

# Marie Kondo brings Japaneseness to America



The tidying guru's complex relationship with America

Gil Asakawa  
Columnist

I've been following the worldwide career of Marie Kondo with bemusement since her first book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, was published in the United States in 2014.

I've watched from a distance as friends have embraced Kondo's single-minded prescription for people to clean up their lives, physically and emotionally, by focusing not on what to toss out but instead what to keep that "sparks joy" for them.

I've followed this fad—which can feel a little bit like a cult—sweep the world from afar because, frankly, I'm not a tidy person.

Recently, I've gotten a closeup introduction to Kondo as a personality and her somewhat complicated relationship to Americans through her Netflix series, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*.

In each episode, Kondo visits the homes of people in the Los Angeles area, where she now lives with her husband/manager and their two daughters. Ranging from a Japanese American couple of empty-nesters to an African American family, a gay couple, a lesbian couple, a widow awash in her late husband's things—the show is a veritable cornucopia of diversity, equity and inclusion. Each episode tugs at the heart and gives lots of tips and ideas for viewers to tidy up their own homes... and lives.

The second episode in particular touched us because it featured a Japanese American couple, who are like a lot of third-generation Japanese Americans we know. Their home was a mish-mash of Japanese cultural items among very typical American furnishings, and the wife made shy attempts to speak Japanese to Kondo—the kind of limited words and greetings almost all Japanese Americans know.

We felt strongly that their penchant for hoarding was the ripple effect of their families' wartime incarceration during the Second World War, and it was powerful to see Kondo curious about and recognizing the pain that still held a pall over some of the family artifacts.

The series' popularity, which puts Kondo's pixie-like personality front and center, made her a lightning rod for racial and



PHOTO COURTESY NETFLIX

Marie Kondo's Netflix show, *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* has become a worldwide phenomenon.

anti-Japanese sentiment last month over a controversial tweet (now-deleted) by American social justice, feminist and socialist author and intellectual Barbara Ehrenreich. "I will be convinced that America is not in decline only when our de-cluttering guru Marie Kondo learns to speak English," she wrote.

After a torrent of criticism calling out the inherent racism in her comment, Ehrenreich took down her tweet and posted a non-apol-

ogy: "I confess: I hate Marie Kondo because, aesthetically speaking, I'm on the side of clutter. As for her language: It's OK with me that she doesn't speak English to

*"Each episode tugs at the heart and gives lots of tips and ideas for viewers to tidy up their own homes... and lives."*

her huge American audience but it does suggest that America is in decline as a superpower."

Hey, I'm on the side of clutter too, but that view of diminishing American "power" is jarringly

stupid. It's as old-school as the Cold War, a shocking and disappointing backward worldview coming from someone who's supposedly progressive, liberal and

forward-looking. And it reveals that the ugly racist underside of the "politically correct" façade can still fester just beneath the surface of not just white supremacists but also people who should know better.

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# Sakura: A reminder of JC history in Victoria



Reflecting on cherry blossom season while in Victoria

Caroline Ishii  
Columnist

Growing up, I remember when my mother would play her favourite record of Japanese traditional folk music and she would sing along. One of her favourite songs was *Sakura, Sakura*, celebrating the beauty of cherry blossoms in full bloom. Even now when I see *sakura*, there is an automatic response to sing the opening lines to the song aloud or quietly in my mind when people are around.

I never realized what an impact *sakura* (cherry blossoms) would have on my life.

Currently spending time in Victoria, B.C., I am fascinated by cherry and plum trees blossoming all over the city. Victoria boasts one of the mildest climates in Canada, so it's usually the first city to start blooming, often months before the rest of the country. The blossoms remind me of *hanami*, the centuries-old practice in Japan of picnicking

under a blooming *sakura* or *ume* (plum) tree. It is one of the things I loved most about being in Japan.

## Sakura and Hanami

In Japan, the blossoms were spectacular during *hanami* but what touched me most was the deep appreciation, respect and wonder the Japanese have for the blossoms.

While the cherry blossoms in Canada may signify the arrival of spring, in Japan they have deeper meaning. The cherry blossoms come once a year for a short time and for the Japanese, represent life itself. There is beauty in life, which is fleeting, so we need to appreciate it fully while we have it.

With the approach of warmer weather front, the Japanese Meteorological Agency tracks the *sakura zensen*, the progress of flowering cherry blossom trees and provides daily forecasts on news programs. The Japanese pay close attention to these forecasts and turn out in large numbers at parks, shrines and temples with family and friends to hold flower-viewing picnics with special food and drink.

