INTRODUCTION


Presented as a personal journey through certain aspects of Japanese culture, "The Japanese Version" does not attempt to portray all of Japanese culture, nor does it pretend to be comprehensive about its chosen subject. Rather, through a series of close-up scenes, it tries both to complement already existing films and media portraits of Japan, and to present a side of Japanese culture that has not been widely seen abroad. Unfamiliar as many scenes may seem to an American audience, in many ways they can be considered "typical" of modern Japanese life.

While "The Japanese Version" is completely accessible to the viewer who knows very little about Japanese culture, the film is a rewarding experience for more knowledgeable audiences as well, as they discern more subtle examples of cultural significance within individual scenes.

This instructional guide can help provide a proper educational context for "The Japanese Version". Viewers will undoubtedly have many questions about individual scenes and personalities in the film, and the teacher may not always be aware of many details surrounding the filming process. The first article, "Details of Individual Scenes", will help elaborate. Secondly, the article entitled "Japanese Adaptation" looks at some of the issues raised by the film and places them in a larger cultural and historical context. Finally, there is a suggested bibliography, and some suggested discussion questions.

A Note on Popular Culture

The Japanese Version shows a side of Japan that many Americans are unfamiliar with and that the Japanese themselves rarely promote overseas. To Americans who associate Japan with its classic "high culture" of the feudal period, the film can be something of a shock. Cultural critic Donald Richie has pointed out that Japanese culture in the modern era has been to a large degree dominated by a popular, lower-middle-class taste, and much of The Japanese Version bears witness to that.

In post-viewing discussions, some Japanese viewers have acknowledged feelings of embarrassment as Americans learn about such elements of Japanese culture as love hotels and wacky quiz programs, even as they admit that these are an important part of their society. [Yoko Hirose's article "Versions of Self-Image" on page 20 of this study guide discusses these feelings of ambivalence.] It can be useful at such moments to raise the issue of "official" versus "unofficial" culture, and to challenge the audience to think about what we as Americans would want others to know about our society. What would we want included, what excluded? The film is intended to complement the many existing media portraits that focus on the "traditional" or "classical" side of Japanese life to the exclusion of other aspects. Rather than wishing to cause embarrassment, The Japanese Version hopes to show the diversity, humor, and humanity of Japan today.

* * *
[NOTE: There are two versions of the film: the 56 minute Standard Edition and the 38 minute High School Edition. Sections below marked with a § are not applicable to the High School Edition.]

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DETAILS OF INDIVIDUAL SCENES

§1. Love Hotels

Following the introductory part of the documentary, "The Japanese Version" presents a widespread Japanese cultural phenomenon barely known in the US: the "love hotel". All Japanese cities have these institutions, often clustered around major railroad stations. Their purpose is unambiguous: they provide a place for heterosexual couples to have sex. A room is rented in two-hour increments, with discounts offered during slack periods of the day (afternoons and overnight). Although room prices vary considerably, a typical 2-hour rental might fall between ¥3500 and ¥7000 (approximately $25-50).

While Americans might assume that love hotels are primarily for illicit affairs, they actually host a wide range of clients. Married couples wanting fresh surroundings and young unmarried couples unable to find privacy at home (where they usually live with their parents) are attracted to the amenities the hotels offer, which usually include big beds and spacious bathtubs, elaborate sound systems, and, in the case of the hotel presented in "The Japanese Version", a variety of fantasy settings. While most Japanese might feel slightly embarrassed admitting that they patronize love hotels, probably one-third to one-half of the adult population has been to one at some point, and thousands of people check into them daily.

The modus operandi of love hotel management is to avoid embarrassment and provide some much deserved privacy. In most hotels, when the customer pushes the button of a desired room number at the check-in "menu board", the corresponding picture darkens. An elevator ride to the room reveals a flashing light over the doorway, and the door closes and locks behind the visitors. When they are ready to leave, visitors phone to be let out. A hand slips the bill through a slot in the door (or the bill is sent up via pneumatic tube), allowing the visitors to discreetly pay the amount due and exit by the down elevator and out the back way.

