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0521637295 - The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures

Edited by D. P. Martinez

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Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures

D. P. MARTINEZ

Japanese popular culture is so rich and varied that no single book could do justice to it, and this volume is only one recent attempt to describe the “worlds” to be found under the deceptively simple heading of “popular culture”. The chapters in this book present a variety of topics, ranging from traditional sumo to the more recently successful introduction of football. The book’s contributors include Japanese as well as British, Icelandic and North American writers, all of whom offer a diversity of views of what Japanese popular culture is and how it is best approached and understood. The unity of the book lies in its predominantly anthropological approach – of the ten contributors five are anthropologists; the others include a linguist, two experts on literature, a journalist and a film theorist – and in its implicit assumption that Japan is the unit of analysis. But, we might ask, as Yoshio Sugimoto did in the first book of this series (1997): which Japan? Male manager-dominated middle-class Japan? The Japan of the Kantô region, dominated by Tokyo, or the Japan of the Kansai region where Osaka and Kyoto are the important cities? Is it urban Japan or rural Japan, the Japan of small nuclear families or of the single young woman? Is there one Japanese society? The essays in this book argue against the view of a single Japanese culture. Yet we cannot ignore the common assumption that Japan the nation and Japanese society are one single thing: in fact that *is* the assumption upon which most nation-states are constructed (Gellner 1983). While the reality of contemporary Japan is far more complex than any single model could well describe (cf. Mouer and Sugimoto 1990; Weiner 1997), it would be simplistic to ignore the connection between the nation-state, with its ideology of a shared “Japaneseness”, and popular culture.

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If asked, most Westerners probably could outline what this image of Japan is: a homogeneous society, where hierarchy and formality continue to be important. A country where men still are dominant and all work for large companies as modern “samurai” businessmen. Japanese women are held to be gentle, submissive and beautiful, and yet also appear in the foreign media as pushy mothers obsessed with their children’s education. Japanese children, by extension, must be miserable automatons who do nothing but study all day and half the night. Japanese society is portrayed as one where esthetics and harmony are highly valued, and yet feudal violence lives on in the guise of the *yakuza* (gangsters). In short, images of this modern state still depict it as a place of contradictions, difficult to understand for any outsider naive enough to try. Matters are not helped by the fact that the Japanese themselves hold these images up as valid representations of their own society.

Anthropologists should be foremost in debunking some of these images of modern Japan, but they must do so in the face of a national culture which stresses similarity over difference. In this Japan can be compared to many other modern nation-states. As Anderson (1991) notes in his important analysis of modern nationalism, one of the factors crucial to the development of the nation-state was the invention of the printing press and, as a result, the appearance of the first mass media: newspapers and novels. Both media assumed that readers shared a common language, a set of common experiences understood by all, a basic level of literacy common to a large portion of the population, and a capitalist economic system which would market the mass-produced newspapers and books. Homi Bhabha picks up this theme in his introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), expanding on the idea that the modern “imagined community” which is the nation requires its own forms of narration.

I have argued elsewhere that we might best understand these forms of narration, which are embodied in various types of the mass media, as myth (1992): myth not as false history, but rather as a series of continually re-worked narrations which reflect and reinforce the values of constantly changing societies. As Samuel and Thompson (1990) argue, these are the myths we live by: not neo-Marxist dominant ideologies, but something closer to a view of culture which shapes and is shaped by society. Approaching popular culture as *the* culture of the nation-state implies a unity of vision. Arguing that popular culture is part of the domain of the mythic acknowledges that the mass media have both a political, or ideological, dimension and a deeper, more symbolic and psychological aspect which allow the messages they convey to mean diverse things to different people at different times and to be shaped, re-worked and re-formulated over time.¹ Thus we can have a popular culture of the Japanese nation which also reflects the diversity of

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Japanese society at a given moment and which can also accommodate changes throughout time. Moreover, as a form of myth, popular culture is able to travel and be transformed, attaining the level of global culture as well.

As the chapters for this book were written, it soon became clear that aside from the mythic dimension there were three central themes which all the contributors touched on: gender, the question of global culture, and the shifting of boundaries within Japan. Yet, because of the complexity and diversity of Japanese society, these three categories should not be seen to be limiting; in fact they are linked in so many ways that any discussion of these themes raises new issues, questions and interpretations at every turn. Before discussing these themes, however, it is necessary to define a few terms and to say something about the anthropological premises of this book.

