

The History of *Konyoku*

Mixed feelings about mixed bathing

Many of the public baths and hot-spring baths in Japan were mixed until the Meiji era (1868–1912), despite sporadic efforts to outlaw the “morally corrupt” practice of mixed bathing in Edo (present-day Tokyo). The sight of people of both sexes bathing together was shocking to the first Western visitors to Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, who were as prudish as they were jingoistic.

Consider this passage from an 1856 account by Francis L. Hawks of U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry’s expeditions to Japan in the early 1850s:

A scene at one of the public baths, where the sexes mingled indiscriminately, unconscious of their nudity, was not calculated to impress the Americans with a very favorable opinion of the morals of the inhabitants. This may not be a universal practice throughout Japan, and indeed is said by the Japanese near us not to be; but the Japanese people of the inferior ranks are undoubtedly, notwithstanding their moral superiority to most oriental nations, a lewd people.[1]

Early editions of Hawks’s book also included an illustration of a Japanese bathhouse showing men, women, and children bathing together. This proved so alarming to American readers that it was removed from later editions of the book.

Foreign visitors were predisposed to take a dim view of Japanese bathing habits because they tended to conflate mixed bathing with the sexual disinhibition of the culture at large. Edward Barrington de Fonblanque, an Englishman who visited Japan in 1860, described the Japanese as “depraved, sensual, and obscene in every sense,” going on to warn his readers about the “indecencies found not only in books and pictures, but . . . painted on their porcelain, embossed on their lacquer, carved in their ivory, and surreptitiously conveyed into their fans.”[2]

Desperate to be seen as an equal by the “civilized” great powers of the West, the Meiji government banned mixed bathing in towns in February 1869. Even today, only mixed baths that predate the ban

are allowed to remain in operation, while opening a new mixed bath is prohibited.

Why did the vilified culture of mixed bathing survive and thrive in Tohoku? There are multiple reasons, among them the limited number of naturally occurring springs (making one bath for both sexes a more efficient use of resources). Another is the social context in which the bathing took place, with unpretentious farming families visiting the same hot springs year after year, or healthy members of the family assisting sick ones into the bath regardless of gender. The biggest reason of all, however, has to be the sheer remoteness of the place. Towada-Hachimantai, and the Hachimantai area in particular, was not easily accessible to visitors from outside the region until after World War II, with many hot-spring resorts only reachable by foot or on horseback. Road construction programs did not get underway until the 1960s, and the bullet train reached the nearby city of Morioka in 1982.

[1] Francis L. Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854 under the Command of Commodore M.C. Perry, United States Navy* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856).

[2] Edward Barrington de Fonblanque, *Nippon and Pe-che-li; or, Two Years in Japan and Northern China* (London: Saunders, Otley and Company, 1863).