

# ***Evolution of Flower Symbolism in Japan: An Amplified Significance in Japanese Civilization through Manipulations***

**Dian Yuan<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA, 19010, United States*

<sup>\*</sup>*corresponding author*

*a. yuandian0630@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** Flowers are an important element of nature, especially in expressing a sense of fragility and impermanence. As people's appreciation of the beauty of flowers rise, different forms of floral arranging appeared around the world. Japanese people have long-valued Ikebana, the traditional Japanese floral arranging art from aspects not merely observing its beauty. In this work, Ikebana's functions as media to express sentiments, to assist Zen Buddhism practice which helps practitioners to achieve inner peace, and to reveal gender-related problems throughout history are being explored and analyzed. Ikebana is widely related to many areas of Japan, and with its importance in Japanese history, popular culture, and religion, its symbolistic value can be extended further.

**Keywords:** Ikebana, flower symbolism, aesthetics, Zen Buddhism, gender

## **1. Introduction**

Flowers are an indispensable element of nature. Their correspondence of season changes, transient characteristics, and meanings being conveyed raise their importance from an element of nature into a symbolism. As floral arranging flourished as an art form throughout the world, Japanese people have created their unique style and further empowered flower symbolism in their national culture. Ikebana, the Japanese traditional form of floral art, has long been known for its simplicity. Some crucial aesthetic ideas such as wabi and sabi were expressed by arranging every piece of leave and flower which will be explained more later in the work.

The importance of flower symbolism in Japan developed far beyond merely aesthetically appealing. Flower symbolism has played a role in expressing sentiments in real life and in literature. It has also become an essential element of Zen Buddhism. Throughout history, flower symbolism could also be seen in problems relating to the imbalance between males and females.

In this paper, we will be exploring how flower symbolism shaped Japan's national culture by affecting people's aesthetic inclinations and by being a part of popular literature and cultural representations related to social class discrimination. We will be studying the mutual relationship between Ikebana and Japanese culture in which not only Ikebana, as an art form, was being affected by culture, but was shaping the culture as well.

## **2. Historical Background of Floral Arranging**

Flowers have been an aesthetically appealing existence that attracted people to admire and appreciate. The variations of flowers were not limited only to their genres, seasons they would blossom, colors or scents, but also existed in languages of flowers and aspects of further manipulation of flower symbolisms. Other than barely appreciating their beauty in nature, people in ancient times started to find ways to preserve the beauty of the relatively perishable beauty brought by flowers, which today, was known as floral arrangements. The floral arrangement was a type of decorative art that started as early as 2500 BCE by Egyptians. The fragrance of flowers was another benefit people exploited flowers for [1]. Except for the beauty and grace flowers could bring, they gradually developed symbolic meanings which became an essential aspect of consideration while being used in floral arranging. In the Han era of ancient China from 207 BCE to 220 CE, flowers and leaves such as bamboo and tiger lily were frequently utilized by religious practitioners based on their symbolic meanings of longevity and fertility [2]. Except for these prominent floral arrangement cultures, the Japanese have created their unique style of floral decorative art, ikebana.

## **3. Flower Language, Expressions of Sentiments**

Ikebana, the traditional Japanese floral arranging art, was a representation of their respect for nature, tranquility, and the treasure of transience beauty. The term ikebana can be translated and defined as “giving life to flowers.” Flowers have played a vital role in Japan. “From the beautiful cherry blossom, which is found everywhere from haiku verse to manga comics, to the vibrant chrysanthemum appearing on everything from crockery to coins, flower symbolism plays a vital role in Japanese art, literature, and everyday life” [3]. Being appreciated because of its grace, Japanese flowers were utilized in many plots such as the tea ceremony, memorial services, holiday celebrations, music, and literature [4]. Hanakotoba was the uniquely Japanese form of the language of flowers. Being different in appearance, each flower has its meaning and conveys varied emotions to people. The truth about flowers is that sentiments could be expressed which builds a foundation for flower symbolism. Throughout history, Japanese people manipulated flowers to play versatile roles, thus making flower symbolism an element that was indispensable to the spirit of Japan, to its people, furthermore, to the entire Japanese culture. Flower symbolism being utilized for representative meanings in history, Zen Buddhism, and cultural aspects such as aesthetic inclinations and gender interpretations all contributed to its high social status nowadays.

