Japanese Culture: Some subtilties o’ the isle

By Simon Hull

> You do yet taste
> Some subtilties o' the isle, that will not let you
> Believe things certain.
> (*The Tempest*, Act V, Scene I)

Japan’s popular culture stirs the imagination of young people throughout the world. Think of the popularity outside Japan of the author Haruki Murakami, or of the contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, or indeed of Hayao Miyazaki, director of the Oscar-winning animation *Spirited Away*. Think too of Pokémon, the Japanese media franchise, and of how its colourful characters can now be seen adorning the sides of aeroplanes, while their adventures are broadcast in well over sixty countries worldwide.

When I was growing up in England, I can even remember how Tamagotchi took the small rural community where I lived by storm! My school quickly moved to ban them, though I nobly decided it would be better to risk a school detention than to let my poor little digital pet keel over and die (as it was prone to do if you left it alone for too long). As of 2008, a staggering *seventy million* Tamagotchi had been sold worldwide (that’s an awful lot of children to dish out school detentions to!).

Yet as enthralling as Japanese popular culture undoubtedly is, I worry that its sheer prevalence can sometimes obscure some of the subtler aspects of things Japanese. It is these “subtilties o' the isle” which I would like to probe in what follows.

At the end of last year, *The Economist* magazine contained a fascinating article entitled “Being Foreign”.[1] It notes how “liberating” it can be to experience “the thrill of being an outsider”, before observing how, in today’s world, this is becoming both easier and more difficult to achieve:

> Easier, because the globalisation of industry and education tramples national borders. More difficult, because there are ever fewer places left in this globalised world where you can go and feel utterly foreign when you get there.

That it is becoming –in one sense –ever more *difficult* to “feel foreign” is, in *The Economist’s* view, an unfortunate trend, because “foreignness is intrinsically stimulating” and “the condition of being foreign engages the mind constantly without ever tiring it”. What’s more, for our purposes it is particularly interesting to note the article’s bold claim that “the most generally satisfying experience of foreignness–complete bafflement, but with no sense of rejection–probably still comes from time spent in Japan”:

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[1] *The Economist* (December 19th 2009), pp.99-101

> To the foreigner Japan appears as a Disneyland-like nation in which everyone has a well-defined role to play, including the foreigner, whose job it is to be foreign. Everything works to facilitate this role-playing, including a towering language barrier.

Lost in Translation

Please cast your minds back for a moment to the hugely successful film *Lost in Translation*. On one level, the film is pure comedy. Almost everything about Japan can seem humorous and frankly very bizarre to a Westerner with zero-knowledge of Japanese culture. The film successfully taps into this reality. For instance, there is the famous "rip my stockings" scene (which my step-father *still* roars with laughter at when I play it to him, even though he's seen it countless times already).

Some of my Japanese friends have raised a concern with me that the film is slightly racist or disrespectful. Although it may risk seeming so at times, I genuinely do not think that there is any kind of serious disrespect intended on the part of the film's director, Sofia Coppola. In fact, at one level *Lost in Translation* can be seen as an outright *celebration* of the kind of foreignness I've just been reflecting on. How wonderful it is to still be able to go to another country and revel in the absurdity of the contrast with your own! Indeed, I am convinced that it is *precisely* Japan's unique ability to make non-Japanese people feel pleasantly foreign which–in a world of rapid globalisation–is one of the primary sources of its cultural attractiveness (or of what we might call its "soft power").

Yet there is another, deeper level on which the film operates. *Lost in Translation* contains an implicit acknowledgement that there is something acutely serious and almost agonisingly *profound* about Japanese culture– something which can *only* be patiently discerned over time, something (in other words) which remains largely inaccessible to the passing foreign visitor.

Think, for instance, of the part in the film when Charlotte (played by Scarlett Johansson) takes the bullet train to Kyoto. She peers in on a traditional Shinto wedding, and watches as Buddhist monks chant ancient sutras, quite unable to make sense of what she is witnessing. Later, she phones her friend back in America, and finds herself struggling to hold back the tears as she recalls her visit to Kyoto because in her words she "didn't feel anything". I suspect a part of her is upset because she can sense that she has witnessed things of exquisite beauty– and yet, as a foreigner with almost no prior knowledge of Japan, these things feel painfully elusive to her.

