

## Shoes: The Early Learning of an Important Distinction in Japanese Society

The past hundred-odd years has witnessed an extraordinary amount of change in the everyday lives of Japanese people, yet certain time-honoured customs seem to display quite dogged persistence. The custom which forms the initial concern of this paper is that of removing shoes on entry to almost every home in the land. In some modern office blocks it has been dispensed with, and in other public places such as restaurants customs vary, but homes in even the most western of houses and apartments continue to have a space at the entrance for this act to be performed. Similarly, many Japanese living abroad, in houses quite unsuited for the practice, create an area at the entrance for their own transition to slippers,—though they may sigh and allow their foreign guests to enter in what must seem to them to be quite despicable huge pairs of shoes, and even boots. So firmly ingrained is the practice that a man who broke into my house in Japan, albeit only to try on my night-dress, left his shoes neatly in the doorway, conveniently providing me, when I surprised him, with tangible evidence to remove to the nearest telephone, and considerable difficulty for himself in any effort he might have made to escape. It is apparently also common practice for suicide victims who choose to jump from high buildings to leave their shoes neatly arranged on the roof.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to establish an explanation for the persistence of this custom and to examine what it may reveal at a symbolic level about Japanese society in general. The rational explanation of course is concerned with dirt and cleanliness, or what anthropologists might term notions of pollution; but, as Mary Douglas has pointed out so forcefully in her book *Purity and Danger*, 'dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter'. She goes on to argue that it is a relative idea, so that in an English view shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing. Dirt is matter out of place. 'In short', she writes,

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Source: "Shoes: The Early Learning of an Important Distinction in Japanese Society", in G. Daniels, ed. *Europe Interprets Japan*, Folkestone, Kent: Paul Norbury Publications, 1984, pp. 215–222.

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1 Mary, Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Harmondsworth 1970, p. 48.