A COMPANION TO JAPANESE HISTORY

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Popular Culture

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Popular culture has been a high growth field in Japanese studies since the 1990s. This is due to the general scholarly acceptance of popular culture as a legitimate object of inquiry, but also to the increasing visibility of Japanese cultural products – ranging from comics to sumō wrestling, popular music to animated films – in the global marketplace. At the end of the twentieth century, Pokémon, Nomo Hideo, Miyazaki Hayao, sushi, and Godzilla were household names and words of global prominence. Whereas a scant decade earlier Japan was more renowned for its mimetic appropriation of Western cultural products, now many are convinced of Japanese creative genius as expressed in popular culture. The study of Japanese popular culture has evolved significantly. Previously the realm of connoisseurs and antiquarians, who were entranced by the aesthetic peculiarities of Edo period artifacts, popular culture has captivated the scholarly interests of historians and social scientists, who use it to address broader issues pertaining to gender relations, national identity, social demography, political economy, and colonialism. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, few question the scholarly legitimacy of popular culture for understanding Japan.

The English term *popular culture* possesses several meanings and connotations that deserve clarification, for these definitions are complex and often contradictory. Japanese terms generally translated as *popular culture* offer slightly more explicit ideological undertones. It is important to note at the outset that popular culture originated as a *relational* concept within a stratified social milieu: that is, the *popular* has meaning only in contrast to the *high culture* or *fine art* of social elites. As such, *popular culture* has both aesthetic and social connotations. The aesthetic connotation is that popular culture possesses less artistic value than high or elite culture because it is purportedly less sophisticated and profound and requires less cultivation to appreciate. The social connotation is that popular culture (*minshū bunka* or *chōnin bunka* in Japanese) is by and for non-elites, the status-disadvantaged, or undereducated groups, who by virtue of their station have neither the means nor the capacity to produce culture comparable in aesthetic value to that of their social betters. The status or ideological orientation of the observer determines whether the "lowborn" pedigree and artistic simplicity of popular culture are considered positive or negative. Scholars with populist sympathies envisage popular culture as *folk culture* (*minzoku*

bunka): participatory rather than passively consumed, produced by a community for itself, rather than for a paying audience. Moreover, it is (or can be) a vehicle for resistance against social oppression. Practitioners of so-called "people's history" (*minshūshi*) romanticize popular culture as *counterculture*: an inherently subversive and irreverent inversion of elite values, a space where non-elites and oppressed populations can define and valorize themselves, even making a virtue of their low station.[1] Since the *populus* (*minshū*) itself is implicitly responsible for cultural production, popular culture is thus an authentic expression of non-elite sensibilities, anxieties, and aspirations, woven into the very fabric of social life.

By contrast, other observers regard popular culture as synonymous with *mass culture* (*taishū bunka*), the product of industrial techniques of manufacture and dissemination. Popular culture thus conceived is not actually produced by the *populus* but rather by a culture industry motivated only by profit and the preservation of elite privilege. It is thus the very antithesis of folk culture: even if a cultural form originates among the *populus*, the culture industry appropriates, repackages, and mass markets it, thereby neutralizing or trivializing its subversive potential. Cultural commodities are consumed passively by hapless masses who have essentially surrendered to this industry both the prerogative and the means to initiate cultural production. Moreover, since cultural commodities are produced for profit and therefore must appeal to the broadest possible audience, there is a concomitant homogenization of cultural products, an unwarranted exaltation of the trivial, and aesthetic degradation. Art and iconoclasm can no longer thrive, for "the mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select."[2] More ominously, popular culture as envisaged by Antonio Gramsci becomes a means whereby dominant elites exert hegemony over subordinate groups, not through force or coercion but via a negotiated "ideological consensus" to which mass media and culture can contribute. While this entails concessions to the tastes and interests of the subordinate masses, it "cannot touch the essential ... the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity."[3]

Already complex and fluid, definitions of popular culture have become even more so under the influence of postmodern theory. In an age in which so-called highbrow or elite culture is as readily available via the same media as so-called popular forms, and in which purportedly "inaccessible" avant-garde techniques are widely used in popular music, television ads, and action movies, the social and aesthetic distinctions between elite, popular, and folk expressions seem increasingly porous and less analytically useful. "There are no longer any agreed and inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture," Dominic Strinati asserts. "Art becomes increasingly integrated into the economy both because it is used to encourage people to consume through the expanded role it plays in advertising, and because it becomes a commercial good in its own right."[4] Moreover, postmodernists have exposed the ways in which artistic canons serve the interests of those in power. This is not to say that social and aesthetic distinctions have completely lost operational power in social life (for instance, ghetto pedigree or "street cred" are deemed essential for legitimate participation in the self-defined "counterculture" of hip hop). But it is worth pondering whether such distinctions have only recently (in the era of late capitalism) ceased to conform with the reality of cultural production

and consumption, or if they ever did. As explained below, as early as the seventeenth century Japanese popular culture pillaged from and signified on elite culture, while elites found the diversions of the rabble so intoxicating that they risked censure to join the party.[5]