## Why are there so many cherry trees in Victoria?

I wondered why there are so many Japanese cherry trees in Victoria.

It was intriguing that Canadians of Japanese ancestry were uprooted from their homes and relocated to camps in the interior during the Second World War,



PHOTO CREDIT: RUBY FUKUMOTO

The winning float from Victoria's Japanese Community Association, the association then donated the prize money of \$300 to the city to purchase 1,013 trees. Year: 1937

including my grandfather Ishii and his family, while the Japanese cherry trees in Victoria, Vancouver and along the B.C. coast, remained rooted and became more endearing to communities.

In the 1930s, Victoria City Parks superintendent Herb Warren began a campaign to replace the overgrown roadside native trees whose roots were heaving sidewalks and blocking sewage drains. Japanese flowering cherry trees were the right size, upright and ornamental. Warren envisioned canopies of

blossoms to attract visitors and new residents.

However, the Depression-era parks committee could allocate only so much toward tree stock and labour. Instead the cam-

*"She would sing along. One of her favourite songs was Sakura, Sakura, celebrating the beauty of cherry blossoms in full bloom."*

paign's boost came from Victoria's Japanese community.

In 1937, Victoria held parades to celebrate the 75th anniversary of its incorporation. A float sponsored by Victoria's Japanese Community Association was

admired and praised, and won a cash prize of \$300. The association donated the prize money to the city for the purchase of 1,013 Japanese flowering cherry trees for Beacon Hill Park and the city's boulevards.

Since that time, people with ties to Japan have donated cherry trees

as gifts in Victoria, Vancouver, and along the B.C. coast. In the 1930s, the mayors of Japanese cities, Kobe and Yokohama, presented Vancouver's park board

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with 500 Japanese cherry trees for planting at the Japanese Canadian War Memorial in Stanley Park to honour Japanese Canadians who served in the First World War. In 1958, Japanese consul Muneo Tanabe followed up with another 300 cherry trees as “an eternal memory of good friendship between our two nations.”

In 1959, Shotaru Shimizu, former owner of a 30-room New Dominion hotel in Prince Rupert, B.C., arranged for 500 Japanese cherry blossom trees to be imported and planted in the city. His generosity is remarkable because it occurred after the forced wartime relocation in 1942, of himself and his family, along with confiscation of their property and goods, and the postwar ban on returning to the coast to live.

Today, Vancouver is famous for its thousands of blossoming trees during springtime. More than 40,000 cherry trees line the streets and live in the many parks of the city. In Victoria, the beautiful pink and white blossoms are a trademark part of the city, attracting tourists and bringing locals pride and joy.

Ann-Lee Switzer co-author of the 2012 book, *Gateway to Promise: Canada’s First Japanese Community*, explains the significance of the cherry blossoms,

“For residents and visitors alike in Victoria, spring only comes alive when the *sakura* appear. The plum blossoms come out



PHOTO CREDIT: GORDON SWITZER

Trutch Street has some of the oldest sakura trees in Victoria, B.C.

earlier, but the days still hold a chill in the air. But towards the end of March when the cherry blossoms begin to burst out, everyone can feel true spring in the warm air. The *sakura* represents a renewal of the cycle of the year as no other event. If the *sakura* did not bloom each spring in the city, a void would be felt by all.”

How peaceful cherry blossoms created a heated debate in Victoria

In late February 2019, the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society (VNCS) president Tsugio Kurushima was asked to comment to

media about the City of Victoria replacing its flowering cherry trees with native tree species. The rationale from the parks department was that native trees are better suited to the effects of climate change than the imported

*“If the sakura did not bloom each spring in the city, a void would be felt by all,” says Switzer.*

cherry trees.

The VNCS mounted a campaign to lobby against any uprooting of cherry trees, including issuing a news release and recruiting a tree biologist expert, Dr. Patrick von Aderkas, from the

Centre for Forest Biology, University of Victoria. Dr. von Aderkas contradicted the city’s position that cherry trees are more susceptible to climate change. He stated that cherry trees have excellent adaptation capabilities regarding climate change better than most native species.

In media interviews, the VNCS president expressed his opposition and sadness at the proposal to remove the cherry trees because of the historic connection of the trees and the Japanese Canadian community and that they are an iconic feature of Victoria

that would be missed by everyone.

Kurushima explained the significance of the blossoming trees, “It was a gesture from the immigrant community to thank Victoria and Canada for allowing us to start a new life in Canada.” He added, “it’s disappointing that City Hall has failed to consult with Victoria’s Japanese community and the wider community about council’s plans that could uproot history.”

