

Tokyo Tower and Tokyo Skytree: History and Symbolism in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

The Tokyo Tower and the Tokyo Skytree are the two most recognizable landmarks on the skyline of Japan's capital. By means of a documental revision, a textual interpretative analysis of media contents, participant observation and unstructured interviews, the objective of this article is to identify the development of these towers as symbols of Tokyo and Japan. It is found that, with more than half a century of existence, the Tokyo Tower represents the successful post-war Japanese society, while in just five years the Tokyo Skytree has become a symbol of Japanese national spirit and resilience in an era of multiple crises. Both broadcasting towers are regularly portrayed in Japanese media linked to narratives of romance, dreams, family and community. Also, enhanced by their special lightening at night, they stand as attractive poles for locals and visitors to choose them as background in relevant events in their lives.

Keywords

Tokyo Tower, Tokyo Skytree landmarks, symbolism.

Introduction

In 1953, after seven years of occupation by the Allied forces led by the United States of America, Japan was trying to leave war and defeat behind, aiming to become a modern, peaceful and powerful nation and part of the world's economic elite. One of the key elements in the construction of this renewed Japanese society was going to be the spreading of mass media, starting with television. In February of that year, regular television broadcasting in Japan began through the public corporation Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK); the following months, commercial television corporations acquired licenses and launched more channels for the region of Kantō (NHK Japan Broadcasting Corporation, 2002) – which contains the Japanese capital and other cities like Yokohama, Kawasaki, Saitama and Chiba. As the number of companies increased, each having its own transmission tower, voices at the government suggested the need to build one large broadcasting tower capable of serving the whole region (Gilhooly, 2002).

In 1957, Hisakichi Maeda, at that time a member of the Japanese Diet, founded Nippon Television City Corporation (NTCC) in order to execute the project of

building such tower with private resources. However, he did not want to build a mere giant broadcasting pole; he and Tachū Naitō, the architect in charge of the design, wanted to seize the chance to create a new landmark for the capital, a symbol of the growing Japan (Takenaka Corporation, 2008a).

By the end of 1958, the Tokyo Tower was finished and opened to the public as the world's tallest freestanding tower at the time (Tokyo Tower, 2013). During the same period, the nation was experiencing a rapid economic growth that would be the beginning of the Japanese economic miracle. Hence, the tower soon became a symbol of the post-war recovery, representing a renewed and ambitious Japan.

Half a century later, the historic moment of the nation was very different. At the first decade of the 21st century, Japan had more than a decade of economic underperformance and a demographic crisis. On the technological side, the broadcasters were aiming to fully convert its television system to a digital one, but the Tokyo Tower was not able to support it due to the increasing number of tall buildings around the city. Thus, in 2008, the construction of a new and taller broadcasting tower named Tokyo Skytree began at

another side of the city. In 2011, when it reached its full height just a few days after the Tōhoku Earthquake, it became a symbol of the national spirit and resilience.

In contemporary Japan, both towers are common scenarios of relevant events in people's lives; they are also commonly portrayed in media; they have become part not only of popular culture, but also of folklore. In the following pages, the objective is to discuss the symbolism these landmarks have, how are they portrayed in national media, and what are some of their social functions.

Method

In order to fulfil the objectives stated, diverse methodological tools of the cultural studies were used. A careful and deep revision of diverse Japanese documental and electronic sources provided the material to recreate the relevant points in the history of both towers and contextualize them against the historical moment of the nation. With the purpose of identifying the symbolism that the towers have according to media and to Japanese people, three methods were employed: a textual interpretative analysis of a sample of media contents produced in Japan for the national audience between the years of 1990 and 2015; participant observation performed in Tokyo in three fieldwork stages between 2012 and 2015; and, unstructured interviews with Japanese people found around different points in Tokyo observing and photographing the towers during fieldwork.