As durable definitions of popular culture have become more elusive, the object of cultural analysis has shifted as well from production to consumption. A key question is who dictates the terms and content of popular culture, the producers or the audience? Who is responsive to whom? Early twentieth-century mass culture theorists, Marxists, and the Frankfurt School insisted that the industrial manufacture of culture served the interests of the corporate elite, manipulated popular taste, and induced apathy among the supine masses, whose interests would be better served making revolution.[6] Subsequent scholarship – generically dubbed "reception studies" – restored agency to consumers, arguing that cultural texts are open to multiple, even seditious, readings and uses. For instance, Lawrence Levine has argued that methods of industrial production and dissemination do not necessarily invalidate cultural products as "authentic" expressions of popular sentiment. Since mass cultural products are read in diverse ways and put to different uses by consumers, they constitute the "folklore of industrial society," which can even be deployed to contest the dominance of those who produced them. "Modernity dealt a blow to artisanship in culture as well as in material commodities," Levine concedes. "But to say this is not to say that, as a result, people have been rendered passive, hopeless consumers. What people *can* do and *do* do is to refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations."[7] But Jackson Lears questions Levine's assertions of the consumer's sovereignty:

> Levine remains oblivious to the fundamental fact of cultural power: not its capacity to manipulate consciousness but its existence as a set of givens that form the boundaries of what the less powerful can do or can even (sometimes) imagine doing ... Each human subject is born into a world filled with chains of signifiers: the expressive forms in which social and cultural power is constituted. ... The chains are not unbreakable: they can be constructed and reconstructed to meet the needs and desires of the individual subject. But they *are* chains.[8]

Nowadays, mass-manufactured cultural products with anti-establishment messages are abundant and lucrative, allowing the culture industry to endure and profit through self-excoriation. This is clearly a concession to popular taste for the risqué and rebellious, but one that admittedly does nothing to endanger corporate control of cultural production. Thus chastened, we hereby proceed with a notion of popular culture less beholden to rigid, ideologically loaded social and aesthetic categories, and which embraces its paradoxical nature as its defining trait. Popular culture is a "compromise equilibrium," a continual struggle for "sovereignty" between consumers and producers.[9] It simultaneously provokes new, sometimes revolutionary thoughts and behaviors as it encourages frivolity and indifference. It is also the arena in which competing constituencies debate matters of great material and spiritual import. Popular culture initiates and sustains discussions on gender norms, inequities of wealth and status, tolerance, national identity, sexual morality, political and civil rights, and social violence, matters that are not or cannot be addressed via formal political processes, legal channels, or grievance procedures.

Japan has had mass-produced, commodified, urban popular culture since the seventeenth century and its influence has been dramatic. One need only glance at the Tokugawa government's copious sumptuary edicts, censorship regulations, and field surveys to realize how pervasive popular culture was and how staggering its impact. Many contemporaneous observers (and not a few subsequent scholars) detected the warrior elite's ruin in its insatiable appetite for slumming with the common folk in their theaters, teahouses, and bordellos. Popular culture – the "impulse to create, to enrich leisure time with cultural pursuits, to imitate the life-style of the upper-class" – made a joke of the Tokugawa social hierarchy, by creating social spaces and imaginary realms in which assigned status (*mibun*) was irrelevant.[10]

An exhaustive chronological account of various media and forms of Japanese popular culture is impossible in this chapter, so the following discussion is organized around four themes – commerce, aesthetics, appropriation, and contestation – and draws on examples from early modern, modern, and contemporary popular culture. This approach enables us to identify conjunctures between recent studies and to envision new approaches for future scholarship.

Commerce

Walter Benjamin dated the revolution in "technical reproduction" that enabled mass cultural manufacturing to the early 1900s. This revolution made it possible to produce and disseminate works of art on an unprecedented scale and "to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public." "Quantity has been trans-muted into quality," he added. "The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation."[11] These transformations were no less profound in early twentieth-century Japan than in the rest of the industrialized world, but neither were they entirely unprecedented. The commodification and mass production and distribution of cultural products in Japan dates from the early modern era. Premodern forms of popular culture were rooted in rural religious observances, finding most vibrant expression in *matsuri* (festivals) to pacify spirits, promote fertility, commemorate seasonal changes, or celebrate harvests. There were itinerant professional entertainers (bards, shrine dancers, theatrical troupes), but their performances did not supplant the more participatory cultural practices of villagers, who performed their own dances, songs, and dramas in conjunction with *matsuri*.

With the advent of castle towns in the sixteenth century, increasingly large numbers of merchants and craftspeople settled permanently in incipient urban centers, thereby creating conditions favorable to the development of urban popular culture. *Matsuri* continued even in the cities of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, but the variety of diversions and entertainments increased exponentially, as a vibrant culture industry developed in the seventeenth century. But, while many of its cultural products and methods of dissemination presaged the manufacture and marketing of modern mass culture, conventional mass culture theories fail to explain the culture industry of the Edo period. Tokugawa society was nightmarishly complex, a nascent capitalist system under a feudal facade, in which wealth rarely corresponded with status. How could the culture industry serve the interests of the ruling elite when it was essentially in the hands of a despised caste? It rather undermined samurai privilege by making cultural

products (teeming with sexual, violent, and scatological content) widely available to commoners, who were thereby distracted from performing their assigned economic and normative roles, and by sanctioning spaces where the castes could mingle, in the most intimate ways.[12] Burgeoning commercial networks even enabled theatrical troupes, entertainers, and printed matter to infiltrate isolated rural communities. By the early nineteenth century, rural folk had erected their own kabuki and puppet theaters (in blatant disregard of bakufu prohibitions limiting theaters to urban licensed districts) and mounted their own amateur productions. ''They acted in plays not because traveling troupes were unavailable,'' Walthall maintains, ''but because they wanted to act.''[13]