Popular culture and anthropology

To the average person living in an English-speaking society, “culture” is a term with a variety of meanings, one of which is so common as to be unquestioned: culture is about the intellect, about high art, about distinctions between classes, about superior knowledge.² In contrast, *popular* culture is the culture of the masses; it is not about art or the intellect and is frequently held to be of no merit whatsoever. Debates surface in Britain every year as to whether the study of popular culture or the funding of forms of popular entertainment are somehow debasing our society. In this debate we see enacted all sorts of issues of class or distinction³ which to an anthropologist are fascinating, but not necessarily central to what an anthropology of popular culture should be *about*. That is a different problem altogether and one premised on another definition of “culture”.

In anthropology as well, the term “culture” reveals itself to contain a variety of meanings: it can refer to the materials produced by a given society (its art, as well as tools, baskets, buildings, etc.); or alternatively to the symbolic or signifying systems of a society. For a structuralist or postmodernist anthropologist there is perhaps no conflict in these two main anthropological meanings of the term: the materials produced by a society are also capable of having symbolic value, and thus the anthropologist’s job is to explore the relationships between material culture and symbolic culture. It is the interaction between these apparently separate aspects of society that must constitute the focus of an anthropological study of popular culture.

By defining the anthropology of popular culture as the study of the interaction between the *apparently* separate realms of the material and the symbolic, I am, in fact, saying nothing that an anthropologist would

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see as unusual. Whether studying the relationship between the wrapping of gifts and polite language in Japan (Hendry 1993); the meaning of body-painting and mythology in the Amazon (Lévi-Strauss 1968–77); or the presentation of bracelets, necklaces and the meaning of prestige in the Trobriand Islands (Mauss 1970 [1925]), anthropologists have always explored this interaction. What is unusual, perhaps, is that I am including popular culture in the same realm. For here we encounter an interesting problem: since the study of anthropology has long been associated with small-scale or pre-capitalist societies, many anthropologists remain suspicious of studies done in larger or more complex societies and popular culture is most often associated with the latter not the former. In fact, whenever we find traces of global popular culture in out-of-the-way places – rock music in Ladakh, India, for example – anthropologists are just as likely to label this as evidence that the original culture has somehow been spoilt.

Accepting the need to understand modern nation-state formations, and, beyond that, the globalization of modern culture, has led some anthropologists to come to consider popular culture in terms of consumption (Miller 1987). For Daniel Miller it is not necessarily how and what people produce that constitutes postmodern culture, but how people consume the products of capitalism, and what products, that constitutes culture. In doing this, anthropology would appear to be following the path trodden by sociologists and writers in media studies: but what anthropology has to offer is somewhat different from these well-established disciplines.⁴ Writers in cultural studies often take it for granted that the writer and reader share a common culture. In contrast, the anthropologist works in a more difficult terrain: making connections between various, if not all, aspects of a foreign culture in which she has studied and lived. In a world increasingly aware of shared technologies and in which images, music and products are also shared, this leaves the anthropologist working in the domain not only of similarities, but of continued differences. This is the domain where culture resists globalization: assimilating, appropriating and producing its own version of, for example, how to market and play football.

It is here that anthropologists have their new arena of study: in the connections made between areas as diverse as, say, cartoons and religion. It is the links or relationships between the “invented” traditions of the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) – its mass-produced culture, and the deeper connections to older culture, such as folklore – that constitute an exciting realm in the anthropology of modern societies. Nowhere is this more evident than in the anthropology of the popular culture of that most complex of modern (or postmodern) societies: Japan.

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Thus I wanted the contributors to the book not to be afraid to make connections between the world of the material and the symbolic, for it is precisely within this relationship that we find the domain of popular culture. This domain is never static; it is always changing, shifting and is often called upon to mean different things to different people. Whenever writers felt unsure of the connections they had made, I had only one bit of advice to give: ask a Japanese child, or young man, or young woman, what *they* think. So while each author makes different assumptions about what constitutes popular culture, the closest this book comes to fixing the terrain is in Chapter 10, with Jonathan Watts' use of Miller's (1987) theory of modern consumption.

