

Cherry Blossoms and the Concept of Impermanence: Nature Worship from an Aesthetic Perspective

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Abstract

As a highly representative natural icon, the cherry blossom has long been deeply associated with the concept of impermanence (*Mujō*) and nature worship. By examining the cultural mechanisms linking cherry blossom imagery, impermanence, and nature worship within classical literature and the Way of Tea (*Chado*), this study analyzes contemporary cultural practices such as MUJI's cherry blossom product series and Hironao Tsuboi's "Sakurasaku" glass. The findings indicate that the cherry blossom became a core symbol of impermanence through the dual influence of *Mujō* and nature worship, gradually solidified via the aesthetic construction of classical literature and the ritualized practices of tea culture. These tripartite cultural mechanisms continue to undergo transformation in modern consumption and design sectors. Unlike existing scholarship that often adopts a singular perspective, this research integrates the internal logic connecting cherry blossoms, impermanence, and nature worship at a mechanistic level, offering a new reference point for the study of cultural symbols. Future research may further expand upon these findings through the lenses of folklore and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords

cherry blossom imagery, concept of impermanence (*Mujō*), nature worship, cultural mechanisms, contemporary aesthetics

1. Introduction

The cherry blossom is a highly representative cultural symbol and a quintessential carrier of nature worship. The concept of "impermanence" (*Mujō*) refers to the belief that all phenomena in the world, whether material or spiritual, are in a constant state of flux, with nothing being absolutely eternal or unchanging [1]. These two elements converge within classical literature, aesthetics, and folklore; the natural characteristics of the cherry blossom serve as the most intuitive metaphor for impermanence, allowing the spirit of nature worship to be manifested through aesthetic experience. Currently, few studies have systematically mapped the interconnected mechanisms between cherry blossoms, impermanence, and nature worship. Taking the connection between the cherry blossom and the concept of impermanence as its research object, this paper integrates the spiritual core of nature worship to explore the cultural mechanisms through which this natural imagery deeply merges with *Mujō* and continues to be accepted and inherited within society.

2. Current State of Research

The concept of impermanence is shaped by the dual influence of Buddhist thought and an environment prone to frequent natural disasters. The cherry blossom's natural traits—its brief flowering period and its tendency to wither at the peak of its bloom—align perfectly with this worldview. Xie Dongliang and Sun Lu argue that cherry blossom culture materializes the concept of impermanence through diverse forms, providing a critical perspective for interpreting national character, social psychology, and cultural essence [2].

Within the academic field of literary studies, the natural object of the cherry blossom has long been regarded as a core cultural icon carrying traditional Japanese views on impermanence and natural consciousness. Its symbolic connotations and spiritual directions are consistently and centrally presented in classical literary texts. Whether in classical *Waka* anthologies such as the *Man'yōshū*, the *Kokin Wakashū*, or the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*, the core imagery of falling cherry blossoms is frequently written about and repeatedly depicted. Its textual meaning is often intimately and inherently linked to themes such as the transient nature of worldly affairs, the fleeting brevity of individual life, and the evanescent passage of youth [3]. Existing research generally points out that the cherry blossom imagery constructed and presented within the system of classical Japanese literature aligns highly with the aesthetic philosophy of *Mono no aware* in its aesthetic spirit and emotional core. This system of imagery not only intuitively reflects the deep cultural link between the cherry blossom and the idea of impermanence but also mirrors the cultural background and spiritual origins of nature worship in traditional Japanese society [4].

In the dual dimensions of intellectual history and aesthetics, the academic community has largely focused its research on the internal connection between cherry blossom imagery and the Japanese spiritual world. The aesthetic image carried by the cherry blossom is not static but has evolved alongside changing historical contexts. This image can be traced back to the period of primitive Shinto, where cherry blossoms primarily served as symbols of a bountiful harvest, emphasizing the “beauty of full bloom.” Subsequently, with the gradual transformation of cultural trends and aesthetic tastes, by the stage of *Kokufu Bunka* (National Style Culture), the aesthetics of the cherry blossom shifted toward the “beauty of falling,” characterized by its withering, which achieved a high degree of congruence with the Buddhist concept of impermanence [5]. Li Hao (2009) explicitly noted in related research that a vast amount of artistic writing regarding the falling of cherry blossoms exists within classical *Waka* texts. Such descriptions are not merely depictions of scenery but are deeply bound to individual perceptions of the brevity of life and the rise and fall of worldly affairs [6]. This literary phenomenon largely highlights the unique cultural value and spiritual significance of the cherry blossom as an important vehicle for nature worship.