Technological innovation and capital accumulation stimulated the growth of the culture industry in the mid seventeenth century, and again in the early twentieth. Woodblock printing (which replaced movable type adopted from Korea) enabled cheaply reproducible calligraphic and technicolor flights of fancy in print media, and foreshadowed the media revolution (for example, sound recording, moving pictures, newspapers, mass magazines) of the early 1900s. Innovations in stage effects and puppetry heightened Edo era audience expectations for spectacle, just as the use of miniatures in war films (for example, *The War at Sea from Hawaii to Malaya*, 1942) and 1960s monster movies (*kaijū eiga*) set new industry standards for special effects. Edo period publishing houses and theater companies likewise prefigured modern record companies, movie studios, and production companies, establishing the practice of contracting major talent to crank out increasingly formulaic products. Through organized fan clubs, cross-promotions, and celebrity endorsements of products and fashions, early modern practices presaged modern marketing strategies that exploited reverence for celebrity. Some have argued that Japanese culture was ravaged by the modern capitalism of ''ruthless European and American entrepreneurs,''[14] but cultural commodification was in fact a wholly indigenous development, making the modern mass culture revolution merely a continuation and intensification of processes set in motion during the Edo period.[15]

Political conditions favored concentrating the means of cultural production in a handful of companies and discouraging the rampant proliferation of independent voices. In the Edo period, theater proprietors vied for a limited number of official licenses to operate within the walled pleasure districts of Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo, a system that facilitated surveillance.[16] Censorship regimes established by the Tokugawa and modern imperial governments found it easier to monitor smaller numbers of producers, a proclivity most visible during World War II, when massive consolidation sharply reduced the number of recording companies, publishers, and movie studios. Censorship of political and sexual content was random and arbitrary, but its effect on cultural producers could be chilling if they did not exercise restraint. On the other hand, failure to deliver titillating goods to insatiable consumers could just as easily put them out of business.

Key to the development of commercial popular culture was the rise of consumer classes, newly empowered by literacy, surplus cash, and leisure time to partake of the blossoming market in cultural goods.[17] Literacy was encouraged among Edo period *chōnin* (urban commoners) as necessary for conducting business, and later among all Japanese as fundamental to the Meiji state's modernization project. Mass literacy enabled commoners to breach status barriers, gain access to elite culture, and prosper

economically to the extent that a night at a teahouse, dance hall, or movie palace would not break the bank. Denied real political rights by the Tokugawa and modern imperial regimes, consumers nonetheless wielded some authority as customers of the culture industry. Decided in their likes and dislikes, consumers made clear what they found entertaining by doling out or withholding their cash. *Chōnin* were the "new arbiters of taste," who realized that "stories of their own antics and aberrations were as entertaining as any of the tales imported from China, or handed down in their own country."[18] Regarding kabuki, Shively contends, it was "good box office to electrify an audience with bold passages and parodies that spoke to the experience of the commoner."[19]

The introduction of profit motives, of course, fundamentally transformed artistic production and cultural behavior. Luminaries such as Ihara Saikaku and Chikamatsu Monzaemon were very prolific because much of their work was formulaic, heeding conventions for subject matter (that is, dissolute rakes and harlots, love suicides) that had already proven profitable. Commodification also clarified distinct relations of production and consumption, a trend perhaps most visible in *matsuri*. Although a participatory ethos remains strong within many communities, *matsuri* have become increasingly commercialized, secularized, truncated, and packaged for tourists and spectators. Not only *matsuri*, but "Japan" itself – "generically imagined and pre-sented" – has become a consumable object, the consumption of which promises a (re)discovery of cultural "self."[20]

Commerce and culture remain inextricably entwined in contemporary Japanese life, and not merely in the sense of art's utility for advertising. Anne Allison, writing about comics, remarks on the productive utility of recreation: "*manga* are utilized as a diversionary and escapist 'play' that 'works' to relieve everyday tensions and thereby replenish a person's energy so that he or she can, for example, return to work."[21] By providing respites from the grinding work and study routines that characterize modern life, play and pop thus keep Japan's economic engines running. Interestingly, this logic, too, has precedent in the Edo period, when official sanction of pleasure quarters was based on the assumption that commoners required temporary release from the pressures of a tightly wound social structure. Only a prescient few imagined that such diversions would contribute to that structure's very doom: as Confucian scholar Dazai Shundai lamented in 1729, "our kabuki plays of today put on licentious and unrestrained matters which … cater to vulgar sentiment. … There is nothing worse than this in breaking down public morals."[22]

Aesthetics

In Japan, no less than in other traditionally stratified societies, theoretically clear aesthetic distinctions corresponded to social status. The dichotomy between *ga* (elegant) and *zoku* (vulgar) cultural forms not only reinforced distinctions between hereditary elites (courtiers and prominent warrior clans) and common people, but also denied the possibility of the comparable aesthetic worth of their respective expressive forms. Moreover, in premodern times elite culture required mastery of written language, whereas commoner culture was transmitted orally, an important contrast in East Asian societies in which literacy signified status. Although elite and

non-elite forms alike often shared a religious basis, commoner culture was assumed to lack the refinement, restraint, and moral value of elite cultural forms such as *gagaku* (court music and dance), Chinese and vernacular poetry, or Buddhist iconography. Intent on instilling Confucian virtues or Buddhist spiritual truths, elite culture was further distinguished by its unabashed didacticism as well as its elegant simplicity, stylized melancholy (*sabi*), and affected rusticism (*wabi*).

