

THE RELIGIOSITY OF JAPANESE ENGINEERING STUDENT Case study at Toyohashi University of Technology

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Abstract

This article is intended to inform a real description related to the religious expression and activity of engineering student in Japan. Information is collected by direct interaction with the students, and also by visiting religious sites around the campus. Visit to the student apartments is also carried out to obtain information regarding religious activity that is held in daily life. It is found from the observation that religious activities such as reading a holy book and praying is not carried out anymore. Praying is done three times a year, namely at Bon ceremony, which is ceremony to respect the return ancestor to the earth from heaven, at Higan ceremony that is ceremony to respect the ancestor, and also new year praying. It is found surprisingly, something unique related to the religion that is many students have and bring amulet (o-mamori) that is obtained from the Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple. It is also popular to take a written oracle that tells the fortune in the Buddhist Temple or Shinto Shrine. This written oracle in Japan is called with o-mikuji. The belief that is not related to the religion but still popular is to respect the mountain. Mountain climbing is a religious activity that often held by the engineering student

Keywords: religious, engineering student, Shinto, Buddhist, Japan

Introduction

This article is intended to introduce the religiosity of Japanese student that study in the department of engineering. The observation takes a place at Toyohashi University of Technology in Toyohashi City, Aichi, Nagoya, Japan.

Toyohashi University of Technology is located in Toyohashi, the second largest city in Aichi prefecture, situated halfway between Tokyo and Osaka, two of Japan's metropolises. Toyohashi is unique in its embodiment of Japans' old and new aspect. Traditionally, the city is famous for its year-round agriculture due to its warm climate. The rustic, pastoral landscape are accentuated by the ever whelming Pacific coast and Mikawa bay from the south to west, and by deep mountain range of Okumikawa from north to east. Toyohashi's magnificent environment is also one of the newly- developing industrial center of Japan. Not only leading Japanese companies such as Toyota, but also Germany including Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen, and Bayer has factories in the Toyohashi area. Toyohashi strives for ecological harmonization, and mutual development of Japan's traditions and industrial developments. As the center of the local intellectual environment, Toyohashi University of Technology play an important role in this regard.

Toyohashi University of Technology was founded in 1976, nearly 27 years ago by the Japanese Government as national university. The aims of Toyohashi University of technology are to conduct research on advanced technologies and to educate students in such technologies with an emphasis on graduate student.

The special advantage of studying at Toyohashi university of Technology is that an opportunity to gain practical experience in industry as an intern. This takes a place during the course of undergraduate studies. Toyohashi University of Technology have around 2100 student including undergraduate, master and doctoral course student, 250 teaching and research faculty member, and 150 administrative personnel.

The Toyohashi University of Technology having 9 departments that all are engineering department. These departments include the Department of Mechanical, Production system, Electrical and Electronic, Information and Computer Science, Material Science, Architecture and Civil, Knowledge-based Information, Ecological, and Humanities and Management Science.

It is hoping that after reading this article the understanding of religiosity of Japanese student that study at the engineering department could be well understood, since in the future these Japanese students



Figure 1. The campus of Toyohashi University of Technology

will work at Japanese company around the world including Indonesia. The understanding from Indonesia side should also be improved so that harmony cooperation could be realized.

The Japanese constitution guarantees religion freedom, and this guarantee is strictly maintained. Therefore, there is no state religion, and no connection between national and religious function. Religious instruction is forbidden at public schools. The principal religions in Japan are Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity (Ogawa, 2002; Reischaver, 1984; and Itasaka, 1996). Statistic shows that few Japanese are deeply devoted to a specific religion and that in fact, many profess to have no interest in religion at all (Itasaka, 1996).

Japanese not only free to believe what they wish, but also they may freely propagate that view, attempting to convince others of its correctness. Article 20 of postwar Japanese constitution guarantee freedom of religion, and article 89, forbidding the use of public money for religious purpose, strengthens that provision (Kasahara, 2001).

Religiosity of Japanese engineering student

Visit to the temple, shrine, or church

Around the Toyohashi University of technology where these observations take place, available 1 Church, 2 Buddhist Temples, and 4 Shinto Shrine. For 1 year observation along 2005, that is found only 2 Japanese student from this University that routinely involved at church activity, and there is no even 1 Japanese student that come to the shrine and Buddhist temple near the university.

