

Relationship between Stereotype Culture and the High Suicide Rate in Japan Today

Kyoko Uchiki

Alliance University

Abstract

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Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, with approximately 30,000 people committing suicide each year in Japan (Website of Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare). Looking back at Japanese history, suicide seems part of Japanese culture. Even in modern society, movies and novels tend to beautifully depict “seppuku” in the era of the Japanese samurai, “kamikaze” during World War II, and lovers’ “double suicides.” Many Western papers have written about the relationship between Japanese culture and high suicide rates. But today, that's not the only reason for the high suicide rate. As evidence of this, the number of suicides among young people not interested in Japanese traditions is increasing. Low national well-being, alcohol culture in Japan, internet prevalence, education, and other social and political influences may also be associated with high suicide rates. However, in today's Japan, we can see a new wave of suicide prevention projects by religious groups, which seems like the light of saving Japanese life.

Keywords: Japan, suicide, culture, alcohol, religion

In this paper, I will write about the relationship between stereotyped Japanese culture and the high suicide rate in Japan and new research results. Indeed, Japanese suicide is a well-known story in samurai movies and novels. However, it is questionable whether today's young people in Japan still hold on to events and old ideas that happened hundreds of years ago. They enjoy video games, social media, anime, contemporary music (hip-hop, etc.), and graffiti art like young Americans. They don't seem interested in samurai movies.

However, CNN reported that "Japan's child suicides have reached an all-time high" (CNN, 2021). The Japanese government is also aware that the number of suicides among young people is increasing. The White Book on Suicide Countermeasures 2011 by the Japanese government said suicide is the leading cause of death among people aged 15 to 39, and suicide among young people is a severe problem in Japan today. So, if young people in Japan are freed from the spell of suicide stories, why do they choose death?

Previous studies have generally attributed the high suicide rate to Japan's unique cultural background. The cultural factor was the Japanese common sense that the group was more important than the individual in Japanese society. Japanese tend to hate shame and social isolation. This is because personal shame and isolation led to shame and isolation for family and friends (or companies and organizations). In Japanese history, when an individual made a mistake, that individual's sin became a family or group's sin. Therefore, historically, suicide has been used to protect family members and peers from personal mistakes. People worldwide have often seen the "seppuku" scene in Japanese samurai movies. It must be hard to understand that kind of Japanese mentalism in an individualistic country such as America. But Japanese samurai didn't want to punish their families, so they took responsibility by committing suicide. Japanese

people considered self-execute an honorable death to avoid adverse effects on family members and descendants.

As an example of the mentalism of honorable suicide, Sengakuji Temple, located in the center of Tokyo, might be a good example. I am from Tokyo and know many middle-aged and elderly worshipers visit there. There are 47 samurai graves loyal to their master, who was unjustly forced to commit seppuku; they committed suicide after taking revenge on their enemies. Their stories, *Chushingura*, celebrated as righteous warriors who risked their lives for their masters, have been told repeatedly in novels, films, and plays—especially typical Japanese love to watch *Chushingura* at the end of every year on TV. I believe non-Japanese people do not understand why the Japanese want to see the suicide drama at the end of the year, but it is one of the usual Japanese acts.

Its influence still seems to remain. A study in 2013 (Russell, 2016) conducted at universities in the United States and Japan found that Japanese students were more likely than American students to accept suicide as a natural outcome. In the survey, 67% of the American students agreed with whether they felt sorry for the suicidal person, compared with only 30% of the Japanese. When asked if suicide was the only way to escape life's problems, only 14% of Americans said yes. In contrast, when Japanese university and high school students were asked the same question, researchers found that 25% of high school students and half of college students said suicide was justified. In other words, for Japanese students, the suicidal person was not pitiful. Rather, they were more affirmative about choosing suicide as their own will. Even more surprisingly, the study found that even medical students admitted that suicide was an acceptable personal decision (p.3).