Love hotels can be shaped like castles on the outside or can look like any other commercial building in Japan. In recent years there has been a trend towards more sedate surroundings, but Shin Ami, designer of the love hotel featured in the documentary, continues to design fantasy palaces. Other rooms include a Louis XIV suite, a New York skyline room, a room with a racetrack motif, and even a "traditional Japanese" suite, complete with Zen garden and shoji screens. As many clients are teenagers and people in their twenties, the rooms are often designed to attract the attention of young men and women; hence the rooms with Mickey Mouse motifs and other juvenilia that are popular among young Japanese.

For the Japanese, the fantasy rooms offer a chance to play, to step out of day-to-day social restrictions, even for an hour or two. The continued success of love hotels seems assured.

2. Weddings

Of all the parts of the documentary, the sequence dealing with weddings is perhaps the most "typical" of life in Japan--so much so that many Japanese audiences are baffled as to its interest to non-Japanese. They fail to realize, of course, that the rubber wedding cakes and frequent costume
changes that are commonplace in Japanese weddings are unknown in the West.

The two couples whose nuptials are presented in "The Japanese Version" live in Chiba Prefecture, a sprawling suburban area northeast of Tokyo. Both ceremonies took place at the Kashiwa Tamehimiden, one of a chain of "wedding palaces" that cater to lower-middle-class Japanese families. Each Tamehimiden can host up to 20 weddings per afternoon; with such traffic, scheduling is tight, and a typical reception, or hiro-en, lasts exactly two hours, despite being crammed with a variety of eating, drinking, and entertainment events (including the ever-popular karaoke, where the guests get up and sing to each other.)

The first couple, presented briefly at the beginning of the section, chose to get married in the Shinto tradition, which is how roughly 80% of contemporary marriages take place. [It is a common Japanese pattern to be married Shinto-style and to be buried Buddhist-style.] Nevertheless, their reception features a decidedly non-Shinto rubber cake and dry-ice show, and they subsequently changed clothes twice, choosing fanciful Western-style costumes.

Our second couple, the Jimbas, are part of a sizable minority of young Japanese (perhaps 20% nowadays) who are dissatisfied with the traditional Shinto ceremony. Without a strong religious identification (as are most Japanese), they chose a Christian-style ceremony offered by Tamehimiden, performed by a real Catholic priest. The Japanese custom of "shopping around" for cultural items renders any Western religious context irrelevant.

3. Cherry Blossom Time

One of the most ancient and enjoyable Japanese rituals is that of the o-hanami, or cherry-blossom party, which occurs during the brief period in early Spring during the flowering of Japan's millions of cherry trees. One person might attend several o-hanami: one with co-workers, another with family, still others with groups of friends.

Small but exuberant drinking parties occur all the time in Japan, but cherry blossom time is the most popular occasion for indulging out-of-doors, instead of in taverns and restaurants. For the producers of "The Japanese Version", it was a welcome opportunity to talk informally with a wide variety of people. This particular o-hanami took place at Ueno Park, in the heart of older Tokyo.

4. Cowboys

One of the most common of Japanese establishments is the nomiya, or drinking place, typically a very small tavern that might also serve light snacks. Every nomiya has its steady clientele; when a customer purchases a bottle of whisky or sake, his name (they cater largely to men) is written on the label and the bottle stored above the bar for future visits. Each nomiya has its own special character; one might feature jazz recordings, another might cater to people in the film business. The place featured in "The Japanese Version" is special: it has a loyal clientele of customers enthralled by the life of the American cowboy. This nomiya is located in the heart of Shinjuku, the entertainment district of Tokyo, and its customers are middle-class businessmen and professionals who can afford the accoutrements of this lifestyle.

