

# A Year in Japan: Understanding Global Flows of Popular Culture

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During the 2012–2013 academic year, I had the privilege of teaching on Fulbright Grant at Japan Women's University and Kyoritsu University in Tokyo. Professor Yoko Shirai was not only instrumental in bringing me to JWU, but taught by my side in a US popular culture course and became a friend outside the classroom. My tenure in Japan was a rich exchange and one of the greatest experiences in my academic career, transforming my teaching and my understanding of international flows of popular culture, the complexities and realities of Japanese culture, and the American presence in Japan. Professor Shirai was an integral part of that transformation.

My project in Japan was to consider the dynamic relationship between US and Japanese popular culture. Upon my return to the United States, I was to take up the editorship of *The Journal of Popular Culture*. The journal was founded in 1967 by Ray Browne, who had split away from the Modern Language Association and the American Studies Association to introduce the academic study of popular culture, which he defined as the perspectives and experiences of ordinary people and the creative forms generally considered middlebrow or lowbrow. From the start, Brown had a view to the world and did not confine his interest to the United States. The journal's first essay on Japan was Masaaki Kishi's survey of images of Americans in Japanese popular fiction (1975), including servicemen who take war brides home, bumbling tourists who bring disease to Japan, and expatriate college instructors who serve as amateur detectives. Other scholars — both American and Japanese — would go on to regularly contribute articles on Japanese popular culture, with topics such as Valentine's day rituals, eighteenth-century popular Japanese literature, religion in Japan, Japanese hot rodders, Japanese consumer tastes and purchasing power, and, of course, manga and anime. Like my immediate

predecessor, Gary Hoppenstand, I was interested as an editor in maintaining and enhancing the international contributions to the journal, and I applied for a Fulbright to broaden my knowledge and understanding of the global flows and eddies of popular culture through contact with scholars outside the United States, like Professor Shirai.

In addition, I had served as Director of Michigan State University's Graduate Program in American Studies, which had an exchange program with Doshisha University (arranged by David Stowe) and thus had attracted several Japanese students to complete their PhDs with us. These were marvelous students who brought great vitality to the program, and wrote dissertations on popular culture topics such as 1960s American folk music, the comparative memory of the atomic bombings, and media images of lynching. Most returned to Japan to teach in universities like Shimane University (Makito Yurita) and Ritsumeikan University (Fumiko Sakashita). Our own students went to Doshisha University to learn Japanese language and culture. After my return to the United States, our PhD candidate Michael Blouin went to Doshisha University and ultimately produced a fine book, *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic: Specters of Modernity*, based on his studies there. This Japanese connection and personal contact were very important to my choice of Japan as a destination, as was Japan's reputation as a center for American Studies. American Studies in Japan has been a robust field, with many excellent scholars and a world-renowned professional organization: the Japanese Association of American Studies, founded in 1947. In Japan, I found a vibrant group of scholars — Hisako Yanaka (Kyoritsu U), Kazuko Ota (Kyoritsu U), Alex Watson (Japan Women's University), Taeko Hiraishi (Kyoritsu), Noriko Shimada (JWU), and Tomoko Tsuchiya (JWU) who were intellectually engaging, generous, and patient hosts.

The project I proposed was a blend of popular culture and American Studies.

Here is my description:

Japan and the United States have had a particularly rich, historic exchange of popular culture, from cowboy to samurai, from manga to baseball, from Disney to Sony, from *Pokemon* to *South Park*. The United

States and Japan, along with western Europe, exert the greatest influence on global popular culture, exporting images, styles, icons, and tastes that are eagerly digested by global consumers. In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has explored the diffusion, reception, adoption and adaptation of popular culture forms, with many works devoted to the influence of these two powerhouses of the media and culture industries. Popular culture has featured prominently in the cultural diplomacy of both nations, promoting economic trade and cultural aesthetics and values. With expanding global communications, people around the world instantly recognize and share aspirations through popular culture brands, icons, and celebrities making this field of study essential to cross-cultural understanding. Because of dramatic changes in the way media content is disseminated across the world, popular culture studies is a rapidly evolving field that benefits from scholarly collaboration. Although popular culture forms may carry civic virtues and cultural understandings, they are by no means static. They are dynamic in their meanings, meeting resistance and adaptation as they travel through producers, distributors and audiences. Understanding this dynamism is the most exciting dimension of the cross-cultural exchanges made possible by grants such as the Fulbright Teaching Award. The intersection between Japanese and US popular culture is an especially fruitful site of scholarly exploration, and I would bring considerable experience and institutional benefits in carrying out such an award.