By the end of the film, however, there are signs that the two main characters have reconciled themselves to this somewhat compelling elusiveness. In the final scene, Bob (played by Bill Murray) whispers something into Charlotte's ear. We see her nodding, but we–the film's audience–are not permitted to overhear what gets said. We just hear a tantalising murmur. It is as though Bob and Charlotte have, in their own way, grasped the deep pathos of Japan, and have implicitly resolved to quietly respect its mystery.

So I think the genius of a film like *Lost in Translation* resides in the fact that it managed to tap into to two related aspects of a foreigner's experience of Japan– the total excitement and wackiness of it all on the one hand, and, on the other, the painful sense one occasionally gets that all this beauty and mystery will remain for the foreigner forever elusive.

Yet it would be a huge mistake to regard this painful elusiveness as a negative quality. Indeed, just a moment ago I described it as "somewhat compelling". To allude to the article from *The Economist* which I quoted from earlier, Japanese culture itself seems to me to be uniquely capable of "engaging the mind constantly without ever tiring it"– such has been my own personal experience, at any rate.

Falling in Love

I first came to Japan in the autumn of 2006. I had been awarded a scholarship from my university in England to study in Fukuoka for a year after graduating. I had no idea what to expect before arriving; I was hugely ignorant of Japanese culture. I knew how to keep a Tamagotchi alive for more than one day, but that was about it, I am ashamed to admit.

Sometime after arriving, I remember opening one of my guidebooks and glancing at the opening line. It read: "Japan does not give up its secrets easily". That idea has stayed with me. What I have been calling Japan's "elusiveness" is, for many foreigners, *precisely what causes them to immerse themselves so deeply in Japanese culture*. For me, Japan is not elusive in a debilitating sense–on the contrary, the fact that it does not give up its secrets easily is precisely what attracts and enchants me the most.

To put it another way, Japan does not throw its pearls to swine. It holds something back from the casual visitor, challenging the foreigner to stay awhile. After being in Fukuoka for a few months, I began to realise that I was somewhere very special. It was like falling slowly in love.

When one falls in love with a person, one becomes increasingly aware of their many subtleties and quirks, and one learns to delight in them. So too when one falls in love with a country. Slowly, during the year in which I lived in Fukuoka, I stumbled across one of the most exquisite subtleties imaginable.

I arrived in Fukuoka expecting to learn about Buddhism and Shinto, and of course, within the first few months of being in Japan I had already visited many temples and shrines. As an undergraduate, I had studied Theology, and so I was naturally drawn towards doing so. After all, one comes to a new country partly in order to learn about its culture, and religion is an important aspect of culture. What I had not been anticipating, however, was that Japan was also going to educate me about my *own* culture in a way I could never have imagined.

Japan’s best kept secret

Shortly after arriving in Fukuoka, I visited Nagasaki for the first time. As I explored this remarkable city, I began to become aware that it had historically been the centre of Japanese Christianity. Over time, I started to educate myself about this history. Slowly, seductively, Japan began to share its secrets with me. I learnt that not only did Japan have a compelling Christian history; it had also nurtured what have become known as “hidden Christians”.

To me, the very idea of “hidden Christianity” is a rather charming one. It seems to imply something gently subversive, and something much subtler than what people from my own culture would normally associate with the religion which has for centuries underpinned and informed Western thought and civilization. Whereas many Westerners of my generation are bored stiff at the very mention of Christianity in its classical form, the notion of Japanese “hidden Christianity” is (in my experience) one that even the most disinterested of Westerners cannot fail to find absolutely compelling.

During the year I lived in Japan, I plunged ever more deeply into this quite remarkable (yet relatively little known) area of Japanese history. I discovered that throughout the Edo period (i.e. for over two hundred and fifty years), Japanese Christians had kept their faith in secret by mixing it with Buddhism and Shinto, as well as with rural folk mythology. What resulted was one of the most intriguing amalgams of cultures imaginable!

If one visits the Christian museums in Kyushu, one can see statues of the Virgin Mary disguised as a Buddhist bodhisattva[2], or as some other Japanese deity. These fascinating statues go a long way towards conveying the sheer vibrancy and colourfulness of Japanese “hidden Christianity”. For instance, in one museum in Amakusa I saw a statue of Mary disguised as a “mountain hag doll”. The statue shows a topless woman breast-feeding a small male child (intended to secretly represent Christ).

Usually, in the statues in question Mary has been made to look fully Japanese, and she is often shown with Japanese facial features and wearing a kimono. Surely no Edo-period inspector would ever have guessed that these statues were in fact secretly meant to represent one of the central figures of the Christian religion (which was banned in Japan in 1626)? And yet, if one turns such statues around you encounter a tiny Christian cross, which would have been concealed by placing the statue against a wall.