But that doesn't seem to be a surprising result in Japan. Another study found that even Japanese psychiatrists tended to consider suicide an acceptable form of free will (Kitanaka, 2008). The researcher said, "In interviews, many of them talked about suicide with a certain sense of romanticism" (p.163). Psychiatrists had not challenged cultural discourses that had traditionally glorified suicide. Researchers reported that Japanese psychiatrists may be complicit in recreating the cultural process of suicide. This means that Japanese psychiatrists tend to see suicide as an option for their patients. Of course, a psychiatrist cannot encourage or support a patient's suicide for ethical reasons. But this is a surprising result that even psychiatrists could believe suicide was an individual choice. In this way, we can see that the concept of suicide differs significantly between Japan and the West. Therefore, there is no doubt that historical and cultural factors have some influence on the high suicide rate in Japan, just like the results of past studies in Western countries.

In this way, given the prevalence of the idea that suicide is an honorable death in Japan, it cannot be denied that cultural and historical factors contribute to the high suicide rate. However, it is hard to believe that young people in Japan today are interested in samurai films and romantic suicide novels. In other words, there is the question of whether they believe the stories of Japanese suicide are a virtue and whether they commit suicide because of the impact of those thoughts.

One study found that Western writings have helped perpetuate stereotypes that strongly link Japanese suicide to cultural factors (Picone, 2012). Japanese suicide in modern society was not influenced by the "Japanese culture" stereotyped by Westerners. As evidence of this, from the 1970s to the 1980s, Japan's suicide rate was only slightly higher than the European average, not

as high as it is today. The Researcher said Yukio Mishima's famous public suicide was a protest against Japan's Westernization directed at Western countries (p.392). In other words, in contemporary Japan, there must be other factors besides the relationship between cultural factors and the high suicide rate. For example, despite its long life expectancy, Japan is judged to be far less happy by World Happiness Report (United Nations. 2020). This may indicate that Japanese people feel stressed daily and are not mentally satisfied with their lives.

Suicide, of course, is not just a stress response but a complex of common mental illnesses.

Although, according to the research, more than 90% of suicide victims or attempted suicides have a mental illness, most patients do not try suicide and exhibit predispositions for suicidal behavior unrelated to their primary mental illness (Hishimoto et al., 2010). Instead, what is worrisome is Japanese alcoholism. Japan has a "Sake culture." For example, as a former Tokyo resident, I can testify that American tourists visiting Tokyo are surprised by the number of alcohol vending machines and bars lining the streets and the number of loud-speaking drunks. Their appearance is different from the quiet image of Japanese people. Even if people are sleeping on the streets drunk, they have no social awareness of alcoholism. The research found that Japanese business man's 60% of drinking was attributed to drinking with customers and co-workers as part of their job (Louie, 2019). Their drinking was a sign of their loyalty to the company. They could lose their career if they refused an invitation to drink from their boss. Business people weren't drinking for pleasure; they couldn't deny the boss's request. Excessive alcohol consumption is a vital risk factor for suicidal behavior (Hishimoto et al., 2010). Another study reported that unnatural bathtub deaths are common in Japan (Kanawaku, 2022). Even if a Japanese person, unaware that they were an alcoholic, died in their bathroom, few people would suspect suicide. The researcher said, "complete necropsy including a thorough

toxicological analysis must be performed, along with an investigation of the circumstances surrounding the bath and death" (p.36). If more autopsies on bathtub deaths occur, the number of suicides in Japan could rise even further.

Thus, Japanese cultural attitudes towards suicide were generally tolerant. However, Japan's population continues to decline, and it is no longer possible to be as forgiving as before. Of particular concern is the rising suicide rate among young people in Japan. The Japanese government conducted a trend survey on the number of suicides, which also found increased suicide rates among men and women in their 20s and younger (White Book, 2022). The research team said that the situation is serious, even from an international perspective.

So why are young people in Japan rushing to death? It seems there are various factors, such as unwanted loneliness, youth poverty, and bullying at school. A survey found that young Japanese people choose to die because they tend not to tell anyone about their worries compared to other countries. (Kawai, 2022) According to the article, Japan's "Do not bother others" education might help mass-produce children who cannot ask for help. Because of this education, they cannot send SOS signs to anyone even if they are in trouble, the reporter said. The author also asks if there is a problem with the pressure to conform rooted in Japanese society, such as "You have to be the same as those around you." Also, The Nippon Foundation reported that adults need to listen to children's voices actively, and it is the best way to prevent child suicide (Nippon Foundation Journal, 2019).

