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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cherry Blossoms and Sweet Sentimentalism: The Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s and its image of *Japaneseness*

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Abstract: In the 2000s, Japan experienced a major trend in pop music known as the 'Sakura Song Boom,' featuring songs associated with cherry blossoms (*sakura*). Even 20 years later, these songs remain popular. This essay examines four songs from this boom and the cultural phenomenon itself, analysing two commercial web articles that emphasise the image of cherry blossoms, strongly linked to Japan and its people. The essay explores the supposed *Japaneseness* and nationalism in these articles. By examining song lyrics, advertising, and circulation, this study investigates whether a collective image of cherry blossoms exists in these songs and their social function. The essay also explores why cherry blossoms became popular in the 2000s. Cherry blossoms symbolise changes and transitions in contemporary Japanese society due to their association with spring events, such as the start of the fiscal year, school terms, and graduation ceremonies. The songs depict protagonists' sentimental emotions triggered by these changes. The essay reveals how the songs and the boom conveyed common performances of sentimental emotions and collective identities, reinforcing *Japaneseness* and nationalism featured in the articles.

Keywords: *Cherry blossoms; Japanese pop music; seasons in popular culture; Sakura Songs; collective identities; nature in culture; nature and nation*

1. Introduction

The year 2000 is known among others as the beginning of what is commonly labelled the 'Sakura Song Boom' (*sakura songu būmu*) in contemporary Japan. During this boom, many musicians released songs about cherry blossoms. These songs are widely consumed to this day, and some artists even released new versions of these songs in the early 2020s, which will be explored in detail in the song analysis section of this research.

Sakura Songs colour numerous aspects of Japanese daily life in spring: Theme songs from popular soap operas on TV, music programs on the radio, advertisement videos on the internet, and various media feature songs associated with cherry blossoms. Pop songs related to seasons, such as Sakura Songs, beach songs, and snow songs, are one of the many ways to celebrate the changing of the seasons in contemporary Japanese popular culture. In order to consider this new celebration of the changing of seasons in today's Japan, the massive boom of Sakura Songs during the 2000s is a valuable phenomenon to investigate. This article explores four songs released during the Sakura Song Boom and ultimately the boom itself. Focusing on song lyrics and how the songs are circulated and consumed, this essay will attempt to answer the following questions: Is there a collective image of cherry blossoms shared in the Sakura Songs? If so, is there any social function encapsulated in the shared image of cherry blossoms in these songs? Why did the image of cherry blossoms become popular and widely consumed in the 2000s?

As this essay investigates these research questions, I will argue that the image of cherry blossoms in Sakura Songs has sentimental emotions as a common characteristic and is associated with changes in livelihood that happen in spring. As these events are

associated with sweet memories in the song lyrics, such as romantic feelings and friendships in one's school days, the sentimentalism in these songs is often utilized to create and relate to positive affects rather than negative emotions. Hereafter, I will refer to the affect experienced by the consumers of Sakura Songs as "sweet sentimentalism". This sweet sentimentalism is widely shared among listeners as the sentimental connotation is intertwined in a commonly conceived orientation towards the image of cherry blossoms in the songs. To explore these research questions, the current essay will also delve into the image of cherry blossoms depicted in two commercial web articles about the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s. These two articles draw connections between the Sakura Songs and changes and transitions that take place in springtime while considering the role of Sakura Songs as vehicles of sentimental emotions. Moreover, the two articles create a facile connection between the image of Sakura and Japaneseness. Both articles associate the sensibility of this sentimentalism with the image of the Japanese by applying phrases like 'Why do they keep captivating the heart of the Japanese?' (Oricon, 2013) and Japanese people's 'sensibility to feel something with seasons' (O.D.A, 2019). To establish and assert this facile connection, they employ references in both the literary and cultural traditions of Japan.

In her book, *Ecology without Culture: Aesthetics for a Toxic World*, Christine L. Marran introduces the concept of '*biotrope*', with which she asserts that the 'biological world inherently indicates both the material and the semiotics' (Marran, 2017, p. 6). As a basis of this concept, Marran argues that nature is used 'to create unassailable identities' (2017, p. 3). The concept of *biotrope* helps us to comprehend the narrative of Japaneseness associated with the image of cherry blossoms in Sakura Songs. Indeed, Marran goes on to explain the strength of the *biotrope* and the application thereof in narrative:

> *Biotropes may be semiotically powerful in narrative because of the quality of that biological origin, even as that original scape is enfolded tightly into humanistic metaphor* (2017, p. 6).

One example in which the strength of the *sakura biotrope* introduced by Marran can be seen is the narrative of the Japanese people's hope to recover from the catastrophic disaster in 2011. Marran points directly to the famous Japanese author Murakami Haruki's speech held in Catalunya, Spain, in June 2011. Marran explains that in his speech, Murakami 'parlayed the *biotrope* of the cherry blossom to claim Japan as an ethnic national collective that would inevitably recover from the catastrophic experience of tsunami flooding and nuclear meltdown' (2017, p. 7). She then mentions that Murakami's idea stands on centuries-old cultural traditions:

> *'Murakami's hope for recovery in the expansive disaster zone rested on a centuries-old concept of mutability as expressed in classical Japanese aesthetics'* (Marran, 2017, p. 7).

This association with the image of cherry blossoms and Japaneseness is shared not only among writers and creators in Japan but also conceived to a certain extent internationally. Another example of the narrative of Japaneseness associated with the image of cherry blossoms that was used to represent the Japanese people's hope of revival after the disaster can be seen in British filmmaker Lucy Walker's documentary film, *The Tsunami and the Cherry Blossom* (2011). As she clearly and adamantly asserted on the official website of the film, she has been fascinated by the beauty of the cherry blossom even before she started making this documentary film. The latter half of the film is filled with the beautiful image of sakura. Associating the image of the sakura with the idea of Japaneseness by introducing interviews with the victims of the disaster who express their special attachment to the blossoms, Walker establishes the image of sakura as a symbol of revival (*fukkō*) from the disaster, connecting it with her image of the collective identity of the Japanese people. Indeed, Walker explains her association between the cherry and Japaneseness on her website:

> *'The [cherry] blossoms also reflect so many emotions, memories, and facets of Japanese character.' Additionally, she mentions the changes and transitions in one's life associated with the image*

> *of spring: 'the spring coincides with the start and end of the school year and so is full of associations of first meetings and final farewells'* (Walker, 2011).

As the current essay will reveal shortly, this aspect of spring, symbolised in the image of cherry blossoms, is heavily featured in both of the web articles about the Sakura Song Boom.