Yet the distinction between *ga* and *zoku* began to cloud as early as medieval times, when shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu patronized a *sarugaku* ("monkey music") theatrical troupe. Yoshimitsu's protégé Zeami refined *sarugaku*'s coarser attributes and in the process created the noh (*nō*), which would remain the exclusive province of warrior elites for the next four centuries. By purging *sarugaku* of its more "vulgar" tendencies, and seeking profundity (*yūgen*) in each movement and scripted line, Zeami aspired no less than to communicate esoteric truths and provoke Zen epiphanies. Nonetheless, here was an elite art with clear plebeian pedigree.

Further complicating matters was the penchant of Edo period playwrights, artists, musicians, and writers for plundering and inverting elite aesthetics. The ability to make allusions to classical literature, poetry, historical events, and myths (many of Chinese origin) had traditionally been the exclusive province of courtiers and warrior elites. But the producers of early modern pop ostentatiously dropped references to *The Tale of Genji* and continental culture into their plays, novels, and prints, a tendency that would have mattered little had there not been an increasingly literate and savvy audience to appreciate such erudite displays. Wealthy *chōnin* indeed prided themselves on their intertextual literacy, their ability to recognize or brandish allusions to the classical Sino-Japanese literary canon. Commoner and elite cultures also shared a preference for "commingled media,"[23] that is, adding poems to paintings, or setting literature to music.

However, within the pleasure quarters commoners developed their own aesthetic terminology – for example, *tsū* (connoisseurship), *sui* (elegance), or *iki* (refinement) – or shunned elite culture's esoterica, cultivated restraint, and elegiac sorrow in favor of the quotidian, lewd, obnoxious, and over-the-top. No less an authority than master playwright Chikamatsu, for whom common people in uncommon plights were favored subjects, insisted that "Art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal."[24] Some artists, to whom Chikamatsu must have seemed priggish, positively venerated *zoku*, finding elegance in vulgarity. This was, in essence, what *iki* represented: the rendering of (unconsummated) erotic desire into aesthetic experience.[25] Most kabuki and jōruri dramas emphasized spectacle, acrobatics, swordplay, and virtuoso manipulation of puppets at the expense of literary quality. The "culture of play" of the late Edo period disregarded morality and the "Heavenly Way" (*tendō*) in favor of the "gargantuan joys of the flesh." "Bodily imagery in both verbal and illustrated texts signified a different kind of social reality with an inverted scale of priorities for the Edo townsmen. It was an order that had as its head the genitalia or anus and as its heart the stomach."[26]

The Meiji era importation of Western aesthetics was revolutionary, though its influence was uneven. Scholars have typically celebrated the arrival of naturalism in Japanese theater, visual art, and literature as indicative of "progress" toward more "realistic" renderings of the natural world. Donald Richie's work on film, for instance, assumes a dichotomy between traditional Japanese "mediation" or

"presentation" (art is "rendered a particular reality by way of an authoritative voice") and Western "representation" ("in which one assumed the reality of what was being shown").[27] Meiji reformers did in fact disparage kabuki specifically for its fantastic scenarios and its stylized, deliberately unrealistic acting techniques,[28] and crafted new theatrical genres (*shinpa* and *shingeki*) to address these "defects." The confessional fiction genre known as the "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*), too, was partially a concession to naturalist tastes. But newer work points out realist strains in pre-Meiji art – early experiments with linear perspective and ocular technologies, an obsession with material, social, and psychological detail – that make it difficult to argue that Japanese culture developed naturalist tendencies only under Western influence.[29]

Notwithstanding the undeniable aesthetic impact of the West, modern Japanese popular culture has clearly – and self-consciously – retained time-honored, native aesthetic principles. A fascinating example is the silent film narrator (*katsuben* or *benshi*), whose performances captivated movie audiences for the first three decades of the twentieth century. Genealogically linked to medieval bards, *etoki* and *gidayū* narrators, and *rakugo* storytellers, *katsuben* provided an authoritative mediating presence and a link to earlier narrative conventions at a time when Japanese film showings were hardly "autonomous" but rather "commingled" with live stage performances.[30] In later years, filmmakers as stylistically distinct as Ozu Yasujirō and Kurosawa Akira drew on native aesthetics, Ozu in his modest framings and elegiac moods, and Kurosawa in his adaptation of noh music and acting techniques in films such as *Throne of Blood* (1958). Ties to the past likewise remain a central aspect of contemporary sumō, which, in spite of many modern innovations that "genesis amnesia" has rendered invisible, exudes an aura of indisputably native traditionalism.[31]

