

## Introduction

### **Transforming Taboos: Challenging Hegemonic Prohibitions in Japan's Past and Present**

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Taboos – customary prohibitions against certain actions, places, or objects – exist in all cultures. The term was introduced to English in the late eighteenth century, after British explorer James Cook visited Tonga in 1777. In memoirs of his voyage, he relates a story of hosting the Polynesian leaders on his ship:

*When dinner came upon table, not one of them would sit down, or eat a bit of any thing.... On expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said; which word has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden (Cook 1846: 110).*

This traditional concept of *tapu* (or *tabu*) regulated every aspect of Polynesian society, usually by designating certain prohibitions ascribed to religion. Until this day, many taboos are of religious nature – strict regulation of the naming of God's name in Orthodox Judaism, or dietary restrictions like Halal and kosher diets for Muslims and Jewish people are some of the more well-known examples. The ways in which notions of sacred and profane shape each culture's understanding of the world, and how they are reflected in societal structures, was famously examined by Mary Douglas in her seminal work *Purity and Danger* (1966).

Douglas, as a Durkheim follower, believed that religion functions to support a certain worldview and to maintain social order and solidarity in complex societies. When she was analyzing purity laws of ancient Jews codified in Leviticus, she noticed they rather formulate distinctions between notions of clean and unclean, and not, as it had been assumed, enforce proper sanitation and hygienic standards. Thus, Douglas contended that humans' primal urge to separate clean from unclean reveals pollution symbols in each culture's "elaborate cosmologies" (Douglas 2003: 5) and not an unconscious pursuit of hygiene: "[i]f we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of

dirt as matter out of place” (Ibid.: 35). In other words, cultures deem something dirty not because it essentially is, but because it functions as such in their cosmology; symbolic meanings of dirt are simply “part of the social system. They express it and provide institutions for manipulating it” (Ibid.: 114). Although what is clean and unclean is different across cultures, Douglas admits that there is a strong tendency to name bodily excretions as “a symbol of danger and of power” (Ibid.: 121). Douglas views the body as a bounded system, with the skin and orifices as vulnerable boundaries of the system; bodily fluids that can cross these boundaries or margins represent a threat to the system. This bodily system is a symbol of larger social systems: “[A]ll margins are dangerous” (Ibid.: 122) as they represent social boundaries and systems of segregation. “Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears” (Ibid. 122) traverse the boundaries of the body and become matter that belongs neither to the inside, nor the outside – they stand in the middle as “the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter” (Ibid.: 35). Thus bodily excretions destroy inside/outside boundaries of the body, but they also metaphorically symbolize inside/outside of society, which is the key as to why they are often considered taboo. Similarly, *anything* that has the power to “confuse or contradict our cherished classifications” (Ibid.: 36) could potentially disrupt the hegemonic status quo. This is why it is most often those in positions of power who define and enforce what is taboo, and what is not (Gramsci 1971).

However, presently what we call “taboo” has expanded from the religious domain and is more often based on moral judgement and secular cultural norms. For example, most societies have taboos against incest (although these differ in rigidity); progressive objection to prejudice has led to the increase of politically correct euphemisms and avoidance of terms deemed offensive; it is unacceptable to point one’s shoe/foot at another person in Thailand and in Arab countries, as these are considered unclean parts of the body.

Moreover, like many aspects of culture, taboos change over time, reflecting changes in societal norms and practices. For example, arguably most people would find the idea of eating cockroaches disgusting, even though they are high in protein and rationally speaking would be a great addition to our diet. What about lobsters, then? They are one of the most expensive seafood items and are considered a delicacy around the world. Interestingly, until the late nineteenth century, lobster was considered the “cockroach of the sea,” and was used as fertilizer and fed only to prisoners, apprentices, and slaves (Willett 2013). This was because lobsters were so

plentiful and undesirable, much like cockroaches today. Thus, it is possible that in the near future we will consider roaches as a delicacy and wonder how it was possible to see them as dietary taboo.

Furthermore, what all taboos have in common is that if violated, they trigger social punishment: either penalization under the law, or attitudes and reactions of other members of society. Adopting a particular social identity requires accepting certain social taboos that become such an inherent part of one's morality that violating a taboo is something unthinkable (Tetlock et al. 2000). Therefore, whether a taboo is rooted in religion or cultural norms, it serves the purpose of regulating what is acceptable, and not, in a society.

This special issue touches upon the above-mentioned to examine various aspects of taboo in Japan. It is based on papers presented during the 2019 Asian Studies Conference Japan in Saitama (June 29-30), in a panel titled: *Transforming Taboos: Challenging Hegemonic Prohibitions in Japan's Past and Present*. Here authors would like to thank the conference organizers for creating a platform to share their findings, as well as participants of the panel for their suggestions and constructive critique. Thanks to that we present four papers highlighting that taboo themselves and their cultural significance in society – as well as systems of power and hegemony more broadly – are open to challenge and transformation. Authors, drawing on theories and methodologies from history, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, examine how different actors have created, co-opted, and/or resisted cultural taboo throughout Japan's past and present.