The men who come to this bar and others like it tend to be in their late 30s and 40s--the last generation to be raised on a diet of American TV and movie Westerns in the early 1960s. Although each man has a different level of involvement with the cowboy life, virtually none of them has been to the United States or has had first-hand contact with real cowboy culture; even the musicians and the rope-twirler learned their crafts from books and television. Some travel to dude ranches north of Tokyo on weekends to ride horses, while others content themselves with wearing the garb and getting together in Tokyo on Saturday night.
The three men interviewed in the documentary are "Doc" Suzuki, a dentist, "Tabo", a salesman, and "Rowdy", an employee of the national railroad (he is also seen demonstrating his roping during the musical sequence). Although their hobby could not be considered "typical"—most Japanese do not dress up in costumes every weekend—the indulging of fantasy that the cowboy life represents is commonplace in Japan, and manifests itself in many ways in contemporary culture. The Shinjuku cowboys are quite cognizant of this, and have their own peculiarly Japanese interpretation of the cowboy myth, explained by Rowdy in the film: "It's not about being an individual—it's about working together...Teamwork, that's what it's all about."

§5. The English Craze

A brief section in "The Japanese Version" discusses the variety of odd English found in Japan, also known as Japlish. This is a phenomenon immediately apparent to an English-speaking visitor confronted with expressions ("Store My Ducks", "I feel Coke", "Good Notebook for Vegetarian") that appear to make no sense. In many cases the international cachet any use of English confers upon a product is sufficient justification to Japanese producers, even if the words are just strung together. But many Japlish expressions do have a rational explanation. Often, a Japanese expression is simply translated straight into English, with the Japanese sentence construction unaltered. For example, an ending appended to many Japanese nouns can turn them into verbs suggesting group activity. Translating directly into English words produces such odd (to our ears) expressions as "Let's Sport", "Let's Healthy", and so forth, but the Japanese consumer, who knows quite a bit of English vocabulary but very little grammar, immediately understands the intent. And since the message is not intended for native English speakers, there is no need to "correct" its English. Another characteristic language variation is the creative combination of syllables, so that personal computer becomes pasucom, or...

§6. Charm School

The John Robert Powers Academy is a well-established American "charm school" that has eight branches in Japan. The one depicted in "The Japanese Version" is in Aoyama, a fashionable Tokyo neighborhood. The clientele is almost entirely women, mostly middle-class, who come to brush up on their social skills. According to the manager, a significant attraction of the school is that is provides each graduate with a diploma, and thus enhances her perceived value in an arranged marriage (perhaps 35% of contemporary Japanese marriages continue to be arranged). The charm school itself would be considered unusual in Japan, although the attitudes it reflects (the love of self-improvement, the yearning for foreign cachet) are widespread.

The standard course is sixty hours long, and includes both physical and social instruction. The physical aspects are probably similar to what might be found in the US: posture, poise, personal grooming, diet advice; the teacher, Susan Holder, is a half-Japanese, half-American model. The other half of the course consists of etiquette classes taught by a Polish émigrée. Although American audiences may find it odd that middle-class Japanese are learning about table settings that are so elaborate they might only be found at dinners of state, the rituals of Western table setting are not unlike the classic Japanese tea ceremony. The same precision, care, and emphasis on procedure that is found in the tea ceremony can be seen in the film. This is the preferred Japanese way of learning: an authoritative teacher, or sensei, and a lot of details to memorize. The information is new, but the cultural style is the same.

7. Commercials

Visitors to Japan often remark that the commercials (or CMs, as they are known there) are usually more interesting than the regular TV programs. Certainly Japanese commercials are among the world's most creative, partly because the directors, who have more creative freedom than their
American counterparts, are able to downplay the actual product in favor of creating a mood and leaving the viewer with a specific feeling. (American companies get nervous if their product is not mentioned frequently during a 30-second spot.) For example, the commercial based on Tom Sawyer shown in the documentary only gets around to the product (an instant noodle soup) at the very end; the rest of the time it is content to create a feeling of adventure among its youthful target audience, and to trigger positive responses by reminding them of a favorite book.