In applying for a Fulbright Teaching Award in Japan, I have three goals: to promote an in-depth understanding of the economic, political, and social contexts of U.S. and Japanese popular culture as they are globally received, to gain understanding of the various ways that young people perceive US popular culture in Japan, and to stimulate transnational scholarly projects on the exchange of Japanese and U.S. cultural forms.

This is an exciting time to teach popular culture to undergraduates, most of whom are immersed in evolving technologies and media forms that shape their lives in ways they tacitly accept without much questioning. Undergraduate students are often surprised to learn that many of the cultural forms they consume are not really “American” at all, but result from a series of cultural transfers. For example, the ring tone was introduced by the Finnish company, Nokia, while the original Nike running shoe was inspired by the Tiger, a shoe made by a Japanese manufacturing firm. In the insular United States, where few people read or watch international news, students are also surprised to learn that not everyone in

the world is happy to see a continual flow of US television programming in English, from CNN International to MTV. The study of popular culture is an excellent subject through which students can explore the global crossroads of creativity and consumption, stimulated by the movement of commodities, people, and images. Although most students retain a strong sense of national pride, they gain a more nuanced approach to the concepts of nation and nationalism, the meaning of cultural goods, and the need for cultural sensitivity in a global marketplace.

With Japanese students, I hope to explore the relationship between nation and popular culture, the influence of American popular culture — from hip-hop to baseball — on Japan, the flow of Japanese cultural forms — from J-pop to J-horror — around the world, and the complex hybridizations of global media and consumer goods. For example, when Coke introduced Fanta Melon Cream Soda in Thailand, it used anime imagery and featured Japanese actors in its ads because it knew that young Thais were entranced with “J-lifestyle.” I am interested in stimulating discussions that compare Japan and the United States as loci of global cultural production and to examine how this cultural power translates into national and global identities and what hopes and fears it represents.

Looking back on this proposal, I can see immediately how much I gained from teaching in Japan. Most importantly, I had *overestimated* the presence and power of American popular culture in Japan, under the umbrella of the cultural imperialism thesis. This still widely accepted, but outmoded, thesis holds that the United States wields its empire not through military and governmental means, but through cultural export; through softpower, it imposes its values, customs, and manners on others, who have difficulty resisting the glut of its cultural products. The analysis is somewhat self-serving, in that Americans can believe that they have the most influential popular culture forms in the world. Although I was not entirely aware of how much I had absorbed this thesis, my brief immersion in the urban environs of Tokyo and my conversations with Japanese professors and students taught me that any such conclusions are naively simplistic. For example, with much of my focus on the United States, I was not fully aware of other — especially inter-Asian — cultural influences on Japan, like the strong presence of Korean music and television, which have grown by leaps and bounds over the past thirty years

(see Iwabuchi). (One of the professors with whom I taught stayed up very late on many nights watching Korean soap operas and was my helpful informant.) Nor, with my limited experience of Japan, did I realize how strongly Japanese culture maintains its own creative traditions, aesthetics, and understandings despite Disney and Coca-Cola and in the face of globalization. I had a realization, as I was standing in front of the classroom, that I was the one conveying American culture rather than simply explaining it. I was in danger of being the soft power, although my students and colleagues may have had more impact on me than I on them.

Professor Shirai and I co-taught a version of “US and the World,” a large lecture course in global flows of popular culture that I initially offered to undergraduate students at Michigan State University as part of the required core curriculum in the humanities. The course gives students a background in media analysis and cultural critique. In its initial incarnation, before I went to Japan, the course began by asking students to examine their social locations and their immediate participation as audiences of global media, and ended with an analysis of global trade agreements involving cultural goods. Along the way, we discussed the complicated spaces of border regions, the global advertising of skin whiteners, the spread of McDonald’s fast food business model, the adaptation and hybridization of music forms like jazz and hip-hop, the ways journalists from different countries covered the war in Iraq, the rise of national film industries that robustly compete with Hollywood, the growing sway of multinational media companies like Disney and 21st Century Fox, and the concerted effort of sports associations, celebrities, news media, and sporting-goods manufacturers to globalize the game of basketball. Students were supposed to come away from the course with expanded understandings of popular culture, the global trade in cultural goods, the export of cultural values, media consolidation and convergence, media effects, social construction, media franchises and formats, and content and discourse analysis.

