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Japanese Culture Abroad

When Japanese popular culture travels abroad, it is experienced differently by varied audiences and therefore fundamentally transformed from its original state within Japan. Ultimately, the language barrier, different cultural views, and selection bias, and lack of immersion offer a different view of the popular culture found in Japan.

Most people abroad consuming Japanese popular culture do not speak the Japanese, or are not fluent enough to understand precisely what is trying to be said. Even with the most accurate translations, some meaning will always be lost, since different languages are never perfectly analogous. We can see the effects of this when we watched *Kamikaze Girls* simply by looking at the title in both English and Japanese. The original Japanese title is *Shimotsuma Monogatari – Yanki-chan to Rolita-chan*, which is translated to *Shimotsuma Story – Yankee Girl and Lolita Girl*. Both titles have very different connotations, which affects the view and expectations of the movie before even seeing it. Even if the more accurate translation was used for the English title, some meaning is still lost, since the English language has no equivalent to the *chan* suffix. Viewed abroad, it is also unlikely the viewer would know much, if anything, about Shimotsuma and its stereotypes. If the location is merely a backdrop, or is fairly straightforward, then this lack of information may not be that important. However, when Shimotsuma is satirized, there is a significant loss of information that viewers abroad likely would not even notice is missing.

Nuanced terms like Yankee and Lolita are also transformed once taken out of Japan. I had no background knowledge of what a Yankee would be described as in Japan, and what I did know of Lolita fashion is essentially just that it existed. I suspect most other people outside of Japan are similarly ignorant regarding Japanese subcultures. This perspective transforms the film from one about two girls who belong to very different groups to a film about two girls who are just very different, which takes away some of the meaning. Additionally, it is unclear to outsiders if these girls are conforming to the gender roles associated with these subcultures or subverting them. While the internet can be useful here when it comes to looking up terms like Yankee and Lolita, it is still hard to fully understand what they mean just by reading about them. However, by seeing the girls as people first and group members second, outsiders to Japanese pop culture can focus more on the characters themselves, rather than what they represent. In this way, the outsider's interpretation is not necessarily lesser. Instead, it just naturally focuses on a different aspect of the film.

The same thing occurs in *Princess Jellyfish* when Tsukimi describes herself as a *fujoshi*. This is translated as female *otaku*, which, aside from questionable accuracy, relies on the premise that the reader knows what an *otaku* is as well. Normally *otaku* is translated to mean something like nerd or dork, but now we run into the issue that different societies respond to these terms in different ways. Here in the United States – where the rise of tech giants like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have shown that geekdom can be profitable, and comic book characters are the stars of blockbuster movies – it has become more socially acceptable to call oneself a nerd, and dork can be seen as a cute term of endearment. These words have lost much of the negative context that they once had here, and that *otaku* seems to still have in Japan.

The nerd vs. otaku differences, in addition to showing how language is difficult to accurately translate, indicates the wider issue of trying to view Japanese popular culture through a different cultural lens. For example, while the United States and Japan view similar traits as being masculine or feminine, a number of American stereotypes for both genders are seen as not socially acceptable in Japan. Four items originally categorized as masculine by the Bem Sex Role Inventory – dominant, aggressive, self-sufficient, and individualistic – were determined to be not desirable for Japanese men, while one item originally categorized as feminine – yielding – was determined to be not desirable for Japanese women (Sugihara; Katsurada). With different views on what it means to be “properly” masculine or feminine, it is inevitable that Americans, or anyone not from Japan, interpret Japanese popular culture in ways it would not be interpreted within a Japanese context. A narrative about an individualistic, aggressive man would be read very differently by Japanese audiences (who would disapprove of the character) and American audiences (who would approve of the character). These differing views can drastically affect the meaning of the narrative.

The Japanese popular culture that makes it abroad is not an accurate representation of Japanese pop culture. The Japanese government’s creation of the Ambassadors of Cute is just one example of this (Miller). This campaign grossly misrepresents Japanese popular culture by simplifying the three Ambassadors into very basic stereotypes of their schoolgirl, Lolita, and Harajuku personas. It also shows a predominantly masculine view of popular culture, as all of this was orchestrated by men, even if the three ambassadors are women. As Miller states, “Women and girls are constrained in Cool Japan ideology, and are not usually represented as shaping, resisting, creating or critiquing Japanese popular culture” (18). While it is unclear how

prolific or influential this campaign really is, it shows that the Japanese government is actively trying to package and transform Japanese popular culture as it gets shipped abroad.

Aside from the government pushing a skewed view of Japanese culture, even Western individuals themselves select a skewed example of Japanese culture to absorb. People will self-select what is interesting to them, and so they will never have a comprehensive view of Japanese popular culture as a whole. Culture does not exist in a vacuum, and seemingly unrelated parts of some culture will still have an effect on each other. This does not mean that to have an accurate understanding of some culture someone must partake in all aspects of that culture. For example, I don't find reality television that interesting, so I have never watched anything related to the Kardashians. Still, I am aware that they exist and I can understand references to them when they occur in other aspects of American culture. While I self-select what is interesting to me, I still have a comprehensive view of American culture because I am exposed to it. When Japanese popular culture travels abroad, this total exposure becomes impossible, allowing people to miss out on crucial aspects of Japanese culture without even realizing it, simply because it is something they have no desire to seek out.

Since the very nature of taking a culture abroad prevents total exposure and immersion, those who experience some culture abroad are also prevented from engaging in participatory culture. Someone abroad cannot go to book signings, or festivals, or fully engage with others involved in the local culture. As participatory culture becomes more prevalent, fans engage more and more with the mainstream media (Jenkins). This makes it harder for someone physically outside of this cultural bubble to experience this culture in an accurate way. Even if someone was culturally omniscient, in the sense that they somehow were fully aware of all aspects of Japanese popular culture, simply by being abroad they could never be omnipresent, or

even just present. Part of understanding popular culture is taking part in and experiencing it, so without this option it is inevitable that the culture is transformed.

As discussed by Dorothy Hobson in her essay “Women Audiences and the Workplace”, the cultural significance of watching television has more to do with the discussions about the show than the show itself. This analytical approach can be applied to Japanese popular culture as well. Someone can watch all the anime they want, but if there is no one to discuss it with, it is just passive entertainment, not active involvement in a culture. Simply by not being in Japan it is harder to find people to discuss Japanese culture with, but due to the internet this is becoming less and less difficult. It is easier than ever to use the internet as a tool to connect with people with similar interest and have these discussions about anime, manga, or whatever part of Japanese culture someone is interested in. However, we still run into two problems here: that any resulting conversations will likely not involve Japanese people simply due to the language barrier, and that by discussing these things with like-minded people, those involved will not have many differing opinions. It is difficult to gain a better understanding of a culture when someone is surrounded by those who reinforce their own opinions, instead of challenging these opinions and offering a broader view.

Essentially, while the internet can be a helpful tool to augment understand of Japanese popular culture, culture differences, like the language barrier and different ingrained culture views, affect the way we view Japanese popular culture. Additionally, it is difficult to fully understand a culture without immersion, which is inherently impossible when experiencing a culture abroad.

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