Tokyo Tower: a landmark of Japan's post-war modernization, the symbol of romance, affluence and dreams

During the 1950s, after suffering a devastating defeat in the Pacific War resultant of an ultranationalist military movement, Japan was trying to move forward emulating the victorious Western powerhouses in many aspects. In this context, it was no surprise that the design of the first broadcasting tower for the capital had been inspired in the iconic Eiffel Tower.

According to information from the Takenaka Corporation – the main contractor in charge of the construction and maintenance of the Tokyo Tower – when the project began in the spring of 1957, Maeda, the president of the owner company, wanted to build a tower similar to the Eiffel Tower, but that surpassed it in height, which is 312 meters. On the other hand, the chief architect for the design, Naitō – from the design and planning firm Nikken Sekkei – is remembered saying:

It is not interesting to just build a pole that emits electricity. To build a tall tower in the city can become a source of tourism. We should create something that contributes to beautify the city and, at the same time, by building a viewing platform, entertains the eyes of people.¹ (Takenaka Corporation, 2008c, para. 3)

Maeda and Naitō's aspirations were in synchrony. They would build a landmark for Tokyo that, at the same time, became a world's number one. The first height proposed was 380 meters, but building materials were still scarce after the reconstruction period that was just ending across the country, so it was calculated according to the needs of the television companies'



Figure 1. The Tokyo Tower. Photo taken by the author.

¹ All the translations from Japanese sources to English were done by the author.

signals to reach the entire region of Kantō and was set at 333 meters (Tokyo Tower, 2013).

On June 23, 1957, the construction of the Tokyo Tower began in the Minato ward, a municipality of Tokyo located in the southwest of the city, nearby the Imperial Palace. Minato did not only comprise the buildings of the main commercial television networks, but also many embassies and headquarters of national powerful corporations; in other words, it was a wealthy and cosmopolitan zone. About 220,000 workers from all the country were mobilized to have ready, in 543 days, the landmark that would symbolize the new and modern Japan (Takenaka Corporation, 2008a).

On December 23, 1958, having two observatories – a main one at 150 meters and a special one at 250 meters – the Tokyo Tower was opened to the public being the world's tallest freestanding tower, surpassing the famous Parisian landmark in which it was inspired.² Its color, white and international orange, was not chosen by the designers and did not have another meaning than to observe air safety regulations

² There is also a 5-story building at the base of the tower, named Foot Town, in which the elevators to the observatories are located. Along the years, museums, shops, restaurants and exhibitions have been added to its attractions.

(Tokyo Tower, 2013) (View Figure 1).

During its first years of existence, the illumination of the tower at night was rare and extremely simple. Only Saturday nights or the nights before a holiday, the four corner poles of the tower were illuminated by 250 light bulbs, slightly drawing the shape of the tower in the night landscape of the city. In 1964, during the Tokyo Olympics, this illumination was turned on for a number of consecutive nights, which was well received by the citizens. Since then, slowly, more light bulbs along the four poles and more nights a year were added to the illumination schedule (Takenaka Corporation, 2008b).

In 1989, aiming to attract more visitors, to symbolize the change of the Japanese era from Shōwa to Heisei, and to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the tower, a new lightening designed by Matoko Ishii was inaugurated with two distinctive patterns: one in white tone for the summer and one in orange for the rest of the year. This new illumination called Landmark Light, with the use of 180 powerful lamps, made the Tokyo Tower shine fully and distinctively in the city's landscape from sunset to midnight every day of the year (Takenaka Corporation, 2008b; Tokyo Tower, 2013) (View Figure 2).