Part of the reason for allowing this sort of conceptual fuzziness to remain can be explained by trying to define popular culture in the Japanese context. Kato Hidetoshi, one of the leading sociologists of Japan, makes an important point in the 1989 *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*. Translating "popular culture" into Japanese is not easy: he prefers "mass culture" or "*taishū bunka*". Immediately we are confronted with an important problem: are Western notions of culture, particularly the division between high and low or elite and mass culture, actually universally valid? Japan is an interesting example, for practices which we might label elite or high culture, have, under the guise of what is Japanese, become more and more the domain of the huge middle class. Japanese women are studying tea ceremony, classical dancing and classical instruments in large numbers and women are also the main supporters of imported Western high culture, such as the theater, classical music, ballet and opera. When several million people participate in "elite" practices, how can we not label them as popular, or part of mass culture? In this volume, with its emphasis on forms of culture which a Western reader could easily identify as "popular", we attempt to broaden the understanding of this issue for Japan by including analyses on sumo (Yamaguchi, Chapter 1), on the event of the royal engagement (Stefánsson, Chapter 8), and in the manner in which several of the chapters attempt to link the postmodern with older traditions (see especially the chapters by Gill, Standish and Napier).

Many of the contributors to this book implicitly argue against the notion raised by Powers, again in the *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture* (1989), that popular culture belongs to the realm of international culture. The idea is that in the USA this culture is homogenized until it loses its international quality, while in other countries, such as Japan, it retains its "foreign" label as part of its prestige or interest value. This might suit anthropologists who would like to dismiss popular culture as not worthy of study, arguing, for example, that it is not really of the society being studied or that it belongs to the domain of representations

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of representations, the hyperreal but not the real (Baudrillard 1983). This argument is not, in fact, taken up by Japanese scholars who have long been concerned with questions about the effects of the mass media on society, in a manner mirroring work done in the West. All the media in Japan are seen to have home-grown roots, whether or not the technology or some of the formats, or both, came from the outside. Thus, samurai dramas and kabuki theater, medieval novels and modern fantasy fiction, Buddhist cartoons and the *manga* (comics, cartoons) industry are so much a part of each other that it makes no sense to call the mass culture of Japan “international” in its character. Parts of it are international and export well, others can only be understood in a Japanese context. Moreover, it is ironic that the most international of “cultures” is actually elite culture, including the arts, opera and ballet: these are all aspects of culture which might easily be labeled global in that they command large international markets.

Finally, and it is most important to re-iterate the point, popular culture (and not just in Japan) is not only *mass* culture, the culture of the imagined community: it is culture consumed, and consumed in various ways, by different people. Another reason, then, that I have not asked the contributors to fall back on a particular theory intended to “explain” popular culture was that I wanted them to take the concept as a given and to explore its various uses and meanings.

The domains of male and female

Of all the themes to be found in this book, gender comes to the fore: every chapter refers to the male and female in Japanese society in one way or another. In fact, when I had to decide how to organize the book the most obvious section divisions were precisely those of gender, followed by sub-divisions of age groups. Part II covers the male domain, beginning with Tom Gill’s chapter on children’s programs (mostly aimed at boys); this is followed by Isolde Standish’s analysis of the blue-collar male adolescent love of *bôsôzoku* (reckless driving) spectacle; the section ends with Bill Kelly’s exploration of the white-collar male-dominated world of karaoke. Part III, “The Female Domain”, is structured in a similar way: Susan Napier closely examines the depictions of the pre-adolescent and adolescent girl in the world of *manga* (both comics and animation); Keiko Tanaka looks at how young women are targeted as powerful consumers by magazines; and Paul Harvey examines the links between housewives, nation-building and morning dramas on Japanese television.

Yet, these divisions are in some ways too simplistic and readers should be wary of drawing conclusions from the way in which I have chosen to

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arrange the chapters. For example, little Japanese girls watch many of the same violent programs which are targeted at boys; and I have seen Japanese girls just as fascinated by walking, roaring Godzilla toys as they are with their dolls. The film *Akira* may well have grown out of the blue-collar *bôsôzoku* sub-culture, but it was popular in a wide segment of the Japanese population; just as karaoke, so much a part of a white-collar man's life after work, is popular now amongst women as well as young men. *Manga* about pre-pubescent girls are read by a wide variety of people and are often created by men,⁵ just as important women's magazines may have their policies decided by their male owners (Tanaka, Chapter 6 in this volume). And all Japanese, from the 1950s onwards, have been exposed to the high ideals and aspirations depicted in morning dramas by the simple act of sitting with their mothers as they watched television.

