

The Business of Capitalizing on Culture: Onsen Industry in Japan

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The legend of Dogo Onsen starts with an injured egret. This egret found a hot spring that was gushing from the rocks around it. It proceeded to return every day to soak its injured leg and after some time it was completely healed and flew away stronger than before. People in the town who had witnessed this bird thought that it was really odd but proceeded to then bathe in the same water. Afterwards, they found themselves less fatigued and were quick to recover from illnesses. Following this instance, onsen hot spring culture began to spread and thrive across Japan. Dogo onsen is more than 3,000 years old and is filled with history from animals to important nobility. Hundreds of stories are told of the physical and spiritual healing surrounding many onsen in Japan. Today, onsen is a luxury that many people, even those from around the world, seek to enjoy in Japan. By using Dogo Onsen as a positive symbol for change, I will show how Dogo onsen has been a leader in creating a strong industry that profits through the spread of Japanese culture and traditions. In this paper there will be an explanation of the history of onsen, the cultural and economic adversities that the onsen industry has had to face, and finally how onsen are evolving to keep both culture and economics unified in order to keep this industry intact.

Japan sits on top of what is known as the “Ring of Fire” which is an area of volcanic activity that is in the Pacific Ocean. Japan’s landscape has created many natural hot springs in Japan. Starting in 1954, the Japanese government made requirements that businesses must meet in order to qualify as an onsen. In the Article, “Onsen: A Culture of Bathing,” Toki states that, “an onsen must be comprised of natural spring water that is at least 25°C in its natural state and contain at least 1 of 19 specific mineral or chemical elements within a certain parameter. Minerals such as sulfur, iron, and magnesium are said to have therapeutic properties that can help promote healthy skin, reduce aches and pains, and even boost the immune system.”(Toki

2016) Healing properties are one of the most important themes in Onsen as seen in the origin story of Dogo Onsen. The government also requires the area to have an environment, landscape, history, climate, and culture. Onsen history can be shown through items such as murals on their walls that customarily include the environment, landscape, history, climate, and culture. Dogo Onsen is a strong example as they show these aspects through its architecture, wall murals, and even depictions of flower groves through the use of towels. Depictions of their history go back hundreds and even thousands of years.

Thousands of years ago, bathing was not usually done in a tub. Rather, many people would steam bathe. Scott F. Clark from the University of Oregon writes that, “Iwaburo, literally “rock bath”, and kamaburo, “oven bath”, are the oldest types of baths recorded in Japan.” (Clark 31) He proceeds in describing the iwaburo as either natural caves or a small cave that was carved into the earth. Wood would be burned for several hours in these small rooms in order to heat the rocks and ceiling. Then, sea water would be poured over the rocks so that steam would fill the air. People would then stay in these rooms until they were sweating heavily. Iwaburo’s were around the inland sea whereas the kamaburo’s were inland. Kamaburos worked in a similar way but were kiln shaped. However, this style of bathing changed when Buddhism started to spread throughout Japan.

While Japanese Shinto beliefs already included important acts through the use of water, such as the Japanese god dipping his spear in the water and thus creating the islands that form Japan. In addition, fourteen other deities were born from Izanagi washing his body in the sea. Buddhism, however, introduced bathing as a way to purify one’s self around the sixth century. At the Buddhist temple compounds there were seven buildings. One of these buildings consisted of a bathhouse to wash Buddha and the monks. Later on, commoners were allowed to bathe

themselves causing bathhouses to be constructed for them to use. During these days, bathing was coed. However, men would wear fundoshi, also known as loincloth, and women would wear koshimaki, which was a type of skirt. Bathing rooms were then separated according to samurai and priests, women, male commoners, and even horses. Dogo onsen took part in this in the 16th century when Matsudaira Sadayuki became the lord of the area and expanded the onsen. Sadayuki added multiple separate rooms and more stability.

Rapid growth of the onsen industry seemed to take off after important events. In the 16th century, civil war broke out over leadership and land. Japan's civil war ended with stories such as Takeda Shingen, who was a commander, using ten secret onsen in his domain to heal his wounded soldiers. More importantly, it ended in the unification of Japan. During this time in the 17th century, the class system was set into place with the samurai being the nobles and the merchants on the bottom. Despite this, the bathhouses were seen as common ground in which everyone was able to use together. Maps of onsen locations appeared, the healing effects became nationally known, and people began to flock.