The Tokyo Tower's bright silhouette became a



Figure 2. Tokyo Tower's Landmark Light in orange tone, view from Roppongi Hills. Photo by the author.

popular element in Tokyoites' lives, promoted also by media. Thus, in 2008, as a celebration for its 50th anniversary, a new and more spectacular illumination was launched – the Diamond Veil. Using 276 LED lamps distributed over the four sides of the body of the tower, the Diamond Veil is able to dress the Tokyo Tower in seven different colors (Kotake, 2008). This illumination pattern is turned on only between the 20:00 and 22:00 hours on Saturdays or on dates that commemorate something for Japan (Tokyo Tower, 2013). The colors for each occasion are chosen according to the celebration, and symbols, numbers or letters can be added on the surface of the main observatory to strengthen the message (View Figure 3).

In its first 50 years, the Tokyo Tower received 150 million visitors to the main observatory (Tokyo Tower, 2013). Although it has had its detractors – mostly due to its undeniable inspiration in a foreign landmark – there is no doubt that it has become an almost obligated stop for any national and foreigner visitor to the Japanese capital, a typical destination for school trips, and a regular landscape to look for by Tokyoites on special occasions.

As a broadcasting tower, it has not only been a “behind the scenes” element of the prosperous Japanese media culture; it has also had a leading role in many media contents since its first years of existence. Films, *manga*, *anime*, television, magazines and newspapers, all Japanese media have portrayed

the landmark at some point.

In a first period, the Tokyo Tower was a favourite victim in the movies of giant monsters, a genre known as *kaijū*. This genre had its origin in the 1954, with the first Godzilla movie, and its boom roughly between 1956 and 1967; it was focused on mutant creatures born from nuclear experiments or accidents, which attacked and destroyed Japanese cities, frequently also portraying armed forces of the United States and the Soviet Union at some point in the story (Tsusui & Ito, 2006). In many of these films, the Tokyo Tower was emblematically destroyed by monsters like Mothra, King Ghidorah, Gamera and Godzilla (Takenaka Corporation, 2008d).

If these monsters represented the resentful nature, the tower symbolized the modernization – and Westernization – of Japan. Its destruction denoted the memories, fears and conflictive feelings of the Japanese society after the nation's recent past as victim of the atomic bombings and loser in the war, its rapid modernization, and its ascendance to the world's elite as ally of its previous enemy.

Nonetheless, as the decades passed and new generations of Japanese people grew in a flourishing and peaceful country, the narratives around the Tokyo Tower in media also changed. This transformation had to do, additionally, with the launching of the Landmark Light, which gave it a romantic and luxurious presence. An urban myth appeared saying that those couples that see together the lightening gone off at midnight



Figure 3. Tokyo Tower's Diamond Veil. Above: Pink Diamond Veil for the awareness campaign for breast cancer, view from Odaiba (October 1, 2012). Below left: White Diamond Veil and a heart in celebration of the tower's 54th anniversary, view from Roppongi Hills along special Christmas illuminations on the street (December 23, 2012). Below right: Four color Diamond Veil and special message “2020” celebrating that Tokyo was awarded to be host of the 2020 Olympic Games, view from Shiba Park (December 23, 2013). Photos by the author.

will be forever happy together (Takenaka Corporation, 2008a).

Consequently, since the 1990s, the Tokyo Tower has been generally portrayed as a place of prosperity, fantasy and romanticism. Many popular stories of *shōjo manga* (girl-oriented comics) – some of which have later been adapted to *anime*, live-action series and films – have relied on the Tokyo Tower to be the place where the magic and love happen.³ In the same way, written novels, films and serial television dramas – some of which even have the name of the tower in their titles – have appeared with their narratives built around the tower as an emblematic place in the characters' lives: where they meet, fall in love or get apart.

Because the Tokyo Tower is located in an affluent and cosmopolitan area in the city, it also is used as a symbol of wealth and aspiration in the narratives. If someone has a view of the tower from his or her apartment, it is understood that such person is wealthy; if someone has an office with view of the tower, it is understood that works for an important corporation; if someone goes to a restaurant or hotel with view of the tower, it is understood that it is in an expensive place.

3 Some notable examples of these series, also popular in Western countries, are *Sailor Moon*, *Sakura Card captor* and *Magic Knight Rayearth*.

