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Roots of Cool Japan: From the Japanese Traditional Edo Culture to Anime and Manga

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Japan's transition from making things to making tales

Japanese popular culture, known as “Cool Japan,” includes animations, comics, video games, figures, and J-pops that are highly acclaimed in Europe and the United States as well as throughout Asia. From the 1970s to the 1980s, Japan gained confidence in its ability to “make things” because consumers around the world embraced its manufactured products such as electric home appliances and automobiles with open arms in preference to the products of other advanced countries. However, at the beginning of the Heisei era, the bubble in the Japanese economy suddenly burst and Japan's gross national product (GNP) plummeted, resulting in what is termed “the burst of economic bubble of 1990.” Relatively cheaper manufactured products from other Asian countries gained precedence over Japanese products. In response, many Japanese manufacturers moved their production plants to other Asian countries, particularly settling in mainland China, where labor costs were lower than in Japan. The recession was protracted and the Japanese people suffered from a sense low confidence in their abilities to overcome the recession.

By the late 1990s, Prime Ministers Mori and, subsequently, Koizumi responded to Japanese political leader Heizo Takenaka's advocacy of an information technology (IT) revolution in Japan as a way to beat the recession. However, Takenaka's policy did not bring true innovation and development from the IT industry. Instead, it led to many years in which there was an increase in manufacturing products such as personal computers, cell phones, DVDs, and digital TVs. His plan never overcame the old idea of “making things.” It only copied the US policies of the Clinton administration that, five years earlier, had proposed the IT highway and had successfully globalized the Internet as the World Wide Web. As Tadao Umesao, a cultural anthropologist, pointed out, a real IT revolution would necessarily mean that the economy and society would shift from

a manufacturing orientation to an information orientation ⁽¹⁾. A real transition would be reflected by the society's transition from "making things" to "making tales." From that perspective, the so-called Japanese IT "revolution" was not an information technology or communications revolution at all.

Furthermore, the disastrous accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant as a result of the East Japan Great Earthquake of 2011 is causing a loss of confidence around the world in Japan's manufacturing technology that seems irreparable ⁽²⁾.

Meanwhile, Japan's international reputation was rapidly improving in an area that Japanese adults generally failed to notice. Hayao Miyazaki, one of Japan's greatest animation directors, won the Animage Anime Grand Prix prize and the Mainichi Film Award for Best Film in 1988 for his *Tonari no Totoro* (English: *My Neighbor Totoro*) and won six accolades for *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (English: *Spirited Away*) in 2002 and 2003, including the 2003 Best Animated Feature award at the US 75th Academic Awards. Another one of his films, *Howl's Moving Castle*, received 10 accolades, including an award for technical achievement at the 61st Venice Film Festival. *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence* by Mamoru Oshii also was praised highly by international film organizations, notably at the Cannes Film Festival. Other highly acclaimed Japanese animations include: *Pokémon* by Kunihiko Yuyama and "Playing King" by Ryosuke Takahashi (both arranged for Nintendo's Gameboy), *Lupin III* by Monkey Punch, *Mobile Suit Gundam* by Yoshiyuki Tomino, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* by Hideaki Anno.

Related Japanese animation products, such as video game software *Super Mario* by Nintendo and *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* by Sony PlayStation, have been bestsellers in the international market. Spinoff products also became popular. Small plastics model manufacturer Kaiyodo in Osaka produced miniature figurines based on popular characters in comics and animations. These figurines were distributed as gifts accompanying snacks and sweets sold in convenience stores. The "cute girl" or "pretty girl" figurines designed by Takashi Murakami and made by BOME in Kaiyodo were displayed as fine art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and auctioned off at Christie's for USD 567,500. English translations of Japanese comics also are internationally popular among young people, occupying a substantial proportion of the comics' sections in American and European bookstores. Emerging trends include fans (often referred to as *otaku*, or "obsessed") that consume comics almost compulsively. These *otaku* tend to wear animation character costumes and rally together on the streets to dance the *Suzumiya Haruhi* dance from the popular anime, *The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi*.

