

# ON SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MASS ENTERTAINMENT IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN<sup>1</sup>

A Social Psychological Aspect of Japanese Popular Songs and Films

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## I

Mass entertainment today cannot be considered apart from the context of communications, and any attempt to deal with the question of mass entertainment in Japan must accordingly begin with an inspection of the whole picture of mass communications in Japan. Mass communications is a product of the modern capitalist society and a thorough understanding of mass communications is essential to the understanding of the contemporary society.

Japanese society even now retains many remnants of feudalism and to attain an understanding of mass communications today it is necessary to know in what manner communication was effected prior to the establishment of the modern State.

Communications in their initial stages of development are an exchange within a circumscribed area between a limited number of individuals. The communicator and commicatee know each other by sight or are at least familiar with the facts of each other's status, residence, and occupation. The greater part of communications within a feudal society take this direct, closed form. They have not reached the stage of mass communications.

Together with this closed nature, communications within a feudal society is characterized by communications channels which mainly run down through social strata from top to bottom. A notice board put up at street corners in villages and towns when a feudal lord issues a directive is a method by which communications are literally channeled from the top—the authorities above—down to the masses. Thus, it is common within a feudal society that communications are channeled vertically from top to bottom and are given out in such an explicit manner as to enable the masses to grasp their contents.

The prevalence of vertical, direct communications in a society previous to the modern one is a reflection of human relations resulting from the system of social class and status peculiar to that society. In other words, members of a feudal society were vertically arranged according to their social status and larg-

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive study on the present status of mass entertainment in Japan see Hiroshi Minami, *Nihonjin no Goraku* (Mass Entertainment in Japan), 1955. Kawade, Tokyo.

scale communications were effected in the form of orders which were passed on from top to bottom (of social strata). Herein lies a social condition which accounts for the vertical nature of communications.

Furthermore, where communications are direct, communications mostly take the form of orders, whose purpose it is to get unconditional mass obedience. In order to achieve this end, communications are expressed in a direct, rather than round-about manner, which is all that is necessary to make the masses thoroughly understand their purport. The greater the authority is, the easier it is to enforce obedience on the masses by a direct, simple form of orders.

This vertical and direct nature has resulted in fine from the fact that communications were channeled from the authorities above to the masses, but, in rare cases, communications within a feudal society did go upward from the masses to the authorities above. Thus, communications within a feudal society can be said to have been one-way traffic for the most part.

Along with the closed, vertical and direct nature, communications within a feudal society were intermediary. By intermediary it is meant that the first communicator passes on a communication to the first communicatee, who in turn becomes the second communicator and transmits the communication to the second communicatee, a process in which communicators and communicatees receive and pass a communication down the line in turn. This relay of communications takes place under the following circumstances.

First, when communications are direct and channeled from top to bottom, the process usually involves relays of several communicators who function according to their social ranking. Here the vertical relay of communications is observed. Second, where communicatees, the masses, lack in the facility of understanding as they did in a feudal society, relay of communications naturally requires an easy, word-of-mouth device. For instance, in the Tokugawa Era, criminal sentences were pronounced in the form of a 'talk' with the offender and the official notice was transmitted to the entire village through their spokesman. Thus the necessity for relays in communication also comes from the conditions on the part of communicatees.

In summary, communications within a feudal society take a closed, vertical form, are direct in their expression, and form a chain of relays. These vertical, direct attributes and the system of relay gradually gave way in modern communications under the circumstances which are described below.

In modern capitalist society, the class structure of society shifted from the status-oriented order of a feudal society and the members of society have come to be arranged less strictly in order of their social status. In other words, while class opposition is based on the ownership of productive means, it is possible in man-to-man communication to expect communications to take not only a vertical, descending course but an ascending one in the form of criticisms, thus disrupting the one-way traffic of communications. The underlying cause of this change lies in the difference between the form of political control in a feudal society and the form of authority in a capitalist society. It can be attributed at the

same time, however, to the fact that the potential of communications has increased due to the progress in printing, communication media and other areas of modern technology.

Communications within modern society spread not only vertically but also horizontally among members of the same social stratum, and communications not only can be effected among the individuals within a circumscribed area as within a feudal society, but also become horizontally possible over a wider, remote area. Broadcasts and motion pictures as well as transportation and communication daily verify the global, horizontal circulation of a communication content whose source is identical. Mass communication are multi-dimensional.