The Japanese advertising industry is massive: in 1988, Japan spent 4,417.5 billion yen on advertising; indeed, one of the largest advertising firms in the world is Japanese. TV commercials tend to be either elegant, graceful film essays or lightning-quick, hard-hitting spots for such products as laxatives and detergent. The use of foreigners in Japanese commercials is frequent, with the gaijin used to further the mood, whether it is "classy" (British or European settings), "friendly" (the American heartland), and so forth, in the same way an American spot might use a Japanese actress to suggest the exotic. The difference is in the sheer volume of foreigners used, even if nothing about the product is really "foreign". Sometimes, of course, the foreigner is a genuine international star eager to pick up some extra money without tarnishing their stateside reputation (Paul Newman, Kevin Costner, Madonna, Woody Allen, and Sylvester Stallone have all done Japanese commercials). But most gaijin in commercials are not celebrities. The public doesn't seem to mind, preferring to plug into the moods being presented: busy New York, wide-open West, or in the case of the commercial being filmed in the documentary, "New York-as-seen-in-The Man from U.N.C.L.E.".[§]

8. Gaijin Tarentos

As embodied by Kent Gilbert and Dave Spector, both profiled in "The Japanese Version", the concept of the gaijin tarento, or "foreign talent", has no real equivalent in the United States. These are men, American-born, whose fluency in Japanese and ability to fit themselves into a perceived stereotype of American behavior have yielded them lucrative TV careers in Japan as professional Americans. Gilbert, the clean-cut Utah man, and Spector, the artificially blonde energetic urbanite, are often presented as "typical Americans", and their opinions sought on a variety of subjects that they do not necessarily have any expertise in. There are two or three more gaijin tarento on TV, including a Sri Lankan and an American bodybuilder, and their friendly demeanor helps soften the edges of what many Japanese think is an aggressive American culture. They are domesticated, tamed "pandas", reassuring to the home viewer. Perhaps this is an essential process in a culture which is essentially non-confrontational.

9. Ultra Quiz

Nippon Television's Ultra Quiz first went on the air in 1976. It airs on four successive Thursdays every November, two hours per night, and is but one of many quiz shows on Japanese TV. The quiz begins in a Tokyo stadium, where a crowd of 20,000 is asked a series of "yes" or "no" questions ("When Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon, was it the left foot or the right one?") By the end of the day, the crowd has been whittled down to about one hundred; they are told to show up at Narita Airport, where a spot quiz eliminates 50%; the rest get on a plane and begin their odyssey across America. Each season the quiz visits a dozen locations, eliminating one or two people at each spot, until two contestants are left; they face off in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. The quizzes mix knowledge of trivia, physical stamina, and luck; each episode takes advantage of its location, usually a "classic" American setting, which also provides the backdrop for a "penalty game" that humiliates the losers in a creative way (the losing contestant in Death Valley has to play golf in what is shown to be the world's largest sand trap, for example).

American viewers expect there to be a sizable prize at the end of this gruelling marathon, but in fact
the prizes are either minimal or outright jokes. To the contestants, the incentive appears to be a question of doing as well as possible, thereby not losing face and disgracing one's university or home town; that in itself is reward enough. The contestants who last do experience a fleeting fame in Japan, and Ultra Quiz is especially popular with university students with time on their hands and trivia in their brains.

The penalty or batsu game in Las Vegas that is presented in "The Japanese Version" is fairly self-explanatory. It is unlikely that an American contestant would silently accept the fear and humiliation cooked up for him by the quiz producers, who manipulate their viewers' psyches masterfully by stocking the room with a rogues' gallery of aggressive American stereotypes: the Mafioso, his voluptuous girlfriend, the black bodyguard, and, for support, Mike, the friendly poker player.

While American audiences find the penalty game cruel, many Japanese viewers do not take the contestant's plight quite so seriously. He has done well simply to reach this stage of the game, and when it is all over everyone shares a good laugh with him.

It is appropriate that Ultra Quiz ends with the Statue of Liberty being offered symbolically to the winner. The Statue is the ultimate symbol of America--far more so in Japan than it is in the US itself--and her image is constantly cropping up in Japan. Despite trade wars, concern about Japan-bashing, fear of crime and yuppie flirtations with the cachet of European opulence, she seems sure to endure as a symbol of a society that is perceived as open, creative, given to wide-open spaces and friendly people, and far away from the daily grind--in other words, a suitable fantasy for the Japanese.

