

**Grey Statues with Red Bibs: Exploring the Cultural  
and Religious Dynamics of *Mizuko Kuyo* (水子供養)**

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# **Grey Statues with Red Bibs: Exploring the Cultural and Religious Dynamics of *Mizuko Kuyo* (水子供養)**

## **Abstract**

Scholarly research on *mizuko kuyo* has largely focused on its religious and social implications with a specific emphasis on its historical development as a significant Buddhist practice in Japan, the continued contemporary observance of the ritual necessitates a re-evaluation of its significance in the context of evolving reproductive norms and attitudes towards fetal loss and abortion in Japan. This paper examines the emergence and significance of the *mizuko kuyo* movement within the broader social and cultural context of contemporary Japan. By exploring state laws on abortion and childbirth, and the rituals and symbolism associated with *mizuko kuyo*, this research seeks to unravel the symbolic and emotional significance attributed to the ceremony, providing insights into its cultural implications and its role in supporting conventional gender roles in Japan. This multi-faceted examination of the *mizuko kuyo* movement thus offers a deeper understanding of its emergence, significance, and impact within contemporary Japanese society.

**Keywords:** Japan, Culture, Religion, *Mizuko Kuyo*, Gender, Childbirth practices, Abortion practices

## Introduction

*“On the days she makes amends,  
a mother kneels beside her mizuko jizo.  
There are thousands like it in the temple  
at Kamakura, effigies of lost  
children – miscarried, stillborn, aborted –  
and parents who come there to care for them.”* (Erickson, 2011)

The image of a mother kneeling beside a *mizuko jizo*, a small statue associated with the memorialization of children who have died before birth, suggests a sense of grief and the need for comfort. The reference to the thousands of such statues emphasizes the universality of this experience, and the idea that many people share this form of sorrow and seek solace in temples like Hase-Dera in Kamakura. The *mizuko jizo* statue represent *Jizō Bosatsu* (地藏菩薩), a revered figure in Buddhism known for compassion and protection of pregnant women, infants, and children<sup>1</sup>. After the *mizuko kuyo* ceremonies gained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, the *mizuko jizo* statues became a ubiquitous sight at temples throughout Japan. Adorned in red bibs and robes, these statues embody both the bodhisattva and the unborn child<sup>2</sup>, serving as the link between a benevolent deity and the spirit in need of aid. With their serene countenances that evoke a sense of calm and compassion, these statues are the central symbol of the *mizuko kuyo* (水子供養) ceremony.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped the *mizuko kuyo* ceremony, focusing on its emergence, significance, and wider societal implications, by employing historical analysis, cultural examination, and sociocultural

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<sup>1</sup> *Jizō Bosatsu* (地藏菩薩) is one of the most popular Bodhisattvas, the belief in whom has “widely and persistently permeated Japanese spiritual life for centuries”, with the earliest legends claiming he was first brought to Japan during the reign of emperor Shōmu (724-49) (Dykstra, 1978). Interestingly, in western academic work, he has become synonymous with *mizuko kuyo* (Thorgeirsdottir, 2014). He is also known for assisting travelers in need. In stone images, *Jizo* has been depicted as a source of comfort for individuals affected by infanticide, starvation, and abortion dating back to at least 1710 AD.

<sup>2</sup> De Visser also remarks on the connection of the name of *jizo* and its protective element, as the kanji for Ji (地) stands for earth and Zo (蔵) means womb, drawing immediately a strong connection between *jizo* and fertility (Visser, 1914; Thorgeirsdottir, 2014).

perspectives. The analysis includes assessing the changing attitudes towards abortion and reproductive rights in Japan, as well as examining the relationship between religion, state, and reproductive practices. Through an examination of evolving beliefs and attitudes surrounding childbirth, fetal death, motherhood, and femininity from the early modern period to the present day, the study analyses the role of *mizuko kuyo* in shaping cultural understandings of motherhood and the status of fetuses, and determine the extent of its impact on women's emancipation and ideas of conventional gender roles in Japan.

The term *mizuko* (水子) has been used since the Edo period to refer to fetal demise due to natural causes, abortion, or infanticide. The term literally means “water child”<sup>3</sup> in reference to the amniotic fluid environment that surrounds the fetus in mother's uterus. In his book *Liquid Life*, LaFleur examines the origin of the term *mizuko*, citing Gaston Bachelard's observation that “water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death for ambivalent reverie.” LaFleur elucidates that *mizuko*, or “water child”, has transitioned from warm waters of womb to another state of liquidity. The term suggests that a new-born, which is in the process of acquiring form, can also swiftly return to a relatively formless state. This understanding of the *mizuko* highlights life's fluid and ephemeral nature, which can easily fluctuate between states of being and non-being (LaFleur, 1994). The Buddhist term *kuyo* (供養) is typically used to describe a memorial service for the deceased, although it literally means “to supply nourishment”. It originally meant giving alms to a priest for the benefit of the dead (Brooks, 1981). The definition of *kuyo* can be extended to include gratitude practices towards objects that have served their purpose, with the boundary between animate and inanimate being somewhat fluid. As a verb, *kuyo suru* (供養する) signifies the act of demonstrating care and reverence towards the deceased. The term “deceased” encompasses both ancestors and recently deceased immediate family members, including children who may have experienced premature death due to natural disasters or illnesses or those who may have been unable to enter the world due to fetal demise or abortion (Moto-Sanchez, 2016).