Based on these phenomena, American economist Douglas McGray proposed a new indicator, the Gross National Cool Index (GNC). His evaluation of Japan's ranking on the GNC is, "Japan would no longer rank high in GNP, but Japan is Number One in GNC" ⁽³⁾. Harvard University professor Joseph Nye labeled Japan as the country that has "the soft power" that attracts people not by force (like the US) but by natural attractiveness ⁽⁴⁾. Yet, Japan produced the world's first picture scroll, *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) in the 12th century and also produced the first comic in the world, *Choju-giga* (*Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*) in the 12th century. These facts suggest that Japan has been a country making tales long before it was a country of making things.

***Kabuki* and *Kibyoshi*: The roots of animation and comics**

A great cultural shift occurred during the Edo period (17th to 19th centuries) in the tradition of "making tales" that was led by *The Tale of Genji* and *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*. During this time, picture stories flourished and blossomed into an art form that ultimately led to the present cultural phenomenon of Cool Japan's animations, comics, and games. In the Edo period, townspeople in the Edo area (present-day Tokyo) as well as in Kamigata (today's Osaka and Kyoto areas) greatly enjoyed *Bunraku* (puppet theater), *Kabuki*, *Rakugo* (comic storytelling), *Kibyoshi* (storybooks with yellow covers), and *Ukiyo-e paintings* (woodcut prints). *Bunraku* and *Rakugo* were called *ningyo-joruri* and *otoshibanashi*, respectively, during the Edo period. The terms *Bunraku* and *Rakugo* are used in this paper with the meaning that is familiar to us today. The townspeople of the Edo period were not, however, passive consumers of the arts. They actively participated in the culture as patrons, performers, and/or creators. As a result, some people became highly knowledgeable connoisseurs, professional performers, and/or headmasters of art schools.

Arguably, the roots of modern animation are in *Kabuki* and the roots of comics are in the "yellow covers." In Japanese Edo popular culture, it was customary for people to form private groups in which they created and performed the stories. Importantly, the Edo period was a time when professionals and amateurs had equal opportunities to create popular culture. Good examples of this phenomenon in today's culture are *Komike*, *Wan-fesu*, and Internet activities. *Komike* is Japanese slang abbreviation for "Comic Market" and *Comiket*. *Comiket* is the large-scale comics' exhibition and sales event held twice every year at the Tokyo International Exhibition Centre. Relevant Internet activities include animation on *Nikoniko-doga* (Japanese-style You-tube) that involves makers and buyers working together. In Japan, from the Edo traditional cultures of *Bunraku*, *Kabuki*, *Ukiyo-e*, and *Kibyoshi* to the modern animations, comics, games, J-pop,

and *Hatsune Miku* (synthesized vocal music), ordinary townspeople have been the originators, performers, and consumers. In contrast, European art developed less from the “bottom up” and more from the “top down,” where artists were hired by wealthy aristocrats to create art that was meant to be appreciated only by the aristocrats.

The roots of the *otaku* culture are in *Iki*

Wabi-Sabi culture emerged in reaction to the gorgeous and glittering *Kitayama* culture epitomized by the Golden Pavilion commissioned by Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. *Wabi-Sabi* culture can be seen in the Silver Pavilion, which symbolizes the Higashiyama culture. Both pavilions are located in Kyoto. The word *Wabi* means elegant simplicity and the word *Sabi* indicates the subtle beauty of age that is evident after a long period of use. Initially, *Wabi-Sabi* was not considered to be aesthetic. However, Japanese people’s definition of beauty changed over time to recognize beauty in these ideas. *Wabi-Sabi* became the quintessence in *Noh* (traditional Japanese masked drama) and the tea ceremony.