When I arrived in Japan, I realized that Japanese students — all young women — did not have the cultural references I expected them to have, and at first I stumbled through a completely unfamiliar terrain with my own lack of cultural reference. The students and I communicated across a great cultural

divide, not least because I was teaching in English. There were immediate barriers of opaque classroom technologies with elaborate security systems, seemingly inexplicable class rosters with students ordered by assigned numbers, and a classroom environment so quiet and respectful that I wasn't sure what to do with it. Despite the familiarity of the classroom layout with a teaching podium, a projector, and student desks, I had no map to navigate this world, and never did "lost in translation" seem so appropriate. With their own cross-cultural experience and deep knowledge of American language, history and culture, Professor Shirai and my other Japanese co-teachers were essential bridges across the divide. Any success I had I certainly owed to them, but what they conveyed of my message remains somewhat of a mystery.

There were many surprises. I knew that a discussion of Disney, because of its strong presence in Japan, would provide us with some common ground. I was used to teaching American students about the global sway of Disney movies and theme parks from a somewhat cynical perspective critical of Disney's corporatization of the imagination. Even in the United States, Disney is sacred: a shared childhood experience of wonder and magic and a theme-park pilgrimage for many middle-class families. But American students' fondness for Disney is nothing compared to many young Japanese women's obvious pleasure in the Disney imagination. Many scholars have written about the glocalization of Disney in Japan: the theme park Tokyo Disney (followed closely by Disney Sea) has the third largest number of visitors of any theme park in the world, after Florida's Walt Disney World and California's Disneyland. Using Tokyo Disney as a case study, Israeli anthropologist Aviad Raz has written that at least between "first-world cores such as Tokyo and Los Angeles" the cultural exchange may mean that the recipient, rather than sitting by passively and silently, ends up appropriating, domesticating, and even "steering" the cultural import (12). What surprised me was how many of my Japanese students expressed an unexpectedly open, lively, vocal, collective passion when I showed them old Silly Symphonies by the Disney animators. At the sight of Walt Disney's early drawings of the bunny Oswald, several cried out, "*kawaii*!" Even though some of my Japanese colleagues expressed concern at a perceived frivolousness in the youth culture's romance with "*kawaii*," I found this affective response infectious. Now, I often show my American students a YouTube

video from the Japanese anime *Seinto Oniisan* (Saints Young Men) that depicts Buddha and Jesus on the Splash Mountain ride at Tokyo Disney. The blend of comical irreverence (devoid of sarcasm) and obvious fondness for these familiar global icons — not just the religious figures but the theme park ride — shows how important affect is in making sense of cultural globalization. Shared emotion steers these encounters as much as intellect.

Another surprise was my students' response to blue jeans. In this lecture, I used the story of Levis as a window into understanding global brands. My assumption was that most young people in the world must wear blue jeans, which originated in the United States as rugged working clothes and then became associated with youth rebellion in the 1950s, hippies in the 1960s, and global fashion in the 1980s and beyond. Blue jeans were once highly prized in the black market of the Soviet Union, and Levis knock-offs are still a hot item among Thai street vendors. Across the world, jeans are signs of America's exported casual style, even in the workplace, as when the jeans-clad President George W. Bush was famously photographed next to the suit-wearing Prime Minister Tony Blair. However, I saw very few people wearing blue jeans in Tokyo, and my Japanese women students didn't sport them in class. I soon learned of some telling reasons for this. The humid Tokyo climate is not very suitable to thick cotton blue jeans, which are hot and not quick-drying; therefore, adaptation of the fashion is restricted by a fact of nature: the weather. Furthermore, young Japanese people are global fashion trendsetters, rather than imitators. Living in one of the most fashionable shopping meccas in the world, where costuming is a public art, these young people assert their own cosmopolitan style. They don't simply consume, they create.

Teaching the structure of the romantic plot, I asked my Japanese students to develop their own version of a basic plot: boy meets girl, difficulties arise, difficulties are resolved, and boy and girl live happily ever after. In the contemporary US romance, the boy and girl are usually odd but socially equal personalities, who must overcome their individual idiosyncracies and hang-ups to successfully mate. The emphasis is on psychological transformation rather than cultural acceptance. Many of my Japanese students envisioned either a student / teacher relationship that was obstructed by parents or two young lovers who were challenged by a catastrophic health problem. Although these

variations are not unknown in US romantic fiction, their primacy for my Japanese students led me to wonder how the conventions of the romance might be differently emphasized, adapted, and steered according to culturally specific needs, desires, and expectations. Popular stories about student / teacher romances are now rather taboo in the United States, but Japanese students, to my surprise, felt no difficulty in conveying them. Romance is one of the most adaptable of genres, as evidenced by the spectacular success of Spanish telenovelas, Bollywood movies, and Korean television dramas, but little is understood about their cross-cultural transfer, reception, and adaptation.

As evidenced by these moments, my experience in the Japanese classroom unraveled many of my assumptions about the influence of American popular culture. With the help of my Japanese colleagues, I was also getting an education on the streets of Tokyo. Several major American holidays coincided with my stay in Tokyo, and I was fascinated to witness the ways in which Japan had incorporated Halloween and Christmas. Both of these holidays originated in Europe, but, beginning in the late nineteenth century, the United States put its stamp on them by emphasizing conspicuous consumption, often over religious significance. Indeed, very year at Christmas time, groups in the United States decry the crass commercialism now associated with the holiday and attempt to revive a sense of sacredness in the birth of Jesus. In Tokyo, where the Christian religion has little influence, Christmas has been embraced primarily for this commercial aspect. The emphasis on gift giving and the decorative elements of colorful lights and gift-wrapping fit well into Japanese culture. US corporations have taken full advantage of the attraction. In 2012, a Coca-Cola billboard loomed over a main thoroughfare of Tokyo with an advertisement — revived from the 1930s — of a happy, ruddy-faced Santa Claus drinking a Coke. It is easy to see why this bounteous mythical figure would appeal to Japan, which has bounteous mythical figures of its own among the seven lucky gods. The KFC fast-food restaurants in Japan also take advantage by dressing up KFC's plantation mascot Colonel Sanders in a Santa Claus suit. KFC (originally Kentucky Fried Chicken) has long been associated with Christmas, reportedly because, in the 1970s, a Christian mission school had ordered its Christmas dinner from KFC when it couldn't acquire the traditional holiday turkey (Whipp). The imposition of the reverential figure Santa

Claus on the corny mascot Colonel Sanders looks amusing to American eyes, but makes perfect sense as a blending of two commercial icons when the original context is removed. Although Christmas doesn't seem especially significant in Japan, it is remarkable on the streets of Ginza as a commercial purification of the holiday from its spiritual roots.

In the last decade, Tokyo has enthusiastically embraced Halloween, perhaps because of Disney's influence. Tokyo Disney imports the myths, icons, and commercialism of American culture, including Halloween. Like Christmas, Halloween was originally a Catholic religious celebration — the evening before All Saint's Day — which, in turn, was adapted from older traditions, such as the Celtic Samhain. A further transformation occurred in the United States, where, like Christmas, Halloween became a huge money-making enterprise. In the United States in the last decade, the commercialism of Halloween has steadily expanded, not only in the sales of candy and costumes, but in the increasingly elaborate home decorations, which now rival the garish Christmas displays. Tokyo Disney decorates for Halloween and has a Halloween parade with dancing Disney figures and floats. It's all carefully timed and regulated, with hoards of spectators cordoned off and policed. Tokyo Disney allows visitors to enter in costumes, but only of Disney characters. With Tokyo's lavish love of costuming, Tokyo Disney is filled with impeccably detailed Alice in Wonderlands, Snow Whites, Prince Charmings, Cinderellas, Mad Hatters, Minnie Mouses, and Big Bad Wolves. In the United States, this level of costuming is only matched by Civil War reenactors who pay extremely detailed attention to historical accuracy.

But if the embrace of Halloween in Japan has been strongly influenced by Disney, the interesting parade is not in the theme park, but on the streets of Kawasaki. In 2012, I walked out of the JR station into a flash mob of dozens of zombies resurrecting Michael Jackson's "Thriller". The Kawasaki Halloween parade had a distinctly Japanese flavor. In the United States, Halloween is an opportunity to express individualism through fantasy costumes, but in Japan, much of the costuming is associated with group identity. For example, several young women were dressed as the logos of their telecom company. Others were costumed as regional mascots. Many costumes worked together as one: five young women dressed as lettuce, tomato, a beef patty, and two ends of a

bun walked together as a hamburger. Celebrants together reenacted Tim Burton movie scenes. Large groups of Power Rangers marched together near a float blaring Psy's universal YouTube hit, Gangnam Style. If Disney carefully controlled the meaning of Halloween by limiting choice, the Kawasaki Halloween parade is the quintessential Japanese interpretation, making the holiday its own by assembling fragments into group expression. It's difficult to see any coherent cultural imperialism at work here, as any imported signs are scrambled and reassembled.

Finally, I was surprised at the stiff competition with McDonald's, another brand associated with American cultural imperialism. As George Ritzer explains in his now classic study, *The McDonaldization of Society*, the company is often criticized for spreading a highly rationalized "fast food" model based on control, predictability, calculability, and efficiency. As my students explained to me, Japan's own Mosburger is preferred to McDonald's, and indeed Mosburger has many more outlets than McDonald's in Tokyo. According to my students, Mosburger beats out the competition not because it has perfected the fast food organizational model, but because it refutes it. Mosburger prides itself on locally sourcing its ingredients and taking more time to cook the food. My students saw the relatively extended cooking time as a sign that the food was of better quality, refuting the fast food model's emphasis on speed and efficiency. My encounters with US brands on the streets of Tokyo revealed that they had a more modest presence in Japanese culture than I had expected and have been interwoven as threads in a much larger tapestry.

At home here in the United States, I often incorporate discussions of Japanese popular culture into my lectures. I talk about the Japanese response to US brands, but I also show my students that US popular culture is not the center of the universe. For example, in a section on global flows of music, including international music events like the Eurovision Song Contest and Bob Geldof's benefit concerts, I talk about the Koohaku Uta Gassen (which I watched on New Year's Eve with Professor Shirai): the interweaving of global pop music and traditional songs, the expression of national identity, the opportunity for cultural responses to social problems (like the 2011 earthquake and tsunami), and the formation of one of the largest music markets in the world through the popularity of girl groups like AKB48. Introducing an analysis of fashion

and style, I use examples from Tokyo, which is a year ahead of New York but with offerings increasingly available through global sales circuits. I muse on the decorative presence of English in Japan, especially in advertising. When ISIS terrorists attacked Paris, I introduced my students to the special meaning of the rich cultural exchange between Paris and Tokyo and showed them the illumination of the Tokyo Tower with the French flag. Although I discuss media and popular culture in Ethiopia, India, Russia, Afghanistan, China, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Canada, and other parts of the world, I turn to Japan most frequently for another perspective. (References to Japan resonate with my Chinese and Korean students; although Michigan State University hosts a significant number of students from these countries, the population of Japanese students has significantly dropped.)

The only knowledge US students may have of Japan comes through its anime and manga. Most of the scholarship in English is on these forms. Like US cultural products in Japan, manga and anime are decontextualized and detached of cultural meaning in the United States except among avid fans. Despite the diversity of the US population, US media corporations are more resistant to incorporating foreign cultural forms intact, so that, for example, foreign television shows (ie. *The Office*, *Ugly Betty*, *Pop Idol*) are repackaged with US actors and adapted for US tastes. Most US news is national and local. Manga and anime have broken through that resistance, but are only a limited representation of Japanese popular culture, and of Asian popular culture in general. With the express purpose of dislodging the Western understanding of Asian popular culture as solely comprised of video games, manga, anime, and martial arts, I recently organized a special issue of *The Journal of Popular Culture* on Asian Popular Culture, co-edited by Yuya Kiuchi (a native of Tokyo) and Lisa Funnell (author of *Warrior Women: Gender, Race, and the Transnational Chinese Action Star*). As they write in their call for papers, the “range and diversity” of a transnational Asian popular culture has been overlooked: “In an increasingly connected world, Asian popular culture is expansive, multifaceted, mobile, and widely consumed.” In transnational communication pathways, Asian popular culture is at least as important as American popular culture and is essential to any study of global popular culture.

Ray Browne devoted his life to proving that the study of popular culture is

fundamental to our understanding of the workings of society. In a world interconnected through communications media, popular culture is the lingua franca. Few people in the world will not recognize the words “Apple” and “SONY.” International fandoms gather to discuss television shows like *Glee* (US), *Boys Over Flowers* (Korea), and *Marimar* (Mexico). Musical styles like hip hop and salsa carry across borders uniting people in common rhythms and understandings. Global celebrities — from Angelina Jolie to Nelson Mandela to Psy — serve as vectors of social and political meaning. With so many languages, styles, and customs represented, global popular culture is an immensely complicated field of study, but essential to making sense of our world. The only way we can successfully engage that complexity is by working together across national borders and languages. The academic friendship I shared with Professor Shirai and others was a beginning for me in that scholarly enterprise, and one that I hope to continue to share with students and colleagues in the years to come.

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