# **Final Essay**

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# Japanese Cinema 310

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# Introduction

For years, many people including myself have questioned why I am so drawn to Japan. There was never a clear cut answer as to what made me fall in love with this country and her people. For me it was always just because. When people would ask me, “Why do you love Japan so much?” All I could say was, “I don’t know, I just love the country” Although, for some individuals this is completely okay-I have been searching for this answer for years so I can more accurately explain the “why”.

**Thesis Statement:**

In this paper, I would like to analyze how this class has helped me understand why I love Japan and her people so much and also some cultural essences within Japan that I am not too fond of. Although we have watched several films that I love, I will only focus my attention on the following films: Ugetsu Monogatari, Swing Girls, Tokyo Story, Hidden Fortress, and Departures. Within these films I will discuss how the following cultural essences: Language, family structure, Group Harmony, Friendship and Japanese: “The way of doing things” has helped me define the “why” I love Japan so much.

**Japanese Language**

Although complex for many Americans, Japanese is a language that is quite beautiful. In my opinion, its complexity makes it beautiful. One complex part of the Japanese language is the use of Honorific speech. Which is known as Keigo (respectful language). There are three main categories that are within the Keigo speech: Sonkeigo-Respectful, Kensongo-humble and Teinneigo-polite. Polite language (teineigo) is the standard form of Japanese. Polite language is considered formal language. It does not show any type of respect or humbleness. Respectful language (sonkeigo) on the other hand is used when referring to superiors or guests. Humble language (kensongo) is used to describe your own actions or the actions of others in your in-group. Humble language’s use typically implies that your own action is assisting another person. In Mizoguchi’s Ugetsu Monogatari, you will see the use of Keigo used beautifully. In this film, Genjuro and Lady Wakusa exchange a deep conversation about his pottery. Here is the conversation between the two of them:

Genjuro: But it takes many years of experience to handle the clay and apply the glaze.

Lady Wakusa: The Fruit of experience is beauty.

Genjuro: You’re fortunate my little ones, to catch this noble lady’s eye. I feel for my creations as if they were my own children that such a noble lady would look kindly on them. It’s a great honor to see them in such a grand residence.

Lady Wakusa: Your talent must not be hidden away in some poor, remote village. You must deepen & enrich your gift.

Although this dialogue is in English, you can see how Genjuro humbly talked about his pottery when he stated his “little ones” were fortunate to have caught the eye of this noble lady. In America, this type of speech does not exist. We use either Formal or casual speech. Although, I have learned some Keigo in the classroom, this Japanese Cinema class has made the use of the language real to me.

In Japanese culture language usage is a part of building friendships within the Japanese society. Typically the more formal you are with each other, the more distant your relationship is. As your friendship start to grow, the use of casual speech is typically used more often. I am now going to discuss how the Japanese idea of group harmony has also added to my special love for the culture.

**Friendship**

The definition of friendship: A person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations. (Oxford Dictionary)When I watched Kurosawa’s Hidden Fortress, the relationship between Matashichi and Tahei intrigued me. They were two peasants living in a war torn country fighting for survival. These two stuck by each other like family. They even stole rice together. As the film progressed, you could see them continually arguing and fighting, yet the stuck together. The idea of friendship is different in every culture. Based on my own experiences and my Study Abroad class, many Japanese individuals who meet people tend to want to build a deep strong friendship that lasts for a lifetime. In American culture, you will tend to have more superficial friendships. The definition of superficial is: Appearing to be true or real only until examined more closely (Oxford Dictionary). Although not true for all Japanese, an overwhelming amount of these individuals tend to believe in this. This is my second reason for having true admiration for Japan and her people. Although a film can only give you a small sample of what the culture is like, my discussion in this section of the definition of friendship is not just based on this film, but also based on my personal experiences and also my Study Abroad class. Japan is a group-oriented society. Not just believing in the individual but believing in the group is what makes this a truly wonderful culture.

**Group Harmony**

In America, children are encouraged to assert their separate identity. In Japan, they learn to harmonize with the group (The Japanese Mind 70). Growing up, I have always understood that friends are important. However in America it is understood in the culture that you can not only rely on the group to advance in life. American culture is really competitive. In Japan, life is surrounded by group harmony. Families tend to eat together more and do many of their activities together. The movie Swing Girls showed how group harmony is an important part of the Japanese culture. Takuo, one of the main characters in the film lost his desire to play in the school band. His ultimate desire was to play on the school’s baseball team. Right as he was about to turn in his resignation to the head of the band, all of the band members except for him get ill due to food poisoning. This leaves Takuo in a challenging situation. Should he quit the band and risk his school’s baseball team losing or should he stay and form a new band. Group harmony was a large theme in this movie. In American culture, due to our individualistic society, this movie would have had a different storyline. Takuo would have probably turned in his resignation to the band leader without even thinking about how his resignation would affect the school and the baseball team. This is my third reason for the “why” I love Japan. To grow up in a society that looks at their entire group and how their decisions will impact the group is quiet amazing. Group Harmony is also an important part of the Japanese family structure. Now I am going to discuss how family structures, according to the films we have watched, have changed over time.

**Family Structure**

Although there are several forms of family structures, I will discuss the following in this section: Extended and Nuclear families. In an Extended family, you’re Grandparents Uncles and Aunts all play a major role in the children’s upbringing. In a Nuclear family, the family structure typically consists of two married parents and their biological children. During the Tokugawa period, family was the social and economic unity of society. Occupation and property belonged to the family rather than the individual. Individuals often sacrificed their happiness to ensure survival of the family. (Culture and Customs of Japan 27). In Tokyo Story, you get a strong sense of the nuclear family and its importance in the storyline. It is still interesting to see that although the nuclear family still is present in Japanese culture, it is slowly starting to change. The fourth reason in the“why” I love Japan so much is due to their family structure. It makes more sense to have the extended family living under one roof, because if maintains a strong bond amongst each family member. It also allows individuals to be smarter with their spending habits,, because the money that each person is bringing in, goes towards the family unit instead of just one individual.

**Japanese 方: “The way of doing things”**

Racially and culturally, Japan is the most homogeneous of the world’s major nations-which is a prime reason, the Japanese have been able to westernize their Society yet still preserve a keen sense of their own special identity.(The heart and mind of Japan 44) This is one of my most favorite parts of the Japanese society. Many things that the Japanese do are considered an art form. This way of doing things is seen in the way they drink tea, the way they eat their food, the way they bow and also the way that they speak. Although quite taboo in Japan and in many cultures, the way the Japanese prepare their dead ones (Nokanshi) is in my opinion an art form. The movie Departures shows how much care and love is put into preparing a person for their family regardless of their religious background. There are many steps such as cleaning the body, disrobing and redressing the deceased in the proper ceremonial clothing and also applying makeup that make this more than just a regular ceremonial task.

**Conclusion**

Overall, I am pleased to have been able to take a class in Japanese Cinema. I have never taken a class like this before, so I could only assume what I thought was right about this culture from the books I read. Although reading is extremely important to learning more about different cultures, I personally feel that watching the cultures cinema from several different eras is also key in understanding how and why individuals may act in certain cases. This class has enabled me to be able to understand more about the Language, family structure, Japanese ideas of group harmony, Friendship and lastly the importance of Japanese 方: “The way of doing things” Although, I still have more to learn about the culture, I can now more clearly define the “why” I love Japan and her people so much.

References

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