Existing research has provided a relatively thorough exploration of the deep logical connections between the concept of impermanence, Japanese aesthetic consciousness, and classical literary works. Following the introduction of Buddhist thought to Japan, the concept of impermanence merged and permeated with inherent indigenous cultural awareness. On this foundation, core aesthetic consciousnesses with distinct national characteristics, such as *Mono no aware* and *Wabi-sabi*, gradually emerged [7] (Juan Xueyan, 2008). The concept of impermanence has exerted a long-term and stable influence on the development of Japanese literature. In literary writing, creators frequently employ typical imagery such as falling cherry blossoms and the fate of characters to express philosophical reflections on the flux of worldly affairs and the meaning of individual existence [8].

Currently, as academic perspectives and analytical models continue to iterate, some researchers have begun to focus on the continuity and innovation of the cherry blossom as a cultural symbol within modern social activities. Cui Shuming and He Jia (2022), taking Hironao Tsuboi's “Sakurasaku” glass as a case study, argue that in the field of modern creative design, the cherry blossom symbol remains a core cultural identifier for conveying the fleeting experience of life inherent in *Mono no aware* aesthetics [9]. Diverse modern aesthetic expressions not only confirm the deep cultural link between the cherry blossom symbol and the concept of transience but also highlight its enduring value within the contemporary cultural field.

While existing explorations, largely relying on the singular dimensions of literature or aesthetics, have provided sufficient interpretation of the cherry blossom symbol and the concept of transience, they lack a holistic investigation into the internal logic of how these elements relate to nature worship and integrate into social life. This paper utilizes a combination of literature review and case analysis to integrate cultural data and research findings. With modern cases at its core, this study merges the three dimensions of the cherry

blossom symbol, the concept of transience, and nature worship to further refine the understanding of cherry blossom cultural imagery.

3. The Aesthetic Logic Connecting the Cherry Blossom Symbol, the Concept of Transience, and Nature Worship

This paper examines the unique symbols formed by the cherry blossom during the process of cultural development, uncovering the symbolic connotations of worldly change and the brevity of life carried by this icon while mapping the internal connections between these elements. The term “nature worship” as used in this study does not refer to specific religious rituals or dogmas; rather, it denotes a cultural attitude through which people understand the world via natural entities and their underlying laws of operation. This perception of seasonal and temporal change provided the direct cultural prerequisite for the formation of natural imagery.

The concept of transience originates from Buddhist thought. In its subsequent development, it detached from its purely religious framework and merged with regional aesthetics, forming a value system in which people accept the finite nature of life. This concept does not carry a negative tone; instead, it guides individuals to confront the temporal boundaries of existence and cherish the beautiful experiences of a brief presence. It has thus become the core ideological foundation linking the cherry blossom symbol with nature worship.

Classical literature served as the primary medium for disseminating the concept of transience. Works of *Waka* and *Monogatari* established a correspondence between the short flowering period of the cherry blossom and the finitude of life. Through literary creation, scholars transformed abstract concepts into perceptible aesthetic content. Tea culture further integrated this philosophy into daily life. The principle of *Ichigo ichi-e* (one time, one meeting) highlights the unrepeatable nature of human encounters, encouraging people to value the present moment and embrace the incomplete state of things [10]. This practice further enhanced the social recognition and cultural legitimacy of the cherry blossom symbol.

4. Case Analysis of Cherry Blossom Imagery in Modern Cultural Practices

The cherry blossom symbol continues to be extensively utilized in contemporary art, design, and consumer products, persistently carrying the symbolic meaning of transience. This paper selects MUJI’s cherry blossom series and Hironao Tsuboi’s “Sakurasaku” glass as case studies to verify the continuity and reconstruction of the cultural logic—linking the cherry blossom symbol, the concept of transience, and nature worship—within contemporary society from the dual perspectives of daily consumption and craft design.

4.1 MUJI’s Cherry Blossom Series: Narratives of Transience and Nature in Daily Consumption

MUJI’s limited cherry blossom series is characterized by minimalism, naturalism, and de-ornamentation. By embedding cherry blossom imagery into the materials, colors, and usage scenarios of daily necessities, it serves as a secularized expression of impermanence and nature worship within the realm of mass consumption. This series eschews exaggerated patterns and intense colors, opting for a palette of pale pink, off-white, and natural wood tones. The cherry blossom appears subtly through faint prints, textures, or scents, aligning with the brand’s “no-design design” philosophy while echoing the restrained and simple spirit of *Mono no aware* in traditional Japanese aesthetics. Regarding material selection, MUJI’s packaging design emphasizes the use of “raw materials,” highlighting their original functions and textures. For instance, many packages and labels utilize paper as a primary material, favoring unprocessed primary colors to reflect the natural quality of the work and present a simple visual texture, thereby continuing the reverence for and utilization of natural materials found in nature worship [11]. In terms of the usage cycle, the limited editions follow the rhythm of the flowering season and are released briefly each year. They do not pursue permanent circulation but instead reinforce the value of the moment through “limited-time availability,” which is isomorphic with the impermanent quality of cherry blossoms that “fall at the peak of their bloom.”