Maybe in response to these voices, the Japanese government opened a hotline exclusively for children. Free pre-suicide phone consultations by non-profit organizations were opened earlier, but the government finally cooperated with those organizations and local governments. The

Japanese government took child suicide seriously, and the Children's and Family Affairs Agency held the first "Related Ministries Liaison Conference on Child Suicide Countermeasures on April 27, 2023.

However, as a suicide countermeasure, the Japanese government's project alone seems weak. Researchers pointed to the emergence of suicide pacts on the Internet which has spurred the recent increase in suicides among young people in Japan (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). These are called suicide communities on social media, where young people who want to commit suicide gather. Young people who don't want to cause trouble to their parents or friends but want someone to know about their loneliness get to know each other, decide where and when to commit suicide and make a suicide plan as an individual or group. In addition to Japanese education, suicidal tolerance, and alcoholic culture, technology may drive Japanese youth to suicide.

It seems like this phenomenon was ignored; in 2022, the Japanese government launched a youth drinking promotion campaign called "Sake Viva (Japanese youth, drink more)" to increase tax revenue. The government's suicide prevention campaign and this campaign to promote drinking contradicted each other. Many citizens took to social media to protest the campaign to encourage drinking. Not surprisingly, the Japanese government canceled the campaign after receiving a lot of criticism from national and overseas mass media.

Other studies pointed out that Japan's high suicide rate is related to acts by medical personnel. As a general phenomenon, many general practitioners in Japan said they found it difficult to get advice from psychiatrists (Kawaguchi et al., 2016). If there is a rule also among doctors, "Don't

bother anyone," it is a disaster for patients. Cooperation among medical professionals is necessary in Japan for suicide prevention.

From many researches, we found that Japan's high suicide rate is due to various factors such as culture, education, and political and social changes, which are intricately intertwined. While the effectiveness of government and administrative suicide prevention programs has not been remarkable, another researcher said a new wave of suicide prevention activities has emerged (Picone, 2012). It is the development of suicide prevention programs by religious leaders. Of course, Christian churches in Japan have been active in suicide prevention. According to the Bible, suicide is self-murder, and manipulating one's life is against God. Unfortunately, Bible teaching is not generally shared in Japan, where Christians are said to be less than 1%.

Therefore, the fact that religious leaders other than Christianity started to become seriously tackling suicide prevention is an effective means. Researchers said that the moment of death is essential in Buddhism. For example, people with hatred and anger are attached to this world so that they won't be freed from karma and negative chains (p.394). In other words, Buddhists explained that even if you kill yourself, you will not be saved. In Japan, many Japanese have declared themselves atheists, and the Buddhist worship of the dead is gradually waning.

However, according to a 1993 survey, about 60% of university students believed in Japanese gods, spirits, and the afterlife, even if they didn't believe in a particular religion (p.397).

By summarizing various papers, we found that we can hold an optimistic view that it is possible to reduce the number of Japanese suicide, but they need effort. It turns out that the idea of honorable suicide has already been erased little by little from the memory of the Japanese people.

Therefore, adults producing Japanese novels and movies must stop glorifying suicide actively. Fortunately, many TV networks stopped creating *Chushingura* because movie companies and TV stations have less money and power (Kasuga, 2021).

Suicide prevention education by various religious groups seems like the light of saving Japanese life. If all communities, such as medical, educational, and cities, can get involved to support them, it would be a significant environmental change. There is no place for moral education in Japan. So, the government could use religious groups' suicide prevention education programs as a reference. Moreover, it might be a good idea to make time for schools to learn about the world's religions. It might act as a new suicide prevention program. I believe education is a cornerstone of creating a strong country. Also, the Japanese government needs to investigate alcoholism among Japanese people actively. I understand the feeling that government does not want to reduce tax revenue, but tax revenue will decrease further if the people become unhealthy.

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