## **4. Mutual Impact between Japanese History and Evolution of Ikebana**

As a representation of Japanese people’s love toward nature, ikebana was an art form that brought humanity and nature together and combined the two as a whole which gave lives to flowers. “The beauty of a flower arrangement lies in its asymmetrical balance, respect for the individual flower, and harmony with nature as a whole. It is more than simply putting flowers in a container [5].” Over more than one thousand years of the history of ikebana, evolutions have happened both in the style of ikebana itself, and different schools of ikebana which assembled a more complex decorative art form in Japan. The mutual impact could be seen between the history of Japan as a nation and the evolution of ikebana as Japanese people utilized the practice of ikebana to show social privileges, however, this activity integrated social classes to some extent.

Floral arranging first served a religious purpose under the effect of Buddhism being introduced to Japan in about 538 A.D. Flowers were placed on altars as offerings for Buddha. Later, in the Heian Period from 794 to 1192, the popularity of the activity which placed flowers in vases for people to enjoy the displayed beauty was noticeably enhanced. Forms of literature, such as poems, novels, and essays, were created to realistically describe people’s appreciation of this beauty

[5]. *The Tale of Genji*, famous Japanese literature written by Musaraki Shikibu in the early 11th century, was an example where flowers were described in literary works, in which the author exploited flowers that share common “personalities” with female characters in the novel to suggest an impression (figure 1).



Figure 1: The Tale of Genji, “Evening faces”[6]

Throughout Japanese history, ikebana has evolved in both its styles, the purposes it serves, and the class of people it was practiced by. While the gratitude for flowers being placed in vases was the same between the East and the West, Japan has developed its unique art form called “Kadō”, with “ka” referring to flowers, and “dō” with the meaning of path. In the fifteenth century, the appreciation toward flowers being placed in a vase could no longer satisfy the Japanese as they started to give broader meaning to floral arrangements. “An earlier attitude of passive appreciation developed into a more deeply considered approach. This approach forms the basis of what we call ikebana today [5].” Though floral arranging was initially practiced only by members of the upper class, such as the imperial family and the samurai class, it soon evolved and was widespread and extended to many ordinary people by the late 15th century. An era of floral arranging with fixed rules and schools of ikebana began then. Towards the end of the

Muromachi period, the oldest textbook of ikebana, *Kao irai no Kadensho*, was written in the year 1486 (figure 2) [7].



Figure 2: Kao irai no Kadensho [8]

Different schools of floral arranging such as Ikenobo, Rikka, Shoka, and plenty of other ones were practiced all over Japan. Basic principles of kadō emphasizing asymmetrical, simple, and free use of materials has affected and gradually became representative of the Japanese people. As floral arranging was evolving under the effect of Japanese culture, Japan, as a nation, was impacted by the spirit of kadō as well. The evolution of kadō eliminated the discrimination between the elite society

and the ordinary people while practicing, which further increased the popularity of floral arranging as a type of decorative art form and contributed to a crucial foundation for flowers to become an indispensable element of Japan. Although the class differences could never be easily modified, the practice of ikebana at least provided people with an area where the discrimination between the elite class and the ordinary people did not exclude people from such activity.

## 5. Significance of Ikebana in Zen Buddhism

In addition to the evolution and impact, floral arranging has experienced and brought to Japanese history, Japanese people gave significance to flowers as symbols of spiritual enlightenment in Zen Buddhism as well, which further enhanced the indispensability of flower symbolism in Japan. With its emphasis on the importance of one's original nature and a sense of simplicity, Zen Buddhism has developed a specific aesthetic form expressed by the terms *wabi* and *sabi*. "These two amorphous concepts are used to express a sense of rusticity, melancholy, loneliness, naturalness, and age [9]." Through artificially arranging flowers by selecting proper types of floral materials and shaping them in desirable ways, flowers were manipulated and made to represent the idea of *wabi sabi*. This aesthetic concept still has a magnificent impact on modern Japan. Zen Buddhism aims to achieve freedom and an expression of original human nature through meditation. The ego-consciousness in the process of meditation was essential to the ideology of Zen Buddhist philosophy. Perishability and simplicity should be cherished and emphasized through many aspects of Zen, among which ikebana played an unignorable role.