Next, unlike limited communications within a feudal society, mass communications in modern society are no longer necessarily direct in their expressions. In modern society, for instance, it has gradually become difficult for influential power, even where such power controls the masses, to enforce obedience on the masses through direct and straightforward communications as was possible within a feudal society: communications have become indirect and camouflaged, and techniques of persuasion have come to be employed. Thus communications of modern society tend to use indirect, instead of direct, expressions. Mass communications are now characterized by indirectness.

Thirdly, relay of communications has gradually disappeared in modern mass communications, and the same content is sent out simultaneously to many individuals over a wider area from a single source. Here the simultaneity of mass communications has taken the place of the successive relay of feudal communications.

As shown above, mass communications are multi-dimensional, indirect, and simultaneous. With these three characteristics, mass communications penetrate into the life of each and every individual living in contemporary society, exercising unnoticed strong and deep psychological effects upon him. The manner in which such effects actually asserted themselves in Japanese society will be discussed next by citing concrete examples in the field of mass entertainment.

Utilizing the European or American technical devices and systems to a maximum, mass communications of present-day Japan, as seen from the technical standpoint, is highly modernized. The content of communication as well as the habit of communication, however, are not thoroughly modernized by the existence of the above-mentioned remnants of feudalism. One important factor in this is the social circumstances under which communicatees are placed. In other words, present day Japanese masses possess a weakness that they have not yet grown out of the communication habit they acquired in the feudal ages.

First, with regard to communication content, many communicatees even now do not take a given communication as anything but a command, and are socially quite inert in their attitude of criticising or resisting it. Under a feudal system, disobedience to a commanding communication meant a heavy penalty and the communication itself was regarded as something sacred and inviolable. Furthermore, sacredness of from-top-to-bottom communications was exploited

to an extreme under the Emperor system after the Meiji Era. Old sayings like 'The Emperor's word is final and absolute' and 'The commanding officer's order is tantamount to the Emperor's order' were used to make the social or military ranking an absolute one.

As the sanctification of communications reaches its height as it did under the Emperor system, the masses are forbidden to hear the Emperor's voice directly with their own ears or to read them in the original. Communications sanctified to this extreme are intended to make the state authority absolute by divorcing Imperial communications from the masses. Thus communications from the Imperial power down to the masses since the Meiji Era were characterized by the manifestation of the sacredness of the Emperor system with recourse to particularly difficult, ambiguous terms used by the Imperial Household. This ambiguous nature of Imperial communications have influenced directly or indirectly the form and content of mass communications in Japan. Even now mass communications in Japan are more or less characterized by their ambiguous and irrational mode of expression, despite the gradual drift toward the simplified and rational mode of expression since the end of the World War.

In order to seek the support of the people for the Emperor system after the War, efforts are now being made towards the democratization of the Emperor system by means of utilizing modern technique of mass communications. Nevertheless, mass communications in contemporary Japan still retain feudal elements which can serve as a spiritual support for the ancien regime. In the following section we will show how the mass entertainment under the pre-war Emperor system in Japan is still tinged with the feudal element, and examine the stagnant nature of Japanese mass culture despite the technological development of mass communications industry in Japan.

## II

Mass entertainment in contemporary Japan may be characterized by the predominant traditional taste preserved in the content as well as in the mode of expression. Let us examine first, the content of popular music, particularly popular songs now thriving on mass media. Here a tendency to appeal the popular sentiment for political and social status quo is pronounced. Popular songs with a theme that would take the masses into the world of traditional sentiments or a theme exhorting feudalistic human relations and morals are produced on gramophone discs. The number of discs sold every month by recording companies in Japan averages some 600,000 (599,000 as of September for 1956), and 70 percent of which are popular songs. Approximately ten new popular songs come out every month. Reportedly marking a post-war record, some 500,000 discs of a hit popular song were sold. Through radios, a medium of high prevalence, popular songs have attained nationwide popularity that surpasses any other genre of mass entertainment. Furthermore, popular songs can spread

out not only through mass media but also through the singing of fans themselves whether in urban or rural areas.

If a study is made of the mode of expression and the content of popular songs, whose coverage is probably most extensive among various genres of mass entertainments, a clue to what the present-day Japanese masses are seeking and thinking will be obtained.

In the following paragraphs, major characteristics of Japanese popular songs as compared with those of their foreign counterparts will be given.

#### I. *Expressions:*

##### (1) Ambiguity or vagueness of Expression.

Often it is not clear whether the first person in Japanese popular songs is male or female. The expression of circumstances and situations surrounding that person is frequently vague. For instance, love songs of foreign countries usually tell by the sentence subject whether the person expressing affection is male or female. In Japanese popular songs, however, terms for the sentence subject like 'Boku' ('I' Male) and 'Watakushi' ('I' Female) are not used very often. Also a partner in love is expressed by a neutral pronoun like 'Kimi' ('You') which is applicable to both sexes. Thus, in Japanese popular songs a person whose sex is not clear, and, therefore, whose part can be sung by either a male or female singer, expresses feelings in an ambiguous setting.

*Example.* 'Ah, the memories come and go

While an evening moon grows dim and disappear in the  
Yonder far-off clouds afloat.'

——'Song of an Evening Moon'——

(Third Stanza)

by Chisho Terao

##### (2) Symbolism by Nature Description.

As seen in the above example, the setting is made equivocal mainly by the symbolic description of natural scenery. A series of meaningless words and sentences as seen in the traditional literary form, such as Haiku, Renku, Kabuki drama, is used to achieve this effect. There is an air of something vague about the moods and feelings.

*Example.* 'Wrapped in a handkerchief pale blue

Whispers walk through a narrow moonlit lane.

Soon wet in the evening dew they sob

With the windows of their heart closed.'

——'Pale Blue Waltz'——

(Second Stanza)

by Ko Fujiura

'The lonely harbor left behind with memories,

A lonely sea gull wet in the rain.

Ah, like a red camellia, a falling red camellia

Fleeting is a dream.

Why tears tonight again for that person at the Spa.'

—'Harbor of Red Camellia'—

(First Stanza)

by Yaso Saijo

II *Content:*

The reason why Japanese popular songs are sentimental in mood and lack the sentence subject as seen in the above examples will become clear if their themes are examined. The themes which assume a large proportion of Japanese popular songs are: the parting sorrow of lovers and of parent and child, and their agonies at being separated. Blended with the aforementioned symbolic description, such a psychological state creates a peculiar indulgence in sorrow and agony. Here pleasure in sorrow and pain, which may well be called Japanese type of masochism, is expressed. A content analysis of typical popular songs will clearly show the intensity of this masochism.

Below the words used most frequently in 10 songs that are currently (as of November, 1956) most popular are given in order of frequency of appearance (figures in parentheses)

1) Nouns:

Tears (9) Flower (8) the Girl (8) Heart (7) Sweetheart or 'the person' (6) Harbor (5) Pier (5) Man (5) Island (4) Night (3) Dream (3) Sea (3) Love (3) Mind (3) You (3) I or me (3) Baby (2) Offing (2) Light (2) Ship (2) Village (2) Memories (2)

2) Nouns concerning nature:

Moonlit night (3) Night (3) Moon (3) Wind (2) Rain (1) Mist (1) Setting sun (1) Cloud (1) Evening wind (1) Evening glow (1)

3) Adjective:

Sad (5) Distant (3) Red (3) Dear (2) Pleasant (2) Tearful (2) Painful (1) Weak (1) Dark (1) Lonely (1) Vacant (1) Provoking (1) Tender (1) Beloved (1) Happy (1) Bright (1)

4) Verbs:

Weep (14) Call or cry out (6) Remember (4) Long (4) Wait (3) Meet (3) Part (3) Return (2) Come (2) Go (2) Disappear (1) Fall (as leaves fall) (2) Get wet (1) Leave (go away from) (1) Blow (1) Walk (1) Rain (1) Smell (1) Forget (1) Wander (1) Listen (1) Leave (abandon) (1)

As a matter of fact there are many other songs that contain many more of these words of sorrow, some of which appear several times in one song. If the total number of popular songs is taken into account, therefore, the proportion of the element of sorrow will increase further.

It can be said that an outstanding characteristic of Japanese popular songs lies in the fact that parting sorrow is expressed symbolically in the natural scenery ('Rain at the harbor' or 'Pier in mist') and that the feeling of sorrow is to be 'appreciated' or 'enjoyed.'

The following song expresses the sorrow of parting lovers by the repetition of the verb 'weep'.

'Weeping, weeping,  
 Unmindful of weeping,  
 The window parts them further.  
 Looking back, they see yonder  
 The stars go flying  
 Like the eyes sad and longing  
 Above, above the Train of Sorrow.'

—'Train of Sorrow'—

by Hiroshi Sakurai

This is not a wholesome love song but a song of self torturing under a 'dark fate.' The fatalist theme underlying this kind of song has kept alive in current popular songs the feeling that was once expressed in 'Dry Pampas Grass', a popular song of almost 30 years ago.—'In this world we two will never bloom into blossoms. After all we are dry pampas grass....'

*Example* '...Drifting, unsettled life is my lot.

Exposure to weather is natural after all.'

——'Wandering Guitar'——

(First Stanza)

by Yaso Saijo

'Happiness always runs away, far  
 From the arms outstretched  
 Leaving hot tears behind.  
 No use crying, asking,  
 It goes away heartlessly.  
 Happiness is a wandering blue bird.'

——'Duet of Women'——

(First Stanza)

by Yaso Saijo

The majority of the masses in Japan are still considering themselves as being at the mercy of this dark 'fate' and feel a kind of self-satisfaction or negative pleasure in their resignation.

In these days of active labor movements and social movements, however, many workers, students, and young people have come to sing cheerful songs of working and studying youth, with the result that popular movements to spread wholesome songs, like the 'Singing Voice Movement', with half million participants all over the country have been actively promoted. The majority of the masses, however, have not yet been able to rid themselves completely of the morbid theme of fatalism and resignation.

The fatalistic masochism is only one phase of popular songs. The other phase is found in drinking songs like 'Tonko Bushi' and 'Yatton Bushi'. These songs provide an outlet to the energy that has been distorted and suppressed by masochistic tendency.

Japanese drinking songs are different from their foreign counterparts.

Whereas drinking songs of foreign countries are generally innocent and cheerful in mood, Japanese drinking songs have an impoverished, pathetic gayety and are fit to be sung only at restaurant parties with entertainers or waiting girls to a Shamisen accompaniment.

Thier contents, in many cases, contain feudalistic contempt of woman and serve only to give energy an aimless, unbridled outlet. These songs usually lack those vague moods or nature descriptions seen in the above-mentioned popular songs, and generally consist of plain descriptions, but sometimes resignation and parting sorrow are also sung in association with nature descriptions. Thus not a few drinking songs have themes of Japanese masochism.

*Example* 'It should have been said—  
 Why unable to utter just that one word?  
 Why unable to confess...?  
 Again the leaving, looking silly.  
 Love is sad, the moon looks hazy.  
 Hi, Tonko, Tonko!  
 ——'Tonko Bushi'——  
 (First Stanza)  
 by Yaso Saijo

As the contents of the popular songs show, frustration of the Japanese masses is regulated through the unique psychological pressure of masochism, an indulgence in resignation or sorrow. Therefore, popular songs do not help release psychological tensions by frustration.

The sad, sentimental theme of Japanese popular songs is seen, however, not only in thier words or contents but also in the melodies themselves. Their melodies have many elements that appeal to the Japanese feeling of pathos. (This subject cannot be discussed here but mention should be made that a study is being made on the subject by the author and his colleagues.)

In any case, Japanese popular songs have not changed much in their theme since the time gramophone records became popular in Japan 30 years ago. Except for a portion of teen-agers in cities, the majority of the masses who are enjoying popular songs find the jazz songs with light, cheerful words and melodies still foreign and hard to accept.

It can be said from the above fact that the taste of the Japanese masses is rather stagnant and that this stagnation may be related to the stagnancy of Japanese culture as a whole.

### III

In Japan the most familiar mass entertainment along with popular songs is films. Numerically speaking, the 1956 (October) statistics show: number of movietheatres, 6,123; number of people who went to movies during the period from 1956 January through October, 850,496,000; number of dramatic films



released during the year, 514. Compared with the case of popular song, the regional difference in the distribution of audience, audience response, and social psychological influence is greater in motion pictures. