

THE ROLE OF JAPANESE FOLKTALES IN MORAL, CULTURAL, AND SPIRITUAL EDUCATION OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

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Abstract: Japanese folktales, as an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage, play a significant role in the moral, spiritual, and aesthetic education of younger generations. Rooted in centuries-old traditions and influenced by Shintoism, Buddhism, and Bushidō, these tales convey universal values such as honesty, compassion, diligence, patience, respect for nature, and patriotism. Through symbolic characters, regional motifs, and narrative trials, folktales foster ethical awareness, social responsibility, and cultural identity in children. Their artistic appeal, spiritual depth, and pedagogical function make them a valuable medium for transmitting cultural memory and cultivating moral and ethical consciousness. In the context of globalization, the study and integration of Japanese folktales into education provide insight into both national and universal human values.

Keywords: Japanese folktales, moral education, Shintoism, Buddhism, Bushidō, cultural heritage, symbolism, regional culture

Introduction

The oral folk literature of every nation represents an invaluable cultural heritage that embodies its spirituality, way of life, worldview, values, and historical memory. Japanese folktales are likewise the product of centuries-old traditions, serving not only to provide aesthetic enjoyment to younger generations but also to impart moral education. Within Japanese society, folktales are esteemed as an effective means of guiding children onto the right path, instilling virtuous qualities, and illustrating the consequences of good and evil. They encapsulate the people's daily life, religious beliefs, regional cultural characteristics, relationship with nature, and historical experiences.

The moral principles of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Bushidō, which developed in Japan, have profoundly influenced the content and ideological orientation of Japanese folktales. These tales promote such virtues as honesty, diligence, humility, compassion, patriotism, respect for others, and the preservation of nature. At the same time, each region possesses its own distinctive folkloric elements, characters, and legends, which enrich and diversify the corpus of Japanese folktales. Thus, Japanese folktales play an important role in educating younger generations in the spirit of national and universal values, preserving cultural memory, and strengthening the moral foundations of society.

Oral folk literature serves as an essential reflection of every nation's cultural heritage and spiritual worldview. Japanese folktales, as a form of cultural wealth passed down from generation to generation, have a positive influence on the moral education of the youth. Through these tales, such virtues as kindness, honesty, diligence, compassion, respect for nature, patience, and humility are promoted. The frequent motif of honest characters being rewarded, while deceit, greed, and cruelty are punished, functions as an important moral guide for young readers in choosing the right path in life.

For example, in *The Tongue-Cut Sparrow* (Shitakiri Suzume), the kind and generous old man is rewarded for his good deeds, whereas the greedy and selfish one receives punishment for his behavior. In *Momotarō*, the ideals of bravery, patriotism, and communal unity are emphasized. Meanwhile, *Urashima Tarō* conveys respect for the mysteries of nature, the consequences of interfering with another world, and the value of time.

The moral ideas expressed in Japanese folktales are directly connected to the country's religious beliefs and spiritual traditions. Shintoism regards nature as sacred and holds the belief that every being possesses a spirit, or kami. This concept frequently appears in folktales, where animals, forests, mountains, seas, and rivers are vividly and expressively portrayed as living entities. Such representations instill in the younger generation an appreciation for nature and an attitude of care and respect toward all forms of life.

The influence of Buddhism, on the other hand, is reflected in themes such as patience, mindfulness, self-restraint, faith in karma, forgiveness, and a sense of personal moral responsibility. In many tales, characters who commit wrongful deeds are punished through the workings of karma, thereby cultivating in young readers an awareness of ethical accountability and the moral consequences of one's actions.

The thematic layers of Japanese folktales are multifaceted, reflecting the value system, educational principles, and social relationship models of society. Above all, the system of characters in Japanese folktales conveys moral and ethical concepts through symbolic interpretation. Through the protagonists' interactions with animals, spirits, and supernatural beings, the tales promote ideas such as self-control, wisdom in making life decisions, and the pursuit of inner growth.

For instance, animal characters often symbolize specific virtues or traits: the tanuki represents cunning and cleverness; the fox (kitsune) embodies magic and trials; while the crane (tsuru) symbolizes devotion and gratitude.