Unlike meditation, *kadō* does not require practitioners to sit and stay in one place for a long period, but it still was a lifelong practice as the process of learning was as crucial as its result. On the way to getting to a peaceful mind state, the virtues of ikebana could be exploited. To begin the meditation, one of the most important and challenging processes was to clear one's mind and free oneself. With the assistance of a natural element, practitioners could easily achieve this state. Ikebana could help people realize a common trait between nature and humanity that life is transient, and help to integrate the two elements. As people gain peaceful minds through ikebana and meditation, the elegance and grace of the environment around them become more noticeable. A realization of the close relationship between man and the universe and that one belongs to nature completely would be the ultimate peace practitioners were seeking [10]. Ikebana, as an essential element in Zen, functioned from the beginning of Zen practices and along the way of meditation. As a result, a one-way relationship does not apply to that between Zen Buddhist philosophy and ikebana. Instead, mutual assistance and complementary functions existed.

The meaningfulness of flowers in the aspect of Zen Buddhism does not only limit the role it plays in the process of meditation but also could be found in the tea ceremonies. As another practice extended from Zen Buddhist philosophy of seeking inner peace, the tea ceremony, which was another ritualistic activity emphasizing *wabi sabi*, was inseparable from Zen. Flowers, as an aesthetic appeal and a symbol that could convey people's emotions through varied physical appearances and deeper languages, were utilized to serve both decorative and spiritual purposes in almost every section of the tea ceremony ritual. "The flower as a literal meaning is poured in the form of a wreath as a marker of unity with nature and as a marker of the season, also the flower as a symbol is poured on a Zen proverb written on Kakejiku and hung on the tea room as a symbol of Chanoyu spirit [11]." (Chanoyu is a tea ceremony in the Indonesian language) Since flowers were an element that originated from nature and could as well represent nature, they became the media that people use to show their connection and respect to nature.

To serve the purpose of exploitation in tea ceremonies, Chabana was created (figure 3). Chabana was the floral arrangement that was explicitly used in decorating tea rooms. "Tea room flower arrangements should be simplicity itself [12]." As a representation of life and nature, Chabana



should not attract too much attention from the guests, which corresponds to its nature of simplicity. The harmony between Sado, the way of tea, and kadō further improved the significance of flowers.



Figure 3: Chabana



Figure 4: Ichigo ichie kakejiku[15]

An important idea of Japanese Chado was the term ichigo ichie (一期一会) which suggested the idea that every encounter could be once in a lifetime meeting. The rarity of every meeting was the reason to be cherished by people. The ideology of ichigo ichie could also relate to the aspect of transience in ikebana. As mentioned earlier, one of the virtues ikebana possessed which could help with the path to achieving a peaceful mind was to realize a common trait between nature and humanity. “In Buddhist thinking, these attachments and desires are the cause of our unhappiness. Once we realize that our life as well as our desires are transient, it’s easy to develop negative attitudes, to start thinking that life itself is meaningless. But through the simple beauty of a flower, so content with the nature of its own short life, we can come to appreciate the transience of life rather than being depressed by it, and accept our place in the universe [10].” Because in ikebana, the flowers chosen were often short-lived. In addition to observing the transience of ikebana works, the realization of the shortness of human life was more important.

Transience was another essential aspect of Japanese aesthetic inclination both in the past and modern times. The beauty which comes along with mortality was more impressive. In their aesthetic standard, Japanese people pursued the sense of time passing through the perishability of beauty [13]. The cherry blossom, which is the national flower of Japan, was also the most popular flower symbol. Hanami is a festival celebrating the arrival of cherry blossoms in the Spring. “Cherry blossom is a symbol of wabi-sabi, an important worldview in Japan relating to the acceptance of transience and imperfection, as well as gentleness and kindness [14].” This idea about

perishability could also be observed in Japanese lifestyles of abandoning useless ones and introducing changes everywhere. The core ideas in ikebana, along with Zen Buddhist philosophy, have shaped Japanese culture and preference on a large scale which was another reason for flowers to possess such a considerable impact in Japan.