Beside there is no even 1 student from Toyohashi University of Technology that visit the Shinto shrine near the University, also 1 from that 4 shrine are in bad



Figure 2. A Buddhist temple is about 1 km near the Toyohashi University of Technology. There is no even one Japanese student from The University that comes to this temple for praying along 2005



Figure 3. Shinto shrine is in bad condition because no one cares anymore with its existence. This shrine located about 2 km near the Toyohashi University of Technology

condition because no one care anymore with their existence as we can see at Figure 3.

Reading a Holy Book

There are activities of reading holy book (Bible) in the university, but the participant is not a Japanese student. Majority of the participants are foreign student. That is found about 2 participants who is Japanese student in the Bible study group in the university along the years 2005. There is no one student that having a holy book related to Buddhist and Shinto.

Praying

In the university there is no praying activity, since also there is no holy place. Japanese student never found praying in the university. Japanese student as also Japanese in general are mostly praying 3 time a year. The praying are held at *Bon* festival (13-16th August), *Higan* (during the spring), and New Year praying (1st January).

The *Bon* Festival

The *Bon* festival is related to Buddhist tradition, which one a year the soul of the people's ancestor make their way back home for short visit. The spirits are welcomed with special fires and spirit altar (Japan Travel Bureau, 1998). At this time (around 13th –16th of August), the university almost empty because all students return to their home town. In Japan at this time many companies close down at this time of the year, giving employees the change to return and relax in their hometown.

The student then return to their hometown, and around 13th August morning they are preparing the *shooryoodana* (small spirit altar). On the night of the 13th, small welcoming fires are lit in front of homes, so that the spirits will not lose their way (*mukaebi*). Often hems with the outside covering stripped of burned. Around this holiday, a very big wood drum (*yagura*) is beat passing the road around the village/town together with *bon* dance that the participant are the member of the village. On the last day of *bon*, send-off fires (*okuribi*) are lit in the same places were welcoming fires burned a few days before (*mukaebi*). Also lanterns and food offered to the soul are taken to river or the sea, to float off and disappear.

The *Higan*

Higan is 7 days Buddhist ceremony to honor the dead, during spring. *Higan* literally refer to the world of eternal stability awaiting us on the other bank of the river dividing living from the dead (Japan Travel Bureau, 1998). At the beginning of the *Higan* festival, the household Buddhist altar is cleaned and graced with flower. Food, such as rice cake covered with sweet bean paste (*o-hagi*), and things the departed like (sake or fruit) is placed at the altar also. Tombs are visited during this time too.

The tombstone is ritually cleansed by pouring a little water over it. Flowers are placed at the base, and incense is burned. Most Japanese have a family tomb behind their own temple, where for generation the families and memorial service have been held. The grave is link with one's distant past, and so has much significance in the Japanese psyche.

The New Years

At the New Year, the Japanese student also leaving the campus to go back to their hometown to do the *hatsu-moode*. It is customary to pray for health, wealth and happiness during the coming year (Japan Travel Bureau, 1998). The crush starts on New Year's Eve with famous shrine and temples packed solid.

Many homes hang *shime nawa* (New Year decoration) outside the home at the entrance or gate to ward of evil. There are a pairs of rice cakes (*kagami-mochi*), the



Figure 4. Ringing of the temple bell (*joya-nokane*) one hundred and eight times at the temples all over the country on new years

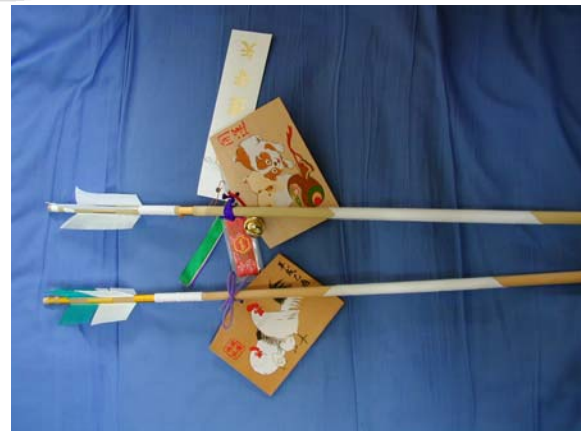


Figure 5. The *hamaya* (arrow with the power of exorcising evil spirits)

smaller one placed on top of the larger, decorating a place of honour such as the household altar. *Kodomatsu* (made of 3 bamboos stalks and pine boughs, bound together with straw) are placed outside entrance, one each side. The *Toshigami* (God who brings good harvests and greater profit), dwells inside.