During the Edo period, *Noh* and the tea ceremony were practiced mostly by *Bushi* (the *samurai* class). The head of the *samurai* class was a *Tokugawa* shogun who favored and fostered *Wabi-Sabi* values. Asian historian Naito Konan stated that Japan was not distinctly Japanese before the Muromachi period (15th century) before *Wabi-Sabi* was recognized as the concept of beauty. He also insisted that *Wabi-Sabi* was indispensable factors to Edo culture ⁽⁵⁾.

However, another type of aesthetic value existed in Edo Japan. This aesthetic value, pursued by ordinary Edo people, is *Iki*. *Iki* is the source of the aestheticism of Cool Japan and is now associated with *Moe* according to the *otaku*. Although Konan emphasized *Wabi-Sabi*’s importance in Edo Japan, he stressed that *Iki* was the most important element in the popular cultures, such as *Kabuki* and *Ukiyo-e*, which were the arts of the ordinary people of Edo Japan. The *kanji* character (粋) was read as *Iki* in Edo, but in Kamigata (today’s Osaka and Kyoto), it was read as *Sui*. Both referred to the same idea with a subtle difference. *Sui* in Kamigata meant “soft and tender feminine beauty” such as that which was found in *Chikamatu* plays. In contrast, *Iki* in Edo referred to “sophisticated spirit, masculine cool, and decisiveness in action” found in, for example, one of the *Kabuki* favorites, *Sukeroku Yukari no Edo Zakura*. The Edo townsfolk, in other words, did not go for the subtle and subdued colors of *Wabi-Sabi*. They favored bright colors like crimson, indigo blue, and hemocian blue. This shade of crimson red is obtained from copper mined in Bichu (in present-day Okayama prefecture) and is used to decorate the window lattices in Kyoto-Yoshiwara and to glaze Arita porcelain ware. Indigo blue originated in Matusaka near Nagoya and it was very

fashionable in Edo kimono patterns. Hemocian blue was a dye that was imported from Europe and used in Katsushika Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* prints.

Shuzo Kuki, a Kyoto school philosopher and the author of the book *The Structure of Iki*⁽⁶⁾, proposed that *Wabi-Sabi* was a part of official Japanese culture that was distant from the feelings and behaviors of ordinary Japanese people. He claimed that *Iki* constituted the sense of beauty held by the ordinary Japanese people. According to Kuki, *Iki* begins with coquetry (as *ikigoto* refers to *irogoto*, meaning "amorous affairs") and *Iki* is synonymous with *ikiji* (English: will and courage). From this perspective, *Iki* is more than a coquettish and attractive attitude; it also is characterized by the strong will that demonstrates resistance. *Iki* is expressed through graceful manners and self-control based upon the mutual aesthetic concern.

Thus, the moral posture and the sense of beauty held by the ordinary Edo people were created by the townspeople who cherished *Iki* and not by the *samurai* class with their focus on *Wabi-Sabi*. In Western dramas such as the Shakespearean plays and also in some traditional *Kabuki* and *Bunraku*, the good and evil are made to confront each other. However, very often in Japanese theater, the traditional sense of right or wrong is not the only judgment criterion. For example, characters find beauty in human weakness or sense deep humanity in lust presented in helplessly mixed up affairs. Kuki commented that judgment was not based on "right and wrong" in Japan; *Iki* provides the criteria for judgment by the Japanese people.

Societies that are dominated by a Judeo-Christian culture would not easily accept this kind of idea even though it has been used to express a special sense of beauty to the Japanese sensibilities for a long time. Recently, increasing numbers of Western intellectuals have found that ambiguous space where good and evil coexist in their examinations of anime and comics. They evaluate this ambiguity as a positive, multi-colored mosaic that supersedes simplistic dichotomous confrontations between good and evil, winners and losers, and the fortunate and unfortunate.