## 6. Relationship between Flowers Symbolism and Gender Perspective

Flowers play a spiritual role not only in aspects related to Zen Buddhism but also exist throughout traditional and contemporary Japanese culture. Besides the functions of ikebana in Japanese history and Zen Buddhism, flowers were manipulated to play a role in the gender aspect in Japan. While using flowers for a symbolic purpose, it was not constrained by a difference in genders. As the stereotypes when using flowers as a metaphor for a human being, that flowers always refer to a pretty woman, Japanese literature, in the past and in contemporary time, have frequently exploited flowers and broken such impressions. Beauty was not limited to describing either men or women. For example, as Henshall expressed in *"Dimensions of Japanese Society"* "Curiously, by western standards, deliberately enhanced 'effeminate', flower-like, graceful beauty has rarely been considered the antithesis of manliness in Japan, either by women or men themselves [16]." Flowers were a symbol that was not strictly confined by gender while representing grace. Though the preferences for using specific types of flowers to depict masculine figures and feminine characters do exist, it did not curtail the utilization of flower symbolism. Without being defined as either feminine or masculine, flowers, as symbols in Japanese history, literature, and even political issues, were enabled to possess more possibilities.

Nevertheless, while exploring the rich history of Japanese people practicing flower symbolism, it could be asserted that in the aspect of women labor, which was a crucial gender issue in Japanese history that has deeply affected Japan as a nation, flowers were exploited mostly by females in the Japanese society. During the Edo period from the early seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century, traditional art forms were practiced by a male-dominated group. Only males from the elite classes were qualified to study ikebana. The situation hardly got modified in the early Meiji period until the rise of the "good wife, wise mother" ideology, which emphasized the focus that women were responsible for creating a harmonious family atmosphere. On the other hand, Japanese people, being susceptible to western opinions, changed their views toward traditional arts like ikebana. "To achieve equality with the West, Japanese gender relations would be based on a nuclear family system with separated spheres for men and women, the latter rooted in notions of middle-class Victorian womanhood [17]." Gradually with the raised attention toward these feminine pursuits, flower arranging and tea ceremonies-related contents became prevalent content for courses. "By the 1920s and early 1930s, the tea ceremony and ikebana were universally accepted as significant aspects of the girl's school curriculum [17]."

While new styles of ikebana and fresh schools continued to evolve and increase throughout Japanese history, it was not until the postwar period in Japan that the proliferation of popularity of ikebana took place. "The real boom in ikebana, from the Occupation forward, can be attributed to a number of factors, including Japan's national mission to become a 'country of culture' (*bunka kokka*); the evolution of avant-garde styles that suited the more open postwar atmosphere that encouraged creativity and democratic participation; charismatic headmasters who competed fiercely amongst themselves; and the deep interest of Western women, who made ikebana appear glamorous and cosmopolitan. Another key factor was postwar educational reform and the establishment of women's junior colleges by leading ikebana schools [17]." Such establishment of ikebana schools has provided large amounts of working opportunities which empowered women as ikebana teachers. Furthermore, with the specialization of floral arranging skills as women contribute to the workplace, new career opportunities related to ikebana empowered women to gradually incorporate the male-

dominated labor market which was inconceivable in other industries. “It further helps us rethink Japanese feminisms, which have tended to emphasize how traditional gender roles limited women’s options, by revealing how some women were able to capitalize on gender norms embedded in traditional arts to empower themselves and forge independent lives while contributing to Japan’s national projects of economic and cultural recovery [17].”

## 7. Conclusion: Infinite Destination of Flower Symbolism

By looking back over the thousand years history of flowers in Japan, from both the perspectives of their physical artistic form of ikebana and the use of their symbolic meaning, Japanese people have manipulated flowers, giving meanings to them and made them advantageous to Japanese civilization. Although floral arranging originally represented a sense of superiority in economic and social status of the elite class, it soon was obligated to prove the whole country’s aesthetical uniqueness and thus secure the impression of Japan as a “country of culture.” Besides being manipulated by people to serve a cultural symbolic purpose, the nature of flowers, their visually appealing and virtue of purity, were qualities Japanese people have treasured. While used in Zen Buddhist philosophical practices, flowers offered a medium for practitioners to communicate with nature and enabled them to more easily enter the ego-conscious mind state; while seen in Japanese people’s daily routines, prevalence of short-lived flowers such as the cherry blossom revealed their aesthetic inclination toward perishability and simplicity. Ikebana was an art form which empowered Japanese people to select and shape floral materials in order to utilize them serving varied purposes.