Versions of Self-Image: A Japanese Perspective
By Yoko Hirose
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"The Japanese Version" is a lively, innovative work that depicts different aspects of contemporary Japanese culture, showing how the Japanese enjoy so-called American influences in their own ways. As the film develops its story in a light-hearted way, it focuses on scenes Westerners might consider bizarre, such as love hotels, rubber wedding cakes, and courses on how to become "westernized". In Japan, these things are really familiar to us. Although most Japanese take these scenes for granted, we do recognize that they are a little strange. As a result, many Japanese viewers of the film will find themselves chuckling at each episode, albeit with a sense of uneasiness. In these sometimes contradictory ways, "The Japanese Version" relates to important issues facing Japan today.

Japanese often use the word kokusaika (internationalization) to signify the desire of many Japanese to become more a part of the "world community". Yet this effort can be frustrated by two problems: the stereotyped views of Japan held by non-Japanese, and the desire by many Japanese to present only certain aspects of their culture to the larger world.

Frankly speaking, when I saw "The Japanese Version" my reaction was mixed. On the one hand, it is a great joy to see a work that will inform many foreign friends about aspects of contemporary Japanese life. But there is also an accompanying uneasiness as I consider what the film is saying about Japanese culture. Though all the episodes presented are quite familiar to us, the film could never have been made by Japanese hands. In this short essay, I would like to clarify some of these contradictory feelings with the hope of providing a hint of understanding about the conflicting forces of kokusaika and the foreign stereotyping of Japanese culture.

First, my feelings of joy. Needless to say, "The Japanese Version" is one of the very few works
which portrays real Japanese culture without falling back on stereotyped Japanese images. We often sigh over the simplistic work done by foreign journalists. For example, to the incredulous folks back home in the U.S., Japan is often depicted as a robot-driven, inhuman technological society. Other observers, when they focus on contemporary situations, try to connect them to such "traditional" Japanese phenomena as samurai, geisha, madly workaholic businessmen, obedient wives, etc. Mount Fuji is frequently invoked. Enough is enough! The numbers of Japanese who go abroad are rapidly increasing, but whenever we travel in Western countries, or meet friends from abroad, we are repeatedly asked the same kinds of questions about Japanese life, always centering on the traditional ways of living that have all but disappeared from Japan today.

This happens so frequently that a short introductory book on Japanese culture, written in English and accompanied by an audiocassette featuring native English speakers, has become very popular among Japanese businessmen and students who are going to live abroad and must face a volley of questions on Japanese life. Although the presentation is very stereotyped and many of its points are rather obscure, if Japanese travelers repeat the account of Japanese culture given in the book and tape, they can satisfy the predictable questions of their foreign friends. In this way, the same old Japanese stereotypes are perpetuated in a vicious circle of disinformation largely divorced from reality.

On the other hand, Japanese are also titillated by such traditional presentations of their society. At the same time that we complain about foreigners misunderstanding real Japanese life, we appreciate the attention. Furthermore, it confirms our cozy insular idea that foreigners cannot possibly understand us anyway.

The pinpoint accuracy of many of the scenes in "The Japanese Version" pierces this smug shell, and asks basic questions about Japanese self-image. Hence the uneasiness I and many Japanese feel when watching the film. In order to examine the self-image of the Japanese, let us first consider the self-image of the individual. There are basically three kinds of self-image: First, the image one presents to oneself; second, the image of what one wants to be; and third, the image of oneself that one wants others to believe. Usually, people who check their appearance by looking in the mirror every day do not necessarily see themselves in totality. They may focus only on their favorite part, or they unconsciously see only their own "idea" of their faces. People are often surprised when they are shown candid photos of themselves, exclaiming "Do I really look like that?"

