the term *furo* surfaced much later (sometime in the thirteenth century) and meant steam bath.<sup>27</sup> Due to the breadth of content within the literature surrounding *onsen*, this historical account of Japanese bathing culture will begin by describing the *yu* or *onsen* culture. It is important to understand the degree to which the Japanese archipelago is populated with hot springs.

### ***Onsen* Locations in Japan**

The Japanese archipelago contains one of the highest concentrations of hot springs in the world. The islands are known to contain almost a thousand mineral springs (both hot and cold)

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 7.

which are fabled to have been used by the Japanese since antiquity. Some accounts suggest that this relationship may have begun as early as 700 B.C.<sup>28</sup> Often heralded as one of the oldest hot springs in Japan, Dōgo (located in Ehime Prefecture) has been estimated to be 3,000 years old, its age indicated by ancient literary records which described the emperor's trips to the *onsen*.<sup>29</sup> Although Dōgo has been credited as one of the oldest *onsen*, the distribution of hot springs throughout the archipelago suggests that other *onsen* may have been frequented in ancient Japan as well.

It is important to grasp the degree to which the Japanese islands are populated with hot springs. Its high concentration of springs in both rural and metropolitan areas greatly influenced the widespread popularity that the *onsen* industry experienced throughout its history. Without the geographic accessibility to hot springs, *onsen* might have never achieved the economic success that it did. Furthermore, *onsen* would have never become as culturally engrained or institutionalized had it not been for the naturally-inbuilt hot spring matrix that existed throughout Japan.

A geographic breakdown of hot spring distribution throughout the Japanese islands results in three distinct regional groupings of volcanic activity: southwestern, central and northeastern. The Southwestern region, including Kyūshū, Shikoku and the western part of Honshu, is home to the Aso and Kirishima volcanic chains. These volcanoes are responsible for the heating of the more renowned *onsen* such as Dōgo and Beppu. The central region includes the Shizuoka and Nagano prefectures, among others, and is heated by the Norikura volcanic chain. It is worth noting that Nagano is known for having well over a hundred hot springs, earning it the title of the most hot spring-rich prefecture in Japan. Finally, the Northeastern

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<sup>28</sup> Fujinami, *Hot Springs*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs."

region is crossed by the Nasu, Chōkai and Chishima volcanic chains. In keeping with the previous geographic regions, there are multiple prefectures with concentrations of over fifty hot springs. Many of the Chishima islands are occupied by numerous hot springs as well.<sup>30</sup> This abundance of multiple volcanic groupings on the small island of Japan can be understood as a resource that was first enjoyed and later capitalized upon, not unlike how natural oil has been exploited in places such as Texas or the Middle East. While this analogy is not meant to equate the morality or ethics behind the commercialization and scandals surrounding either industry, it highlights the human propensity to take advantage of abundant natural resources. These hundreds of *onsen* have undergone many changes over the past several thousand years from both an architectural and environmental perspective. Therefore, it is imperative to conceptualize what a traditional *onsen* was like from a physical and experiential standpoint.

### **Religiously Politicized *Onsen* waters**

Throughout the lifespan of bathing culture in Japan, there has existed a wide diversity in the types of baths and how they have been used. However, it is clear that from the onset, *onsen* waters have never been simply about washing one's body. Predating even the medieval period there existed a powerful therapeutic and religious connection. As early as the beginning of the sixth century, the act of bathing was intimately tied to rituals associated with communal purifications via water. One of the first instances of spring waters being employed to wash away not only physical dirt, but spiritual grime was devised by Buddhist monks, although the advent of bathing together in large tubs of water was inconsistent with how the Japanese had previously cleansed themselves. The ritualistic norm, water was heated in a large, copper cauldron which was then routed to smaller wooden tubs, a method which still persists within contemporary

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<sup>30</sup>Fujinami, *Hot Springs*, 27-30.

Buddhist schools in Japan.<sup>31</sup> In many respects, the concept of purifying oneself or simply experiencing *onsen* in Japan cannot be historically divorced from religion. Despite the fact that as late as the twelfth century religious and prosaic justifications and incentives were still amalgamated,<sup>32</sup> the number of religious connections to the institutionalization of bathing in hot springs and communal baths suggests a foundational relationship. It was during this late-seventh century period of religious influence that the religious ties to bathing culture came to be used as a means to further the political agendas of those in power and mine karmic capital for the wealthy elite.

Thus during the Nara period, compassion-based values and ideals that had been instilled by Buddhism since its import to Japan began to manifest themselves within the budding bathing culture. Empress Kōmyō, who was consort to Emperor Shōmu (724-748), sought to display her imperial benevolence by creating a new type of bath: the charity bath. The Empress vowed to wash one thousand beggars by hand in one of the temple baths in Nara. Thus, the charity bath was born. However, by the Kamakura period the charity bath had grown to be more broadly defined as an act of reverence for one's deceased ancestors. In order to honor the departed, a devotee must offer baths to any that should come his way, regardless of age, sex or relationship. This custom of providing the opportunity to all to bathe resulted in a widespread love of bathing which has endured to this day.<sup>33</sup> Another version of the charity bath was when wealthy patrons of a given temple would sponsor baths for the poor, either monetarily or via contributions of firewood or fuel to heat the water. It was believed that through habitual charitable donations that these wealthy believers might be able to purchase spiritual repose in the afterlife.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 248.

<sup>33</sup> Fujinami, *Hot Springs*, 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> Grilli and Levy, *Furo*, 54.

actual religious credibility, the incentive for the rich to make bathing accessible to the poor fostered a passion for bathing culture, which lay in both the satisfaction of giving and the appreciation of receiving a hot bath. Although charity baths aided in promoting the cultural proliferation of this type of bathing, the political incentives were what ultimately motivated the Empress in providing these baths. Similarly, when charity baths were adapted to honor the dead, practitioners were bathing others primarily to increase spiritual capital.

Even during the war-torn Muromachi period *onsen* baths were more than a bath, developing into yet another type of religious bath known as the devotional bath. Unlike its predecessors, this bath was an act of spiritual submission and devotion and not just a physical cleansing of filth. The practice consisted of praising the Buddha while submersed in the pure spring waters.<sup>35</sup> While the religious and spiritual minutia of these baths are not within the scope of this thesis, the devotional bath reveals that within a few hundred years of the invention of charity baths, which were initiated by Buddhism, hot springs had again become the center of religious bathing practices. The Buddhist promulgation of the curative properties of *onsen* is firmly rooted in and supported by mythological accounts.