Supported by these media narratives, the Tokyo Tower, particularly at night with its opulent illuminations, has become a favorite landscape for Japanese people. There are some points around the city with a full view of the tower that, at the same time, show an outstanding composition with other landmarks, attracting tens of people every night – especially when the Diamond Veil is scheduled – to have dates, take pictures or just enjoy the view.

The Shiba Park is a preferred location for older generations to relax day and night while taking pictures and admiring the tower by itself or together with the Zōjōji, an ancient Buddhist temple. On the other hand, Roppongi and Odaiba are the preferred spots of younger people and couples. These have been turned in the last couple of decades in shopping and entertainment districts with their own foreign-inspired landmarks or illuminations inspired by foreign and recently adopted celebrations – like Christmas, Valentine's Day or Halloween – that enhance the tower's presence.

Thus, from a reference to Tokyo's rapid industrialization to an allusion of its cosmopolitan, affluent and romantic essence, the Tokyo Tower has been portrayed constantly by domestic media and has become a symbol of the identity of post-war Japan and a part of Japanese people's lives.



Figure 4. Above: Tokyo Tower in summer Landmark Light, view from the Zōjō-ji. Below: Night landscape view from Odaiba, including three foreign-inspired landmarks: The Tokyo Tower in Diamond Veil, the Rainbow Bride in summer illumination and a replica of the Statue of Liberty. Photos by the author.

Tokyo Skytree: the symbol of Japan's spirit and strength, past and future

In December, 2003, Japan had a decade suffering the effects of an economic crisis. Nevertheless, even amid the rapid development of other Asian nations, it had remained as one of the strongest economies in the world. After almost five decades of showing its recovery power, Japan was no longer looking at the exterior for inspiration; on the contrary, it had regained its national pride and identity, and was trying to use its very distinctive culture as part of its economic assets towards both the domestic and foreign markets (Mandujano, 2013; Mandujano Salazar, 2016).

In this context, digital television broadcasting began to be offered in the area of Kantō. However, this technology required a strong signal in the city, which was already packed with tall buildings that interfered with the electrical waves produced by the Tokyo Tower. Thus, the six large TV broadcaster corporations⁴ in Tokyo considered it necessary to have a new tower of at least 600 meters and began promoting the project; in February, 2005, the proprietary rights to develop the new tower were awarded to Tobu Railway Corporation – hereafter TRC (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015a). TRC left the design and administration of the project in hands of Nikken Sekkei, the same firm that had been in charge of the design of the Tokyo Tower (Nikken Sekkei Ltd., 2012).

The location for the new tower was decided to be at the Sumida/Taito area, in the northeastern part of the city (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015c). Contrary to the Minato Ward, where the Tokyo Tower is located, this zone comprises mostly middleclass households, small factories and craft workshops, many of them with ancestry linked to the area. Sumida and Taito Wards are also famous for its downtown atmosphere and its traditional landmarks, like the Asakusa district and the Sumida River, part of the imagery of the Edo period.⁵

TRC and Nikken Sekkei wanted to regain for Japan the title of the “tallest free-standing tower” that had been taken away from the Tokyo Tower many years before. After researching for potential rivals around the world, it was decided that the new tower had to have

⁴ The public NHK and the five commercial: Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), Nippon Television Corporation (NTV), Fuji Television Corporation (Fuji TV), TV Tokyo Corporation (TV Tokyo) and TV Asahi Corporation (TV Asahi).

⁵ From 1603 to 1868. Edo was the name of Tokyo during that period and was the capital of the Tokugawa samurai government. Culturally, it is characterized by the dominance of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism ideologies and the flourishing of large cities, commerce, art and entertainment.

at least a height of 610 meters (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2013). As Japanese society has historically been prone to look for second meanings in numbers and names, the height was established in 634, which in Japanese can also be read as *musashi* (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015d). *Musashi* was the name of the main province in the Kantō area before being dissolved into prefectures during the administrative makeover after the Meiji Restoration in 1868; Edo – today's Tokyo – belonged to that province.