Japanese life as shown in "The Japanese Version" gives us a similar kind of shock. Our discomfort in watching it comes from feeling that the Japanese culture and people that appear in it represent neither the image we want to be nor the image we want to present to the world. Yet each scene is filled with accurate observations of everyday life; leaving aside considerations of degree or taste, this is undoubtedly Japan. Although we have been eager to be "really understood" by foreigners for a long time, we may find ourselves getting angry at such candid snapshots.

As I consider these issues I wonder if we Japanese really have seriously considered our own self-image. Such a consideration is needed now more than ever before, as the desire for kokusaika, for internationalization, is growing at the grass-roots level as well as in government. Yet our understanding of what this concept means remains confused and simplistic.

As a first step, we Japanese should carefully identify and analyze these scattered images of ourselves. Without real self-understanding, one cannot grow, and moreover one will never achieve mutual understanding nor gain friends in the world. In order to understand ourselves, we must examine our national image from different points of view. By coming to terms with the discrepancies in the various images of ourselves that exist, our understanding of ourselves will slowly approach reality. Perhaps we will have to admit to the world--and to ourselves--that Japan is
no longer the land of such long-cherished stereotypes as geisha and samurai, and that a true portrait of our culture must also encompass love hotels, cowboy bars, and Ultra Quiz.

This process may well involve confusion, discomfort, and embarrassment. However, without this catharsis, we will never reach either a real understanding of ourselves or come to a mutual communication with others. "The Japanese Version" is a significant step in stimulating this re-evaluation.

JAPANESE ADAPTATION

By Caron Allen and David W. Plath, University of Illinois We in the West are aware that traditional Japanese culture was rich in its diversity but somehow we seldom notice that modern Japanese culture is every bit as colorfully varied. The Japanese Version does not attempt to portray that whole panorama but it offers a valuable glimpse into some of the special scenes of Japanese life today.

It may be surprising that many of the symbols, images and idols we think especially "American" are so widely known and cherished also in Japan. In Japan, however---as in many parts of the world---these elements of popular culture are features that people use when signalling to one another about what it means to be modern.

The cultural critic Donald Richie has noted that Americans still like to think of Japan as some sort of hermetic Oriental Kingdom where tradition stands firm against the onslaught of technology. As the film shows, however, Japanese are ardent and able consumers as well as manufacturers of the latest technology and of the popular culture that goes along with it. In the process "American" forms and images---many of which we originally borrowed from Europe---are so thoroughly domesticated and re-incorporated into local life that they become, in effect, "things Japanese".

Language offers a good example. The usual estimate is that currently one has to know at least five thousand words from English in order to be a fluent speaker of everyday, ordinary Japanese conversation. These words may have been "borrowed" at one time but many of them have been recombined into phrases that are "native Japanese". Not spoken outside of Japan, these phrases have to be interpreted for people who regard English as their mother tongue. The abbreviations OA or OB or OL make no sense in ordinary American speech but Japanese immediately understand them to refer to "office automaton" and "old boy" (alumnus or alumna) and "office lady" (earlier known as BG, or "business girl").

The film suggests that Japan has had a long history of willingness to learn from the outside world, to draw on ideas, inspiration and knowledge like an eager student. The appetite for adaptation has carried forward into the twentieth century. One of the great strengths of modern Japanese culture appears to be this ability to partake discriminately of the world's human abundance while continuing to re-create the Japanese people's own identities as individuals, as a people, and as a nation. As the film exclaims, "this new mix is Japanese culture".Weddings: A New Old Tradition Americans tend to imagine that a Japanese wedding must somehow be very old and traditional and chock-full of sacred symbols. This line of thinking is typified in the James Bond film "You only Live Twice", where 007 weds a Japanese agent in an elaborate procession and ceremony at a Shinto shrine. In fact, The "traditional" Shinto wedding was invented in 1900 on the occasion of the marriage of the then-Crown Prince, later the Showa Emperor. Japan's leaders felt a need to bring their country in line with European industrial nations, whose royalty were married in Church by Christian rites.