During this time as well, westernization hit and slowly changed ideals around coed bathing. Later baths were forced to have separate rooms around the 1860's between men and women. Clothes were also completely forgotten at this time. Dogo onsen also saw big changes in the late 1800's as Isaniwa Yukiya became the first mayor of Dogo Yunomachi in 1890. (Dogo 2020) He then renovated a deteriorated and falling Dogo Onsen. While there was protest, he fought to make Dogo something that could stand for a century. 1894 is now the official start date for Dogo Onsen as a business. Since the main building was completed, there were more additions and renovations later in time which now includes four buildings and more stability in case of natural disasters.

Next, a massive steppingstone for growth in the onsen industry was after WWII. Post WWII was a time for large economic growth and prosperity. Onsen businesses saw this opportunity and reinvented their marketing campaigns by giving multiple day packages that included items like food and entertainment. Japan's post war era led to the creation of onsen towns and resorts for many to enjoy. Marketing toward those with time to spare encouraged people to experience nature as a form of healing as indoor and outdoor onsen became popular. Escaping from daily life and the ability to experience socialization, spiritual healing, and physical healing drew in many. Onsen innovations procured what today is now known as the onsen tourism. Onsen has thus become a billion-dollar industry in Japan that many around the world seek to understand and enjoy. In Joyce Say's journal, "Covid19 Pandemic Affected the Industry of Health and Wellness Tourism," she stated that "The Japanese Onsens have been changed and developed in conjunction with the folk beliefs and recreational needs of the Edo period, and the growth of modern capitalism based on the basis of Touji." (Say 2022) Within the last couple of decades, onsen has become one of the best ways to get to know the locals in Japan as it is positively seen as a way to jump into Japanese history and culture. Onsen tourism industry has affected Japan's locals in more ways than their own relaxation and healing.

Throughout the years, Japan's onsen industry has since seen change in a myriad of ways that has resulted in positive and negative outcomes. Tourism in Japan has been facing a slow revitalization in business since the 2009 global financial crisis. To promote Dogo Onsen, Dogo Onsenart was started in which modern art installations by locals, "reveal existing assets of the region using art as a catalyst, rediscover their values, communicate these to the world and find a way to revitalize the region ... Community building through art has drawn attention as the Tsumari Approach" (Colin 2018). Dogo's expo led to mass visitors learning about and

experiencing art based on cultural identities and experiences through textiles, sculptures, and other forms of art.

Another form of promotion that Dogo Onsen didn't even have much to do with was the use of their building to inspire Hayao Miyazaki's film, "Spirited Away." Hayao Miyazaki's film was directly influenced by the Buddhist temple inspired architecture at the front of the Dogo Onsen for the bath house in his movie. Spirited Away became famous around the world and has allowed many to positively experience and fall in love with onsen culture. An oscar award was presented to this movie in 2003 for "Best Animated Feature." Records were broken as it was the first hand-drawn film as well as the first non-American film to win this award. Hayao Miyazaki's film follows the story of a young girl as she tries to save her parents who had eaten cursed food in an onsen resort town that caters specifically to Japanese gods. Spirited Away covers many important themes like nature vs pollution, coming of age, and that of Japanese identity vs internationalization. However, people around the world were enraptured by the movie's beautiful imagery that many have come to expect when they enter an onsen. Spirited Away's onsen is filled with rich and hued colors that make everything shine and seem unworldly. Gods can be seen entering the bathhouse with awful odors and leaving almost purified as their elation shines. The bath water has in depth details as you can see the steam rising and the food has a glow to it. It represents the Japanese detail-oriented mindset along with what tourists expect to experience within Japan. This is not the only movie, anime, or media that has used or has been inspired by onsen culture.