According to Walker's website, the image of cherry blossoms serves as a symbol of Japan, the Japanese people and culture, and was a major inspiration for her film. In the film, the image of harmony between the Japanese and nature, and the commonly imagined sense of unity among the Japanese, both represented by the image of beautiful cherry blossoms, play a significant role as a symbol of hope for recovering from the disaster. Such examples related to the idea of recovery are case-in-point examples for the strength of *biotropes* in narratives.

The two web articles about the Sakura Song Boom present musicians and listeners as successors of the classic *biotrope,* which 'employ[s] *bios* to produce *ethnos*' (Marran, 2017, p. 11). According to Carolyn S. Stevens, these commercial media and non-academic writers are 'the real arbiters of taste'(2008, p. 4) in the market of Japanese pop music. Considering their substantial influence on consumers' opinions and the wide-reaching consumption of the media, the narrative of Japaneseness in the two articles is too significant to neglect. Although the scope of this essay is limited to a specific group of people who consume these songs and information about these songs, such as the two web articles, I believe that investigating the supposed Japaneseness in the two web articles can capture one aspect of the cultural milieu of contemporary Japanese popular culture, ultimately analysing how the modern-day connection between sakura and the imagined Japaneseness is generated, disseminated, and maintained.

The association between the sakura image and Japaneseness is, in fact, a modern invention, according to Japanese historian Nakamoto Maoko. Tropes of cherry blossoms have existed since the pre-modern era, as can be seen in various pieces of classical Japanese literature. An esteemed Japanese literature scholar, Haruo Shirane, points out that it was in the Heian period (794-1185) that cherry blossoms became the main flowers of spring alongside plum and yellow *kerria*. In *Kokinwakashū* (905), the first imperial collection of *waka* poems, the word *hana*, meaning flower, came to refer 'primarily to the cherry blossoms (*sakura*), indicating that it had become the supreme flower of spring' (2012: 35). As one can perhaps imagine, there are numerous poems of cherry blossoms in this collection. However, according to Nakamoto, it was in the Meiji period (1868-1912) that scholars and writers started associating tropes of cherry blossoms with the image of the Japanese. By stating that *someiyoshino*, the most common type of cherry tree in the archipelago today, was first cultivated at the end of the Edo period (1603-1868) and then bred on a wider scale throughout the Meiji period, Nakamoto argues that 'landscapes of cherry blossoms' that had wide variety depending on regions were changed into landscapes of 'a single kind of cherry blossom,' which was newly planted *someiyoshino* (2023, p. 512). Nakamoto also argues that the afforestation of *someiyoshino* was accelerated by the two victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). The starting point of the dissemination of this new kind of cherry blossoms indeed overlaps with the rise of cultural nationalism.

Some scholars, such as Suzuki Sadami, characterize the victory of the Russo-Japanese War as the trigger of the culmination of cultural nationalism among writers, scholars, and politicians of Meiji Japan (2005, p. 153).

An example Nakamoto provides is Nitobe Inazō's monograph, *Bushido* (1899). She argues that *Bushido* contributed to 'nationalizing the time' (*jikan no koku Minka*). By associating tropes of cherry blossoms, which have been loved and referenced in songs and poems, and *bushi* (warriors), an elite class in the pre-modern era, with contemporary Japanese people (of his time), Nitobe created an image of "Japan" which transcends time and connects the past and the present (Nakamoto, 2023, p. 506).

Nakamoto also mentions that around the same time as *Bushido*, there was a narrative that associated the image of cherry blossoms with collectivism (*shūdan shugi*). During this period, it was a common metaphor to describe the West with roses and Japan with cherry blossoms. Nitobe indeed applies this trope in his book as well. The image of Japan became connected with collectivism through cherry blossoms, and this resulted in "cherry blossom nationalism" (*sakura nashonarizumu*) both in the pre-war era and during the war (2023, p. 505). Consequently, Nakamoto argues that the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s, which was influenced by the global trend of nationalism as a reaction to intense globalization, and more importantly, the image of cherry blossoms in the boom had its roots in this nationalistic image of the flower that had appeared and was widely spread before and during the war (2023, p. 497). It follows then that the sweet sentimentalism in the songs of the Sakura Song Boom has a certain function with regard to this kind of nationalism. I argue that the sweet sentimentalism indeed functions as a bond, which brings cohesiveness to the people in the imagined community 'Japan' conceived by the consumers and distributors of the songs and their orientations circulated by popular media, such as the two articles featured in this essay. When consumers share these Sakura Songs, they also share the positive connotations of the songs that feature sweet sentimentalism, and this sweet sentimentalism helps to establish the image of *Japaneseness* as a collective identity. As David Leheny explains in his *Empire of Hope*, these shared 'common performances of emotions' create the sense of 'collective identities' (Leheny, 2018, p. 10). In this regard, the Sakura Song Boom which occurred during the 2000s is worth investigating as an exemplar of the commonly imagined connection between sakura and *Japaneseness* in contemporary Japanese popular culture.

This essay will first provide an overview of the boom itself, the two web articles, and the four song examples. After that, by analysing the four songs' lyrics, the current essay aims to disclose the aforementioned sweet sentimentalism. Subsequently, in the conclusion, this essay will analyse the nationalistic connotation of the Sakura Songs mentioned in the two commercial articles, as well as the role of sweet sentimentalism in the nationalistic connotation of the image of cherry blossoms.

2. The Boom, the two web articles, and the four songs

In her *Japanese Popular Music* (2008), Carolyn S. Stevens explains the importance of sales-oriented commercial writing when one analyses Japanese pop music. Stevens emphasises the importance of acknowledging the vigorous non-academic musical publishing industry in Japan, aimed at general readers. She continues to detail two reasons why she included non-academic writers in her study: 'First, because they are widely read by consumers, they have real influence; secondly, because the publication time lag is very short, the content is more up to date than academic books and journals' (2008, p. 3). Subsequently, she explains the terms to describe writers in the industry. She argues that terms like *hyōronka* and *hihyōka*—in English, critics—are getting replaced by *raitā* (writer). As she clarifies, 'more closely aligned with the industry,' these journalists work to promote contracted artists.' Another important term is *baiyā* (buyer) for large record franchise shops such as HMV and Tower Records. After introducing these terms, Stevens emphasises the importance of the popular press in studying Japanese pop music: 'Japanese pop music texts from *ongaku hyōronka*, *raitā*, and *baiyā* have influenced audiences' interpretations of trends, creating a mass' preferred reading' of pop music. The writers—more so than the academics—are real 'arbiters of taste,' shaping the public response to the mass media (2008, p. 4).