Among the general population however, Shinto rites became standard only in the last 30 years. Until a generation ago, weddings were performed at home before a small family gathering. They varied widely by region, social class, and family preference. Many of the wedding practices now defined as "traditional" were originally the practices of the pre-modern samurai elite not necessarily
of the mass of the population.

Weddings have been moved from the home to hotels and commercial wedding "palaces". The have become elaborate and expensive—$50,000 is the going rate for a middle-class wedding—with at least 50 guests feted at the reception banquet after the ceremony. As shown in the film, the clothing, lighting, rubber wedding cakes, fountains, delicacies, and serving dishes suggest anything but the austere lines and natural forms that are thought of as characteristic of traditional Japanese art.

Wedding directors have not yet incorporated "something blue" into the performance but they have ingeniously combined many somethings that are old, new and borrowed. The bride changes clothing at least three times during the reception. She enters in a white kimono, shifts to a colorful kimono, then to a western wedding gown or a cocktail dress. The bridegroom enters in formal Japanese garb hakama and haori, then changes to a morning coat or tuxedo.

Throughout the reception there are symbols old and new to invite a long and happy life together, gratitude to parents and seniors, and abundant progeny—even though the statistically average Japanese married couple today stops with 1.53 children. The symbols are "Japanese", whether they involve displaying fans that open up to express a full life (traditional) or lighting a rack of candles arranged in the shape of a Valentine heart (new).

Wedding palace entrepreneurs have energetically promoted this "traditional" extravaganza and continue to make it more elaborate. To dismiss it all as mere commercialism, one would have to argue that Christmas in the United States has become just a spending spree of hollow meaning. Japanese readily grumble about the cost of weddings but are willing to pay that cost because the symbols and events are the right way to communicate what marriage means now.

Seen from one point of view, the amount of care, thought and worry (as well as the amount of money) expended on weddings today are manifestations of an often-noticed Japanese concern for following prescribed Form. These weddings also demonstrate that Form is not fixed for eternity: it can be drastically reconstituted within the span of a single generation.

Cowboys and Conformity

We Americans, self-proud as individualists, tend to regard concern for prescribed Form as mere ritualism and a mark of weakness. Japanese are more likely to consider it a sign of personal strength and self-discipline. Of course Form can be stifling when pursued to excess; Japanese culture has a rich stream of jokes, stories and sit-coms burlesquing people who are too punctilious. But Japan-watchers generally agree with Japanese themselves in arguing that this willingness to follow Form helps greatly in producing the relatively high levels of everyday courtesy and public safety in Japan that are envied in many other countries.

Insularity and attention to Form are causing problems for many Japanese as they struggle to live in a world of global markets and media and worldwide human interaction. Slogans about ethnic purity and homogeneity, however, blot out foreign awareness of the vast diversity of human types, needs and conflicts within Japan as a nation of 120 million individual persons. One could even argue that the problem of finding ways to say "this is me" is felt all the more acutely because of the value placed upon attention to Form. The bubbling pool of images of wedding princesses, cosmetic surgery, gaijin tarento and James Dean has to be understood in this larger context.

Probably as many Japanese as Americans would cheerfully join with J.T. Kanehira in the film when he sings "Take This Job and Shove It!". Dressing in cowboy garb or masquerading as Marilyn Monroe are quick and direct ways to identify with something distant and different---to warn others
not to judge the inner-me by my everyday performance as a dedicated dentist or salesperson. Such images gain in power when they can be fitted into a familiar framework of ideas about the larger and more abstract forces that operate in the universe. One young man in the film refers to Elvis as a kamisama, a word whose dictionary translation is "god". One has to be careful not to interpret this as implying an almighty Jehovah or even a being who holds supernatural powers. The kamisama include the Shinto gods and the Emperor himself, beings who reside in the realm of the extraordinary. But the word also is used widely, more simply to suggest "He's somebody with charisma and I'd like to borrow a bit of it".

On the whole, the kamisama are regarded as benevolent, but borrowing their powers can be risky---the familiar theme of the sorcerer's apprentice. Foreign images, as George Fields comments in the film, can be an oddity or a menace. They help sell products, and appeal to individual needs for self-expression; they also can upset one's sense of security as being a well-rooted Japanese. TV game shows such as Ultra-Quiz, and daily media reports on crime in the United States, help neutralize that menace and level the playing-field of popular imagery.