The *mizuko kuyo* is rooted in the belief that failure to perform the ritual may result in negative consequences, such as spirit attacks, illness, accidents, strained relationships, or financial loss. It is performed in diverse religious contexts, including Shintoism, Buddhism, and new religious

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<sup>3</sup> The term “*mizuko*” (水子) consists of two kanji characters: “*mizu*” (水) meaning “water” and “*ko*” (子) meaning “child.”

movements, and entails propitiatory offerings to the bodhisattva *Jizo*<sup>4</sup>. This ritual is a mode of veneration for the spirits of deceased fetuses and, in the instance of abortion, may function as a way for the parents to offer a formal apology to the child and acknowledge its shortened life. Although there is no single pattern for this service to be performed in Japanese Buddhism or Shintoism, there are substantial commonalities. The service typically follows the general pattern seen in regular services for the recently deceased and memorial vices for ancestors known as *senzo kuyo*<sup>5</sup>. It can be held monthly or yearly on the anniversary of the deceased's death, and families may choose to request a private service or include their offering as part of a service for multiple *mizuko*. During the service, the forms of the Buddha and various bodhisattvas are invoked, and several Mahayana sutras are chanted. A significant part of the service involves offering light, food, flowers, and incense to the Buddha on behalf of the child as symbols of a larger offering of one's life. Many families also purchase a sculpture of *Jizo* or a representation of a *mizuko* and place it in a special location within the temple grounds.

*Mizuko Jizo* figures are traditionally depicted wearing a red bib and cap, which represent the bodhisattva's role as a protector of children. However, these figurines can also be found dressed in various other styles, including fashionable clothing adorned with childlike patterns such as alphabet letters or Hello Kitty designs (Chavez, 2012). Some statues even feature weather-appropriate attire such as raincoats, baseball jackets, or knitted shawls, reflecting the diverse cultural influences and personal tastes of those who commission or create them (Brooks, 1981). Additionally, families often give their deceased child a posthumous Buddhist name, known as a *kaimyo* (戒名), which is inscribed on a mortuary tablet called an *ihai* (位牌). These tablets

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<sup>4</sup> In Japanese culture, assimilative tendencies are employed to comprehend cultural values, which emerged from the fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism, the two major religions in Japan, during the 7th and 8th century CE. The *mizuko kuyo* ritual incorporates elements from both traditions. Shinto talismans, known as *omamori*, are used during the ritual to provide protection and good luck. Offerings of food and drink are also made, which is a typical feature of Shinto ceremonies. In addition to these Shinto elements, the ritual also incorporates Buddhist practices such as the recitation of sutras and the use of Buddhist imagery, including statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas. The blending of religious traditions in the *mizuko kuyo* ritual reflects the syncretic nature of religion in Japan, where different beliefs and practices are often combined and adapted to suit local needs and circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> *Senzo Kuyo* is a memorial service for ancestral spirits. The *senzo kuyo* ancestor rituals have been an important part of Buddhism since it was introduced to Japan 1500 years ago. During *senzo kuyo*, family members and loved ones gather at a temple or shrine to offer prayers and incense to the deceased. The service typically includes chanting by the attending monks, offering of food and flowers, and recitation of sutras.



may be kept in a chapel within the temple or taken home and placed in family's Buddhist altar, also known as a *butsudan* (仏壇) (Smith, 1988).

## **A Historical Overview of *Mizuko Kuyo***

### *Pregnancy and Abortion during the Edo Period*

The *mizuko kuyo* ritual is a complex and multifaceted practice that can be understood by looking at changing attitudes towards pregnancy and childbirth, social dynamics associated with sexuality and reproduction, and the evolving role of abortion in sexual culture (Hardacre, 1999). An understanding of these factors is essential to grasping the historical roots and cultural significance of the *mizuko kuyo* ritual.

While the origin of this ceremony is uncertain, Japanese sociologists widely acknowledge its emergence in the 1950s and its increasing prominence in the mid-1960s (Smith, 2013; Hardacre, 1999; Harrison et al., 1995). There are several possible reasons for the emergence and popularity of the *mizuko kuyo* ceremony. One possible explanation is that, prior to World War II, fetuses were not considered individuals, so no funeral services were held for deceased fetuses (Moto-Sanchez, 2016). In premodern Japan, it was believed that a child did not become a real person until sometime after birth. Evidence for this can be found in many customs that distinguish a new-born from other people, such as not giving it a name and refraining from putting its arms through sleeves for a certain number of days after birth (Harrison, 1999). Additionally, it was believed that young children who passed before the age of seven<sup>6</sup> returned to the realm of the *kami* (神)<sup>7</sup>. Before burying a deceased young child or *mizuko*, it was customary to place sardines or another type of fish in their mouths or caskets. According to Hoshino and Dosho (1987), this practice may have been done to prevent the child from

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<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship in history and anthropology has challenged the notion that the child's seventh year marked the point at which they were deemed fully human and that infanticide was deemed acceptable in early modern Japan, but most scholars still contend that the fetus and infant were not fully regarded as human during this period.

<sup>7</sup> In the Shinto religion, a *kami* refers to a revered and worshipped deity or divine spirit that can be associated with various natural forces and elements, as well as ancestral spirits and other supernatural beings. The term “*kami*” is represented by the Japanese character 神, which can be pronounced “*shin*” or “*kami*” in Japanese. The concept of *kami* is fundamental to Shinto religious beliefs and practices, and numerous shrines and festivals are devoted to the veneration of specific *kami*. *Kami* are believed to possess the ability to influence human affairs and to bestow blessings and protection upon those who worship them (Hardacre, 2017).

attaining enlightenment and being reborn into another world. As such, it is believed that parents of a deceased young child, or possibly an aborted fetus, often hoped to keep the spirit close and encourage its rebirth into the human world (Brooks, 1981; Hoshino and Dosho, 1987).