On March 8, 2019, a music writer (or *raitā*), O. D. A., published a web article titled 'The Rise and Fall of Sakura Song Boom' on *Ongaku Natarī* (Music Natalie). *Natalie* (*Natarī*) is a pop culture website launched in 2007. It covers five categories of pop culture: music (*Ongaku Natarī*), comics (*Comikku Natarī*), comedy (*Owarai Natarī*), movies (*Eiga Natarī*), and theatre (*Stēji Natarī*). They also run their online merchandise store, the Natalie Store (*Natarī Sutoa*). Each of these categories has its own Facebook, X, and Instagram

presence. On top of the three social media accounts, *Ongaku Natarī* runs a YouTube and TikTok channel. *Ongaku Natarī*'s X account has 1.2M followers as of December 26, 2024, while their competitor, *Oricon*, which is often compared with Billboard as its Japanese equivalent (Stevens, 2008, p. 4) has 1M followers.

The author lists Fukuyama Masaharu's *Sakurazaka* and aiko *Sakura no Toki* as the beginning of the boom. O. D. A emphasises Chaku Uta as the trigger of the boom. As it is mentioned in the article, Chaku Uta, which is a short version of a song one could download and use as a ringtone on one's cell phone (*chaku* is derived from *chakushin on* and means ringtone; *uta* means song), became a major way to consume pop songs in Japan. Chaku Uta, at its beginning, was a short version of songs. It was usually just one chorus or a verse, as it was meant to be used as a ringtone. The article argues that this need for shorter versions of songs forced creators to create a song that evokes a vivid visual image. Cherry blossoms were a 'useful' theme for the seller of this service, not only because they depict vibrant imagery but also because of their strong association with 'encountering and parting' (*deai to wakare*) and 'floweriness and perishability' (*hanayakasa to hakanasa*). These words, especially *wakare* (parting) and *hakanasa* (perishability), have sentimental connotations. They are linked with emotional climaxes associated with sentimental feelings. Here, we can see the tinge of sweet sentimentalism associated with events and imagery that occur in spring, represented by the cherry blossoms. According to the article, the cell phone companies were attracted to the commercial value of a commodity that evokes an affectual reaction, and as the demand increased, artists created more Sakura Songs, taking advantage of the apparent sentimentalism, as can be seen in the next section of the current investigation. Moreover, the fact that the web article written in 2019 largely features this sentimental aspect of Sakura Songs during the Sakura Song Boom in the early 2000s indicates that there is an established, inextricable link between the early Sakura Songs and sentimentalism that is still effective almost twenty years after the original releases. As Stevens reminds us how non-academic writers shape consumers' tastes and responses in the field of Japanese pop music, the article on *Ongaku Natarī* can emerge as the key to seeing the connotations of these songs shared among the consumers.

In her essay, Nakamoto explains the beginning and unpacks the significance of the boom. She argues that for a long time after the Second World War, there were no well-known popular songs featuring cherry blossoms. As mentioned previously, during the war, the image of sakura was bound to nationalism. The beautifully ephemeral image of cherry blossoms, loaded with militarism and patriotism, eventually came to be used to glorify *tokkōtai* or the Divine Wind Special Attack Unit, the suicide attack unit in WWII.[5] According to Nakamoto, the trauma of this wartime image of the flower prevented musicians from writing songs about sakura for at least a decade after the war. She also points out that, even though the positive image of cherry blossoms came back around the time of the Tokyo Olympics (1964), until the 1990s, there were not a lot of songs that largely featured cherry blossoms in the realm of popular music. She argues that considering this context, 'the emergence of 'sakura' songs in the 2000s, its popularity, in other words, the phenomenon that 'young people' (*wakamono*) sang about sakura, and that it was accepted by generations in the society can be considered a big change (or return)' (Nakamoto, 2023, p. 500).

The Natalie article mentions that, after its peak in 2009 with thirty-seven Sakura Songs released in one spring, the boom began to decline with the rise of smartphones[6], music streaming services[7], and the dissemination of YouTube. The timeline provided by the website shows that the number of Sakura Songs released in one spring dipped to as low as eight in 2019, a stark contrast to the thirty-seven ten years before.

[5] Anthropologist Ohnuki-Tierney Emiko explores this association between the image of sakura and tokkōtai in her monograph, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalism: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese* (2010 [2002]).

[6] iPhone started to be sold in Japan July 2008.

[7] Apple Music and Spotify began their services in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Nakamoto also provides her reader context for the era. According to her, the early 2000s overlaps with a brief trend of nationalism, which was a reaction to expanding globalisation. As examples, she lists: the 2002 FIFA World Cup, during which supporters of the Japanese team painted their faces with the national flag; the consequent surge of anti-Korean sentiment; the establishment of the first Abe administration in 2006; and the publication of *Puchi nashonarizumu shōkōgun shōkōgun-wakamonoshōkōgun-wakamono tachi no Nippon shugi* (Petit Nationalism Syndrome—Japan Principle of Young People) by psychiatrist and critic Kayama Rika in 2002 (Kayama, 2002; 2023, p. 498). This temporal upturn of nationalism may also have played a role in the temporality of the Sakura Song Boom.

Out of the many Sakura Songs released in the 2000s, this essay focuses on the lyrics and advertisement methods of four different songs. The songs were chosen using a second web article published on the *Oricon* website in March 2013. The publication date of the article places its appearance just after the peak of the boom.

The first song was *Sakurazaka* by Fukuyama Masaharu, released in 2000. In both *Natalie* and *Oricon*'s articles, *Sakurazaka* is introduced as the beginning of the boom. In the same year, Aiko released *Sakura no Toki*. The article on *Natalie* marks this song as another beginning of the boom, along with Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka*. The other two songs are *Sakura (dokushō)* (*dokushō* means vocal solo) by Moriyama Naotarō, released in 2003, and *Sakura* by Ketsumeishi, released in 2005. The latter two artists re-introduced their songs to a new generation, ca. 15 years later: Moriyama released *Sakura (2019)* and *Sakura (2020 Gasshō)* (*gasshō* means choir) in 2019 and 2020, respectively, as mentioned in the song titles themselves. Ketsumeishi released a new music video for the song in 2021, titled *Sakura (2021 ver.)*. As it is to be explained in detail in the later song analysis part of this essay, these new forms of the two songs were widely consumed when they were released. The fact that these two songs regained their commercial success after around fifteen years reveals their continuous popularity among the songs released during the boom. Moreover, in the article by *Oricon*, both songs are introduced as 'classic' (*ōdō*) Sakura Songs, and in the article by *Natalie*, Ketsumeishi's *Sakura* is introduced as the 'trigger' of the boom. Therefore, this current study analyses these two songs in addition to Fukuyama and Aiko's songs.