One of the key factors contributing to the formation of moral education in Japanese folktales is the concept of collective consciousness and the principle of **wa** (和), which emphasizes the pursuit of harmony and unity within the community. This idea is expressed in folktales through the prioritization of communal well-being over individual interests. The hero's success often results from acting in cooperation with others, offering help to those in need, or sacrificing personal gain for the sake of the group. In this way, folktales reinforce the values of cooperation, responsibility, and social solidarity that are characteristic of Japanese society.

Moreover, the educational process in Japanese folktales often unfolds through experiences and trials. The protagonist's journey typically consists of various tests, moral challenges, and processes of self-justification, which align with the Japanese educational concept of **shugyō** (修行) – the practice of self-discipline, personal cultivation, and the pursuit of spiritual maturity. Such narrative structures instill in the younger generation the idea that success in life can only be achieved through perseverance, hard work, and resilience at every stage of one's journey.

The reflection of regional culture in Japanese folktales is primarily manifested through depictions of the local natural and geographical environment, traditional occupations, and regional customs. In tales originating from mountainous areas, spirits of the mountains, forest

creatures, and mythical beings connected to nature frequently appear, whereas in coastal regions, narratives often center on sea spirits, the lives of fishermen, the underwater world, and rituals associated with the sea. This demonstrates the direct influence of the natural environment on the formation of folktales. For instance, in Urashima Tarō, the depiction of sea dwellers, the undersea palace, and the world of corals reflects the maritime culture of the Ryūgū region.

In Japanese folktales, the transmission of values is often achieved through advice, symbolism, metaphor, and artistic imagery. The contrast between good and evil is presented in a more nuanced way compared to the sharp dualism typical of Western folktales: even antagonists are sometimes capable of moral reform, self-awareness, and repentance. This reflects the principle found in Japanese moral pedagogy that “human nature is inherently good, and one merely needs to find the right path.” Therefore, rather than emphasizing punishment, Japanese folktales tend to highlight repentance, transformation, and the attainment of moral clarity as forms of ethical education.

The cultural diversity of Japan’s regions is vividly reflected in its folktales. Each area possesses its own unique customs, mythological beliefs, and traditions. For instance, the folktales of the Ainu people in Hokkaido emphasize living in harmony with nature, showing reverence toward animals and the spiritual world, and preserving hunting traditions. In contrast, the tales from Okinawa and the Ryūkyū Islands are characterized by themes of sea mythology, ancestral spirits, and local customs. Additionally, elements of samurai culture – the principles of Bushidō – are indirectly represented through character traits and the glorification of duty and loyalty. Values such as bravery, honesty, faithfulness, fulfilling one’s duty with honor, and respect for elders contribute to fostering high moral qualities among children.

Japanese folktales are distinguished by their artistic appeal, spiritual depth, and educational significance. They teach young people not only to become virtuous individuals but also to respect the customs and cultural heritage of their own nation. In the context of globalization, such tales play an invaluable role in fostering national identity, preserving cultural diversity, and nurturing the spiritual and moral development of the younger generation. Therefore, studying Japanese folktales, integrating them into the educational process, and comparing them with those of other nations can greatly contribute to broadening cultural awareness and strengthening moral consciousness among youth.

Conclusion

As an integral part of national culture, Japanese folktales play a vital role in the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual education of the younger generation. The virtues emphasized in these tales – such as kindness, honesty, compassion, patience, patriotism, respect for nature, and humility – contribute to shaping children’s worldview and fostering their growth into conscientious and responsible individuals. These works embody the influence of religious beliefs such as Shintoism and Buddhism, as well as the moral ideals of the Bushidō code and the regional customs and cultural values specific to different parts of Japan. Consequently, folktales are valued not only as literary monuments but also as vehicles of cultural memory, instruments for strengthening national identity, and means of moral and spiritual education.

In the era of globalization, when the study and comparison of different nations’ cultural heritages have become increasingly important, the analysis of Japanese folktales provides

deeper insight into the spiritual world of the Japanese people and reveals the profound meaning of universal human values. The continued transmission of Japanese values through folktales from generation to generation demonstrates their enduring cultural and educational influence. Therefore, teaching and studying Japanese folktales hold significant scholarly and practical importance in the educational process, in promoting intercultural dialogue, and in nurturing the spiritual and moral maturity of the younger generation.

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