Still, the aesthetics of modern Japanese popular culture suggest how globalized (or, some would say, homogenized) standards of popular taste have become. Most Japanese today are thoroughly desensitized to the charms of *wabi/sabi*, *iki*, or *yūgen*. Anyone approaching Godzilla or television programs such as, say, *Iron Chef* or *Crayon Shin-chan*, with the cardinal principles of classical Japanese aesthetics (suggestion, asymmetry, perishability, and simplicity) in mind risks disillusion.[32] Since the early twentieth century, imported entertainment (*hakurai geinō*) has largely dictated standards of popular taste, particularly in music and cinema. Surprisingly few Japanese have ever seen cinematic masterpieces by Kurosawa or Ozu, voicing a clear preference for the Hollywood product. Those with niche interests in jazz, reggae, hip hop, or so-called "ethnic" musics cherish the aura of exoticism and authenticity enshrined in imported records and fanzines straight from "the source" (*honba*). In the 1990s it was *tres chic* to purchase vintage Levi's jeans worn by "real Americans," suggesting that imported cultural goods still enjoy aesthetic cachet at the turn of the millennium.

Appropriation

Japan is often described as a "hybrid" culture: a memorable line from the 1991 documentary *The Japanese Version* asserts that borrowing from other cultures "is as Japanese as eating rice." A corollary cliche is that once Japanese appropriate a foreign

cultural artifact, they domesticate it, or ''make it Japanese'' (whatever that means), without compromising their ''national/cultural core.'' Iwabuchi Kōichi maintains that this sponge-like ''Japanese capacity for cultural borrowing and appropriation does not simply articulate a process of hybridization in practice, but it is strategically represented as a key feature of Japanese national identity itself.''[33]

Such depictions of nonchalant, ''strategic'' appropriation underestimate the tensions aroused in the process. Since the foreign origins of so much of what is known as ''Japanese culture'' are indisputable, two issues are always at stake: the ''authenticity'' of the appropriated artifact or cultural form;[34] and the integrity and clarity of Japanese cultural identity. Such trepidation may have been more acute in the modern era: the adoption of Portuguese pantaloons and the Okinawan *shamisen* seems to have generated considerably less controversy over national identity or authenticity in the sixteenth century than the importation of sleeveless dresses and the ''lascivious'' saxophone did in the twentieth. Nonetheless, the Confucian revival of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was essentially a quest for a more authentic Confucianism, to be procured through the study of original ancient texts rather than later commentaries, just as the ''national learning'' (*kokugaku*) movement was in part a reaction to this renewed influx of Chinese thought and culture, an attempt to identify and recover an indigenous cultural, spiritual, and moral heritage uncontaminated by foreign influence.

Kokugaku foreshadowed the modern *Nihonjinron* (theories of Japaneseness), which sought to recoup a national character allegedly menaced by Western modernity. In the realm of popular entertainment, perhaps no single medium better expresses discontent over Japanese hybridity than the *enka* song genre, whose principal message, in Yano's estimation, is ''We long for our past Japanese selves.'' Indeed, among *enka* fans, flirtation with imported culture is depicted as a life stage, a youthful indiscretion: ''Fans explain their turning to enka in terms of a musical taste that lay dormant, waiting only for their life experiences and, for some, a sense of their innate Japaneseness, to catch up to its lyrics and music.''[35] Paradoxically, cultural appropriation had served Japan well as a strategy for *preserving* national sovereignty and integrity. Sinification of politics, music, religion, and art from the sixth through the eighth centuries was intended to earn the esteem of Tang China and thereby stave off a possible invasion. And the study and implementation of Mongol military tactics after the 1274 invasion helped repulse the second attempt in 1281. So, when the Western imperial powers came knocking in the mid nineteenth century, the new Meiji state had historical precedent for believing that a determined effort to study and replicate what they called ''international standards'' might achieve similar objectives. Popular diversions were not exempted from such attention.[36]

The effects of Meiji cultural reforms – which emphasized emulation of Western models in music, theater, literature, visual art, and architecture – were rapid and dramatic in some quarters, less so in others. Commoners not so well integrated into the modern age continued to enjoy their *yose* (variety shows), *rakugo*, and *misemono* (peep show) entertainments. And when the government tampered too much with their beloved kabuki, they simply created new variants (*taishū engeki*, popular theater) that retained the bawdy irreverence of old and still allowed cheering, jeering, and spontaneous disruptions of stage action. If ''enlightenment'' meant sitting quietly in one's seat, then enlightenment be damned.

The longstanding official contempt for popular entertainment now enjoyed a new rationale, based on "scientific" notions of progress, pragmatism, and "enlightenment," not to mention the prudery of Victorian era Western culture. Ury Eppstein argues that the practical utility of Western music, rather than its "artistic merits," intrigued Meiji leaders, some of whom apparently were within earshot of the military music emanating from British warships when they shelled Kagoshima in 1863. Besides its military applications, they believed that Western music could also have educational value for "character building, maintaining good order, and promoting clear enunciation and good reading ability."[37] The government also encouraged the proliferation of school *undōkai* (sports days) and the adoption of "manly" American and European sports such as baseball, rugby, fencing, gymnastics, and swimming, hoping to promote moral education, military efficacy, and modern lifestyles, and to offset the presumed physical inferiority of the Japanese.[38] The leaders were less enchanted, however, with Western-style political cartooning, with which dissenters ridiculed officials and their programs. Cartoonist Honda Kinkichirō satirized the Meiji milieu (and circumvented libel laws) with a "hybrid cartoon vocabulary" that "drew both on the cultural knowledge from the world into which he had been born and from the outside world that had impinged on it."[39]