According to the *Oricon* chart, Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka* sold more than 2,299,000 CDS: an enormous hit. Moriyama also sold more than a million CDS. His *Sakura (Dokushō)* sales surpassed 1,063,000 CDS and showed up on the weekly *Oricon* chart 133 times. Although Ketsumeishi's *Sakura* did not reach a million, they sold 962,000 CDS. In both cases, the songs were the best-selling songs of their respective careers as musicians. By comparison, the production of Aiko's *Sakura no Toki* was limited to 200,000 CDS, only 134,000 CDS of which were sold. Although it was a limited production, this tune is the ninth most-sold song released by Aiko, who has been at the forefront of the Japanese pop music scene for more than 20 years as of 2024. More importantly, as mentioned before, Aiko's song is regarded as the beginning of the boom along with Fukuyama's smash hit.

Both websites mention the association between *sakura* and changes or transitions in one's life.

> *The bloom season of cherry, spring, is the season that has many changes, such as encountering and parting (deai to wakare), departure (tabidachi), start of a new life (shin-seikatsu no hajimari), and so on (Oricon, 2013 Translated by the author).*

> *In Spring, which is the season of the beginning of new life (and it is the season people buy new mobile phones), many songs that have 'sakura' in their titles are released. Each company's Chaku Uta website features articles about 'Sakura Songs' in spring (O.D.A, 2019, translated by the author).*

As a matter of fact, each of the four songs shares the image of sakura as a symbol of changes and transitions in life. Fukuyama's, Aiko's, and Ketsumeishi's songs apply this image to romantic love. In Fukuyama's and Ketsumeishi's songs, sakura is used to evoke

nostalgic feelings towards their love in the past, and the memory of the romance is beautified. Putting it another way, sakura functions as a symbol of change, and the protagonists in these two songs remember the romantic climax in their lives. There is a distinct contrast between changing seasons and enduring memories of romance, which essentially belong to the past. As opposed to these two songs, aiko's *Sakura no Toki* illustrates her wish for her boyfriend's love to be unchanged while they go through the changing of the seasons. Unlike Fukuyama and Ketsumeishi, aiko illustrates her wish for unchanging love towards the future in contrast with the changes of the seasons.

Moriyama's song is often associated with graduation, a big turning point (*fushime*) in one's life. In the lyrics, one can see the comparison between the transition of the seasons and a big transition in one's life, which is graduation, a departure from one's school days, teachers, and friends. In this example, the seasons change as the protagonist also experiences an important change in his life. The song became, consequently, a staple in graduation ceremonies. In February 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Moriyama launched a project called 'The Sakura Gift Project' (*Sakura o okuru purojekuto*). This online project targeted high-school students supposed to graduate that year. On the campaign website, high schoolers could upload their movies of their memories of high school days. The website automatically created a sequence of movies with *Sakura (2020 Gasshō)* as the background music. In 2021, Moriyama himself virtually joined the graduation ceremony of Tobata High School in Kitakyūshū city in Fukuoka prefecture and sang his original rendition of *Sakura*. Some parts of the graduation ceremony were filmed and released on YouTube. As of December 26, 2024, the video gained 8,897,515 viewers. These usages of Moriyama's *Sakura* explain the song's reputation as the staple of graduation ceremonies, even after more than two decades have passed since its release.

Although they show some variety of reactions to the changing of the seasons, all the examples depict sakura as a symbol of changes and transitions. The lyrics of these songs feature protagonists who are facing changes and transitions in their lives. Ideas of the changes are symbolised by the imagery of cherry blossoms. In the next section, this essay will closely examine the four songs' lyrics and investigate the sentimentalism associated with the idea of changes and transitions.

3. Song Analysis

a) Sakurazaka by Fukuyama Masaharu

In the first verse of *Sakurazaka*, which follows the initial chorus at the very beginning, Fukuyama illustrates the landscape he is looking at: 'The pink resembles sadness' (*悲しみに似た薄紅色*) indicates that a heart-breaking event happened to him, and he is remembering the tragedy as he is looking at pink petals of cherry blossoms. In the following lines, he explains the reason for his heartbreak.

揺れる木漏れ日 薫る桜坂

悲しみに似た 薄紅色

Wavering sunlight, coming through leaves,

Fragrant Sakurazaka

The pink resembles sadness

君がいた 恋をしていた

君じゃなきゃダメなのに

ひとつになれず

There you were.

I was in love.

There was no one but you,

But we could not be together as one.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

'There was no one but you, but we could not be together as one' (*君じゃなきゃダメなのに ひとつになれず*) explains the fact that the protagonist found passionate feelings of love, but the two lovebirds could not be together. The second chorus follows, bringing forth a noticeable contrast between the changing seasons and his sweet memory of love that has not changed.

愛と知っていたのに

春はやってくるのに

Woo Yeah 夢は今も 夢のままで

Although I knew it was love,

Although spring comes,

Woo, yeah, the dream is still a dream.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

The first two lines of this second chorus, 'although I knew it was love, although spring comes' (*愛と知っていたのに 春はやってくるのに*), illustrate his sense of regret marked by *noni*, which indicates the contradiction between his expectations and the reality. He felt that it was a significant romance, unstoppable as the spring coming, yet unlike the spring, it could not be achieved, just like a dream. The poetic persona seems to have two dreams: the first dream refers to his romantic feelings or his memory of romance; the second dream can be equally interpreted as a beautiful memory and as an unachievable goal. To put it another way, he is taking his memory as either an object of his sweet nostalgia or his romantic love that is still unachievable. Either way, we can find a stark contrast between the beautiful 'spring,' which is coming towards him, and the beautiful 'dream,' which is either lost, unachievable or moving away from him.

In the bridge following the third chorus, there is a clear reference to the change of the seasons.

逢えないけど

季節は変わるけど

愛しき人

Although we cannot see each other,

Although the seasons change,

My dear,

君だけが わかってくれた

憧れを追いかけて

僕は生きるよ

You were the only one who understood me.

Chasing my yearning,

I will live my life.

(Fukuyama, 2000 Translated by the author)

'Although we cannot see each other, although the seasons change, my dear' (*逢えないけど季節は変わるけど 愛しき人*) indicates that the seasons keep turning without him being able to meet with his love. Then, one can take the last line, 'Chasing my yearning, I will live my life' (*憧れを追いかけて僕は生きるよ*), as the declaration of his decision to move on. Without meeting the real 'you,' he decided to keep going on with his life, embracing the beautiful image of her represented by the word 'yearning' (*akogare*). Here, we can see the strong contrast between spring as a symbol of something that keeps changing and the image or dream of his 'dear' (*itoshiki hito*), which stays the same despite the passage of time.

Although he depicts the image of his lover in his mind using multiple different words: 'dream' (*yume*), 'you' (*kimi*), 'dear' (*itoshiki hito*), 'yearning' (*akogare*), and 'love' (*ai*), each word illustrates unchanging romantic feelings which function in contrast with the change of the seasons. The contrast between changing seasons and this unchanged love indicates that even if time goes by without meeting with his love, the protagonist continues to embrace his romantic feelings. Here, the fact that he does not know if he will accomplish the romance, and more importantly, his will to keep his candid and sincere love despite the uncertainty, creates a tinge of sentimentalism.

b) Sakura no Toki by aiko

The two verses of *Sakurano Toki* explain the romance which the female protagonist is going through. These verses function as context setups. The first verse reveals that she is currently experiencing the joy of romance. The line, 'I feel that meeting with you made everything' (*あなたと逢えたことで全て報われた気がするよ*), explains her uplifting feeling. The first reference to 'spring' and 'sakura' appears in the pre-chorus.

「春が来るとこの川辺は桜がめいっぱい咲き乱れるんだ」

あなたは言うあたしはうなずく

'When spring comes, this riverside will have cherry blossoms blooming in profusion.'

You say, and I nod.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

These two lines illustrate the landscape they are looking at. By her boyfriend's words, the protagonist perhaps imagines the riverside with cherry blossoms in full bloom. The second line of the pre-chorus depicts the harmonious couple looking at the river and picturing the coming spring. The song's mood is filled with joyful and colourful feelings of love. This cheery mood remains the same throughout the first chorus. In the first chorus's third and fourth lines, we find her wishing that their love will continue through time: 'slowly, slowly, we transcend time / I wish it is you who I will share another happy kiss with' (*ゆっくりゆっくり時間を超えてまた違う幸せなキスをするのがあなたであるように*).

In the second verse, the mood has changed. Now the protagonist is feeling anxious about losing her boyfriend's love.

今まであたしが覚えてきた 掌の言葉じゃ足りない程

伝えきれない愛しさに 歯がゆくてむなしくて苦しいよ

まぶたの上にきれいな青 薄い唇に紅をひく

色づいたあたしを無意味な物にしないで

The words I learned,

the handy, easy words, are not enough.

I cannot convey my love to you enough.

It makes me impatient, feel useless, and then I suffer.

Beautiful blue on my eyelids,

and I draw rouge on my thin lips.

Now I wear these colours.

Please, do not make me meaningless.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

The first two lines depict the protagonist's frustrated feelings caused by her inability to find the proper words to convey her romantic feelings towards her love; this frustration results in the anxiety of losing him. She puts makeup on her face and then says the

poignant line: 'Now I wear these colours / Please, do not make me.' This line gives us a vivid impression of her fear of losing him. *Iro* means colours, but it is also used to describe sexiness and to allude to sexuality in the Japanese language: thus, as she is wearing the colour of sexiness, she is scared that she, painted with *iro*, might become meaningless by not being desired by her love.

The second chorus has a more direct reference to the transitions of the seasons.

気まぐれにじらした薬指も慣れたその手も

あたしの心と全てを動かし掴んで離さないもの

限りない日々と巡り巡る季節の中で

いつも微笑んでいられる二人であるように

Your capricious ring finger, your skilled hand

Something grabs and moves my heart and everything and never let me go

In the endless days and turning seasons,

I wish we would always be smiling together as two.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

Here, we can see her central message: she wishes her happiness to continue throughout 'the endless days and turning seasons.' In the bridge part that follows this second chorus, she repeats this wish with an even more robust tone.

春が終わり夏が訪れ 桜の花びらが朽ち果てても

今日とかわらずあたしを愛して

Even when spring ends, summer comes, and petals of cherry decay.

Please keep loving me, like you do today.

(aiko, 2000 Translated by the author)

Kuchi hateru, which means to decay in Japanese, creates an impactful and heavy image of desolation. The petals of cherry blossoms could be a trope of her beauty or a sweet feeling of youthful romance. Even the beauty of these petals fades away with the transition of time, and she asks that he continue to love her in the same manner, regardless of the seasonal changes.

Like *Sakurazaka*, *Sakura no Toki* treats spring and cherry blossoms as a symbol of temporal transition. However, the object of comparison is their love going forward instead of the sweet memory of the past, which is featured in Fukuyama's song. This strong feeling of her romance and her wish for unchanging love creates a sentimental feeling in

contrast with the decaying beauty of the petals of the cherry, which implies losing her beauty or her youthful romance.

c) *Sakura* by Ketsumeishi

The third example, Ketsumeishi's *Sakura*, has a similar theme to Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka*. In this song, Ketsumeishi illustrates a recurring spring that triggers the memory of his girlfriend in the protagonist's mind. It starts with the chorus:

さくら舞い散る中に忘れた記憶と

君の声が戻ってくる

吹き止まない春の風 あの頃のままで

君が風に舞う髪かき分けた時の

淡い香り戻ってくる

二人約束した

あの頃のままで

In scattering flowers,

the forgotten memory

and your voice come back.

The restless spring wind

remains the same as those days.

The scent of you, parting your hair,

That faint scent comes back.

It remains the same as those days,

The days we made the promise.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005, Translated by the author)

From the very first line, we can see the scattering flowers function as a trigger of the poetic persona's memory, which evokes his lover's voice. The difference from Fukuyama's *Sakurazaka* is that Ketsumeishi takes spring as a recurring season that has the 'spring wind' (*haru no kaze*), which 'remains the same as those days' (*ano koro no mama*). Then the scattering flowers and the spring wind remind him of the faint scent of her hair, which is also 'the same as those days.' The protagonist of Ketsumeishi's *Sakura*, intoxicated by scattering flowers, immerses himself in his dream of "forgotten memory," in which everything remains the same, including both of the two humans and the season. This makes a good contrast with Fukuyama's protagonist, who sees changing seasons as reiterations of his unchanging love, and Aiko's protagonist, who goes through changes

of the seasons, imagines the changes in her future, and wishes her boyfriend's love remains the same.

At the end of the first rap section, we can see some staple topics introduced in the web articles related to changes and transitions in one's life: 'encountering' (*deai*), 'parting' (*wakare*), and 'unchanged' (*kawaranu*). Again, these keywords represent changes and transitions that are strongly associated with spring and cherry blossoms. Here, one can see a case-in-point example of the association.

さくら散る頃 出会い別れ

それでも ここまだ変わらぬままで

咲かした芽 君 離した手

いつしか別れ 交したね

さくら舞う季節に取り戻す

あの頃 そして君呼び起こす

Around the time of scattering cherry,

We met, we parted.

