

Social Issues, Group Mentality, and
Cultural Essences in Japanese Film

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Introduction

Because of my major at my university being Japanese, having lived in Japan for a year, general interest in Japanese culture altogether, and not just because it is a requirement, I made the decision to take the Japanese Cinema film class. The class was conducted slightly different than I expected. I had gone in to the course expecting to watch films and discussed what we liked or did not like, compare the differences in culture, and watch a lot of enjoyable films. However, the course called for a lot more than this. We had to analyze details such as camera work, background music, significance of little details, and further details about film that I did not have any idea about because I had never in depth analyzed a film before taking this Japanese Cinema course. In the course we watched a wide variety of films from different points in time, black and white films, nearly silent films, to more modern films with comedy and so on. This created a great diversity in being able to compare different types of film work and properly exposing the students to details that may have otherwise been overlooked if we did not watch such a variety. Within this essay, I decided to analyze three of the more modern films, A Boy and His Samurai, Departures, and Swing Girls as they had many common essences and character development in my opinion. The fourth film I will analyze is an older film, Tales of Moonlight and Rain, which included a lot of folklore and mythology from Japan and this film was vastly different than the other black and white films we watched that focused much more on “realism” compared to the other films we viewed.

What Creates Outstanding Character Development?

Within A Boy and His Samurai and Departures, there is a strong similarity of how the main male characters of the films both developed over the course of the film. There were a lot of different paths the two characters could have gone in the film, however they both chose to “choose the path that is less traveled,” which contributed to having some hardships, however being able to overcome these. This also leads to both characters having a hard time finding who they themselves are and how they can pursue a path in life that would make them happy. In contrast, the main character in A Boy and His Samurai had support from the significant woman in his life from the very beginning. In Departures, the main male character was not as fortunate. This was the beginning of showing how Japanese people care about the way they are viewed, which I will go in to further detail in the following sections below.

The Need for Social Acceptance

Ignoring the millennial generation’s view of genders, a male is usually seen as the provider, the head of the house, the one to guide and care for the family. This leads to what is expected and how the male is viewed by others in the family. Within Departures, the main male character, Daigo, he lost a job, and soon after had success finding a new career. This new career was the position of caring for the deceased’s bodies and preparing them to be laid down to rest. After finally realizing that this was a career he enjoyed, his wife find out shortly after and immediately wanted him to quit. Her reasoning being was that their child would be made fun of in school and would not be

able to tell anyone of what the father does for work. This is important, because she was not only expressing what their future child may or may not feel, but she was clearly expressing her own feelings about the whole situation. She herself was worried about how others around her would think about their family because of this. This strongly ties in to the group centered mentality that is found within Japanese society. Majority of people do not want to stick out and seem different from the “typical” Japanese way of life. When a person is seen as different in Japan, there is a sort of stigma that stays and follows that person or family around. This is something that the wife, Mika, wanted to avoid. Taking this in to consideration, her actions and way of thinking seem justified, and not blown out of proportion as many people thought when viewing this film. In contrast, from a Western point of view, more specifically American, this kind of concept is hard for people to understand. For the most part American people do not strive to work together or want to be viewed as part of the group. Americans are told from an early age to “stay out of the crowd,” meaning to be individual and have a personal way of thinking that is different from others. This carries on throughout life whether it be on sports teams, the work place, or even in sibling rivalry, Americans want to be seen different and better than others. This is explained well in one article, stating that, “Dependence is encouraged rather than discouraged. This contrasts to America where social and emotional independence is guiding normative value...Japanese continue to seek emotional security, in and outside the family: in school from their teachers and at work from their boss,” (Befu). Further enforcing what was said earlier, this all plays a very impactful role in the daily life of both countries and the people. Relating back to the film, Mika was only trying to avoid a situation that she knew would be inevitable because of how

Japanese society is structured. Throughout the years in Japan this mindset has not seen much change. Relating to my life, in my time that I was living in Osaka and traveling to different parts of Japan I noticed a lot of this happening. Not only does it include not wanted to be seen as different, but it also extends to people not wanted to reach out to help in certain situations because then they become involved and then are seen as part of the problem. For example, if there is a fight or any type of altercation, usually people will keep walking and not want to become involved. I witnessed a high school couple that were arguing and then started to physically hit each other. I stood watch for a little bit to actually see if it was true about Japanese people not wanting to become involved in such situations, and to my surprise everyone watched this girl being hit by her boyfriend and did not stop to intervene. I myself had to step in, and only when I stopped them from fighting other people came in to help break them apart. This aspect was explored more through one article by Harumi Befu, stating that, "In the group model, cooperation and conformity among group members are prime virtues; conversely, open conflict and competition are seen as being taboo," (Befu). This further enforces the way of thinking of people wanting to be in the majority, and not the minority.