The prevalence of abortion and infanticide in premodern Japan suggests that young children were not seen as autonomous individuals separate from their families and communities. This lack of concern for children as individuals reflects the absence of a cognitive structure that conceived of them as such, either religiously or socially. In this context, dead infants were virtually invisible, with no established customs or practices for honouring their memory. However, the emergence of the *mizuko kuyo* ritual during the 20th century stands in stark contrast to this view. *Mizuko Kuyo* represents a shift in attitudes towards dead children, and the ritual's evolving views of the deceased reflect the changing values of Japanese society.

The Edo or Tokugawa period (1603 to 1868) holds significant importance in comprehending the linkage between the attitudes of the present-day Japanese populace towards abortion and their corresponding religious ideologies. The lingering influence of Confucianism on the Japanese family can be traced back to religious and moral beliefs that were integrated into the Japanese self-concept, particularly during the Edo period. When the Tokugawa fostered Confucian thought, it became infused with Japanese cultural traditions and intermingled with both Buddhism and Shintoism. Consequently, Confucianism was employed as a conservative ideology to reinforce the natural order of the patriarchal family society and to regulate gender norms and relationships.

During the Edo period, Japan saw a significant emergence of contrasting perspectives regarding sexuality and reproductive health. This was also when many Buddhist folk customs first developed and are now considered an integral aspect of contemporary *mizuko* rituals (LaFleur, 1994). Literary and folkloric evidence suggests that both abortion and infanticide were prevalent practices in the Edo period and preceding eras. Terms such as *kaesu* (返す) “to return”, *modosu* (戻す) “to send back”, *nagasu* (流す) “to let run out”, or *orosu* (下ろす) “to pull down” were commonly used to refer to the act of abortion throughout Japan. According to Harrison (1999), infanticide or *Mabiki* (間引き), which translates to “clearing out space,” was a commonly accepted means of regulating fertility during the Edo period in Japan. This was often performed by a parent or midwife and involved various methods such as strangulation,

suffocation, and applying heavy pressure. Despite the strict punishments against these practices imposed by national and local governments, including execution in some areas, enforcement was often limited. This dichotomy can be attributed, in part, to the simultaneous condemnation and acceptance of these acts, like the attitudes towards prostitution that persist in contemporary society (Hardacre, 1999).

### *Shifting Perceptions during War & Post-War Periods*

During the Edo period, the practice of abortion and infanticide was not strictly prohibited by law. However, with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the government enacted legal measures to ban these practices and upheld a more traditional Confucianist stance on the value of human life. The decision to outlaw abortion and infanticide during the Meiji period (1868-1912) was motivated by a growing concern among the Japanese elite about the relationship between population size and national strength and security. During the period of Japanese imperialism, which spanned from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 to the end of World War II in 1945, the production of goods, and the enlistment of soldiers to support the war efforts was a top priority, and the state actively encouraged the growth of large families (Harrison, 1999). As Japan sought to modernize and become a major world power, policymakers believed that a larger population would be necessary to sustain and defend the nation.

During the 1930s and 1940s, there was widespread stigmatization of contraception and abortion in Japan due to the government's repeated attempts to restrict and regulate these practices. In the 1930s, women were frequently subjected to the fervent exhortation of *umeyo fuyaseyo* (生めよ育やせよ) “bear children and strengthen the nation”. This slogan reflected the growing emphasis on nationalism and the reinforcement of conventional gender roles, where women were expected to fulfil their responsibilities as wives and mothers and contribute to the growth and prosperity of the nation through procreation (Ogino, 1994). The popular media often depicted instances of abortion as scandalous and greatly exacerbated feelings of guilt and shame associated with it (Hardacre, 1999). The public nature of the treatment of abortion, combined with state prohibitions, contributed to the perception of abortion as a public issue rather than a private or domestic matter. The government’s policies aimed at suppressing the utilization of contraceptive methods and the termination of pregnancy, which resulted in

the widespread marginalization of these practices<sup>8</sup>. The pursuit of contraception or abortion was discredited as an act committed by *hikokumin* (非国民) “unpatriotic traitors”, leading to the detention and imprisonment of several advocates of the birth control movement (Ogino, 1994).

In the aftermath of World War II, Japan experienced economic turmoil and high poverty rates, which contributed to a high incidence of abortion as a means of birth control due to a lack of adoption systems and limited living space (Ogino, 1994). The legalization of abortion in 1949 in Japan occurred during a period of significant political and social changes<sup>9</sup>, leading to a notable rise in the number of abortions carried out in the country (Brooks, 1981). Consequently, there was a corresponding surge in requests for formal memorial services to commemorate aborted fetuses, reflecting the increased prevalence of abortion in Japanese society (Lafleur, 1992). By the late 1960s, the term *mizuko kuyo* became known as the new practice that focused on dead infants or fetuses, including the *shizan* (死産) “stillborn”, *ryūzan* (流産) “miscarried”, and *ninshin chūzetsu* (妊娠中絶) “aborted”. Later, the term was expanded to include any child who died prematurely, upsetting the natural order of things by leaving this world before his or her parents (Moto-Sanchez, 2016).

### *Emergence of Mizuko Kuyo & Influence of New Religious Groups*

New religious groups in Japan have played a significant role in promoting conservative views on abortion and incorporating practices related to miscarried and aborted children into their religious rituals. In the early 1960s, *Seicho no Ie*, a conservative and nationalistic new religious group founded by Taniguchi Masaharu in 1930, began incorporating the recognition of the spirits of miscarried and aborted children into its regular religious practices in the *Uji-shi* (Yu,

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<sup>8</sup> The first modern penal code in Japan, modeled after the French penal code, was enacted in 1880 and criminalized abortion by both pregnant women and other individuals. The penal code was revised in 1907 under the influence of the German penal code, with even more severe penalties for abortion (Ogino, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> In the aftermath of World War II, Japan encountered a multitude of challenges including a faltering economy, diminished agricultural output, and rapid population expansion. Moreover, the repatriation of soldiers and their families exacerbated an already pressing housing shortage, while inflationary pressures mounted (Norgren, 1970).

n.d.)<sup>10</sup> section of its organization (Harrison, 1999). This group is well-known in Japan for its support for stricter abortion regulations. Over the years, *Seicho no Ie*, in collaboration with factions of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), organized several unsuccessful political campaigns to outlaw or severely restrict abortions<sup>11</sup>. Their motivation was and continues to be to change individual moral decisions and strengthen the nation. Other new religions, such as *Reiyukai* (霊友会) and *Kurozumikyo* (黒住教), held similarly conservative views on women and reproduction and supported *kuyo* services related to *mizuko* (Picone, 2015).

In the 1970s, non-sectarian spiritualists began promoting the *mizuko kuyo* ritual through advertising campaigns targeted at young women, which appeared in tabloid newspapers<sup>12</sup>. These campaigns claimed that the spirits of aborted fetuses harboured resentment towards the women who “should have” carried them to term and become their mothers. While it is unclear whether the campaigns caused or reflected a broader trend, they contributed significantly to widespread adoption of the *mizuko kuyo* practice (Hardacre, 1999). Since the 1970s prominent *kuyo* temples have emerged, exemplified by the Shiun-zan Jizo-ji in Chichibu, Saitama-ken. This temple is well-known for offering *mizuko kuyo* services daily and special services during *higan* (彼岸) and *bon* (盆)<sup>13</sup> festivals, providing a prominent example of the contemporary *kuyo* practice (Brooks, 1981)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> *Seicho no Ie Uji Bekkaku Honzan* is the special head temple of *Seicho no Ie*, a religious organization centered around Hozo-jinja Shrine located in Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture. This temple was constructed in 1960 and is renowned within the religious community for its significance in conducting memorial services for spirits such as ancestors, *eitaikuyo* (which are services held on the anniversaries of the dead who oversaw a temple for long periods), and unborn babies who died due to miscarriage.

<sup>11</sup> In 1972-1973 and 1982-1983, members of the political faction of *Seicho no Ie*, along with other conservative members of the Liberal Democratic party, made efforts to introduce reforms to the Eugenic Protection Law. They argued that allowing the killing of innocent fetuses for economic reasons was no longer necessary in Japan and launched nationwide campaigns promoting the concept of “reverence for life” (Ogino, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> The weekly tabloids such as *Josei Jishin* and *Young Lady* often featured articles about temples and other religious establishments, detailing travel directions and fees for various grades of ritual (Harrison, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> During the Buddhist holidays of *higan* and *bon*, ancestral spirits are honored and offerings are made. *Higan* takes place twice a year during the vernal and autumnal equinoxes in March and September, respectively. *Bon*, also known as the festival of the dead, is usually held in August and is a time when ancestral spirits are invited to return to their homes.

<sup>14</sup> The establishment of the Shiun-zan Jizo-ji temple and its *mizuko kuyo* practice was motivated by the founder's (Hashimoto Tetsuma) affiliation with the Japanese Right and their opposition to abortion. The basis for this

Many scholars (Harrison, 1995; Landres, 1996; Hardacre, 1999) have strongly criticized temples that offer *mizuko kuyo*. The scholars claim that these temples exploit the fears of retribution, *tatari* (祟り) (Yu, n.d.)<sup>15</sup>, from the spirits of miscarried or aborted fetuses to extort money from vulnerable and credulous individuals. Werblowsky (1991, 1993) argues that the practice of *mizuko kuyo* was initially motivated by economic concerns. As Japan underwent agricultural reforms and experienced a separation of state and religion after World War II, religious organizations saw a decline in their sources of income. As urbanization and the emergence of smaller nuclear families led to decreased income from funerals and related memorial services, *mizuko kuyo* fees became a way for these organizations to compensate for this loss.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a marked rise in the number of women in Japan who sought out and participated in *mizuko kuyo* rituals (Hardacre, 1999). This phenomenon can be attributed to multiple factors, including the advent of ultrasound technology and its integration into prenatal examinations, which facilitated a more explicit visual representation of the fetus and led to a shift towards the individualized treatment of stillborn fetuses. Additionally, the growing trend of full-time homemaking among women reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations within families, with women increasingly viewed as having a natural inclination towards nurturing their offspring. The “myth of innate motherly affection” *bosei-ai shinwa* (母性愛神話) has led to the stigmatization of women who opt not to have children, painting them as deviant or socially unacceptable (Kayoko, 2003). Harrison (1999) posits that the evolution of the relationship between the concepts of children, family, and women's roles concerning both has enabled the practice of *mizuko kuyo* to gain traction in contemporary Japanese society.

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opposition was the postwar statist ideology that advocated for state control over women's reproductive functions (Harrison & Midori, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> The word “*tatari*” is said to be a distorted version of “*tachiari*,” which refers to the manifestation of deity. According to one idea, infectious diseases, starvation, natural disasters, and other calamities are manifestations of god, and religious observances in shrines allegedly began in worship of god to stop and seal these catastrophes as well as to enshrine gods.

## **The Debates on *Mizuko Kuyo*: Exploring Different Interpretations**

### *Perspectives on Psychological Healing, Cultural Beliefs, and Religious Cosmology*

The *mizuko kuyo* ritual has sparked a heated debate in Japanese religious studies. One of the first scholars to address the phenomenon in English-language academia was Bardwell Smith (1988). Smith described *mizuko kuyo* as a therapeutic response to women's close encounters with death. He argued that the ritual reflected the “emotional problems experienced by many Japanese women following an abortion experience” and allowed them to “acknowledge death even if it was one, they had chosen”. While most women may not have experienced distress following an abortion, a “large number” did and sought solace through *mizuko kuyo*.

The first comprehensive study of *mizuko kuyo* was conducted by William LaFleur (1994), who maintained a largely sympathetic perspective toward the practice. LaFleur noted that Buddhist cosmology in Japan did not distinguish between human and non-human life as clearly as Christian cosmology did. The fetus or child (temples and practitioners always refer to it as a child or baby, never a fetus) was considered to have human life from conception. However, this life was not yet considered the fully developed human being that the child would become. Japan has a long history of infanticide, consistent with this perspective. LaFleur discusses the tension that Japanese parents experience when considering an unwanted pregnancy. This tension exists between respecting the life of the child-to-be and hoping for a good quality of life for that new child and other family members.

The article on *mizuko kuyo* by Hoshino Eiki and Takeda Dosho (1987) was the first English translation of original Japanese research. Hoshino and Takeda's work aimed to show that *mizuko kuyo* is a “trend closely connected to the religious views of the Japanese people, particularly their concept of the spirits of the dead.” They traced the origins of the Japanese concept of spirits and draw connections between *mizuko kuyo* and rituals intended to appease these spirits, who are believed to curse their descendants if angered. Werblowsky (1993) argued that the ritual's focus on purification and the placation of angry spirits reflects broader concerns with the precariousness of life in contemporary Japan, where rapid social and economic changes have destabilized traditional norms and values.

### *Perspectives on Agency, Commercialization, and Empowerment*

Helen Hardacre (1999) criticizes the way that various temples perform *mizuko kuyo* memorial rites in response to requests from their parishioners without any supporting theoretical basis from their Buddhist organization. Hardacre also condemns the commercialization of curses in the ceremony, repeatedly describing it as “fetocentric” and “misogynistic.” and argues that it did not emerge “as an unmediated expression of popular sentiment about abortion.” She instead claims that temples used an “intense media advertising campaign” to generate demand for the ritual, often focusing on the potential harm that vengeful spirits of aborted fetuses could cause. Hardacre states that *mizuko kuyo* was “promoted as an 'answer' to a 'problem,' created primarily by those who promoted the rites”. Furthermore, she also argues that although the term “*mizuko kuyo*” is used in various religions in Japan today, it has no textual basis in any of them. The lack of a textual “anchor” allows individual religionists to use the term as they please and as their clientele will accept it, eventually making it highly commercial.

Elizabeth Harrison (1995) has argued that Hardacre's perspective on *mizuko kuyo* underestimated the agency of Japanese women. Harrison contends that it is crucial to consider women's agency in comprehending the significance of the ritual. While some Japanese feminists view *mizuko kuyo* as an example of a religious patriarchy oppressing women, Harrison argued that this view is unfair to women who participate in the ritual to cope with complex and unresolved emotions related to their pregnancy loss, such as grief and regret. According to Meredith Underwood (1999), *mizuko kuyo* is a ritual of repentance that allows women, often in subordinate positions, to be accepted in society. Through their willingness to repent, women demonstrate their willingness to adhere to traditional social and family roles. However, Underwood also suggests that the ritual involves borrowing male authority, strengthening the bond between mothers and children, and publicly acknowledging the previously hidden experience of abortion or child loss. In this sense, *mizuko kuyo* can be seen as a form of rebellion against men and a way for women to assert control over their own reproductive power. Underwood, while acknowledging that *mizuko kuyo* involves “a subtle mixture” of “circumscription and agency”, “accommodation and resistance”, sees it as an institution with positive critical dimensions.



The *mizuko kuyo* ritual has thus been subject to significant academic scrutiny. Smith and LaFleur viewed it as a therapeutic means of coping with abortion, while Hoshino and Takeda associated it with traditional Japanese beliefs concerning the spirits of the deceased. Hardacre expressed concerns about the commercialization of the ritual, while Harrison emphasized the agency of women who participate. Underwood viewed *mizuko kuyo* as a form of atonement and empowerment, enabling women to assert control over their reproductive autonomy. The discussions surrounding *mizuko kuyo* provides valuable insight into the complexities of the ritual, which helps understand the multifaceted nature of the ritual and the intricate ways in which cultural, religious, and psychological factors intersect and influence individuals experiences of it.

## **The Dichotomy of Acceptability and Reprehensibility**

### *The Intersection of Abortion and Mizuko Kuyo*

In her 1997 publication *Marketing the Menacing Fetus*, Hardacre noted that “It may be that future generations of both sexes will produce a different ritualization of sexual and reproductive experience, one not necessarily driven by a fear of fetal spirit attack and that *mizuko kuyo* installations that we see now may bear different labels twenty years from now” (Hardacre, 1997:198). However, over the past twenty-five years, *mizuko kuyo* has remained the primary means of commemorating abortion in Japan. Despite a decline in frequency, no substantial modifications have been noted in the performance of the ritual. The popularity of the practice can be seen in the widespread recognition of the 2019 documentary film “*Mizuko*” (Dane & Rebelo, 2019), which brought attention to the tradition and its cultural significance. The film's acknowledgment at various film festivals highlights the growing interest in *mizuko kuyo* in Western countries, and the practice continues to have relevance and significance beyond Japan too.