But even in sixth century, immersion in an *onsen* was not simply to wash away surface grime but provided a means to cure disease. The curative qualities rose to legendary proportions spreading the mythological accounts of how the most famous Japanese hot springs were founded. Thus, the legendary waters of *onsen* were considered gifts from animals, gods, or Buddhist deities and hence it was common for the highly reputed *onsen* to have their own creation myth.<sup>36</sup> For many Japanese these stories would have further heightened the act of hot spring bathing and added another component to their transcendent *onsen* experiences. In the case of the Arima hot

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 9.

<sup>36</sup> Miyazaki and Williams, "The Case of Osorezan," 414.



springs, "three crows curing their wounds in a pool were discovered by the gods Onamuchi no mikoto and Sankuna Hikona no mikoto who were travelling...looking for some curative herbs. The gods understood this pool was a hot spring."<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, the mythological genesis of Kinosaki *onsen* bears a strong resemblance to that of Arima, "a big bird, curing its wounds in some water, is discovered by a peasant...the gushing water (*yu*) was called *Koū no yu* (the waters of the stork)."<sup>38</sup> The legend of Dogo *onsen* also shares the same thematic elements as Arima and Kinosaki, "legend has it that an injured white heron found Dogo *onsen* and flew to the ailing springs every day until its ailing leg was completely cured."<sup>39</sup> The fact that all three mythological accounts reveal the curative properties of their respective springs by describing a wounded animal being healed help corroborate their credibility. Nevertheless, the existence of these legends provided the initial credibility for many Japanese hot springs for potential patrons.

The ancient Japanese perception of the benefits of hot spring submersion was arguably more ritualistic than religious, but *onsen* waters were not simply thought of as cleansing but curative as well. The Japanese prescribed a causal relationship between humans and illness postulating that the sick must have a spirit that had been consumed by poison. One method of ridding the body of spiritual sludge was hot spring immersion.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the efficacy of this treatment, beginning early in Japanese history the properties of hot springs were firmly solidified as restorative.

In the centuries following the Muromachi period, the curative aspects of different hot springs became a large part of their success and appeal. These benefits created yet another reason for many Japanese to visit. As had been the case for many years, temples continued to state that

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<sup>37</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 247.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>39</sup> Nakata, "Japan's Hot Springs."

<sup>40</sup> Winfield, "Curing with Kaji," 115.

if a sick person was to bathe in the temple hot spring they would be immediately cured of all illnesses and gain future immunity. However, in the early-nineteenth century, the level of curative specificity of certain springs was eerily high. For example, the Spring of Yakushi was advertised to be good for eye diseases and hot flashes while the Spring of Colds is good for removing excess water from the body.<sup>41</sup> The general promotion of hot springs as medicinally effective (to either the physical body or the immaterial soul) is understandable. However, the specificity of some of the hot spring's curing abilities elicits skepticism regarding their validity. Often, when it comes to marketing intangible or subjective properties, specificity indicates legitimacy. The projection of confidence by the temples coupled with cases of some people actually being cured by the springs was obviously enough for many Japanese to buy into propaganda surrounding *onsen*. One case that supports this notion is a book that was written in 1808 that recognized the curative properties as well as the aesthetic beauty of Kinohaki *onsen* which resulted in sustained economic prosperity.<sup>42</sup> This theory is not meant to completely reject the efficacy or validity of remedial waters. Rather, this analysis is intended to highlight the degree to which Buddhism propelled the popularity and mysticism of *onsen* up until the twentieth century, at which point the therapeutics of *onsen* came into play.

### **Onsen Therapeutics**

The therapeutic value of Japanese hot springs is historically well-documented. One of the major differences between therapeutic and religious baths is that they have different origins and evolved independently. As previously illustrated, religious baths were supported by wealthy

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<sup>41</sup> Miyazaki and Williams, "The Case of Osorezan," 411-413.

<sup>42</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 251.

believers and secular organizations whereas therapeutic bathing originated geographically.<sup>43</sup> The therapeutic benefits of bathing in natural hot springs were discovered early.

In Japan, hot springs abound and their purifying, natural waters have been used for centuries to treat illnesses as well as promote general health. Balneotherapeutics, or spa treatment, consists in drinking and usage of hot waters, and varying hot mud and sand bath applications. Also, as one might expect, the therapeutic efficacy of natural waters far surpasses that of its artificial (i.e. municipally tapped) counterpart. Although the amount of minerals present in the waters of a hot spring are minute, they are still potent and curative.<sup>44</sup> There are different types of hot spring classifications, each of which contain their own set of restorative properties. A common hot spring variant is the Simple spring, whose therapeutic value stems from its high temperature. Dōgo and Beppu are examples of Simple springs and are beneficial in treating migraines, nerve pains, and other common maladies. Some of the more interesting hot spring types are as follows: Carbonic acid springs, Earthy springs, Bitter springs and Radio-Active springs. Bitter springs have long been used for purgative applications while, astonishingly, radio-active springs have been known to lower blood pressure.<sup>45</sup> The therapeutic value of *onsen* has been scientifically proven for hundreds of years. Due to an intimate relationship with *onsen* and bathing in general, the Japanese have likely recorded additional benefits of these waters which may or may not be scientifically sound. However, the fact that Japanese routinely dip into radio-active hot springs and see to benefit from these experiences at the very least indicates a high therapeutic value in *onsen*. These therapeutic applications illustrate the concept that, within Japanese bathing culture, behind the act of bathing there are many

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<sup>43</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 7.

<sup>44</sup> Fujinami, *Hot Springs*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 45-47.

therapeutic incentives. This is not to say that there is no therapeutic or emotionally curative value in submersing oneself in artificial waters.

### ***Sento* Beginnings**

The *sento* has existed in Japan for over four hundred years and even in its beginnings these neighborhood baths served as the primary means of physical washing in its inception until the late sixteenth century when it transformed into a social gathering space as well. However, the social aspect is not apparent in earliest form, which was created strictly for hygienic purposes and was completely driven by function. During this beginning phase of *sento* development, the *sento* was no more than a place to wash for an affordable price. There were economic incentives that motivated the construction and patronage of *sento* throughout Japan. These monetary rewards coupled with the communal need is what initiated the creation of the first public bathhouses in Japan.

Within the existing literature there does exist some controversy as to when exactly the first secular public Japanese baths were created. However, according to Butler, "The earliest evidence of commercial baths appears in [a]...diary kept by priests at Kyoto's Gion shrine. In a reference of 1352 notes that [states] a 'penny bath' [*sento*] was established. The same entry adds that such a bath, operated by a commoner, had appeared first during the Genkō era (1321-1324)."<sup>46</sup> Though these may have been the first iterations of the *sento*, the fact that they only existed in select locations and that they were only built at temples may have resulted in their being overlooked by many authors. However, there exists an interesting similarity between this account and the later commercialization of *sento*. Despite the fact that these public baths were created over two hundred and fifty years prior to the widely accepted "first" *sento* in Kyoto, the

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<sup>46</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 20.

way in which they were commercialized is the same. The baths built during the Genkō era were deliberately opened at temples, which were places where secular communal bathing had already taken root and groups of people frequented.<sup>47</sup> The founders of these first *senjo* understood that there would need to be at least a medium-sized demographic that would reliably visit the bath.

Throughout fifteenth century the popularity of *senjo* experienced rampant growth. They were prominent features of neighborhoods throughout Kyoto, often identified by their cost or location. Some *senjo* became so famous that their neighborhood intersections became known by the name of the local bath house.<sup>48</sup> These baths were communally oriented for predominantly economic reasons. There were two directly related requirements that successful *senjo* business owners had to keep in mind: the baths needed to be affordable so patrons could frequent them on a regular basis without experiencing excessive financial strain, and the hot water and steam needed to be used efficiently so that the proprietors could keep fuel costs low. Thus, these parameters rendered a private bathing culture unviable.<sup>49</sup> Although the exact cost of individual admission to *senjo* during this period is uncertain, the operation costs that needed to be met by the owners necessitated group bathing to ensure reasonable rates. The dynamics between these groups of people were the beginnings of the conviviality that has persisted throughout the history of *senjo*.

### ***Senjo* as a Social Space**

The first public bathhouse in Tokyo was founded in 1591, which marked the start of the diverse cultural growth surrounding baths.<sup>50</sup> Stemming from the original communal nature of the

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<sup>47</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 20.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 94.

bath, the large groups of people that would travel to their local *sentō* would eat, drink, and sing.<sup>51</sup> Bathhouses of this period were spaces in which neighbors, friends, and strangers would come together and socialize and it was in these interactions that this communal cleansing ritual transformed a simple bath into a *sentō* experience. The *sentō* also introduced the concept of social mixing, which has persisted to the present. This mixing not only aided in slowly deconstructing the existing social hierarchy but also created a new cultural flow between the elite and commoners. For example, the "rock bath" is thought to have been first invented by the common class but was further explored and developed by the wealthier elite in succeeding centuries.<sup>52</sup> On a fundamental level, the concept that upon entering the physical bathhouse one is not only strips off their clothes but also their social rank is revolutionary. There are few instances in the Japanese postmodern world where social status and material wealth are outwardly indistinguishable. Despite the institutionalization of an individualized bathing culture, the *sentō* and *onsen* have managed to maintain an atmosphere that is relatively destigmatized and where social status is obsolete. The existence of this facet of bathing culture, in which the promotion of social equity is intrinsic, can be attributed to the environment originally created by the historical *sentō*.

In the early-seventeenth century, a mixing of the physical variety had grown into a problem that attracted government attention. The *yuna*, or bath prostitute, came into existence during the mid fourteenth century and served as regulators of Buddhist temple baths in a strictly platonic capacity. However, by the early seventeenth century the duties that these *yuna* performed had expanded to include scrubbing backs, pouring water, and tending to the hair of male bath patrons. During the seventeenth century the Tokugawa government outlawed these

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 35.

"female-bath attendants."<sup>53</sup> Judging by the government prohibition of a relatively longstanding practice of females assisting in the baths, we can safely assume that they had to begun to attend to the sexual desires of some of the patrons. Not only would such a practice create a issues of sanitary concern but it would have resulted in drastically different bathing experience. This carnal component of the *senjo* experience was likely a draw for many Japanese males of the period. However, this ban did by no means extinguish the growth of *senjo* throughout Japan during the seventeenth century.

Thus far, the majority of the explanation surrounding the growth of hot springs has been relating only to Kyoto and Tokyo. However, throughout the pre-modern period *senjo* were being built across Japan. Despite the constant threat of warfare during the fifteenth century, there was significant financial reward that awaited the business owners willing to risk the capital required to build these expensive structures. This created economic stimulus to bathhouses, blacksmiths, and crafters alike. The increase in industry profitability can be attributed to the diversification of the bathing demographic that had grown to include not only the elite but the commoners as well.<sup>54</sup> There was also a cultural and hierarchical stratification narrowing that arose out of the social mixing that was promoted within the *senjo* culture, which has had lasting effects on the Japanese social status quo.

Historically, there were many factors that contributed to the popularity of *senjo*. Prostitution, drinking, singing, social mixing, and an affordable wash all helped to motivate scores of commoners and elites alike to go to their neighborhood *senjo*. Today, due to almost all private residences being built with their own *furo*, many neighborhood bathhouses are disappearing and experiencing extreme economic strain. However, in an attempt to rekindle the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, "Washing off the Dust," 33.

interest of the majority of Japanese, revivals of some of the old marketing tactics are being employed by *sentō* proprietors. Rather than relying on people to frequent the *sentō* out of need, business owners have stressed the social aspects and affordability of these neighborhood baths to spark the interest of a majority that, frankly, no longer has an inherent need for a communal bath. Similarly, with changing consumer interests, *onsen* have been forced to adapt to remain economically viable and have shifted the focus away from the waters towards the entertainment experience surrounding the actual bath itself. These new marketing strategies of *sentō* will be explored in depth in chapter three along with how *onsen* have evolved to fit an international consumer demographic while simultaneously catering to the Japanese citizens. The cultural implications of the changes in both *onsen* and *sentō* will also be examined in chapter three.



### Chapter Three: *Onsen* and *Sento* Today

The modern-day *onsen* and *sento* are vastly different than their historical counterparts. Although they are no longer imbued with the mystical, the godly, and the spiritual, *onsen* and *sento* have reinvented themselves as affordable and legitimate entertainment in new ways that elevate them beyond a mere bath.. However, what is most interesting is that despite all its woes, both consumers and business owners alike have tried to preserve the *onsen/sento* tradition as more than a bath. Over the last hundred years, Japan has undergone intense economic growth, which has resulted in a shift in consumer needs and desires. For the majority of Japanese, the neighborhood bathhouse is no longer a necessity for daily use. Similarly, the *onsen* experience declined in popularity in the wake of twentieth century westernization. This chapter will detail what the transformations have been, focusing on two famous Japanese hot springs, the emergence of the super-*sento* and other modern iterations, and the economic challenges faced by both industries.

#### **The Transformation of the Modern *Onsen***

If one of the *onsen*-goers of the seventeenth century were to visit modern iteration of *onsen* they would be shocked by how hot springs have changed. Throughout their lifespan, *onsen* have constantly changed to fit the current consumer demands, which dictated how they reinvented themselves to become more than a bath. *Onsen* have also endured economic setbacks over the course of Japanese modernization. One factor that has siphoned the resources of many *onsen* for decades is the tributes that the temples surrounding the hot springs command. Many of the natural hot springs are actually located within the grounds of temples and thus *onsen* and inns that draw visitors to the town are required to pay a tax to the temple.<sup>55</sup> While this fee is likely relatively insignificant for many of the more prominent *onsen*, it cripples the growth of a smaller,

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<sup>55</sup> Miyazaki and Williams, “The Case of Osorezan,” 414.

lesser-known village *onsen* that might not receive high foreign or domestic tourist visitation. Although these smaller *onsen* have a lower cost of operations, their revenue stream is also small by nature, which is why taxation would have a greater effect on their profitability. In order to accommodate and increase tourism to some of these rural *onsen*, some local entrepreneurs adopted the heritage tourism model. This allowed villages to maintain strong connections to their traditional heritage. Festivals, food, local artisan products and hot springs that were unique to the locale all aided in the development of a tourist destination.<sup>56</sup> This is one example of how *onsen* have been able to be economically bolstered by non-necessity-based factors. The concept of the *onsen* experience being more than a bath is also at play. Kinosaki *onsen*, which will be discussed later, has employed the use of these coping mechanisms and responded to evolving consumer interests by innovating new structures.

The nostalgic longing that began in the 1980s is another instance of *onsen* responding to changing consumer interests. The majority of tourists to *onsen* in the 1980s elected to avoid the generally efficiency-driven and uninviting monoliths that were the modern *onsen*. Instead, they voiced a desire to experience a more traditional and natural environment. The response from *onsen* was to create the *rotenburo* (outdoor bath) in which guests could experience nature while simultaneously enjoying the shelter of a roof of some sort and the heat of the bath.<sup>57</sup> This solution became a huge success at *onsen* throughout Japan and is still prominently featured at almost every hot spring today. It is important to keep in mind that *onsen* were able to make these adjustments due to an almost guaranteed and predictable flow of tourism and visitation year round. However, recent scandals surrounding the authenticity and sanitary safety of communal bathing have further complicated their economic viability.

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<sup>56</sup> McMorran, "Heritage Tourism," 340.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 344.

Within the last decade there have been isolated instances of foul-play within the *onsen* community, which ultimately called into question the authenticity of hot springs across Japan and elicited a nationwide examination of thousands of hot springs. The catalyst of this audit was Shirahone *onsen* known for its white, clouded waters. In 2004 the *onsen* was discovered to have been adding white dye to their waters due to a color dissipation which began almost fifteen years prior to the scandal.<sup>58</sup> In the wake of the Shirahone incident, Ikaho *onsen* admitted to having diluted their springs with water sourced from municipal taps. This was due to a natural cooling of the water that had occurred. This decision to dilute allowed businesses that would have otherwise been shut down to remain active and cut costs since the water was no longer one hundred percent pure.<sup>59</sup> These incidents possess implications that spread much further than the issue of consumer confidence. Many rural villages that rely on *onsen*-based tourism to generate revenue have also been endangered by the deception. Similarly, inns surrounding the *onsen* have suffered occupancy rate decreases of almost fifty percent and received communications from dissatisfied clients.<sup>60</sup> The effect that these scandals have had on *onsen* and their immediate micro economies has been devastating. These incidents have forced many *onsen* to shift their development and advertising efforts away from the curative nature of their waters. Tourists have also allowed their attention to be lured away from the waters, which were previously one of the central tenets of hot spring experiences, and into the other forms entertainment that the hot springs villages and resorts have begun to offer. Since these scandals, hot springs have managed to remain highly attractive forms of entertainment for both foreigners and Japanese alike. The following section will examine a case study of two of the most famous *onsen* in Japan (Arima

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<sup>58</sup> Faiola, "Exposed."

<sup>59</sup> Kwan, "Plain Tap Water."

<sup>60</sup> Faiola, "Exposed."

and Kinosaki) and analyze how they each evolved to thrive within a rapidly modernizing Japanese society.

Before beginning my analysis of each hot spring, it is worth noting that, for *onsen*, there are two courses of action in response to fluctuating consumer interests. One method of action is adapting to fit the changing times by increasing their entertainment value (the immediate or superficial forms of entertainment that can be easily accessed by the visitors such as arcades, shows, or movie theatres) and updating their amenities and expanding into a resort to accommodate the high volume of potential Japanese tourists. Conversely, an *onsen* can refuse to modernize and instead focus on accentuating the historic authenticity of their establishment and the traditional atmosphere of their village. My analysis will begin with Kinosaki *onsen*, which chose the latter course of action.

### **Case Study One: Kinosaki *Onsen***

One of the most iconic *onsen* in Japan, Kinosaki hot springs have been popular since their inception. According to a survey conducted by the Japanese Department of Health, in 1923 Kinosaki was visited by 1,010,000 people in that year alone, which led to its prefecture being named the most highly visited prefecture in Japan.<sup>61</sup> In a denial of the modern status quo of *onsen* development, the Kinosaki hot springs adopted a protective attitude towards their village, prohibiting any modern development of existing *onsen*.<sup>62</sup> While this attitude could be seen as potentially limiting for the overall growth of Kinosaki, the adherence to tradition and an unwavering opposition to modernization will likely appeal to a large enough demographic to provide more than enough economic support for the foreseeable future. Noted as one of the main draws of the Kinosaki locale, the distinctly-synergetic urban and natural landscape creates a

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<sup>61</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 252.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 253.

phenomenal visual experience. The complementary relationship between the willow trees that line the river and the quaint two-story *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns) is a major component of this overall natural synergy.<sup>63</sup> In order further legitimize the authentic and traditional experience in the face of pervasive modernism, Kinohaki village adopted a distinct stance with regard to their village identity. The municipal legislature views the entire community as one large *ryokan*. Inside the *ryokan*, visitors can frequent the different *onsen*, shop, dine, and leisurely stroll along the river bank, clad all the while in their hotel-provided *yukata* (lightweight kimono style bathrobe).<sup>64</sup> With the advent of large, enclosed and often concrete resort-style *onsen*, the sight of Japanese bathers milling about villages in their *yukata*, towel in hand, on their way to a hot spring has all but vanished.

For many Japanese, the convenience of the boundless amenities and entertainment options within the physically independent *onsen* resorts has prevailed over the authenticity, charm, and historic value offered by a traditional hot spring village such as Kinohaki. There are no important festivals or enticing geishas to muddle or otherwise interfere with the visitor experience.<sup>65</sup> Rather, the quality of the waters and the veritable nature of experience are the qualities that Kinohaki has chosen to advertise and preserve. In many ways, the village of Kinohaki has managed to remain practically unscathed by the rapid modernization within Japanese society. This adherence to tradition helps to differentiate Kinohaki from its competition and has allowed the village to economically prosper as an entire unit. Kinohaki *onsen* is the quintessential example of emphasizing that the entire experience surrounding the bath is almost paramount to the actual bath itself.

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<sup>63</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 256.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 256.

Today, websites offer the most up-to-date advertising information for the various hot springs and can be viewed in either Japanese or English. As one might expect, the ways in which onsen are marketed towards Japanese and Westerners is different. Thus, I will visually critique the English and Japanese-facing partitions of these websites and analyze the informational content of the English pages.

As was discussed earlier, many *onsen* have undergone a phase of reinvention, both architecturally and from a marketing standpoint, which has been prompted by a change in consumer interests, sanitary needs, and globalized tourism. However, Kinohaki hot springs, which has been a bastion of tradition amongst a largely progressive *onsen* industry, still adheres to the principles on which it was founded. On their website they introduce their seven *onsen* and describe the curative properties of each. For example, their *onsen* named Yanagi-yu (willow tree water) is said to bring good luck to women seeking to bear a healthy child. Another of their well-known springs known as Ichino-yu (one I have visited) is said to induce academic excellence and provide safety when travelling, two unrelated blessings. The karmic benefits of one of their newest baths, Goshono-yu, are said to include good luck in finding one's soul mate and preventing fires.<sup>66</sup> The restorative powers of these baths evoke mysticism in the minds of visitors and create a bathing experience that is about more than simply removing grime or healing one's muscular maladies. While these claims might otherwise seem trend-based or inauthentic, Kinohaki hot springs have always sought to focus on maintaining a traditional atmosphere in their village and ensure their water quality is second to none. Therefore, although these curative benefits may seem made-up or overly-mystified, Kinohaki's credibility and reputation of authenticity aids in the suspension of disbelief when visiting these baths.

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<sup>66</sup> "Seven Hot Springs."

The style in which they advertise their *onsen* to foreigners corroborates the findings of the case study of Kinosaki and Arima, which was previously explained. Their website includes a section that encourages visitors to wear the *yukata* provided at their *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn) and even provide tips on how to properly dress oneself in the garment. The *ryokan* section of their page is robust and provides a host of pictures of the different inns as well as the surrounding neighborhoods. However, there is no mention of the department stores or the movie theatres one might visit because they either do not exist or are not the focus of the Kinosaki *onsen* village. The traditional and authentic village experience itself is what makes Kinosaki *onsen* more than a bath. It is about donning a *yukata* and strolling beside the river; hearing the ambient clip-clop of wooden sandals as others pass you on your way to the next *onsen*. All of these atmospheric elements amount to the sublime experience that Kinosaki seeks to protect and share with its visitors. The distinct way in which tourists are able to immerse themselves in this traditionally and culturally authentic village and interact with the *onsen* and surrounding shops is what amounts to the bathing experience becoming more than a bath.

### **Case Study Two: Arima Onsen**

Having travelled to Kinosaki once myself, I can attest to its traditional authenticity. There was a certain mystique that surrounded the unified and historic village that caused it to stand out amongst the myriad of other hot springs I visited during my time in Japan. Unlike Kinosaki, the Arima hot springs conformed and capitalized when confronted by modernity. Located in Kobe prefecture, Arima has been heralded as one of the oldest and most celebrated *onsen* since antiquity. Largely due to its geographic location, when a railway line was constructed between Kobe and Osaka in 1874, Arima experienced a substantial increase in visitation. Since then, Arima has become a part of the city of Kobe and, due to an increasing population during the

hundred years preceding the 1990s, many *ryokan* have been built. However, today the most popular means of accommodation are large, concrete, multistory hotels. Not surprisingly, the *ryokan* and the hotels have become territorial over parking, mass transit stops, and other spatial commodities.<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, the dichotomy between the traditional and modern businesses in Arima has created tension and, although the respective establishments are successful, there is no longer exists thematic or communal unity. Today, visitors tend to stay on an average of one night, which indicates the shift in purpose of the locale.<sup>68</sup> Arima simply became one in a plethora of entertainment types available to the Japanese. Their conformity to the whims of contemporary Japanese consumers ultimately resulted in the loss of relevant, traditional identity, which has contributed to their loss in traction as an international tourist destination. Although in Arima a bath is still more than the act of physical cleansing, the way in which it transcends that definition has become based in modern material comforts. This has caused many Japanese visitors to Arima to have only a transient interest in the hot springs, viewing them as a form of recreation rather than a spiritual or cultured experience. Interestingly, while this reality is evident in the advertising towards Japanese tourists, the marketing of hot springs towards Westerners often calls attention to the exotic and mystic aspects of the establishments.

Possibly indicative of the economic disparity between the two establishments, Arima's website seems dated when compared beside that of Kinosaki. Due to the fact that Arima is often visited by those who come for the day to shop, dine, and also take a bath, the presentation of their overall atmosphere and water quality is not overly compelling. They may have felt that there was never a reason to increase the quality of their web presence because there was enough regular traffic from the residents and tourists of Osaka and Kobe. The more I explored there

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<sup>67</sup> Hendry and Raveri, "Two Japanese Hot Springs," 250.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



website, the more it occurred to me that Kinoshita's website was really a direct reflection of the pride they took in maintaining a beautiful village of tradition. On the other hand, Arima advertises the curative properties of their waters in a more therapeutic way.

The information on hot springs partition of Arima's website begins with delineating the curative powers of the Kinsen *onsen*. This spring claims to alleviate muscle and joint pain, heal allergy-based skin infections, soften the skin via meta-silicates, and even provide antiseptic relief for hives, wounds, and burns. The waters of their Ginsen hot spring are known to be effective for visitors with high blood pressure, cardiac diseases and circulation problems. Interestingly, imbibing the spring water is thought to improve diminished appetites by, "stimulating the secretion of gastric juices."<sup>69</sup> Though this curative claim may be dubious and might merely be a translational difficulty, it reflects the lack of care that went into the creation of Arima's website. The rest of Arima's website provides lists (organized in primitive graphs) of the various eateries, shopping areas, other points of interest. Interestingly, when viewing their website in Japanese as opposed to English there is a massive difference in quality. There are many more pictures and informational partitions and the overall design quality is much more similar to that of Kinoshita. This suggests that Arima's has become apathetic toward attracting foreign tourism and have relied on foreigners to travel to Arima based on its historical reputation. Obviously, that historical clout was not enough to maintain the interest of the discerning, modern Japanese demographic.

It is evident from their website that Arima too wishes their experience to be more than a bath. However, they only seem to care about marketing that transcendent experience to the Japanese market, a fact that is supported by disparity in quality between the English and Japanese versions of Arima's website. Judging from the information provided on the English

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<sup>69</sup> "On Benefits of Arima."

website, the therapeutic benefits of their hot springs and the multitude of shops, restaurants, and entertainment are the main selling-points of the Arima experience. Although the websites of both of these *onsen* on their own might indicate opulence within the bathing industry, many *onsen* and *senjo* across Japan have struggled to remain viable while new cultural norms and standards of living have undermined their previously inherent prosperity.

### ***Senjo* Visitation: Modern Motives**

Arguably, as a result of the construction of homes with their own bath, the *senjo* industry has been faced with the tough economic realities of the modern day. The biggest of these has been the question of why should Japanese come to these neighborhood baths now. Unlike the *onsen*, *senjo* owners could not turn to the mysticism and tout the uniqueness of specialized nature of their curative waters. The *senjo* was a purpose-driven space first and foremost. It was born out of an economic need for communal bathing, and since private bathing has become affordable, obsolescence looms on the horizon for *senjo*. However, many *senjo* advocates have created new, innovative ways to market the seemingly prosaic bathhouse to the Japanese masses.

Historically, Tokyo had an extremely high concentration of bathhouses. Even with the economic strain that has forced many *senjo* owners out of business, some 1500 public bathhouses still remain throughout the capitol.<sup>70</sup> In an attempt to save the *senjo* that still remain, concerned groups have attempted to market the bathhouses to tourists as a form of affordable, culturally-informative entertainment. Regarding this marketing scheme, Edelson states, "[these groups] want to teach people that at \$3.70 a visit, public bathhouses are one of the cheapest forms of cultural entertainment Tokyo has to offer."<sup>71</sup> While this type of marketing is aimed at

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<sup>70</sup> Edelson, "The Bathhouse."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

foreigners (due to the mention of "cultural entertainment"), it is likely that some Japanese might be interested in visiting a public bathhouse for the historic experiential value.

One type of marketing that is aimed at just this is the "All-Japan Bath Day," which was inaugurated in October of 1993. This holiday of sorts is supported by *senjo* throughout Japan who add aromatic lavender to their waters on this day alone.<sup>72</sup> If for no other reason, this holiday would appeal to those Japanese who appreciate aromatherapy and help to rekindle the feeling of community that irregular visitors may have missed. Although the motives behind frequenting a *senjo* on a superficial level may seem transient, Japanese *senjo* enthusiasts think otherwise and have sought to increase awareness of the communal and social advantages of visiting public bathhouses on a regular basis. In an attempt to appeal to the mature, career-oriented Japanese, a *senjo* advocate known as Takehiko Sugita states that, "we are all different ages, we all have different jobs, but when we're in the bath naked, we're all the same."<sup>73</sup> In a similarly motivated attempt to captivate the outgoing youth community, the editor of a prominent *senjo* magazine, Chieko Kawaguchi, states, "[going to the *senjo* is] a terrific way to meet people, especially in a city as large as Tokyo, where it's sometimes difficult to meet people outside your workplace."<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, the fact that Sugita highlights the social mixing component of public bathhouse demonstrates that this aspect of *senjo* culture has persisted throughout the lifespan of *senjo*. Although this aspect of *senjo* culture may not be as commonly appreciated as it was during the era of bath prostitutes and communal drinking parties, the fact that the social benefits are being used to help resuscitate the dying bathhouse breed is promising. Today, the social advantages surrounding *senjo* culture is the primary method used to advertise to the Japanese population.

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<sup>72</sup> Edelson, "The Bathhouse."

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

However, the patronage demographic of *sen*to is not limited to Japanese alone, foreign tourism also accounts for a percentage of public bathhouse revenue.

As might be expected, a certain percentage of the more well-known bathhouse's patronage is made up of tourists from abroad. Luckily for *sen*to owners, there exists a degree of exoticism that is implicit in the way foreigners view *sen*to. The simple concept of communal bathing is enough to spark the interest of many Westerners, most of whom end up visiting a *sen*to or two during their trip. Personally, I have met men of varying social statuses when visiting *sen*to during my time in Japan. More often than not, many are eager to have a conversation, whether it be about why I come to *sen*to or about what each of our favorite *haiku* (Japanese poem) are. However, social interaction aside, the authenticity of bathing in a rustic public bathhouse would be enough to earn my business. Despite my interest, the stability of the traditional *sen*to industry is tenuous. Though not solely responsible, the exodus away from *sen*to by those seeking to bathe in hot water in a communal setting has been caused by a derivative of the public bathhouse, the super-*sen*to.