Another goal of the developers was to create a colossal tourist attraction. However, contrary to the case of the Tokyo Tower, this time the objective was that the new tower became a symbol of Japan's essence, its beauty sense and its technological innovation, harmonizing with the traditional surroundings and becoming a monument that connected Japan's past and future.

Tadao Kamei, the architect coordinating the project, was moved by the image of a gigantic tree that faced at the sky while having its roots firmly set in the ground (Nikken Sekkei Ltd., 2011; Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015b). The new tower's neo-futuristic design was inspired, as well, in the aesthetic and architectonic techniques found behind the traditional tall buildings that, despite the centuries and natural phenomena, had survived: the five-story pagodas of Buddhist temples (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015d).

TRC wanted to involve the society in the project. Hence, the corporation asked the public to suggest names for the new tower. Among 18,606 keywords submitted, six names were selected; then, on June 10, 2008, after two months and 110,419 votes from Japanese people, *Tokyo Skytree* was selected by 29.8% of the votes, only one percent over *Tokyo EDO Tower* (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd., 2008). The next month, the construction of the Tokyo Skytree began.

On March 1st, 2011, by reaching 601 meters, the tower became the tallest in the world (Fukui Shimbun, 2011). Ten days later, Japan experienced the most powerful earthquake in its modern history, with an epicenter near the northeastern coast of Honshu, the main Japanese island and where Tokyo is located. Commonly referred by Japanese media as the Tōhoku Earthquake, it did not only heavily shake Honshu, but also triggered a massive tsunami that destroyed numerous towns in the north of the island, caused the meltdown of nuclear plants and more than 15 thousand deaths (National Police Agency of Japan, 2016; Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2011). The Tokyo Skytree resisted without damages and was able to

reach its full height a week after the disaster (Nikkei Inc., 2011).⁶

At the end of February, 2012, with a delay of two months from the scheduled date due to a shortage in materials after the earthquake, the construction of the Tokyo Skytree was finalized (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2013). On May 22, 2012, it opened to the public and the expectation had been such that in just two months the main observatory had more than one million visitors (Tobu Group, 2012)

⁶ On November 17, 2011, it was recognized as the world's tallest tower by the Guinness World Records.

(View Figure 5).⁷

Since the beginning of the project, the tower's color and illumination were also relevant elements in the design to reinforce the symbolism of its Japanese essence and originality. It was decided that its structure had "an original color based on 'ajiro', the lightest shade of Japanese traditional indigo blue" (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2013,

⁷ As part of the Skytree complex, called Tokyo Skytree Town, a subway and train terminal and a massive commercial and cultural center were built. The commercial complex was named Tokyo Solamachi (in Japanese Tokyo Soramachi, meaning "Tokyo's skytown").



Figure 5. The Tokyo Skytree along with the Asahi Beer Hall and the Asahi Flamme d'Or, view from the Sumida River. Photo by the author.

para. 2). This shade, named “Skytree white”, was said to represent the traditional artisan culture of Edo still present in the Sumida/Taito area with a twist to indicate the advancement into the future (Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015b).

On the other hand, its illumination was decided to have two basic patterns. Miyavi, an Edo-purple and gold combination, that was said to symbolize Edo’s traditional aesthetic sense; and, Iki, a blue and silver arrangement, representing the strong spirit and disposition of Edo’s commoners (Nikken Sekkei Ltd., 2011; Tobu Railway Co. Ltd. & Tobu Tower Skytree Co. Ltd., 2015b).

From the very start, the owners, designers, architects and engineers behind this project intended to create a bond between the tower and the people of Tokyo and Japan. They aimed for the common Japanese citizen to feel close to and represented by the new landmark and they have been considerably successful.