The continued practice of *mizuko kuyo* in Japan is a testament to this tradition's enduring cultural, religious, and social significance. Many Japanese people still hold traditional beliefs that view the spirits of miscarried or aborted fetuses as vulnerable and in need of protection, and the practice of *mizuko kuyo* offers a way to honour and care for these spirits (LaFleur, 1994). Furthermore, in recent decades, *mizuko kuyo* has taken on new meaning, offering a way

for individuals to cope with the emotional trauma of pregnancy loss or abortion. The practice provides a space for mourning, grieving, and finding closure, further contributing to its continued use. Additionally, *mizuko kuyo* has been embraced by some Buddhist sects as a means of modernizing and adapting their teachings to contemporary social issues. As a result, the practice has been promoted to cultivate compassion, respect for life, and understanding of the suffering of others, making it an essential part of contemporary Buddhist practice in Japan.

The *mizuko kuyo* ceremony in Japan is sociologically significant as it reflects the intersection of abortion, which while widely practiced remains stigmatized, and the need for rituals to atone for what is considered morally reprehensible. Japanese healthcare authorities are strict in regulating available forms of contraception but permissive in allowing abortion as a method of birth control. Abortion is seen as a way to avoid pregnancy being recorded in the family registration system (*koseki*) and is considered a responsible form of family planning that helps to avoid bringing shame upon the family (Jones, 2017)<sup>16</sup>. The contraception policy of Japan has tended towards conservatism and is reticent to change. While abortions are legally permitted (Lee & Inuma, 2022)<sup>17</sup>, they require costly surgical procedures. Adoption of contraceptives is limited, and access to emergency contraception, in the form of morning-after pills, is restricted by its high cost and requirement for a prescription. As reported by the Center for Reproductive Rights, a global organization, Japan is the sole member of the G7 and one of the eleven major nations, including Taiwan, Greece, and Turkey, that mandates spousal consent for abortion<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Japan's family registration system: *Koseki* requires birth to be recorded on the mother's family documents, even if the child is given up for adoption. The system preserves the male advantages of the patriarchal order and fundamentally protects the *ie* system while socially penalizing single mothers and their children.

<sup>17</sup> In general, the Penal Code (1907) prohibits abortion. However, induced abortion is legalized under the Maternal Protection Act (1996) if certain requirements are met. Despite falling under the violation of the Penal Code, the Maternal Protection Act permits induced abortion if the circumstances meet the specified requirements (Izumi, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> In 2013, the Health Ministry clarified that it didn't apply to unmarried couples, and in 2021, it exempted married women who can prove their marriage was essentially over because of domestic violence or other reasons, but many hospitals enforce the requirement on unmarried women anyway. The Health Ministry's notice is not legally binding and allows clinics to create their own practices and pricing for providing abortions.

### *State Laws and Parallel Reproductive Customs*

The state's involvement has also influenced the perpetuation and significance of reproductive customs in Japan. The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare did not approve the use of intrauterine devices (IUDs) until 1974, even though IUDs had already been in use in other countries for a decade or more (Norgren, 1998). By the time the IUD was approved in Japan, most countries had already replaced plastic IUDs with safer and more effective copper IUDs, which were not approved in Japan until 1999. The healthcare authorities also legalized oral contraceptives in 1999, more than 30 years after they became available internationally. According to Sugimoto (2021), the *ie* ideology<sup>19</sup> of the Japanese government and the stance medical professionals previously hindered the general availability of oral contraceptives in Japan. Condoms are the most commonly used method of contraception in Japan, with 85.5% of couples using them to prevent pregnancy, in contrast to the 3.7% of couples who use oral contraceptives<sup>20</sup>. This low percentage is attributed to a lack of awareness and education and the social stigma surrounding the use of oral contraceptives.

The Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare had historically taken a moralistic stance on oral contraceptives, linking their use to the “respectability” of the Japanese family system (Norgren, 1998). It was argued that by providing women with protection against unwanted pregnancies, oral contraceptives would encourage promiscuity and corrupt women's morals. Until recently, doctors, midwives, family planners, and even women themselves opposed the use of oral contraceptives, viewing them as a threat to their livelihoods, abortion rights, and women's health (Norgren, 1998). Although contraception gradually became the primary means of fertility control since the 1960s, abortion still plays an essential role as a backup for failure in contraception. Currently, statistics on fetal mortality in Japan incorporate deaths resulting from abortions, the recorded abortion rate in Japan in 2019 was approximately 8.3 abortions per

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<sup>19</sup> The *ie* is a social framework that has been a defining feature of Japanese society since the Edo period (early 17th century through mid-19th century) and has continued into the modern era. It is designed to ensure intergenerational continuity, with a family homestead, name, and business passed down from father to eldest son along a paternal line that can span multiple generations. The *ie* ideology is rooted in Confucianism, which emphasizes the importance of family and hierarchy in society. According to this ideology, the family is the basic unit of society, and the preservation of the family's integrity is considered paramount.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). Contraceptive Use by Method 2019: Data Booklet (ST/ESA/SER.A/435).

1,000 women of childbearing age<sup>21</sup>. The accuracy of these statistics may be limited by underreporting, potentially resulting from factors such as social stigma. Additionally, obstetrician-gynaecologists may underreport abortions to avoid taxation on the income they generate, as health insurance does not cover the procedure (Abortion/Termination of Pregnancy - Japan Healthcare Info, 2017).

Lafleur's (1994) and Taeuber's (1960) analyses of contraceptive behaviour patterns in Japan reveal that such patterns are influenced by various cultural, religious, and historical factors, including Japan's history of infanticide and abortion. They have argued that there was a cultural foundation for the acceptance of abortion and infanticide in Japan due to the fact that the Japanese made little ethical distinction between abortion and contraception. Japan has thus been able to avoid the controversial and polarized debates on abortion commonly seen in Western nations because of its unique cultural and religious heritage. This includes, Buddhist beliefs that relate to the fluidity of life, death, and reincarnation, as well as the presence of the *mizuko kuyo* ritual practice (Norgren, 2001).