In virtually all respects, including cultural policy, the Meiji transformation was a "revolution from above," no less than the ancient Taika Reforms had been. But with the technological revolution that produced modern mass media – sound recording, radio broadcasting, moving pictures, and print media – and the increasing integration of the world economy during the era of colonialism and World War I, cultural products from abroad literally poured into Japan, more or less directly into the laps of consumers, unfiltered and undiluted by elite intervention as in previous times. To be sure, censors prevented Japanese movie audiences from ever seeing Rudolph Valentino's lips touch those of his leading lady ("kissing movies" were not permitted until the American occupation, during which there was a veritable deluge), but nativists fretted over the direct influence he and other Hollywood screen idols exerted on the mating rituals of so-called "modern girls and boys" (*moga* and *mobo*). By the early 1900s, Japanese partook of a cosmopolitan smorgasbord of foreign literature and plays in translation, popular songs, sports, and films. After World War I, American entertainment and lifestyle eclipsed those from Europe, but opera (Italian or Beijing), French *chanson*, Argentine tango, American jazz, Hawaiian hula, Russian ballads, and Cuban rumba were all available for musical entertainment. Even "Arirang" – a folk song which for Koreans expressed indignation toward Japanese colonial rule – was a hit record in interwar Japan, in several recorded versions.

By the 1920s, then, Japan was fully integrated into a new globalized "community of taste": cultural appropriation was thoroughly routinized, an everyday occurrence, in which mass media empowered practically anyone to participate.[40] So firmly rooted were such voracious habits that wartime measures to cleanse Japan of foreign influences and "overcome modernity" (*kindai no chōkoku*) seem laughably naive in hindsight. Defeat, occupation, and close cold war ties with the United States only intensified the flow of cultural goods into Japan, creating a cultural "trade deficit" that only in very recent times is becoming more balanced due to the global popularity of Japanese anime (animation) and video games. Flows of cultural goods are indeed more complex today, as are Japanese reactions to them. Regarding film, Richie

remarks, somewhat hyperbolically, "Whether something is traditionally Japanese or not is no longer a concern – no one can tell and no one cares. Tradition is not to be guarded. It is to be augmented as the riches of the rest of the world are assimilated."[41]

It is astounding to contemplate the reversals of the turn of the millennium: as Japan's economic influence has waned (a model of capitalist development to avoid rather than emulate), its prominence as an exporter of play has soared. Of course, Japanese culture has enjoyed global prominence for some time – consider late nineteenth-century *japonisme* and its influence on French Impressionism, karate and jūdō, or monster films from the 1950s and 1960s. But who could have predicted the current dominance of Japanese animated cartoons on American children's television, the Major League Baseball success of Nomo Hideo and Suzuki Ichirō, the prominence of Japanese "idol singers" and soap operas in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand, the astounding reception of *Iron Chef* (*Ryōri no tetsujin*) and sumō wrestling on the Food Network and ESPN, respectively, or the popularity of manga cartooning styles and "character goods" (for example, Hello Kitty, Pokémon) among children in much of the developed world?

Iwabuchi argues that Japanese corporations, with tacit government support, export cultural products to "improve international understanding of Japan, particularly in Asian countries," hoping to "soothe – even suppress" bitter memories of Japanese colonial aggression.[42] Whether "pop culture diplomacy" can achieve Japanese objectives in Asia remains to be seen, but one result of Japan's export of cultural products is undeniable: an upsurge of general interest in Japan – including Japanese language – among American consumers of such products. My own classes, and those of my colleagues, overflow with anime, martial arts, and video game enthusiasts, for whom Japan represents not mimetic but creative genius. They favor anime's "thematic complexity" and disdain the "psychological comfort" and "satisfying resolutions" they find endemic in American popular culture.[43] Anime director Miyazaki Hayao thus deposes George Lucas in their pantheon of master storytellers.

Contestation

Popular culture discredits conventional notions of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious. In Japan popular culture provided a forum in which the state, the culture industry, and various constituent actors, representing every conceivable demographic, ideological, or regional affiliation, discoursed on weighty issues regarding citizenship, gender roles, identities, sexuality, social inequities, tradition, and modernity. Recent studies have moved away from notions of popular culture either as simply an imposition of hegemony from above (the Marxist/Frankfurt School take), or as a vehicle for resistance from below (the *minshūshi* take), and rather have embraced a more complex and flexible concept of popular culture as a public space in which a plethora of agendas, interests, and values compete.[44]

It goes without saying that the state, working through the culture industry, did attempt to exert hegemony via popular culture. This is evident in the Tokugawa government's designation of pleasure quarters as "evil places" (*akusho*), assigned to remote, swampy districts; in the modern imperial state's heavy-handed pre-produc-

tion censorship regime, its severe taboos regarding media depictions of the imperial family, and its ubiquitous prescriptions for proper Japaneseness; even in the American occupation's doublespeak encouraging "free speech" while handing down "recommended" and "forbidden" subjects for film and press. Neither can we deny that popular culture functioned as the "hidden transcript" by which recalcitrant non-elites shrewdly articulated desires for personal liberation, social justice, and control of their own destinies.[45] This was certainly the case during the Freedom and People's Rights Movement (*jiyū minken undō*) of the late 1800s, when oratorical singers (*enkashi*) belted out protest songs on the streets, thereby circumventing censorship of publications and earning reputations as "singing street guerillas."[46]

