

## Why are Japanese Toilets So Hard To Use?

*A summary of the history of Japanese toilets from 14,000 BCE to now*

What... what is this piece? probably every single person who ever reads this will think. Why would I choose such an immature, childish thing to write about? Well, Japan has what are probably the most advanced toilets in the world -- as of 2002, almost half of all Japanese private houses have a highly advanced toilet known as a *Washlet* (ウォッシュレット *Woshuretto*). That was more than the amount that owned a personal computer. It is also known as a Super Toilet in English. Why is it called that? It has an array of features from the common integrated bidet (found in most toilets and can be set from “*posterior wash*” to “*feminine wash*” and you can interpret those yourself) that also cleans itself after and before use and the most common seat heating, which seems silly and impractical here, but due to the lack of central heating in most Japanese homes, this can be a valuable feature in the freezing bathroom (they can frequently be just a few degrees above freezing). Even in the Yayoi period (300 B.C. to 250 A.D.) the larger settlements had sewer systems and people would use their poop as fertilizer if they had no sewer, and also because Buddhists were vegetarians and they had no herds of livestock as a source of fertilizer. This was a time when Europe was still going in an outhouse and dumping chamber pots outside. Even then, Japan was far ahead in terms of the bathroom.

### Historic Toilets

In the Jōmon period (14,000 BCE to 300 BCE), settlements were built in a horseshoe shape with a sort of plaza in the middle and garbage heaps outside. In the garbage heaps, experts found coprolites (fossilized poop), indicating that the garbage heaps were used as toilets. The period after that, the Yayoi period (300 BCE to A.D. 250) probably had the first sewage systems and they were used for the larger settlements. Later, around the Nara period (710-784 A.D) there was a drainage system made of 10-15 cm wide streams where people would squat as well as flush toilets. They would use wooden sticks called Chuugi as a sort of scraper, but later they used seaweed and large leaves (leaves were mostly used in the mountains) and then a type of toilet paper made of washi, a traditional handmade paper. However, pit toilets where you squat over a hole were more common for most of this time because Buddhism was a very common religion and they were vegetarians or pescetarians (vegetarians that also eat fish) and human waste could be used as a fertilizer and they were much easier to build. Prisoners would clean up the toilets, as shown in various documents, such as:

*“Prisoners shall be directed to clean up sewage at the Palace and government offices as well as toilets of the east and west on the morning after a rainy night”*

(Collected Interpretations of the Administrative Laws *Ryo-no-shuge*)

This history of high cleanliness standards led to much cleaner cities than in other places like Europe. For instance, while Europe was still dumping their sewage onto the streets, making the cities smelly and disgusting (especially in summer), in Japan they would use sewage systems or reuse their waste as fertilizer. Supposedly, the first Westerner to visit Edo was shocked because

of how clean the city was. A method of waste disposal used in the prefecture of Okinawa was to attach the toilet to the pig pen and feed the waste to the pig. However, the practice was banned after WWII by American authorities who considered it unhygienic. Another piece of toilet news that happened after WWII was the spread of western style sit toilets and urinals due to the influence of the American occupation. 1977 marked when the sale of sit toilets exceeded the traditional squat toilets in Japan. In 1980, TOTO -- the world's largest sanitary equipment company -- introduced the Washlet, marking the beginning of a new toilet era.

## **The Modern Age of Toilets**

After the introduction of the Washlet, a new period of Super Toilets came. These were high tech toilets (costing from 200 to 5,000 in USD with the majority being about 500) with several features including the most basic features like the commonplace built in bidet and the even more common seat heating (which is more practical in Japan since most houses have no central heating, making rooms without air conditioning frigid in the winter and scalding in the summer). These features can also be customized. For example, you can adjust the pressure, direction, and temperature of the bidet. More advanced features include playing music to “relax the sphincter” (such as the first few phrases of Op. 62 Nr. 6 *Frühlingslied* by Felix Mendelssohn), automatic air deodorizing, a germ resistant surface, and a soft close feature that slows the toilet lid before closing and therefore preventing the lid from slamming, and more and more and more features, from detecting whether a person is facing the toilet and automatically raising both the seat and the lid and otherwise just raising the lid to glowing in the dark, and controlled through an often wireless display with buttons.

Washlets, as they were called, were at first slow to sell, but soon Japan was acclimated to the idea and by 2002 more people had them than they had personal computers. A fun feature of these toilets is that although most buttons have little pictures on them indicating what they do, the flush button is often written only in Japanese, presumably causing many a situation where someone tried to flush and instead got a warm jet of bidet spray on their face. There are also medical features like measuring blood sugar through urine samples taken with a tiny spoon and measuring body fat ratio using electrodes that send a mild electric charge through the user's buttocks and features for the elderly like arm rests and things that help you get back up again. Of course, with these high-tech toilets have come a pantheon of toilet makers, including the original TOTO, Inax, NAIS, and Panasonic.

## **Exclusively Japanese Features with Bases in Tradition**

Meet the Sound Princess, known in Japan as *Otohime* (音姫), which is a pun on the name of a Japanese goddess. It probably doesn't do what you think it does -- it's a device found in bathrooms that plays the sound of running water when you wave your hand in front of it (see picture). Why? Well, many Japanese women are afflicted with a psychological condition known as paruresis, which makes the user embarrassed to pee in public (or in cases, anywhere, but the Sound Princess won't help you with that). In the case of Japan, women are embarrassed to show the sound of them peeing, so before the Sound Princess they would simply flush the toilet while peeing, wasting water and making utilities high, especially in office buildings and schools, but

the Sound Princess simply uses a recording, saving water and money. This might seem like the product of a prissy, excessive modern society, but it goes further than that. Even in ancient times, cleanliness was fervently practiced. The daily bath was always done. Walking in with your shoes on was considered filthy. Consider this: kirei, the Japanese word for “beauty”, can also mean “clean”. And anything you do in a toilet is about as unclean as you can get.

Another accessory would be the toilet slippers found in most homes and a few public bathrooms, also rooted in tradition. In Japan, it is common to separate areas into unclean and clean, and never mix the two. This is why, in Japanese housing, the bath is usually separate from the toilet (this can actually be a selling point for houses) and the toilet slippers are only worn in the bathroom, and nowhere else. A common faux pas of foreigners is to wear slippers outside the bathroom, mixing the clean and unclean and presumably earning them the disdain and laughter of everyone else. You also have to leave them facing the right way so you can get in without touching them, making it a sort of backwards shuffle.

So, Japan has a, well, not what one would call “rich” but varied history of sewage and toiletry. From the garbage heaps of over 10,000 years ago to the bidet-rich fancy technological toilets of now, Japan has remained not only ahead of the west in toilets, they have maintained an extreme cleanliness with their bathrooms. Considering public toilets in gas stations, we could probably take a hint from them. (Unless of course their gas stations are just as bad, I’ve never been there.)

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