### **Super-*sen*to Surfaces**

A more apt example of communal bathing's more than a bath function can be seen in the *sen*to's newest iteration, super-*sen*to which have become popular in modern Japan among both the young and the old. Unlike the *sen*to and *onsen*, the super-*sen*to is not an object of tradition or necessity.<sup>75</sup> This independence from necessity has allowed the super-*sen*to to diversify its forms of entertainment rather than constantly focusing on streamlined efficiency and keeping the cost of operations low as traditional *sen*to have done. One of the super-*sen*to's most compelling qualities is that it caters to the Japanese post-modern love of all things comfortable, affordable, and sensually stimulating. At 500-2000 yen (about six to twenty two dollars) for either all day or

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<sup>75</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 64.

twenty-four-hour access, the super-*sentō* experience is a reasonably affordable for the majority. Spacious parking lots (a rare commodity in densely-populated metropolitan areas such as Tokyo), and modern facilities such as restaurants, bars, massage rooms, large tatami-matted rooms for relaxing, and game corners are common features that set the super-*sentō* apart from its more modest and traditional counterpart.<sup>76</sup> In addition to the greater entertainment value that super-*sentō* offer, there are a multitude of types of baths that serve as another pillar of the success of these establishments. Jacuzzis, infrared tubs, and pulsating massage tubs are all staples of the super-*sentō* bath repertoire.<sup>77</sup> However, possibly the most shocking of these bath types is the *denki-furo* or electrostatic bath. This bath runs a low-voltage electric current through the water which stimulates faster healing in human cells and induces muscular relaxation.<sup>78</sup> The existence of these unusual bath types paired with the success of super-*sentō* suggests that the Japanese frequent these businesses to experience something greater than just a tub of hot water. They come to experience a sensual smorgasbord provided by the different bath types.<sup>79</sup> It is the allure of high-tech tubs and a wide array of entertainment at an affordable price that causes many Japanese to become regulars to this bathing experience that offers more than simple sanitary function.

In addition to the previously discovered therapeutic validation of hot water immersion, research has revealed psychophysiological benefits to regularly bathing in hot water. The experiment tested people's comfortableness when submersed in a hot bath. Ultimately, the study concluded that bathing in hot water may contribute to psychological effects such as comfort and

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<sup>76</sup>Machida, "Paradise."

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 69.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 64.

relief in addition to the previously known physical effects.<sup>80</sup> While this study was conducted on participants who had bathed in *onsen* the conclusion is beneficial for the marketability of both *senjo* and *onsen*. The evidence suggesting physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits of partaking in the bathing culture of Japan is compelling. Unlike the *senjo* and super-*senjo*, *onsen* establishments are able to tap all three of these benefits when deciding how best to advertise and market themselves, which has been the root of some of the economic challenges facing *senjo*. Some of these challenges include sanitation concerns have also caused concern amongst *senjo* and *onsen* patrons.

Although sanitary risks might be expected when assessing the safety of ritualized communal bathing, the institutionalized nature of the Japanese bathing culture caused many of these risks to go undetected until recently. In 2002 six people died from a bacterial outbreak known as Legionnaires.<sup>81</sup> Although this is the only incident that attracted widespread media coverage, likely due to the deaths involved, it is possible that these sanitary dangers might be a more pressing problem than one might think. Even if the dangers of bacterial outbreaks and sanitary issues are slim, the fact that they have been publicized has seeded doubt in the minds of potential customers of these baths. For many Japanese, this may be sufficient cause for abstaining altogether from these *senjo* cesspools.

The health concerns and authenticity issues surrounding both *onsen* and *senjo* industries have hindered growth and created additional hurdles business owners will have to overcome to nurture a trusting and loyal client base. As has been explained, the *onsen* industry has been able to rely on the atmosphere, environment, mythology, and curative properties of their waters to

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<sup>80</sup> Goto, "Psychophysiological Effects," 140.

<sup>81</sup> Talmadge, *Getting Wet*, 27.

create their economic success. However, in lacking many of these aspects, the *sentō* industry has sustained a blow that, what with divergent consumer necessities, may never heal.

Today, the normalization of the private bath culture in Japan has ravaged the *sentō* industry forcing many businesses to close their doors. In Tokyo over 90 percent of homes have either a bath or shower, which has all but eliminated the need for communal bathhouses.<sup>82</sup> The popularization of the *furo*, which has become almost a given standard of living, enabled an already individually oriented society to partake in the pleasure of a hot bath in the comfort of their own home. The *furo* could be considered a metaphor for the nuclearization of the Japanese family and bathing rituals in general.<sup>83</sup> Bathhouse business owners have remained cognizant of this shift in bathing practices and have attempted to reinvent their marketing strategies to appeal to the entertainment side of the Japanese resident demographic. However, it is difficult to draw bath-seekers away from the modern and amenity filled super-*sentō*. With common *sentō* renovations amounting to at least one million dollars, many *sentō* owners have decided to either suffer the decline in patronage sans renovations or demolish their bathhouses and construct more economically relevant structures such as condominiums in their place.<sup>84</sup> To date, there have not been any universally effective or applicable methods by which *sentō* owners can reliably win back their lost patrons. While this does not completely rule out the possibility of a revival of the communal bathing scene, the material-centric and solitary mentality trending throughout contemporary Japanese residents does not bode well for such a future. It may very well be the case that *sentō* are simply a relic from a bygone age that is in its final stages of existence, with little to no hope for an economic resurgence. Luckily, due to additional aspects through which they can attract visitors, *onsen* have been able to adapt combat their own economic strains.

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<sup>82</sup> Edelson, "The Bathhouse."

<sup>83</sup> Koren and Maruo, *Japanese Bath*, 37.

<sup>84</sup> Edelson, "The Bathhouse."

However, the *senjo* cannot not rely on any increase in patronage if they upgrade or augment their facilities to suit Japanese consumer desires, which have caused economic viability complications that have manifested themselves in the present day.

The health concerns and authenticity issues surrounding both *onsen* and *senjo* industries have hindered growth and created additional hurdles business owners will have to overcome to nurture a trusting and loyal client base. As has been explained, the *onsen* industry has been able to rely on the atmosphere, environment, mythology, and curative properties of their waters to create their economic success. However, in lacking many of these aspects, the *senjo* industry has sustained a blow that, what with divergent consumer necessities, may never heal.



## Chapter Four: Conclusion

Throughout Japanese history, *onsen* and *senjo* have played an important role within cultural, economic, hygienic, and religious contexts of Japan. Bathing culture has undergone many changes over the past eight hundred years, which has resulted in a fundamental shift in how the *onsen* and *senjo* industries focus consumer attention. In pre-modern eras, the *onsen* experience was more than a bath due to the mystical and curative properties of its waters, which garnered the industry widespread popularity. Although not equally sensationalized, the historic *senjo* saw success based on an implicit societal need for an affordable bathing facility, which later became more about socializing and making merry with neighbors and friends than about bathing. These fundamental differences in establishments have inexorable economic viability implications for both industries. However, before hypothesizing about the fate of either industry, let us first recap how *onsen* and *senjo* evolved throughout the ages.