Still, here is the same.

We sprout the bud,

You let my hands go.

Before we knew it, we had already said goodbye to each other.

I retrieve it in the season of whirling cherry.

Those days, and you, I recall.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005 Translated by the author)

The protagonist's romantic relationship with his love ended in the late spring, a time of scattering cherry petals. One can see that from 'around the time of scattering cherry, we met, we parted.' They saw their love was sprouting, but she let his hand go, and they exchanged the words of parting with each other. However, in the spring season, the memory of 'you' comes back with the scattering flowers, as the scenery of the scattering cherries is infused with the memory of his love. Then it flows into a refrain phase:

花びら舞い散る

記憶舞い戻る

Petals, whirling, scattering.

Memories, whirling, returning.

(Ketsumeishi, 2005 Translated by the author)

In these lines, we can see that the scattered flowers evoke the memory of romance in the protagonist's mind. At the very end of the song, the group repeats these lines six times and sings the first line of the refrain phrase once more. The two-line refrain follows another refrain phrase, '*hyrurīra*,' which is an uncommon, and hence memorable, onomatopoeia that evokes the sound of petals whirling in the winds. The onomatopoeia is repeated seven times, the same as after the first chorus. The repetition of onomatopoeia at this point anchors the image of scattering flowers and the spring wind. Eventually, over this vivid image of petals of cherry whirling in the spring wind, the following two-line phrase introduced above enhances the song's central theme: nostalgia towards the romantic memory evoked by the scattering flowers. Here, we can see the image of sakura used to trigger the beautiful memory of 'you' in the protagonist's mind, although the romance in the real world has already disappeared.

d) Sakura (dokushō) by Moriyama Naotaro

As mentioned previously, Moriyama's *Sakura (dokushō)* has a strong association with graduation (*sotsugyō*). The lyrics are filled with a cheerful message to friends who are moving forward with their lives, departing from the friendship they cultivated during their days in school. Even from the very beginning of the song, the lyrics depict a joyful friendship shared among the protagonists and its celebratory mood:

どんなに苦しい時も 君は笑っているから

挫けそうになりかけても

頑張れる気がしたよ

No matter how hard it was, you were smiling

Even when I almost gave up,

Your smile made me feel like I could do it.

Then the pre-chorus comes in. There is no clue related to what precisely is blurring the protagonist's landscape. It might be spring fog, petals of cherry blossoms, or just a metaphor of the departure implied by graduation, as the landscape is fading away. Whatever it is, he starts hearing the song from the days in the past. Even though the key theme is departure rather than nostalgia, we have a subtle hint of nostalgia here as well.

霞みゆく景色の中に

あの日の唄が聴こえる

In the landscape fading away,

I heard the song from those days.

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

This sense of nostalgia somewhat resonates with the other three songs investigated so far, being correlated to changes and transitions in life as well as the inexorability of time. The protagonist, who is departing from his school days, simultaneously looks at the future and the past with nostalgia. Then, the song flows into the chorus that has graduation and departure as its central theme.

さくら さくら 今、咲き誇る

刹那に散りゆく運命と知って

さらば友よ 旅立ちの刻 変わらないその想いを 今

Sakura Sakura,

Now, you are in full bloom,

knowing that you will be scattered in a blink.

Farewell, my friend.

Now it is time to set off on a journey.

Now, the unchanged feeling...

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

'Knowing that you will be scattered in a blink' suggests the short life of cherry blossoms. This could be a trope of foreseeable and inevitable changes in humans' lives, more specifically, the day of graduation coming up in the protagonist's life. 'Farewell, my friend' (*saraba tomo yo*) and 'time to set off on a journey (*tabidachi no toki*) are the staple words of graduation, often seen in the message read out by high school students in graduation ceremonies. 'Unchanged feelings' (*kawaranai omoi*) could be an affection for his friends mentioned in the same line. Focusing on 'Unchanged,' we can find a suggestion of the contrast between changed things and unchanged feelings, which we have encountered in the other three songs; however, the symbolism gets a little more complicated in the current example: while the cherry blossoms still symbolize changes and transitions, in contrast to the other songs, the change occurring to this protagonist's case is a certainty approaching, while the protagonists in the previous case-studies solely imagined or expected changes, vaguely at best. Nevertheless, at the same time, the poetic persona's wish for their continuous friendship is also here, like Fukuyama's and Ketsumeish's memory and Aiko's wish for enduring warm feelings. He certainly knows that the friendship will not remain completely unchanged, but he still carries his sincere wish for the continuation of their friendship.

The second chorus and the last chorus depict a stark contrast:

さくら さくら ただ舞い落ちる

いつか生まれ変わる瞬間を信じ

泣くな友よ 今惜別の時 飾らないあの笑顔で さあ

Sakura sakura,

It is just whirling down,

believing in the moment of rebirth.

Do not cry, my friend.

Now, it is time for a sad parting.

Here, with your earnest smile.

さくら さくら いざ舞い上がれ

永遠にさんざめく光を浴びて

さらば友よ またこの場所で会おう

さくら舞い散る道の上で

Sakura sakura,

Now, whirl up in the air!

Basking in the eternal cheerful lights.

Farewell, my friend.

Let's meet up again in this place,

on the road of scattering flowers.

(Moriyama, 2003 Translated by the author)

The mood of the third chorus is driven by the sorrow of his separation from his friends. 'Do not cry, my friend,' and 'now, it is time for a sad parting' capture this feeling. In the last chorus, one can observe the protagonist's positive hope towards the future while he wishes to see his friends again in the same place. The parallel between 'It is just whirling down' (*tada mai ochiru*) and 'Now, whirl up in the air!' (*iza maiagare*) depicts the difference in the mood of the two choruses. Both sorrow and hope are present at this significant turning point in the protagonist's life: graduation. The big change in front of the protagonist causes these two conflicting emotions.

Graduation and cherry blossoms are both associated with transitions and changes. The former is of human life, and the latter is of the seasons. The idea of departure from one's friends and a big change in one's life triggers sentimentalism. The sadness of separation from his school friends is turned into the emotional climax of the song, being enhanced by the protagonist's wish for continuous unity and friendship with his school friends, as they know that they will be physically separated soon. In other words, this emotional climax is inextricably related to the warm emotions towards their friendship, which will be lost, or at least cannot remain the same. The protagonist, his friends, and the listeners of the song all know that the separation and potential dissolution of the friendship and other big inevitable changes await them. They have mixed emotions towards change, as all humans do: the wish for friendship to remain the same, which is impossible and they know it, and the brilliant hope towards the future. This hopeful gaze towards the future against the backdrop of mixed emotions heightens the sentimental mood.