While Dogo onsen and their surrounding businesses promote themselves using the history of Dogo, some onsen towns have fallen to the dependency on using stereotypical Japanese culture in order to keep their businesses profitable. As culture is one of the most

important aspects of onsen it has also been the biggest adversary when it comes to the tourism industry. Bhasim defines cultural commodification as, "...socially constructed and involves businesses taking things such as identity and language and turning aspects of them into a service or good." (Bhasim 2016) In the city of Kanazawa, the Yukaku Onsen district has helped to create an event named Bonbori festival. Bonbori festival started in 2011 in honor of the anime, "Hanasaku Iroha." First, it starts off with lighting lanterns and sending them off with notes that have wishes on them. It also puts a huge emphasis on Shinto prayers and a Shinto priest sending these prayers. Before the beginning of this festival, which was based on stereotypes designed to draw tourists' attention, the Yukaku Tourist Association had been looking for something to pull in tourists during the low season during September and October. Takayoshi Yamamura says that the intent behind this festival was to keep it ongoing and that, "it should be established in people's minds as a traditional event of the region to the extent that they would be unaware that it was originally based on an anime." (Takayoshi 2015)

Yukaku Onsen district's first year pulled in over 5,000 overnight tourists compared to the fourth year in which there were more than 12,000. (Takayoshi 2015) This type of tourism advertisement has happened many times, not just in Kanazawa. While it is obvious that this type of tourist tactic works and the economic benefit is massive, it often puts pressure on the locals in which there is limited human resources, trash amounts increased, and noise pollution increases as the festival's time lengthens. Most importantly though, it has profited off of cultural identities or has altered cultural events that leaves a bad taste in the local's mouths.

On the other hand, it is revitalizing rural Japanese rural communities, whether this be through new traditions born from a need or traditions that have been carried for hundreds of years. Migration of the youth to the larger cities in Japan has risen which coincides with the

Japanese population declining. Movement from smaller towns to the city is either for better work opportunities or just the increase of commodities that the bigger cities have to offer. Local migration has led many towns to be left in the hands of the older generation. Youth movement has leaves the job of maintaining traditions like festivals and parades in the hands of many who are no longer physically able to. Japan's onsen industry has thus offered a way for rural towns to reignite as many tourists have been drawn to less busy areas in order to see more Japanese wilderness and animals. As a result, towns have been built with onsen as the backbone to their economics and community.

Onsen towns are not only seen as a main source of income but have also created a place for nostalgia and stereotypically traditional Japanese culture to be implemented. For example, the onsen resort known as Ginzan Onsen is known for the many onsen inns and hot springs. Ginzan Onsen is in a secluded area that features a canal in the middle of the town with small foot bridges connecting the gap. It is a reminder of old Japan as the old-time architecture and overwhelming closeness to nature creates an enchanting atmosphere. The lights at night create an even more beautiful and romantic atmosphere as a hue covers the whole town. It is common to be welcomed by staff members wearing kimono and then led to traditional tatami mat covered floors. Businesses like kimono renting have risen which allows tourists to immerse themselves even further into the culture. Many people walk around these types of towns wearing either kimono or yukata that onsen rent out.

An adverse effect of towns relying on the tourist onsen industry has been caused by their dependence on not only local tourism but international tourism. In 2019, the world was hit by Covid19 and it affected everything, let alone the onsen tourism industry. This affected the onsen industry as bathing with others isn't very social distancing friendly. Noriko Yagasaki from the

International Association of Traffic and Safety Sciences reports that, “As of 2019, the Japanese travel market had been on an increasing trend, with Japanese domestic travel (overnight and day trips) having a stable market of ¥20–22 trillion along with an increasing number of foreign visitors to Japan. However, in 2020, the total was ¥11 trillion, down 61% from ¥27.9 trillion in the previous year” (Yagasaki 2021) Since this statistic, tourism has dropped even more. In order to help stimulate the Japanese economy, the Japan Tourism Agency proposed a campaign aimed at Japanese locals that give travel vouchers. Tourism vouchers could be applied to lodging and dining that would cover up to 20,000 yen. As tourism in Japan is a trillion-dollar business, the Japanese government and onsen tried their best to adapt to the circumstances.