During medieval Japan, bathing began to become institutionalized under imperial and religious doctrines. Empress Komyo's charity baths were instrumental in the introduction of bathing in hot water to the masses. These imperially spurred provisions of baths initiated the infusion of religion and *onsen*, which resulted in the focus of bathing being fixed firmly on the waters themselves. Of course, many of the Empress's motivations were firmly rooted in religion and she sought to demonstrate her spiritual piety and benevolence as a ruler. Similarly, wealthy patrons of Buddhist temples would fund charity baths to increase their karmic capital in the afterlife. Despite the political and religious payouts the Empress and the elite sought to obtain, these privately sponsored baths were what originally seeded a love of hot water-bathing in the hearts of the Japanese commonwealth. As this passion grew, many Japanese began to inform themselves of the rich mythology surrounding the founding of the various *onsen* across Japan.

To this day, the legends of each *onsen* continue to enchant foreigners wishing to visit the hot springs and spiritually validate many of the older Japanese that make pilgrimages to famous *onsen* villages. The therapeutic benefits surrounding *onsen* were also used in more recent history to incentivize hot spring visitation. These scientifically-validated curative properties of *onsen* waters have become a large part of the criteria by which potential patrons select which spring to frequent.

Unlike the culture of hot springs, *senjo* culture catered to Japanese public's hygienic needs from inception. Though these public bathhouses were also born out of religious entrepreneurship, there was never any mystic, mythological, or spiritual component attached to the *senjo* tradition. These baths were initially created and popularized as pragmatic and inexpensive way for the masses to clean themselves. However, through becoming local social gathering spaces, the *senjo* experience grew rapidly from a daily mundanity into a lively and entertaining ordeal. Due to the high costs behind preparing hot baths the option for the majority of citizens to bathe privately did not become viable until much later. Soon after their creation, however, they grew into social hubs and served as a daily source of entertainment for neighborhoods during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Large groups would often rent out a *senjo* for private baths and drinking, laughter, and merrymaking were all common sights in the bathhouse. They even became sites of prostitution so popular that all carnality was banned Tokugawa government in the seventeenth century, which caused the *senjo* to become much less of a boisterous and entertaining environment but a social hub nonetheless. Interestingly enough, many modern day *senjo* owners and proponents are attempting to revive the bathhouse as a place of inexpensive social interaction (sans prostitution) and community to appeal to an increasingly disinterested Japanese public.

Today both *onsen* and *sentō* industries face an increasingly discerning and wary Japanese consumer base. Scandals regarding the authenticity of *onsen* waters coupled with the bacterial outbreak-related deaths have caused deterred many customers on which these struggling hot springs relied upon. Perhaps for this reason or more commercially and economically broad reasons, both *onsen* and *sentō* are re-inventing themselves yet again, in effect, restructuring the more than a bath conception of themselves. They have definitively placed less focus on the waters themselves and instead concentrated on the accouterments and amenities that they provide. However, some such as Kinoshita *onsen* have gone the traditional route choosing to accentuate the historic authenticity of their waters, built environment, synergy with nature and the distinct atmosphere that arises therein in order to appeal to tourists. Others such as Arima *onsen* have opted for a more modern approach by advertising shopping, dining, and arcades alongside their waters to garner the interest of those seeking modern conveniences and urban entertainment. In contrast, *sentō* have suffered massive decreases in visitation due to the presence of the *furo* in almost every Japanese home as well as the advent of the super-*sentō*, which has commanded a large percentage of potential recreational bathers.

As I may have alluded to, the fates of the *onsen* and *sentō* are quite different and although both possess cultural and historic significance, their future economic viability is intrinsic to their foundational nature. The *onsen* has from day one been an entertainment based object. It is true that there were curative, religious, and spiritual benefits to be gained from submersing oneself in these natural waters. However, it was never necessary to visit an *onsen* to the majority of Japanese citizens. Although one might immediately perceive the economic stability of an unnecessary bath to be less than that of one born out of necessity, it is the *onsen's* superfluous nature that has ironically allowed it to remain viable even in the face of modernity. It can never

be antiquated or obsoleted. This has not been the case for the *sentō*, which was wildly successful at the time of its advent and for many hundreds of years after. However, with the invention of private baths, the *sentō*, which offered nothing more than a low cost, no frills bathing experience, has been rendered useless. Like the decision faced by the *onsen* industry in the mid-twentieth century, *sentō* must either elect to modernize or accentuate the historical aspects of their facilities to remain viable. Unfortunately, many bathhouse owners possess neither the funds nor the future visitation assurance necessary to implement these structural modifications to be economically competitive. Therefore, it is my conclusion that the traditional *sentō* will become functionally erased from the modern fabric of Japan in the near future. *Onsen*, on the other hand, will remain a cultural staple of Japanese entertainment for foreigners and natives alike due to its rich mythological history, religious ties, high entertainment value and the curative properties of its waters.

It is clear that successful bathing industries in Japan have always been about much more than providing a hot bath. *Onsen* have been consistently successful by constantly reinventing themselves in response to the current consumer interests. Similarly, super-*sentō* have also achieved widespread popularity due to their multitude of bath types as well as the diverse entertainment that they provide. The success of both of these industries has been based solely on their variety of entertainment types such as shopping, dining, gaming or bathing in distinctly curative waters. As such, they have been able to placate concerned Japanese consumers by shifting the focus of their establishments (i.e. when waterborne bacterial outbreaks hit the news the focus of super-*sentō* or *onsen* could be redirected to their other forms of entertainment). Conversely, traditional *sentō* have never been able to adapt to changing consumer interests due to their basic aesthetics, ordinary waters and lack of alternate forms of entertainment, all of

which are fundamental to their existence. While the future of the traditional *sentō* is bleak, *onsen* and super-*sentō* are poised to solidify their positions as staples of Japanese culture. Regardless of the exactness of these predictions, it is certain that bathing culture in Japan is vibrant, flourishing and indicating long-term economic stability and prosperity, all of which has been made possible by *onsen* and *sentō* continuously reinventing themselves to remain entertaining and engaging spaces that are, and have always been, about much more than a simple bath.

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