4. Conclusion: The Function of the Sakura images

This essay has explored the lyrics of four song examples, two of which mark the beginning of the Sakura Song Boom, and two of which were widely marketed and circulated during and after the peak of the boom in the early 2020s. In this conclusion section, this essay will explore a common characteristic, namely, sweet sentimentalism, in the four songs that have been collectively categorised as songs of the Sakura Song Boom in the 2000s. Subsequently, this essay will investigate the functions of the image of cherry blossoms in the narrative of supposed Japaneseness in the two articles and the establishment of collective identity among consumers and distributors of these songs and articles.

Indeed, the common element shared by all four songs is the symbolism of transitions and changes in one's life, encompassed in the imagery of the cherry blossoms, which reportedly have a very short life cycle. In addition, all four songs have a deeply entrenched sentimentality. Sakura, as a symbol of transitions and changes in one's life, functions like a mirror to reflect something else in the human world. Sometimes it can be an unchanged romantic memory, sometimes it can be a wish for continuous love, and sometimes it can be a wish for the future and an unchanging friendship. In this regard, another remarkable thing is that all these wishes are rooted in positive and sweet feelings: a sweet memory of love, a wish for a sweet future with their unceasing love, and a fun and sweet memory with school friends. As the cherry blossom shows changes by scattering and recurring, the perishable beauty of flowers represents the ephemerality of sweet feeling, which protagonists of these songs wish to continue. This triggers sentimental emotions, as the image of the cherry hints at the changes that they fear. In other words, they are all facing these sweet, unchanged feelings-or wishes—with the conceivable bitterness of losing them.

The cherry blossoms, which are imbued with sweet sentimentalism, are similar to what Sara Ahmed calls 'Happy Objects.' She explains, 'Certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects' (2010, p. 34). She explains the role of habits in the argument about happiness: 'It is not only that we acquire good taste through habits; rather, the association between objects and affects is preserved through habit' (2010, p. 35). The creation and consumption of Sakura Songs can be this 'habit.' Popular songs are surely not the sole preservers of the image of sweet sentimentalism associated with cherry blossoms. However, one can assert that Sakura Songs created in the boom in the 2000s shared the sweet sentimentalism as the collective view of emotions associated with cherry blossoms. Ahmed mentions sharing 'an orientation' toward objects: '[W]hen happy objects are passed around, it is not necessarily the feeling that passes. To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would simply mean you would share an orientation towards those objects as being good (2010, pp. 37-38). This argument might help us consider what was happening during the Sakura Song Boom: the songs shared not only the object, namely the imagery of cherry blossoms, but also the orientation towards those cherry blossoms as a trigger of sweet sentimentalism.

The marketing and advertising of the Sakura Songs, at least the two articles this essay introduced, draw a facile connection between cherry blossoms and the supposed common identity of the Japanese people. *Raitā* of *Oricon* and *Ongaku Natarī*, both of which are leading companies providing information about Japanese pop music to their audiences, simplistically associate the Sakura Song Boom with their desired image of Japan, its people, and their identity.

> *There have not been any other examples of making this many songs with one motif representing a season. I believe, as long as Japan has the seasons, as long as we have the sensibility to feel something with seasons, Sakura Songs will never go away* (O.D.A, 2019 , translated by the author)

> *Regarding its sales, the popularity of Sakura Songs is very stable, but why do they keep captivating the hearts of the Japanese? After all, it is the beauty of cherry blossoms that entertains us from the beginning of the bloom to the time of scattering, days and nights, from moment to moment* (Oricon, 2013, p. Translated by the author).

Oricon even mentions a fundamental piece of Japanese classical literature, *The Tale of Genji*, and the first imperial anthology of waka poems, *Kokinwakashū*.

> *People started to be attracted to cherry blossoms in the Heian period. It shows up in books that grand historical figures have left, such as Kokinwakashū and The Tale of Genji. We are familiar with the image of sakura as a seasonal word in haiku. Transcending time, its beauty has attracted many people and has stimulated viewers' sensibility. As to the familiarity, the Japanese currency and coins' designs with sakura might be great evidence.* (Oricon, 2013, p. Translated by the author)

Here, we can see an aspect of Christine Marran's 'biotrope' mentioned in the introduction of this essay. One can sense the praise of Japaneseness, which is illogically associated with the images of cherry blossoms and the seasons embedded in these writings. Nonetheless, although the two web articles connect Japan and sakura, and *Oricon* even mentions classic literary examples, they do not detail that connection itself in any reasonable or theoretical way. These articles rely on simple but ambiguous words such as 'beauty' of cherry blossoms and 'sensibility' to perceive their beauty, which is simply acknowledged as unique to the Japanese. In other words, they build on the power of 'biotrope.' They feature the image of the Japanese as people who love cherry blossoms, and they believe that the Japanese have a particular sensibility to feel beauty especially. One thing we should not forget about is that, as was mentioned earlier in the essay, although tropes of sakura have surely existed in the world of pre-modern literature, the association between the image of cherry blossoms and the collective idea of *Japaneseness* is a Meiji invention, according to Nakamoto.

Nakamoto argues that ideas such as 'cherry blossoms, which the Japanese have loved since ancient times' make people imagine the existence of the nation and its people, which putatively transcends time. Also, the existence of 'the same' *someiyoshino* across the nation makes people imagine the entity of the 'people' who 'share the same space.' The size of this 'space' decreased after Japan's defeat in the war, and cherry blossoms were planted again with new connotations such as 'peace' and 'requiem' for the people who had died in the war. Then, she argues that the boom of 'Sakura Songs' in the 2000s occurred in the global trend of nationalism, which was a reaction to the intense globalization, and at the same time, more importantly, had roots in the image of the cherry blossoms that was disseminated both in the pre-war time and during the war (2023, p. 497). The facile connection between the cherry blossoms and supposed Japaneseness in the two articles is a case-in-point example of the putative image of the people of the nation, which is associated with the nationalistic connotation of the flower.

These two major companies' circulation of the image of the Japanese who love sakura, which lacks empirical reasoning, also has a self-orientalising aspect. In his groundbreaking *Orientalism*, Said discusses the orientalist attitude.

> *"shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, the self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter"* (Said, 2003, p. 93).

The association between the image of *sakura* and *Japaneseness* does not require logic to reinforce its legitimacy. The two articles affirm this association just because 'they are what they are.'