While Lafleur and Taeuber have predominantly emphasized Japan's culture and history as crucial factors driving the widespread use of abortion in the country, the study by Coleman (1983) and Yoriko (2014) underscores the requirement for a sophisticated and culturally-informed approach toward comprehending and responding to the multiple factors that impact women's encounters with abortion and the associated rituals. Coleman's research, highlighted the role of politics and vested interests in shaping Japan's contraception policies. According to him, Japan's liberal abortion policy is not simply the product of traditional acceptance of abortion but rather the result of a unique opportunity created by subsequent formation of groups with vested interests in defending access to abortion. Coleman has identified several influential actors, such as doctors, family planning organizations, and religious institutions, who have advanced their interests and perpetuated specific contraceptive practices (Norgren, 1998). Yoriko's (2014) study added to this understanding by shedding light on the influence of medical and healthcare professionals in shaping cultural attitudes toward abortion. Yoriko identifies the medical community and related service providers as the originators of the request for memorial rituals for aborted fetuses rather than the women who underwent abortions.

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<sup>21</sup> According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in Japan, the recorded number of abortions in 2019 was 66,760. (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. (2021).

### *Religious Perspectives and Societal Dynamics*

The state's relationship with dominant religious institutions in Japan, such as Buddhism and Shintoism, has also influenced the contraceptive practices in the Japanese society. The absence of robust opposition from Japanese religious organizations and the persistence of traditional attitudes tolerant of abortion have contributed to its widespread practice in the country. Although Shinto and Buddhism disapprove of abortion, they rarely express their opposition publicly, in contrast to the Catholic Church's vocal stance (Coleman, 1983). This permissive stance towards abortion in traditional Japanese society, including religious communities, has allowed induced abortion to become deeply ingrained in the lives of Japanese women in the post-World War II period (Ogino, 1994). Moreover, the state has actively advanced traditional cultural practices, such as *mizuko kuyo*, as a means of conserving national identity and tradition. This promotion has contributed to maintaining the practice as a significant cultural ritual in Japanese society, despite shifting societal attitudes towards abortion.

As a heuristic therapeutic mechanism, *Jizo* rituals, including the *mizuko kuyo*, establish an interdependent, communal, and sacred arena where a previously isolated woman can find comfort and solace in sharing her grief and loss with those who may be facing similar distress. By assisting others in overcoming feelings of fear and shame akin to her own, she is empowered and able to advance in her own healing journey. This participatory healing dynamic has facilitated the development and widespread popularity of *Jizo* cult practices among women (Moto-Sanchez, 2016). It is irrefutable that the *mizuko kuyo* provides a means of healing for women and has gained acceptance and increased in popularity due to its ability to enhance the social acceptability of their experiences. However, this does not completely eliminate the stigma associated with having an abortion. Women who participate in memorial ceremonies are deemed privileged or blessed, while those who do not are criticized, perpetuating the notion of the "curse". The media and advertising regularly portray *mizuko* negatively, blaming their presence for any misfortunes or ailments experienced by families. The debate surrounding *mizuko* is exemplified by the position of Jodo Shinshu, Japan's largest Buddhist sect, which does not recognize the legitimacy of memorial services for aborted fetuses (Hardacre, 1997).

## **The Paradox of *Mizuko Kuyo*: Therapeutic or Deceptive?**

### *The Idealized Mother in the Confucian Gender Ideology*

The social construction of femininity in Japanese society remains centred on the maternal role, even as societal norms have evolved over time. According to cultural anthropologist Takie Lebra (2007) Japanese women's lifestyles are closely tied to Confucian gender ideology, which prioritizes the roles of “good wife and wise mother” *ryosai kenbo* (良妻賢母). The concept of *ryosai kenbo*, which emerged in the late 19th century, encompasses this ideal and reflects the national values of the time. Confucianism dictates that mothers should be role models of discipline and impart it to their children through their behaviour rather than through strict discipline. Despite changes in societal norms, the ideal of a self-sacrificing, suffering, and silent wife and mother continues to hold significant cultural value in Japan today.

Lebra further noted that the Confucian legacy in Japanese culture places a significant emphasis on altruism, prioritizing actions motivated by the greater good over self-interest. Japanese traditional values are primarily oriented around the importance of hierarchies and interpersonal relationships, the delineation of particular roles and responsibilities for women, and a strong emphasis on adherence to group norms. Self-interested actions are generally considered unacceptable and often justified in terms of their altruistic outcomes. This cultural stance towards self-interest is consistent with the Confucian gender ideology, where motherhood is seen as a symbol of selflessness<sup>22</sup>. In this context, abortion is viewed as a self-centred deed that leads to negative karma. It is believed that maintaining balance, harmony, and the natural order of familial relationships between the living and deceased is crucial. To do so, women are expected to participate in *mizuko kuyo*, which involves accepting responsibility for taking a life and the karmic repercussions of such an act. To make amends for their actions, they must strive

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<sup>22</sup> From 17th century onwards, the moral principles of Confucianism were disseminated to women in Japan through instructional manuals known as *Jokunsho*. These texts emphasized the importance of Confucian family values, with a particular focus on the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and wives and parents-in-law. The objective of these manuals was to uphold the *Ie seido*, or household system, which promoted the continuity of the household as a fundamental unit of Japanese society. The “*Onna Daigaku*” or “Greater Learning for Women” is the primary example of this type of instructional manual aimed at women (Sugano, 2007).

to perform generous and compassionate deeds towards the “child” (Landres, 1996). It is important to consider Hardacre's contention in this context that the phenomenon of *mizuko kuyo* exhibits a partial utilization of a fetus-centric rhetoric. This rhetoric is frequently directed towards young, unmarried women and relies upon the ideology of motherhood to impose negative societal connotations on non-reproductive sexual behaviour in these individuals while overlooking the same behaviour in their male partners. As a result, *mizuko kuyo* serves as a platform for the manifestation of sexual politics, constituting a power struggle over the norms and regulations of sexual culture.

Such specific of conduct is not just specific to Japan but India as well. The needs and preferences of women are not taken into account in the policy-making practices. In addition to this, the contraception policies are not adequate to mitigate the challenges faced by women, which leads them to seek solace in religious practices. This could be the reason why feminist movement critiqued the commodification of *mizuko kuyo*, perceiving it as a profit-driven enterprise that leverages grief under a guise of spirituality. During the 1980s and 1990s, women's rights advocates challenged the deception of *mizuko kuyo* and aspired for women to comprehend the sham of this exploitation of women's guilt in the black market (Hardacre, 1997). The ritual serves as a means for mothers to re-establish themselves as caring individuals and to restore family ties with the spirits of the deceased children in *Sai no Kawara*<sup>23</sup> (Moto-Sanchez, 2016). *Mizuko Kuyo* thus reinforces the notion of the woman who underwent abortion as responsible yet remorseful and guilty. The relationship between the woman and *mizuko jizo* mirrors that of a mother and child, thereby promoting a fetus-centric perspective and reinforcing normative social norms and gender roles (Montoya, 2021).

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<sup>23</sup> Explores Japanese Buddhist mythology regarding the sandy beach called *Sai no Kawara* (Sainokawara), a riverbed in the netherworld where the souls of departed children do penance. The legend of *Sai-no-Kawara* originated in Japan and was first documented by the priest Kuya Shoin (903-72). According to popular belief, the souls of unborn or miscarried children who pass away before their parents, enter a state of purgatory near the banks of a rocky river. These souls are said to be required to construct stone towers symbolic of Buddhist pagodas as atonement for causing grief to their parents, but each night demons allegedly dismantle their efforts, forcing them to repeat the task daily. Through the hymn of *Sai no kawara Jizo wasan* (Hymn to *Jizo* of the River Beach of Sai), devotees implore *Jizo* to protect the children and lead them towards enlightenment (Brooks, 1981).

## *Symbolic Manipulation and Socio-Religious Control*

The *mizuko kuyo* ritual, does not serve to liberate women as autonomous individuals but rather re-establishes their place within a conservative social order. Landers (1996), drawing on Condon's (1985) work, has posited that the *mizuko kuyo* ritual functions as a means by which women acknowledge their negative karma, express dependence on their husbands, and affirm their traditional gender roles within the complex web of circumstances, obligations, and events that define their lives. The woman who performs the ritual takes on the role of an ideal Japanese mother who endures her negative karma with grace and fortitude. The central symbol of the ritual, the *Jizo* image, representing both the bodhisattva and the aborted fetus, is manipulated by both the woman performing the ritual and the temple officiants. The aborted fetus is seen as an etiological agent, threatening to cause harm unless propitiated through the ritual.

Although significant progress has been made in the realm of gender equality since the 1970s, it is apparent that in Japan, there persists a prevailing perception that women are duty-bound to prioritize their roles as exemplary wives and mothers. This traditional patriarchal view idolizes women who make efforts to care for their husbands, in-laws, and children, thereby maintaining the traditional nuclear family structure. The *mizuko kuyo* ritual serves to reinforce the social fabric of traditional Japanese culture by subjecting the woman to traditional gender roles and subjugating the *Jizo* symbol to socio-religious control (Landres, 1996). While the ritual provides some solace to women who have experienced pregnancy loss, it perpetuates the idea that motherhood is a woman's primary vocation, emphasizing fetus-centric and patriarchal notions of motherhood. The *mizuko kuyo* ritual thus reinforces the social fabric of traditional Japanese culture. A critical examination is thus necessary to challenge these underlying ideas and foster a more equitable and empowering role for women within Japanese society.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to predict with certainty whether the practice of *mizuko jizo* will continue in Japan in the future. The practice will likely persist as long as stillbirths, miscarriages, and abortions remain a part of Japanese society. The sociological significance of *mizuko kuyo* stems from the fusion of abortion, a de facto norm in terms of prevalence and acceptability, with the perception that the act is morally reprehensible and requires various rituals of atonement and pacification.



The healing qualities and significance of a ritual are typically contingent on the intensity of pain and the extent to which individual suffering is perceived to be intertwined with the social fabric. Japanese Buddhism portrays *mizuko kuyo* as a means of offering solace and salvation, simultaneously exacerbating women's guilt. Given the various cultural and social pressures imposed on women, viewing *mizuko kuyo* as an organic expression of grief and remorse would not be accurate.

While it is undeniable that women require a means of self-expression and space to ritualize the emotions of grief and guilt associated with abortion, it is also imperative to acknowledge the commercial and patriarchal elements present within the ritual. The changing cultural landscape and societal attitudes toward abortion may impact the future of *mizuko kuyo*. As younger generations become more accepting of abortion, the practice may become less prevalent or evolve into a different form. Additionally, as the patriarchal elements of the ritual are recognized and challenged, there may be changes in the way *mizuko kuyo* is practiced. The study of the practice as a form of patriarchal gender expectation within a dense network of meanings and rituals that still provides a means of self-expression can thus provide a better understanding of the role of gender, culture, and religion in shaping women's experiences and attitudes toward abortion and grief.

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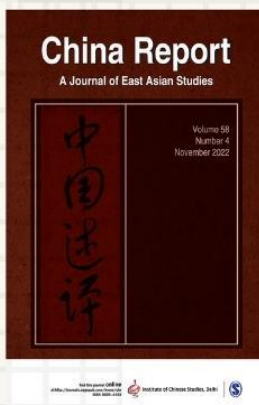
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