Covid19 enforced avoiding confined spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings. The website *Selected Onsen Ryokan* explains two main ways that onsen and onsen hotels are having to change. First, people are being pushed to experience the onsen in private onsen baths. Many onsen hotels already had private baths so it already allowed people the ability to have their own space. Second, all meals were served in either guest rooms, independent dining rooms, or in segmented dining areas. Modern technology has also been used as a way for onsen to continue. One onsen in particular has adapted to social distancing by encouraging people to experience onsen at home. In 2020, Arima Onsen in Hyogo Prefecture offered a whole new way to experience many different onsen. The Japan Times reports that, “The first batch of videos, already released on YouTube, takes viewers wearing VR headsets to five inns, allowing them to enjoy various kinds of hot springs including the sound of the water and the breeze in surrounding nature.” (2020) While onsen are seen as a way to go back in time to traditional Japan, this way of experiencing onsen has created a new way for those abroad to get a taste of what they could experience in Japan.

While Japan and the onsen industry has had to make huge changes in the past few years, Dogo Onsen was already a leader in change before Covid19. As Dogo Onsen is one of the oldest onsen in Japan, it is also one of the first onsen in Japan to allow those who have tattoos. Tattoos in Japan are heavily stigmatized as they have a strong connection to Japanese gang members. Discrimination towards tattooed people extends to pools, gyms, and even beaches as signs explicitly state that those with tattoos are not allowed. Some onsen will allow people to enter if they have small tattoos that are easily covered by bandages, but they are typically very strict. However, in an interview the manager of Dogo Onsen stated that, “Well, different kinds of people come here. Of course, people from abroad and people with tattoos as well. Many types of people visit here so as a part of our hospitality we decided to welcome all people, even those with tattoos, so everyone can enjoy Dogo Onsen equally.” (Only in Japan, 2016) Dogo onsen’s change has been both culturally important and economically important for onsen. A change of ideals has allowed for new opportunities for those with tattoos as they are increasingly becoming a fashion statement within Japan. It has also widened their community allowing for more economic gain.

Another way that onsen are widening their customer base and therefore their economic income is through the expansion of areas that allow for more socialization. Onsen have always been a way to heal spiritually and physically but it is also something that allows for locals and foreigners to socialize. Foreigners have seen onsen as something that is exotic and totally out of their comfort zone. However, it has become a way for them to interact with other Japanese and learn more about each other. Also, it is a way for foreigners to experience commodities that Japan has to offer. At Dogo Onsen, the second floor is the area for people to eat traditional onsen food as well as experience entertainment. Many other onsen and onsen hotels have expanded

their multiple floors into areas that include modern features like restaurants, bars, spas, arcades, massage chairs, and vending machines. Innovations within onsen have made the onsen experience an all-day event.

Onsen expanding areas that allow for more socialization have diversified in terms of limiting the language barriers, which have allowed for more foreigners to feel comfortable when approaching the onsen industry. Websites which offer multiple languages have allowed foreigners to reserve rooms at onsen hotels easier than ever before. Websites enable tourists to tell their hosts if they have any dietary needs that need to be taken into consideration when preparing their meals, whether for personal, health, or religious reasons. Onsen have also made it easier for guests to properly enjoy the onsen through signs that educate them on how to use the baths. Multi step signs that show onsen procedure and expectations allow a person to consider norms like entering the public bath after washing themselves, not putting their towels in the pools, and putting up their hair. Unless there are experienced onsen goers around, a person may not meet some of the expectations that surround the onsen experience.

To sum up everything that has been stated so far, Japanese onsen culture is changing and it has been for hundreds of years. This is due to influences from religions, economic needs, and other cultures that have come to Japan. Isaniwa Yukiya said it best that, “Only if we build something that will continue to be unrivaled even 100 years from now will it be of any value.” (Dogo Onsen) From the story of the egret to the art exhibitions that promote the relationship between modernization and history, Dogo onsen has shown that history is a huge part in understanding Japanese values. Change is an inevitable force that affects every culture around the world but it is how a culture reacts to these changes that make a difference. Dogo Onsen has been a leader by showing that change can be a positive thing as long as your values remain

intact. Media such as the movie *Spirited Away* and the anime *Hanasaku Iroha* have had a huge influence on how other cultures see onsen. There are adversities to culture like cultural commodification or economic adversities like Covid19. However, the government and communities must work together and evolve in order to keep Japan culturally and socially “Japan” while also achieving economic success.

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