This facile connection and self-orientalising image in conveying the idea of Japaneseness are bolstered with 'sensibility', supposedly typical of the Japanese people, which enables them to feel strong emotions such as the sweet sentimentalism evoked by the Sakura Songs. In this regard, sweet sentimentalism, as a criterion of granted *Japaneseness,* plays a significant role in the affirmation of the facile connection and the self-orientalism.

Moreover, sweet sentimentalism functions to connect people in the imagined community, which is commonly conceived among the consumers and distributors of this kind of information. Both web articles take the connection between Sakura Songs and *Japaneseness* for granted. Other than an unreasonable link with classic literature, how do they find the collective identities of Japanese people in the image of *sakura* and Sakura Songs? I argue that the consumption of Sakura Songs disseminates the sweet and sentimental 'orientation' towards the object, as Ahmed says.

Furthermore, the consumption and advertisement themselves establish collective identities among the people who listen to and circulate the songs. David Leheny draws a connection between 'common performances of emotions' and 'collective identity.' This idea of 'collective identity' might help us to understand the two articles. As he considers the establishment of 'collective identities,' Leheny says:

> *"These identities might be reinforced or recognised by common performances of emotion—the rending of garments, ululation at weddings and funerals, enraged burning of a foreign-owned store during a demonstration or riot—but even these expressions would likely conceal the great range of feelings and experiences of the participants themselves."* (Leheny, 2018, p. 10).

The creation and consumption of those songs could be an example of these 'common performances of emotion.' Consuming sentimental songs collectively categorized as Sakura Songs, which get largely featured by media in a certain time of the year, singing these songs in karaoke in the season of cherry blossoms, or learning lyrics and songs and singing together with one's school friends at graduation ceremonies can be considered ways of reinforcing collective identities. These are participatory ritualist celebrations of the creation and reinforcement of collective emotions.

Leheny introduces Ken Ito's study on Japanese melodramatic literature:

> *"In his study of Japanese melodramatic literature, Ken Ito notes how often his students point to overriding sentimentalism in much of Japanese popular culture, and indeed one could, for example, produce a lengthy YouTube montage of Japanese film scenes of characters running, crying, and waving to their friends or loved ones seated in departing trains."* (Leheny, 2018, p. 10).

We can find this 'overriding sentimentalism' in those four Sakura Songs. Like the conceivable YouTube montage mentioned in the quote, one could easily produce a playlist of sentimental Sakura Songs from the 2000s that have sweet sentimentalism as a central theme. If, as Leheny argues, a common practice of emotions reinforces collective identities among the people who share the practice, Sakura Songs in the boom in the 2000s reinforced the collective identities among consumers. Moreover, their circulations, the number of sales that made these songs national-level hits, and the recurrence of the two songs in the early 2020s show that a significant amount listeners of Japanese pop music in the 2020s engage in some way with these common performances of emotions. In other words, the shared orientation towards sakura in the songs involved with sweet sentimentalism creates and maintains collective identities among the massive number of consumers and listeners of Japanese pop music.

Although these four songs do not display self-orientalising aspects in themselves, as detailed in the two web articles, when the songs are collectively categorised with the generic term 'Sakura Song,' they can be employed in the advertisement of the self-orientalising image of the Japanese people who love cherry blossoms. This love towards cherry blossoms, which is discussed as particular to Japanese people by the web articles, is inextricably connected with the 'sensibility' to feel the sentimental emotions which occur to supposed Japanese people when they listen to a Sakura Song. The two articles link this sensibility to *Japaneseness.* Here, we can see their image of *Japaneseness* represented by cherry blossoms. The Sakura Songs' sweet sentimentalism functions as a cohesive bond among the supposed 'Japanese.'

Lastly, this association between seasonal objects and particular themes, such as sentimental emotions in this essay's case, has been commonly practised in Japanese literary

culture. In his book called *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons*, Haruo Shirane explores seasonal associations of objects and themes. According to him, seasonal topics developed a specific set of cultural associations, and nature became 'the primary vehicle for expressing private emotions' (Shirane, 2012, p. 19). He then argues that, in the modern day and especially in urban settings, 'nature may be far away.' He says, 'The average company employee probably encounters little nature or even natural sunlight in the day.' Shirane continues, 'although nature may be far away, it is relived or recaptured in the cultural imagination.' This cultural imagination has been 'a key means of social communication' in Japan, according to Shirane:

> *"The diminished representation of nature and the seasons in contemporary Japan, however, does not lessen their enormous impact across more than a thousand years of Japanese cultural history, not only in poetry, painting, and the traditional arts but also in a wide range of media, from architecture to fashion. As we have seen, natural imagery in poetry provided a key means of social communication from as early as the seventh century, and representations of nature and the seasons became an important channel of aesthetic, religious, and political expression in the subsequent centuries."* (Shirane, 2012, p. 218).

The sweet sentimentalism associated with the Sakura Songs themselves can be a noteworthy contemporary example of what Shirane calls 'the highly encoded system of seasonal representation.' By not simply associating the image of cherry blossoms and seasonality with the sense of *Japaneseness,* such as in the two web articles, but instead carefully analysing the image and connotations associated with seasonal objects in contemporary Japanese culture, one can obtain a lens to see the cultural milieu of 'the highly encoded system of seasonal representation.' As I believe that cases of seasonal representation in contemporary Japanese society are a fruitful and promising research field due to significant dissemination and consumption thereof in quotidian life, I hope this study can contribute to greater research related to seasonality and the view of nature in contemporary Japanese consumer culture.

In summary, the Sakura Song Boom that occurred in the 2000s has roots in the nationalistic association between the image of cherry blossoms and *Japaneseness* established in the Meiji period, as noted by Nakamoto. The two articles this essay has investigated have an unmistakable tinge of this nationalism, as these articles make a facile connection between cherry blossoms and the image of the Japanese. As can be seen in the four examples this essay provided, many of the songs released during the boom are infused with sweet sentimentalism. This sweet sentimentalism reinforces the nationalism based on the supposed *Japaneseness* visible in the two web articles, because the sensibility to perceive such sentimentalism is regarded as a trait traditionally inherited by generations of the Japanese that belongs exclusively to them. Moreover, as a commonly performed emotion, sweet sentimentalism also functions as a cohesive bond of commonly conceived 'Japanese', the image of which is shared among consumers and distributors of the nationalistic connotation of *sakura* featured in the two articles.

Investigating the image of cherry blossoms provided by these commercial articles is crucial to scrutinising the perception of these songs and the boom itself. As repeatedly mentioned before, according to Stevens, the storytellers of these narratives of *Japaneseness* are the 'real arbiters of taste.' These can be the puppeteers in the shadows who handle the songs and circulate the nationalism scented with the fragrance of cherry blossoms and coloured with a tinge of sweet sentimentalism.

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