Shortly after the VNCS news release went out, the VNCS got a call from Victoria’s Mayor Lisa Helps who stated it was never the intent of the city to replace the cherry trees. She said that one of the councillors misunderstood their tree management plan and gave out wrong information in an interview which led to this misunderstanding.

Victoria’s city council passed a motion on Feb 28, 2019. It recognizes the historic importance and symbolic significance of cherry blossom trees, encourages that cherry trees be maintained as part of the city’s tree management program, and that the mayor would write to the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society to express appreciation for their historic gift and clarify the city’s policy regarding the cherry trees.

Because of the proactive and diligent work of the VNCS, the cherry trees will remain a feature of Victoria for the foreseeable future. Although this issue has

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The fact that Netflix chose to have an interpreter on the show and have Kondo speak much of the time in Japanese (she can speak English, but may be shy about her accent, a typical Japanese trait of self-effacement) is a great sign that America is becoming more tolerant, and not slipping in stature in the world.

And while we're talking language, let's get this straight: *Amurricans* can't seem to pronounce Kondo's name correctly. Her last name is NOT pronounced like "condo" in "condominium." It's "KOHN-doh," like "cone" only shorter. Since she spells her name for westerners as "Marie," I guess I can't correct that, except I'd bet in Japan it's pronounced "Mah-RHIH."

The show has gotten positive reviews outside of Ehrenreich's dumb comment, so her language isn't hurting Kondo's celebrity brand.

Her Japanese is either interpreted by omnipresent yet never intrusive Marie Iida, who is awesome at converting Kondo's rapid-fire Japanese into un-stilted conversational English, or translated into subtitle captions on the screen. Anyone who's watched a Japanese movie or anime with subtitles knows this is not a sign of the decline of Western Civil-

ization.

Kondo is a perfect package for Western television: it's easy to assume she's just cute and hard to take seriously, but instead her confidence commands a powerful presence that demands respect.

She has mastered her processes and can show people worldwide with or without language barriers how to fold clothes or use small boxes to organize the flotsam and jetsam of an unruly closet, garage or kitchen pantry.

Her "KonMari" method—short for Kondo Mariko (as she's known in Japan)—is a brilliant market-

sense if you're interested in cutting clutter in your environment. Instead of tossing out as much as you can stand, Kondo's brilliant perspective is to decide what you want to keep—by seeing if those items, books, photos or clothes "spark joy" in you. It's a positive affirmation of embracing the things in your life that matter, not a guilt-tripping need to cut away stuff willy-nilly.

But the KonMari method isn't for everyone.

For instance, I've never known a single journalist—including myself—whose desk didn't look like the aftermath of a natural disaster.

We like it that way. My surroundings would probably give Marie Kondo a heart attack.

So I appreciate her stardom, and am glad for Kondo's growing empire of tidy people. She's bringing Japanese values—and her quirky take on them—to America. That's a good thing, as we get past the racists and haters and she becomes part of the American mainstream.

I might even fold some of my clothes and stand them up in my drawers. But beyond that, I'm happy to watch her from amidst my papers, cables, gadgets and stacks of stuff, thank you very much.

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For more from Gil Asakawa, visit: [www.nikkeiview.com](http://www.nikkeiview.com)



PHOTO CREDIT: GORDON SWITZER

Sakura at Hatley Castle near Victoria, the garden was established in 1907.

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dissipated, the VNCS says it will remain vigilant.

**What sakura mean to me**

*Sakura* in B.C. are a reminder of the Japanese communities that once thrived here but were uprooted due to war and prejudice. They represent the spirit of the Japanese Canadians who were interned.

Despite being exiled from their homes into camps and stripped of their possessions, they persevered. They understood that life and beauty are precarious like cherry blossoms so we must appreciate what we have and go on despite difficult circumstances.

Despite cramped shacks and harsh weather conditions, they stood upright and remained proud. They faced hatred and prejudice before, during and after

the Second World War and didn't break.

After the war, they flowered against all odds, not being able to go back to their homes and businesses after the camps, having their possessions sold, and being left with almost nothing.

With future generations, including myself, there is renewal and forgiveness. We must remember the struggles of our ancestors and bring this compassion to strangers who are different from us and we may not understand. By doing this, we plant seeds for true understanding and new growth.

Centuries later, the words of Kobayashi Issa, Japanese haiku poet and Buddhist priest, are relevant today more than ever,

*In the cherry blossom's shade, there's no such thing as a stranger.*

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