But a simplistic domination–resistance polarity does no justice to popular culture's historical and sociological role. One complicating factor is the fact that, contrary to Marxist schematics, the respective interests of the state and the culture industry rarely coincided neatly, in part because of the very marketability of counter-hegemonic cultural practices and art forms. Moreover, to assume that people consumed cultural products under duress is to deny them rationality and agency, not to mention accountability, for their choices, tastes, and habits. This plays right into the hands of those who insist that ordinary Japanese were victims of their own government, bearing no responsibility whatsoever for aggressive militarism and colonial expansion. Lastly, there are numerous examples of a synergy of interests, in which the culture industry manufactured products that simultaneously satisfied popular tastes and served agendas of the state. Jennifer Robertson identifies one such confluence in the all-female Takarazuka troupe's staging of "colonialist revues" set in exotic Asian locales targeted for Japanese intervention. Another example is the proactive role jazz musicians took to create a new form of nationalistic popular music, rather than docilely mothball their horns under threat of a wartime ban.[47]

Chikamatsu's melodramatic *giri-ninjō* (duty versus emotion) tragedies illustrate that contestation need not entail direct confrontation: rather than explicitly assaulting Tokugawa social structures and moral codes, his stories circuitously address them by depicting the consequences for human happiness of living by such precepts. *Giri*'s inevitable triumph may have reinforced samurai hegemony, but its devastating effects were laid bare on stage for audiences to ponder. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine even hardcore technophiles leaving a screening of the animated film *Akira* unaffected by its dystopic imagery. Many acclaimed anime express ambivalent attitudes toward technology,[48] forcing the audience to reflect on the spiritual, social, and moral costs of the very technological overdevelopment that makes such sophisticated animation possible.

Popular culture raises disturbing questions about personal and group identities in a society many still consider sublimely homogeneous. For instance, the prevalence of Osaka dialect in *manzai* (comic dialogues) is a defiant assertion of localism in the face of Tokyo hegemony. Michael Ashkenazi argues that *matsuri*, too, as "one of the last culturally legitimate bastions of localism left," constitute a "local counterattack" against the capital's "tyranny." In the 1990s residents of Kyoto's low-rent Higashi-kujō district – including Korean-Japanese, disabled, and working-class folk – held a *madang* (Korean-style festival) exploiting their "neighborhood's notoriety to make a political point: democracy means difference."[49] "Against a state that celebrates genetic and cultural homogeneity," Caron writes, "and where democracy is conflated

with a desire for uniform equality, this neighborhood festival celebrates difference as a form of democracy and espouses an open, inclusive public sphere."[50]

Gendered identities have been a durable fixation of Japanese popular culture. Canonical icons such as *onnagata* (female impersonators), which emerged as a necessary response to a government ban on female kabuki performers, and the Takarazuka Revue's *otokoyaku* (male impersonator) performed idealized representations of femininity and masculinity, respectively, but also made it possible to envisage gendered identities as fluid rather than tied to biological sex.[51] For women, Barbara Sato suggests, popular culture "created a new set of images by which they could better understand who they were, or at least who they might be." When Matsui Sumako took the stage as Nora in the 1911 production of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, her electrifying performance stirred ongoing debates on women's roles as homemakers, mothers, autonomous economic actors, and public figures, a discussion that continued in the pages of *Seitō* (Bluestocking), a product of the print media explosion of the early 1900s.[52]

Indeed, popular culture empowers people to don or shed identities at will, even to contest the very boundaries of Japaneseness itself. John Russell's ethnography of the commodification and consumption of "blackness" concludes that many Japanese get dark tans, listen to African diasporic music, choose hip hop fashions, or pursue sexual encounters with people of African descent as acts of "resistance, self-discovery, and empowerment." As evident in an entire subgenre of explicit sexual fiction, in black-face burlesque, and club nightlife, indulgence in black culture and mingling in the most intimate ways with black people become ways of transcending the limits of the "homogeneous nation" (*tan'itsu minzoku*): "Consumption of the black body and its essence liberates one's full potential, one's 'true self'."[53] Russell's study indicates that a "consuming passion" for blackness reflects profound discontent about Japanese national, ethnic, and gendered identities, an insight that might elude us in the absence of sophisticated scholarship on popular culture.

Conclusion

Scholarship on Japanese popular culture is growing in quality and quantity. The historiography of the Edo period demi-monde is more voluminous than that of modern pop, but until recently has lagged behind in theoretical development, as it has traditionally been concerned more with artistic techniques and aesthetics than with social issues or political economy. Most early work on Edo period pop delighted in pointing out aspects that indicated a peculiarly Japanese genius, rather than situating it within a more comparative theoretical framework of popular (or mass) culture. However, in preparing lessons on early modern popular culture, I am continually struck by how Edo period patterns of cultural commodification, production, and consumption portend what happens in the twentieth century. Future studies may indeed highlight continuities transcending the chronological boundary between early modern and modern, as I have attempted to do here. In recent decades historians of Japan have increasingly emphasized continuities that transcend the "watershed" moments or "turning points" usually used to make sense of Japanese history, such as the unification of the country, the Meiji Restoration, or the American

occupation. Such conceptions have been instructive regarding Japan's political, social, and economic orders, but we may be similarly enlightened by a view of popular culture in the *longue durée*. Moreover, from a global perspective, we may be surprised how prescient the purveyors of pop in early modern Japan were regarding the development and marketing of mass popular culture.