Another remarkable object I discovered in a museum in Fukuoka is a so-called “magic mirror”. It looks for all the world like an ordinary Edo-period mirror, and it has an image of a Buddhist paradise engraved into the frame. However, if one shines a light through the centre of it, a silhouette of the Virgin Mary kneeling before the crucified Christ appears on the wall before you. It really is a truly remarkable object.

Yet this intensely secret, intimately hidden side to Japanese culture does not stop there. I am currently a Japanese government scholar based at Sophia University in Tokyo, where I am researching an incredible (yet little known) document called *Tenchi Hajimari no Koto*, or (in English) "The Beginning of Heaven and Earth". This was the sacred text of Japan's hidden Christians, and it is an enchanting amalgam of Catholic doctrine, Buddhist and Shinto mythology, and rural Japanese folklore.

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[2] In Japanese Buddhism, a bodhisattva is an enlightened being who, out of compassion, forgoes nirvana in order to save others.

For anyone familiar with Catholicism in its traditional form, the text is, on one level, highly amusing. As with the film *Lost in Translation*, one surely cannot fail to be amused by some of the cultural misunderstandings we encounter therein.

In "The Beginning of Heaven and Earth", many aspects of traditional Catholicism really do get "lost in translation", and are given a very charming Japanese twist. For instance, the birth of Christ happens as follows: a butterfly comes and hovers above Mary's head. Suddenly she swallows it, and then gives birth immediately! Again, whereas in the traditional account of the crucifixion Christ stands before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, in this text he becomes *two* people, Pontius *and* Pilate! Or again, the Latin word *sanctissma* (meaning "most holy" as in *Maria sanctissma*, or "Mary most holy") inherits a Japanese twist, and becomes "Sancti *Shima*", or "Sancti island".

So all of the Theology I had studied with such diligence as undergraduate at Cambridge becomes rather charmingly mixed up in this unique and remarkable text. Yet, as was also the case with the film *Lost in Translation*, these many cultural misunderstandings are not *merely* something to be laughed at. At a deeper level, the text's inherent strangeness has a beauty and an elusiveness to it which represents something quite special and profound. What's more, I have learned over time that the many different aspects of Japanese "hidden Christianity" have the potential to teach me much of value about my own culture.

What should they know of England, who only England know?

So wrote my fellow countryman, Rudyard Kipling. Through my exhilarating encounter with Japan's "hidden Christian" heritage, I have been inspired to view English culture anew. It is testimony to Japanese culture's richness and subtlety that I have–though my study of one aspect of it–been inspired to rediscover some of the best aspects of my own country's history. Without Japan, however, this simply would not have been possible.

Having discovered that there were once "hidden Christians" in Japan, I went on to find out that there were "hidden Christians" in England too! After the English Reformation, there were some Catholics who did not wish to convert to Protestantism. These became known as the "English recusants".

There are some intriguing points of parallel between English recusancy and Japanese "hidden Christianity". For instance, in the Victoria and Albert museum in London, tucked away upstairs, you can find a small glass display case. The case is labelled "Secret Catholicism", and within the case one can see the hidden objects the English recusants used to conceal their Catholic faith from English Protestants. Anyone who has visited the Christian museums in Kyushu cannot fail to spot the many remarkable parallels.

Indeed, the English recusants were even sharp enough to spot the parallels themselves. During the time when they were in exile from England (around the mid-seventeenth century), a series of plays were written about the plight of Japanese Catholics at that time. By pointing to the heroic example the persecuted Japanese Catholics were setting, these plays were intended to strengthen the resolve of the English recusants in the face of the suffering which they themselves were also undergoing on the other side of the world.

These quite remarkable Latin plays were only discovered in a dusty library in England a few years ago, and they help to shed new light on the precise way in which two very different cultures can enrich and mutually inform one another. Heartwarmingly, they also display a respect for the many virtues of Japanese people and their culture which was well ahead of its time. As it says in the prologue to one of these plays:

> Now, Phoebus [i.e. the Sun], put away ignoble fears and, running round your usual course through the sky, as a trusty witness relate to the late-rising races [i.e. the West] what pearls of piety my Orient nourishes![3]

These moving lines go some way towards articulating what I have been trying to do in this essay– namely, to excavate some of the pearls of a culture which does not give up its secrets easily.

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[3] Masahiro Takenaka and Charles Burnett , *Jesuits Play on Japan and English Recusancy* (Tokyo 1995), p.39