Given this warning, what generalizations may be made about gender as represented in Japanese mass culture and what can be said about the relationship between age, gender and consumption? As almost every recent work on women in Japan has argued,⁶ there remain sharp divisions between the male and female domains in Japan and yet they are also held to be complementary and necessary for the construction of the social. It is generally held that women are associated with the inside, the private domain (*uchi*) and men with the outside, public domain (*soto*). Yet, as Susan Napier and Halldór Stefánsson in this volume note, the female was, and still is, often associated with the outside (*soto*), with outsiders and thus with dangerous powers; paradoxically, of course, these outsiders were necessary and had to be incorporated as "insiders", that is, as wives and mothers.

In contrast, the construction of maleness in Japan is rarely considered, but it can be said that, given its strong patrilineal emphasis, the men of a household are associated with the inside (*uchi*), although their work is often done in the public, outside domains. In essence women are aliens in the male domain and yet *must* enter this domain if society is to be reproduced. Thus, Japanese women are both a source of danger to the norm and the very means of perpetuating that norm. It then becomes possible to depict Japanese women as both symbolically dangerous (as does Napier), as well as the very source of all that is Japanese (as does Harvey), and thus able to mediate between the two poles (as Stefánsson argues): what is important to understand is that these are women at different points in their life-cycles. While as young unmarried workers they are depicted as vampires, goddesses and girl-children with wild powers, women are also targeted as powerful consumers: the wielders of large economic resources which are free to be spent on luxury and leisure items, such as trips abroad or fashion

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items (Tanaka), or consumer goods associated with new fads, such as soccer (Watts). Within the same society, the standard model of the middle-class and middle-aged Japanese housewife is of a woman at the center of the household, the one who makes all decisions: the good wife and wise mother, the bearer of all that is Japanese, who is also a powerful consumer and economic decision-maker.

Men, on the other hand, are rarely considered as part of the study of gender in Japan, although as Cornwall and Lindisfarne argue (1993) we cannot understand the construction of what is female in any society without seeing how it is constructed against and through what is male, and vice versa. Such constructions of gender are often complex and dynamic, so that although it is structurally neat to argue that Japanese women are associated with the outside and danger and men with the inside and stability, reality is far more difficult to pin down. And representations of reality reflect this difficulty. So men in Japan are also associated with traditional Japaneseness (Yamaguchi and Nagashima), the stable center which resists change; and, yet, they are also capable of being dangerous outsiders (Gill and Standish). The difference, perhaps, between the male and female case in Japan has to do with class and status: women might be said *always* to be dangerous “Others” even when they are “domesticated” as wives and mothers; in contrast it is only men on the margins – motorcyclists, gangsters, gamblers, etc. – who fall into this category. It could be said that women cannot free themselves of their ascribed status association with danger; men, on the other hand, by moving into the middle-class white-collar world of the company man, can change class and therefore leave the status group of marginal, dangerous outsiders.⁷ Elsewhere I have argued that even this simple model is complicated by considering age: a young woman is more dangerous than a middle-aged married woman, as is a young man, and so on (Martinez 1995).

Furthermore, both Chapter 1 by Yamaguchi Masao and the final section of the book, “Shifting Boundaries”, might well be read as examples of how some of the boundaries in Japan have shifted, or are in a never-ending process of shifting. Sumo, an ancient Japanese tradition suffused with religious symbolism, and linked to the world of the theater through kabuki as well as to the imperial family, is, as Yamaguchi reveals, as much a part of Japanese postmodern popular culture as are the imported sports of horse-racing and soccer. Moreover, as Stefánsson argues, sumo might be seen as a “masculine” aspect of Japanese modern culture, not yet ready to be polluted by contact with the outside world, while the more “feminine” imperial family is leading the way in making Japan a more “international” nation. The adoption of horse-racing and soccer (both introduced in the nineteenth century by the British) might

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also be seen as part of Japan's internationalization but, as Nagashima notes, it has taken women a long time to become part of the racing scene in Japan; and Watts outlines a century-long struggle to make soccer popular, which has finally succeeded by marketing the game as a product that could appeal to young Japanese women as well as men. The boundaries between male and female, inside and outside, what is dangerous and what is stable, are constantly being negotiated and it is in the arena of culture which is labeled popular that we can see some of this negotiation taking place. Paul Harvey's examination of women's morning dramas and their history explores well some of the facets of this symbolic "give and take".