The most promising trend in the study of Japanese popular culture has been the increased willingness to take it seriously as an object of historical investigation, to go beyond the connoisseur's fixation with aesthetics, and to integrate it into broader areas of social and ideological inquiry. Specifically, recent studies highlight the engagement of interwar and wartime popular entertainment with colonial, fascist, nationalist, and gendered ideologies, challenging previous notions of pop culture as a vehicle for escape from the earth-shattering events of Japan's mid twentieth century. We are developing an appreciation for the ways that popular culture helped shape Japan's modern history and the behavior and consciousness of the Japanese people, how it facilitated exchange on contentious issues within Japanese society, and the role it has played in Japan's interactions with the outside world. Popular culture is ignored now only at great peril to the historian's comprehensive understanding of the Japanese experience

NOTES

1 Gluck, "The People in History," pp. 34, 38–40; Walthall, "Peripheries," p. 372.
2 Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in Rosenberg and White, eds., *Mass Culture*, p. 62. Quotation from José Ortega y Gasset, "The Coming of the Masses," in Rosenberg and White, eds., *Mass Culture*, p. 45.
3 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 161. See also Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, pp. 165–71
4 Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, p. 226.
5 Nakano, "The Role of Traditional Aesthetics," pp. 130–1; Shively, "Popular Culture," p. 708.
6 Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, p. 80.
7 Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society," p. 1373.
8 Lears, "Making Fun," pp. 1422–3 (emphasis added).
9 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. See also Storey, *Cultural Studies*, pp. 4–5.
10 Walthall, "Peripheries," p. 386.
11 Benjamin, "The Work of Art," pp. 221–2, 241.
12 Thompson and Harootunian, *Undercurrents*, p. 10; Donald Shively, "The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki," in Hume, ed., *Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 218.
13 Walthall, "Peripheries," p. 382. See also Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, pp. 95–112.
14 Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, p. 247.
15 Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, p. 167.
16 Seigle, *Yoshiwara*, p. 22.
17 Shively, "Popular Culture," pp. 706–8, 715–33.
18 Hibbett, *The Floating World*, pp. 36, 35.
19 Shively, "The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki," p. 194.
20 Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*, p. 140. Quotation from Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, pp. 35, 41.
21 Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires*, p. 74. On the engagement between avant-garde art and commercial culture in the early 1900s, see Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, pp. 165–215.

22　Shively, "The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki," pp. 195–6, 197.
23　Anderson, "Spoken Silents," pp. 262–5. Quotation from Hibbett, *The Floating World*, p. 65.
24　Chikamatsu quoted in Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., "The Vocabulary of Japanese Aesthetics I, II, III," in Hume, ed., *Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 74.
25　Nakano, "The Role of Traditional Aesthetics," p. 129; Nishiyama, *Edo Culture*, p. 56.
26　Thompson and Harootunian, *Undercurrents*, p. 27.
27　Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, pp. 25–6.
28　See Yuichirō Takahashi, "*Kabuki* Goes Official: The 1878 Opening of the Shintomi-za," in Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader*, pp. 140–2.
29　See Screech, *The Lens within the Heart*; Thompson and Harootunian, *Undercurrents*, pp. 27–8.
30　Anderson, "Spoken Silents," p. 270.
31　Guttman and Thompson, *Japanese Sports*, pp. 142–5.
32　See Donald Keene, "Japanese Aesthetics," in Hume, ed., *Japanese Aesthetics*, pp. 27–41.
33　Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, p. 53. See also Russell, "Consuming Passions," p. 144.
34　See, for instance, Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, pp. 19–43.
35　Yano, *Tears of Longing*, pp. 178, 6.
36　Takahashi, "*Kabuki* Goes Official," pp. 140–2.
37　Eppstein, "Musical Instruction," pp. 1, 4.
38　Guttman and Thompson, *Japanese Sports*, pp. 68–95.
39　Duus, "The *Marumaru Chinbun*," pp. 50–4.
40　Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, pp. 90–1.
41　Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film*, p. 217.
42　Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, p. 75.
43　Napier, *Anime*, pp. 256, 251.
44　See Silverberg, "Constructing a New Cultural History," p. 116; and Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 37.
45　Scott, *Domination*, pp. 2–4.
46　Yano, *Tears of Longing*, p. 31.
47　Robertson, *Takarazuka*, pp. 89–138; Atkins, *Blue Nippon*, pp. 132–9, 152–9.
48　Napier, *Anime*, pp. 86–9.
49　Ashkenazi, *Matsuri*, p. 133.
50　Caron, "On the Downside," pp. 433–4.
51　Donald Shively, "*Bakufu* versus *Kabuki*," in Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader*, pp. 36–7; Samuel Leiter, "From Gay to *Gei*: The *Onnagata* and the Creation of *Kabuki*'s Female Characters," in Leiter, ed., *A Kabuki Reader*, pp. 211–29; Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 40.
52　Sato, *The New Japanese Woman*, pp. 19, 14–15.
53　Russell, "Consuming Passions," p. 135.

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