People are ringing of the temple bell (*joya-nokane*) one hundred and eight times at the temples all over the country at midnight on new years (Figure 4). Besides, people who visiting shrine at New Year to pray for happiness bought *Hamaya*, an arrow with power of exorcising evil spirits (Figure 5).

The amulet

The amulet is popular also among the Japanese engineering student. The amulet in Japan is called *o-mamori*, made from a piece of paper or wood with incantation is wrapped in a small cloth (Japan Travel Bureau, 1998). The amulets are obtained at the shrine or the Buddhist temple. The *o-mamori* is just a small bag without anything inside. Out side part is decorated with *kanji* character with have a meaning related with the wish of some one (Figure 6 and 7). The most popular *o-mamori* are the *o-mamori* for success in study (Figure 6), and *o-mamori* for get married (Figure 7).

Attention should put here since the Japanese believe to amulet is not regard to the supernatural power of the amulet. The Japanese amulet is a kind of target of achievement that one wants to reach.

Written oracle

Most of the student also the Japanese peoples during New Year praying also involve with the activity to take a written oracle that tell the fortune. This written oracle in Japan is called with *o-mikuji* as depicted in Figure 8.

After take the *o-mikuchi* and read it, in relation to avoid the bad thing come out or in hoping the good things part



Figure 7. The amulets for happiness in get married



Figure 8. The *o-mikuji*, a written oracle that tells fortune



Figure 6. The amulet for success in study



Figure 9. Put the *o-mikuji* at the branch of the tree to avoid the bad things, and hoping the good thing that written in the *o-mikuji* will soon realized



Figure 10. Sacred Mount Horaiji, near Toyohashi



Figure 11. *Jizoo*, who relieves peoples from suffering and distress

to realize, the Japanese then put the *o-mikuji* at the branch of the tree near the shrine or temple as depicted in Figure 9.

Jizoo

When we make a travel, or just walk around with the Japanese, and if we find a statue like Figure 11, The Japanese will pray in front of this statue. We can see the statue like this at the side of the road at all over Japan. The name of this statue is *Jizoo*, a very familiar object of folk belief in Japan and is made from sculpted

stone. Peoples believe *Jizoo* relieves peoples from suffering and distress, Japan Travel Bureau (1998).

Japanese superstition

If we ask the Japanese student about the Japanese superstition, even they are not believed anymore, but they still can remember some topic about superstition. Examples of the superstition are mentioned below.

Things that bring luck:

- Having a dream of Mount Fuji, a falcon, or an eggplant
- A spring of tea plant standing vertical in one's teacup. This event is described by the phrase '*chabashira ga tatsu*'
- A crane

Things that bring bad luck:

- A thong of a *geta* (wooden clog) that is break
- Cutting a nails in the night
- A crow

The number four is unlucky since its pronunciation '*shi*' mean death. There for there is no hospital rooms in Japan with room number 4. The northeast is considered unlucky, since it is the direction by which demons enter and leave, which have special name *kimon* (devil gate). Also thought that is unlucky to sleep with the head towards the north (*kitamakura*) since this is how dead bodies are laid out.

En (karma), many Japanese, even not religious, often refer to '*en*'. *En* is karma, destiny, and the idea that certain things happen because they are bound to. This concept comes from Buddhist, and is used to explain good luck.

The devotion

In the university, the students are educated to pay their devotion to their senior, and the next to their teacher or professor. After they are finish study the devotion that should be pay to the company where they are belongs. We cannot find a devotion to the God in the University.

Japanese employees are expected to devote their lives to their companies, to the extent that one could say they have, for all intents and purpose, "caught" religion (Japan Travel Bureau, 1998).

Conclusion

The religiosity of Japanese engineering student for the case at Toyohashi University of Technology can be conclude as follow: The religious activity such visiting the holy place, reading the holy book, daily praying are not found practiced in recent day. The main praying activities are found at *Bon* Festival, *Higan* Festival, and New Year celebration. Having an amulet (*o-mamori*) and taking a written oracle (*o-mikuji*) are still popular.

Mountain still has a mystic sense, and finally the devotion is much directed to the company where they are working on.

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