At the level of user experience, MUJI's cherry blossom products transform the concept of impermanence into a tangible and perceptible daily ritual. Products such as cherry blossom aromatherapy, stationery, and tableware do not emphasize eternal preservation; rather, they guide users to focus on the present experience during the limited spring period. This design logic popularizes nature worship within daily consumption, allowing cherry blossom imagery to become a medium through which consumers perceive natural rhythms and accept the transience of things. By restoring the natural appearance of cherry blossoms through minimalist design and echoing the core of impermanence through limited supply, MUJI demonstrates that cherry blossom imagery can still gently achieve a lifestyle-oriented expression of *Mujō* and nature worship in modern commercial society, realizing the contemporary popularization of traditional aesthetics.

4.2 Hironao Tsuboi's "Sakurasaku" Glass: Narratives of the Moment and Time in Craft Aesthetics

As a paradigm of contemporary Japanese craft design, Hironao Tsuboi's "Sakurasaku" glass deeply embeds cherry blossom imagery into its material, craftsmanship, and structural form, making it a concrete vehicle for the concept of impermanence within the contemporary cultural field. In this design, the cherry blossom imagery is not a mere decorative symbol but is intimately interwoven with the user experience and temporal narrative.

In its initial state, the cherry blossom imagery appears in a minimalist and restrained form, primarily serving as a visual guide. As the usage scenario changes, it gradually moves away from its subordinate status as static decoration and evolves into a dynamic, autonomous core symbol used to intuitively represent the passage of time. When warm water is poured into the glass, the cherry blossom pattern on the body slowly unfolds and reveals itself through temperature changes and the infiltration of water marks; as the moisture slowly evaporates, the pattern fades and eventually disappears. This complete visual evolution precisely recreates the entire life cycle of the cherry blossom from full bloom to withering.

This sharp visual contrast and state transition continuously and intuitively reinforce the inherent transience and instability of cherry blossom imagery. Thus, it is evident that the "Sakurasaku" glass design utilizes the clever application of imagery and modern design language to achieve a profound communication of the concepts of life's brevity and impermanence. In this process, the cherry blossom imagery is no longer an isolated, static visual symbol but merges with the flow of time and individual emotional experience to form a stable and self-consistent aesthetic mechanism. With Zen thinking at its creative core, Tsuboi melts the concept of impermanence and nature worship into a modern vessel, allowing users to achieve a personal realization of the *Ichigo ichi-e* philosophy through daily actions such as holding the glass, pouring water, and observing. The secularized practice of impermanence represented by tea culture thus achieves inheritance and continuity through this modern medium.

5. Conclusion

The fundamental reason cherry blossom imagery has achieved a deep integration of impermanence and nature worship—as well as its socialization and inheritance—lies in its use of *Mujō* as a key intermediary to form a stable ideological link with traditional nature worship. Under the continuous shaping of multiple cultural practices including classical literature, tea ceremony, art design, consumer product design, and film, the cherry blossom has gradually become a vital cultural icon carrying Eastern life aesthetics and national social spirit.

Existing research mostly examines the correspondence between cherry blossoms and impermanence from singular perspectives such as literature or aesthetics, with fewer integrative analyses of the internal connection mechanisms among cherry blossom imagery, impermanence, and nature worship. On the basis of systematically mapping the relevant theoretical context, this paper combines two modern cases—MUJI's cherry blossom series and Hironao Tsuboi's "Sakurasaku" glass—to fully present the cultural mechanisms by which the cherry blossom links impermanence and nature worship across the dimensions of daily consumption and craft design. It further reveals the pathways of continuity and forms of transformation for this mechanism within the contemporary cultural context, providing a new analytical perspective and research path for understanding the inheritance logic of Japanese cultural symbols.

Certain limitations remain in this study; the selection of cases is primarily concentrated in the field of modern design, and the expression of cherry blossom imagery in folk activities and international communication has not been fully addressed. Future research could further expand the scope of cases and integrate perspectives such as visual communication, consumer culture, and cross-cultural comparison to deeply explore the evolution of connotations and dissemination characteristics of cherry blossom imagery in different social contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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