Tokyoites were very interested in following the evolution of the tower since the beginning. Numerous people, in an amateur fashion, took pictures of the process of construction from diverse points in the city. A demographic group particularly active in this practice was that of over 60 year-old men. Many of them retirees or owners of small businesses, they took as their hobby to document by photograph the progress of the Skytree. According to the most common comments during interviews, they considered the construction of such massive tower to reflect the national creativity, work culture and community. They felt close to the thousands of workers that everyday put their lives on the edge; they said they felt the passion they were putting in their work aiming for a national goal.

Hence, when the Tōhoku earthquake happened and the Skytree showed its resistance, it was only expected that it were promptly assumed as the ultimate symbol of the national identity and spirit.

This was further supported by Japanese media. In realistic contents, the narratives in news and documentaries usually intertwined the coverage of the rescue and rebuilding actions after the disaster of March 11th with the story behind the construction of the Skytree and the people working there, highlighting Japanese people’s resilience and ability to face unexpected circumstances.

In fictional contents, a prominent example is the television family drama, *Inu wo Kau to iu koto, Sky to wagaya no 180 nichi (Raising a dog, my family’s 180 days with Sky)*, produced by TV Asahi and broadcast nationwide between April 15 and June 10, 2011,

during the final stages of construction of the Tokyo’s Skytree and after the earthquake. The story focused on a young couple with two small children living nearby the construction site, in one of the working-class apartment buildings of the area, and how a dog changed their lives for the best. The name given to the dog was “Skytree” in honor of the tower that the father and daughter admired and eagerly expected to be finished. The narrative made use of the Skytree and its building process, as well as the temperament and spirit of Skytree the dog, to refer to the hardships and setbacks in life and how a strong spirit can turn those adversities into opportunities to become a better self.

Through such narratives and after its public opening, the Tokyo Skytree has become a landmark broadly loved by Tokyoites and Japanese in general. Not only the Skytree itself, but also those locations like the Sumida River or Asakusa, from where its silhouette stands out, have become favorite places for Japanese to visit and admire.

Regardless of the burden for the noise and traffic detours during construction and for the sudden increment in people and traffic during the first months since its inauguration (Aoki, 2012), for locals the tower’s symbolism remains positive. They feel it not only represents the resourcefulness, group work and spirit of Japanese people, but also a bright future tied to past struggles and knowledge.

Conclusion

The Tokyo Tower and the Tokyo Skytree complement each other to embody, on the skyline of Japan’s capital, two different stages in Japan’s history, symbolizing diverse elements of the national identity.

Built just after the ending of the Allied Occupation and the reconstruction after the war, in the middle of an industrialization and modernization period emulating the elite Western nations led by the United States, and at the beginning of an economic prosperous era, the Tokyo Tower represents the successful and wealthy post-war Japanese society. It symbolizes the aspirations of Japan and its determination in regaining a place as a powerful and recognized nation. Since the 1990s, with the launch of diverse illumination patterns, it has also become a symbol of romance and dreams, particularly favored by younger generations.

On the other hand, erected during a less prosperous era, surviving and showing its strength amid one of the most difficult crises that the nation has faced in decades, the Tokyo Skytree represents the comeback of Japan to its roots and its essence. It has become a symbol of Japanese community, of people’s national spirit and resilience, of their pride in their past



Figure 6. Illuminations of the Tokyo Skytree, view from the Sumida River. Above: The Tokyo Skytree in Miyavi illumination. Below: The Tokyo Skytree in Iki illumination. Photos by the author.



Figure 7. A night view of the Tokyo Skytree from Asakusa. Photo by the author.

and confidence in their future.

Although the Tokyo Tower has left its place as main broadcasting tower in the country to the Skytree, there is no doubt that both landmarks will continue to be part of Tokyo's landscape, regularly portrayed in Japanese media and cherished by Japanese people as emblems of their history and identity.

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