Biontino outlines how Korean subjects of the Japanese empire resisted government attempts to change their funerary practices. Before Korea opened its ports in 1876, burial customs and practice had been thoroughly Confucian. But following Japan's annexation in 1910, burial practices were challenged in an attempt to align them with Japanese procedures. Korean funerary customs were considered superstitions and heavily criticized and ridiculed by the Japanese, but Korean society was not willing to accept changes requested by Japan, for these were perceived as taboo according to the Confucian rites. Biontino provides insights into the work of tabooization in colonial Korea based on the analysis of the diary of Yun Ch'i-ho (1864-1945), a famous and controversial figure in modern Korean history. His memoirs show a man who struggled between Confucianism and Christianity, Korean nationalism and Japanese collaboration, and shed light on the thoughts and feelings of Koreans living in that period.

Gaitanidis discusses the recent phenomenon of the anti-spirituality (*datsu-supi*) movement and its relation to “heretical” and “anti-cult” discourses. Like the so-called “cults” since the Aum affair, *supirichuariti*, the katakana word that refers to the concept of “spirituality,” has been the target of attacks for its allegedly “dangerous” religiosity and fraudulent money transactions. Gaitanidis introduces a recent phenomenon that adds yet another layer of attacks on spirituality in Japan: in the last 5 years, criticism against *supirichuariti* (sometimes termed *datsu-supi*, “anti-spiritual,” or spiritual apostasy) seems to have risen from among the ranks of the spirituality movement’s most fervent followers, to attack an ideology that has become “too self-centered” as its critics argue. This type of rhetoric seems, at first glance, to reiterate the anti-cult, pseudo-nostalgic narrative that considers money transactions to be “taboo” in the case of “proper religion.” Yet, Gaitanidis argues, the taboo-ization of spirituality as an object of business transactions by the spiritual apostates reveals a more subtle critique, which is centered on capitalism rather than on religion.

Stephens-Chu tracks a shift in societal views of menstruation, from a religious taboo to a hygiene issue. Menstruation, often called “the last taboo,” was originally considered a mystical phenomenon in Japan. Then, however, it came to be seen as a source of pollution, surrounded by various proscriptions. Around the turn of the twentieth century, views of menstruation shifted again from a cause of spiritual defilement to an issue of hygiene that should be managed through proper bodily comportment and careful use of commercial menstrual products. After this time, while hypothetically ‘free’ of connotations of impurity and pollution, women still were not – and are not – free from stigma surrounding menstruation. Stephens-Chu concludes with testimonies of young women’s experiences of compulsory swim class in grade school, as well as recent news articles discussing the topic, to highlight both the social and health issues currently surrounding young menstruators in Japan.

Szczygiel points to the relatively high social visibility of excrement in Japan. Defecation is arguably the most private bodily function: it is conducted behind closed doors, and any mentions of the body’s excretory capacities have been largely eradicated from the public sphere. However, she argues that in Japan there is a relatively high social visibility of excrement, by which she means an abundance of symbolic manifestations of excrement, such as poop accessories or “poop talk” on television programs. This poses the question of exactly how big of a taboo is poop in Japan. To understand this phenomenon, Szczygiel conducted an online questionnaire with 185 non-Japanese participants who had been to Japan.

She argues that symbolic manifestations of excrement can be categorized into three realms: health, education, and commodity. Health and education realms stem from high health consciousness that assigns bowel movement as a health barometer, while the commodity realm emerged as an answer to the accepted presence of excretory experience in Japan and capitalizes on this phenomenon.

Is it appropriate to analyze “taboo” in the context of Japan? The authors of this issue acknowledge that the English term “taboo” is steeped in a history of Orientalism, in which white, Euro-American scholars and leaders depicted non-Western cultures as a foil to Western Civilization. Western Europe and America were the paragon of civilized society, while anywhere else was backwards, barbaric, or primitive. Taboos were amusing superstitions of “the natives” at best, and detrimental roadblocks to the “civilizing” process of colonial subjects, at worst. And of course, a blind eye was turned towards the West’s own superstitions and “illogical” practices.

However, scholars like Mary Douglas attempted to explain the logic and significant symbolic meaning and purpose of taboos across the world. *Purity and Danger* helped to show that taboos can represent social systems and structures of power and identity. This leads to another important question – can Douglas’ theoretical framework be applied to Japanese culture? After all, it is based on an analysis of Abrahamic religions. Moreover, social structures and cultural concepts of the body vary from society to society. Regardless, many Japanese scholars, such as Tanaka (2013), have invoked Douglas’ work in their own analyses of Japanese traditions and Japanese culture, and the term “taboo” (tabū) is also frequently used to talk about both secular and religious proscriptions. The Japanese concepts of *uchi* and *soto* (inside and outside) can be argued to be an emic approach to delineating both bodily and social boundaries, which aligns closely with Douglas’ argument in *Purity and Danger* (see, for example, Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) for a discussion of the *uchi-soto* binary). For the authors in this issue, taboos, whether religious or secular, mark important social categories: sacred and profane, safe and dangerous, male and female, elite and non-elite, ordered and disordered, inside and outside. While taboos have been mischaracterized as immutable rules, we show that they are, in fact, neither immune to the passage of time nor universally followed by members of a society. Indeed, it is when rules are broken, boundaries are crossed, and lines are blurred, that we most clearly see a society’s systems of power and hegemonies and the challenges to these hierarchies. For us, this is the cross-cultural significance of the concept of

taboo; not following cultural proscriptions disrupts the social order – but we must always keep in mind, *whose* order is “the social order”?

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