The global and the local

It follows from what has been said that much of the book may also be read as different analyses on the themes of globalization and modern consumerism, for the success of each aspect of popular culture described is not uniquely a Japanese phenomenon. It might help to think of popular culture in general and of Japan in particular in terms of Marshall McLuhan's modern oral tradition (1966). Like the great oral epics of old, much of popular culture is in a form accessible to people everywhere and anywhere but, oh, how it changes in translation! Lee van Cleef was just as popular in Japan as Clint Eastwood, the hero of the westerns in which van Cleef was so often the villain. Godzilla in his early incarnations was favorite Saturday afternoon children's viewing in the USA, but as Gojira in Japan he has had a much longer – though not so varied – life. Japanese rock stars do not travel well, while British and American ones obviously do. Japanese films which are not greatly appreciated in Japan have become cinema classics in the West, while great Japanese favorites never make it to the West. As Kelly notes, the idea of karaoke has traveled, without any of the music so popular in Japan coming with it. Soccer now might be labeled the world's only truly global sport (if only those North Americans did not skew the picture) and horse-racing cannot be far behind. In the realm of children's culture, Thomas the Tank Engine has been a big hit throughout modern societies, while Postman Pat cannot be exported to Japan because his four fingers appear to be symbolic of Japanese *yakuza* (gangsters). And, in a case of never-ending borrowing, the *Jû Rengâ*, which became the *Power Rangers* in the US (with new Western actors intercut into the fighting scenes) have been re-imported to Japan with the Western actors dubbed into Japanese!

The examples could be endless, but the point is the same: we can dismiss popular culture as being somehow empty of meaning and not

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worthy of study and miss much of what is going on in all societies. Or it could be argued that the meaning of such representations is so culturally specific that it is impossible to understand the popular culture of other societies save in a Marxist relationship of ideology being imposed on the brainwashed consumers of the various media. Or it could be acknowledged that the relationship, as the above examples show, is much more complex – different consumers get different things from the mass media and are targeted as specific groups by manufacturers and advertisers (Moeran 1996). The question we might ask once more is how is it that an anthropology of popular culture continues to use a discourse now often derided by postmodern anthropological theory (cf. Moeran 1990; Mouer and Sugimoto 1990): that is, how dare we continue to write about Japan as a unity? How can we decide what is Japanese and what is alien? This question is central to an issue raised here earlier: the construction of the culture of the modern nation-state.

Thus, although the recent trend in modern anthropological studies of Japan is to try to move away from analyses of models of what *is* Japanese towards some more meaningful depictions of what it feels like to *try to be* Japanese (cf. Kondo 1990; Rosenberger 1992; Sugiyama-Lebra 1984), it must be understood that studies in the latter mode depend on the models so often derided in the former. The crucial point is that the rhetoric of the Japanese state remains one of a homogeneous national identity. In this Japan is similar to many modern nation-states in that it has had to construct a model of a unitary identity shared by all citizens (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Yoshino 1992). Identity no longer depends on religious models (although it may be based on such older models, just as Confucian ideals remain important in modern Japan), or on loyalty to one particular ruler/leader, but on the wider construct of the imagined citizenship of the imagined national community. This nationalism depends on the mass production of mass culture and, while the logic of capitalism (late or otherwise) demands diversification, the underlying logic of one identity (the Japanese) as different from that of their neighbors (let us say, Korea and China) remains crucial to the construction of the nation-state.

This construction is not, as has been noted so brilliantly by Carol Gluck (1985), easily arrived at. It is not, as Hobsbawm has argued, best understood as part of an analysis done only from “above”, but needs also to be “analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people” (1992: 10).⁸ We need to consider both the elite and common, the urban and rural (cf. Robertson 1991), and the normal and uncanny (cf. Ivy 1995). Most of all, it is not static (cf. Tobin 1992): the foreign is quite capable of being imported and “remade in Japan” and this is not only true of Japan, but of any modern nation-state.