An American viewer's first reaction is likely to be that Ultra-Quiz and the use of gaijin tarento are efforts to make Americans look like fools. Of course there is some spoofing along these lines---just as is done with "Samurai Night Fever" on Saturday Night Live. There also are many more hours of the day and evening when Japanese TV shows are spoofing Japanese life. Indeed, even Ultra-Quiz in its own way is as much a commentary on Japanese as American culture, given the extent to which Japanese life has become such a compound of "borrowed" images now so extensively domesticated that their origins are often forgotten. It's the Japanese contestants in Ultra-Quiz who get mud on their faces, and the Japanese novice card-dealer who was too naive.

Whose Dream Is It?

One of the larger issues raised by The Japanese Version is whether the Japanese are simply borrowing an American dream or whether it is more accurate to say that they have repackaged their own dream in American wrapping.

Certainly the traffic in symbols, images, words and ideas across the Pacific has overwhelmingly moved in one direction. Few Americans command more than a dozen words of Japanese; fewer could name even one pop singer or television show famous in Japan. As many commentators have noted, if it were possible to copyright a language and charge one cent every time a word of American English is spoken in Japan, the notorious trade deficit would be reversed overnight. One of the virtues of the film is that it alerts an American audience to dimensions of the U.S. - Japan partnership that our mass media is ignoring in their blind attention to industrial productivity and the exchange of hardware and goods.

The lesson reaches far beyond Japan. For better or worse, in recent decades American popular culture has been the world's dominant generator of images and ideas of what it means, on the level of everyday comfort and fun, to be wholly modern. People from a number of other nations who have seen the film remark that it would be easy to produce sequels on "The Thai Version" or "The Egyptian Version" and so on. Blue jeans, cowboy boots, Coca Cola and Mickey Mouse have become a global language of lifestyles, as American English has become the standard language for international commerce and foreign relations.

Perhaps Americans can allow themselves a moment of pride over the situation. They should follow it with moments of reflection. The world favors us with attention and imitation: what do we owe in return? Should we be as energetic about exploring images and ideas from other countries? Won't "The American Version"---a limited combination of themes and symbols put together in one place and time---eventually wither into formalism, or is it guaranteed to last forever?
Looking at "The Japanese Version" allows Americans to tune in on another channel in Japanese life. Ultimately it can help us tune back in to a central channel in our own lives.

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GENERAL


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# 1282 Shintaro ISHIHARA "An Open Letter to Americans," 12 Feb 90
# 1312 Ryuichi IMAGAWA "Wanted: A New Bridge in the Pacific," 23 Apr 90
# 1324 Mitsuru TOYODA "BlueEyed Emissaries for Peace," 21 May 90

Charm Schools:
# 1361 Mihoko KOBAYASHI "Lifestyles: Nouveaux Riches," 20 Aug 90

Housing:
#1299 Katsumi SADO "The 21st Century Dream House," 19 Mar 90

PERIODICALS AND PHOTO SOURCES
The East, Look Japan, Japan Echo, Japan Pictorial, Japan Quarterly.

ADDITIONAL TEACHERS' SOURCES
Free Resources for Teaching about Japan. Linda S. Wojtan. Midwest Program for Teaching about Japan, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Bloomington, IN 47405.


Video Sources:
Japan Society of New York
333 E. 47th St.
New York, N.Y. 10017

QUESTIONS for DISCUSSION

1. Name some examples of Japanese culture that have been popularized in the United States.
2. Why do some Japanese choose to have a Christian wedding even though they say they have "no religion."
3. Why do some Americans find the mix of old and new, and imported and homegrown aspects of Japanese society contradictory?
4. Why might Americans be less aware of Japan and Japanese culture than the Japanese are of us?
5. How does mass media influence our lifestyles?
6. What are the advantages of adopting cultural forms from other countries? Are there any disadvantages?