As in this paper, it has explored how Japanese people found out the unlimited possibility of floral symbolism and used such versatility throughout the history and in every aspects of its national culture. However, flowers’ representation of the growth of Japan economy and the superiority of its aesthetics would not be the final destination of flower symbolism. As in the future, people might empower them with even further obligations to fulfill far beyond the point they are being exploited nowadays.

## References

- [1] “History of Flower Arrangement.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, April 26, 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_flower\\_arrangement#:~:text=The%20earliest%20known%20flower%20arranging,and%20simply%20as%20table%20decorations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_flower_arrangement#:~:text=The%20earliest%20known%20flower%20arranging,and%20simply%20as%20table%20decorations).
- [2] Montmorency, Raven. 2019. “Ancient Culture: Flower Arranging across the World.” Nspirement. August 7, 2019. <https://www.nspirement.com/2019/08/07/ancient-culture-flower-arranging-across-the-world.html>.
- [3] “Flower Symbolism in Japanese Culture | Examples & Meanings.” 2018. The Japanese Shop Blog. September 24, 2018. <https://www.thejapaneseshop.co.uk/blog/flower-symbolism-japanese-culture/>
- [4] Drevets, Tricia. 2021. “The Cultural Significance and Symbolism of Japanese Flowers.” 1800Flowers Petal Talk. July 23, 2021. <https://www.1800flowers.com/blog/flower-facts/symbolism-of-japanese-flowers/>.
- [5] “Kyoto Visitor’s Guide--Ikebana.” 2011. Kyoto Visitor’s Guide. February 13, 2011. <http://www.kyotoguide.com/ver2/thismonth/ikebana.html>.
- [6] Kawamata, Tsunemasa. n.d. Evening Faces’ Chapter from the Tale of Genji. The Metropolitan Museum. Accessed August 2022. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/671032>.
- [7] “Origin of Ikebana.” n.d. Ikenobo. Accessed August 10, 2022. <https://www.ikenobo.jp/english/about/history.html#his01>.
- [8] Kao irai no Kadensho, Japanese oldest ikebana textbook written in 1486
- [9] Zen Buddhism, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2002
- [10] Shimbo, Shoso. 2007. “The Ten Virtues of Ikebana: Zen and the Way of Flower,” September, page 1–3.
- [11] Suryawati, Cicilia Tantri, and Endang Poerbowati. 2018. “Flower Symbolism in Chanoyu Spirit.” *Proceedings of the International Conference of Communication Science Research (ICCSR 2018)* 165 (July): 469–71. <https://doi.org/10.2991/iccsr-18.2018.104>.
- [12] Kurganska, Angelina. 2021. “Chabana — Ikebana Flower Arrangements for the Tea Ceremony.” Path of Cha. December 5, 2021. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://pathofcha.com/blogs/all-about-tea/chabana-ikebana->

*flower-arrangements-for-the-tea-*

*ceremony&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1660842592645452&usg=AOvVaw18tiu53jG09qq3WEgL6-nJ.*

- [13] Keene, Donald. 2002. *Appreciations of Japanese Culture / Appreciations of Japanese Culture*. Tokyo ; New York: Kodansha International.
- [14] *Flower symbolism in Japanese Culture*
- [15] *Kejiku: Ornament which is hung on the side of the tea room.*
- [16] Henshall, Kenneth G. 1999. *Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins and Mainstream*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Mcmillan. page 4
- [17] STALKER, NANCY. 2018. "Flower Empowerment: Rethinking Japan's Traditional Arts as Women's Labor." Edited by Julia C. Bullock, Ayako Kano, and James Welker. JSTOR. University of Hawai'i Press. 2018. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3zp07j.12>.