Going a little into A Boy and His Samurai, the main male character, Kijima, also had character development that led to a slight confusion in gender roles and also the view he received from the main female character, Hiroko. He was a samurai in his time, however when he arrived in the present time in the film he grew an interest in cooking and making sweets after seeing a show on TV. This led to him spending a lot of time preparing desserts for the family, for events, and also for his own practice. In one scene Hiroko's friends came over for a party and they were surprised to see that a male had

prepared all of the desserts. Not only does this show a surprise in the gender roles being reversed, but this also showed how much people assume certain actions of one gender against another.

Group Oriented Thinking

Through the film Swing Girls, I noticed an importance of the group oriented way of thinking that is found in Japan. The importance of the group is expressed through the need of every band member to need to work together in order to orchestrate the music. Something a lot of people would not know is that this way of thinking is taught early on in children's life within Japan. Children from early on are expected to work together to clean their school, which is the beginning of the teaching of the group mindset and that within society to work together for the better of the group, not the individual. This is further explored when comparing this music film to a Western music film. In Western films there is a main character that usually goes through a hardship and is the star of the show. This does not happen in this film, as there is not exactly one main character completely, but focuses on the Swing Girls as a whole and their journey through forming a band and learning how to play instruments together. In Harumi Befu's article, she states that, "As an ideal type, the group is structured so that all members are selflessly oriented toward the goals of the group. The leader with benevolence and magnanimity helps, supports, and protects his followers at all times regardless of the personal cost. In return, other group members are expected to express their uncalculating loyalty and devotion," (Befu). This was a perfect quote to match the situation explained in the film. The leader in the case of Swing Girls was the math teacher who pretended to know saxophone, and the group of course being the band. The next example of group orientation that I thought

was unique to Japanese culture was a specific scene. Some girls were dedicated in playing in the band, however others decided to invest their money in shopping and going on dates. They saw their former band mates performing, thought it looked cool and fun, and decided to sell back everything they bought in order to join the band again. This is a subpart of Japanese culture, where Japanese people tend to join in what is popular or cool at the moment. This part of the culture applies to many countries, however in Japan this tends to go on a larger scale.

Historical Points

A older film that we viewed in class, Tales of Moonlight and Rain, contained a lot of historical essences. The interesting part of this film was that it also went in to some Japanese folklore that is a unique style and culture completely different from America. This for me was a unique experience because it is something that was far off from what I usually view in movies. The transition from what appeared to be a story of a low class family from a few hundred years ago turned out to be a complete supernatural experience.

The first part that I want to discuss that may have been historically accurate was the use samurai. This is of course a famous part of Japanese culture that is well known over the world, however it explored a little deeper into details such as the ranking system and how to move up in classes as a samurai. However, the most interesting part was the appearance of the ghost woman. There are a lot of folklore about the disappearances of people within Japanese culture. This was a great and artistic way to explore this through the ghost woman who appeared to one of the characters. What was interesting is the use of “kidnapping” of one of the male characters, which is shown a lot throughout Japanese culture. Even films such as Spirited Away give an example of a person being stolen

away from the real world and trying to be captured within a different world. “A boy or young man who accountably disappeared from his home was assumed to be not lost but stolen, to be the victim of kamigakushi or abduction by a god...Such stories have not only been handed down in oral form in many villages, but can also be found in strange profusion in the written collections of tales in which Japanese literature has been so rich since medieval times,” (Blacker). This point again, I want to emphasize is something that I feel is unique to Japanese culture, In America, there are many different types of folklore, usually about creatures, ghosts, or extraterrestrial beings. This is something that is completely different from what the Japanese use in their folklore. The reason why I say that it is unique, is because the use of “kami” within Japanese culture. Kami itself could be looked at as a type of folklore and mythology in itself, with kami being not a god, but nonetheless a divine spiritual being that exists in different objects, including inanimate objects. Therefore this type of folklore is something like nothing else for the use of kami which is unique to only Japan.

Conclusion

To sum up the thoughts of this essay, there were a lot of different aspects of Japanese culture that were put in to all the films we watched and they impacted the direction that each film went in to. Something that has a profound effect on how a person may view Japanese films does depend on the level of knowledge a person has on Japanese culture. Personally, looking back on how I filmed Japanese films before I lived in Japan is complete different to how I see Japanese films now. The way I connect with characters has changed as well, all because I from first hand experience understand many different aspects and reasonings within Japanese culture compared to the average

American who may not know anything about the culture. Through these films, knowingly or not, the directors included many different essences that reflect different levels of Japanese culture. This went in to many directions, such as social issues, reflecting on issues at the time period the films were made, and showing uniqueness to aspects that can only be found within Japan.

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