Today's *otaku* have a special, uncertain, love-like fondness towards the Manga and anime heroines. They term this feeling *Moe*. The typical heroines were *Maetel* in *Galaxy Express 999* and *Fujiko Mine* in *Lupin III*, who expressed female leadership qualities. *Moe* recently targeted five types of beautiful girls in *Sakura Taisen* and *Sailor Moon*. These *otaku* heroines elicit real emotion although they are unreal. *Otaku* cannot express their love in person to these unreal characters, so they try to bring their heroines out from their two-dimensional world of comics and animations into the three-dimensional world by producing figurines or as lovers or maid figures in cosplay restaurants or at a "Maid Café."

From animism to animation

Animism is another aspect of Cool Japan. Animism is a primitive form of religion that is found among the inhabitants of some South Pacific islands. Anthropologist E. B. Tyler conducted fieldwork on some of these islands. Inhabitants on these islands believed in the existence of a supernatural power that they called “mana” and that this “mana” helped them to communicate with the living creatures, trees, and objects that they made from trees such as their canoes.

The first Japanese folklorist, Yanagida Kunio, recorded a similar phenomenon in *Tono Monogatari*, a record of folk legends gathered in Tono, Iwate Prefecture. He noted that in Tono village, human beings, horses, and silkworms lived in the same *magariya* house and that the people there believed in the existence of *Oshirasama*, which can transform itself into a horse, a silkworm, or a princess. Origuchi Shinobu, another well-known folklorist and the most distinguished student of Yanagida’s, conducted fieldwork many times in Japanese farming villages. He reported that, from ancient times, Japanese people achieved heart-to-heart communication with grass, trees, insects, and fish (Sou, Hon, Tyu, and Gyo) and talked with the gods of the mountains, the woods, and the rice fields.

This folklore provides the main themes in Hayao Miyazaki’s films *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* (or *Princess Mononoke-hime*).

The Japanese perspective that men can spiritually communicate with living creatures is found as early as the *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*, which first appeared in the 12th century Kamakura period and has continued to influence artists in different periods. The list of its important influences is long; but, a few of them are: *Tobae* (or *Toba* drawings) that sprang from the art style of the *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals*; animal *Ukiyo-e* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi that depicts cats in different poses; painters of the Kano school; Maruyama Okyo, who established the Maruyama School of drawing in the mid-Edo period; and the works of Ito Jakuchu and his fellow painters. This remarkable tradition has also impacted present-day anime and comics, resulting in the full-action visual images of animals with human characteristics.

This idea of blending human and animal bodies may not be comfortable for Westerners who reject the extreme personification of animals as upsetting God’s boundaries between the human and the animal worlds. However, in Japan, the *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals* is believed to have been intended to familiarize children with Buddhist teachings. Birds, foxes, monkeys, frogs, and rabbits present various behaviors that are typical of human beings. Today we see this tradition of animism in the three iconic figures of animation: *Doraemon*, *Kitty* of *Hello Kitty*, and *Pokemon*. The great influence of animism also is found in the

human-shaped and pet-shaped robots that are so welcomed by the Japanese people today.

When he was creating Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney observed mouse behaviors very closely and he tried to be as realistic as possible with Mickey's movements ⁽⁷⁾. Contrariwise, Tezuka Osamu, the creator of Astro Boy, and who respected and adored Disney, drew animals and robots out of his imagination to present the "human characters." The Edo painters who painted flowers and birds grew flowers and kept birds in their homes but they never used them under close observation when they drew them. Instead, they drew the images of flowers and birds that they had nurtured in their minds. They believed that in that way they were better able to recreate the souls of those living things on canvas ⁽⁸⁾.

I have attempted to show that Japanese people commonly believed that human beings naturally maintain spiritual communication with animals and plants. This ancient animistic belief is embedded in the Manga and anime that Japan is today sharing with the world. Hopefully, this will make a meaningful and positive contribution to the cultures that have destroyed aspects of nature through their endless manufacturing of products from nature's raw resources. The Japanese culture rather proudly offers this to the world with the hope that it will serve as a strong and positive message for a better future.

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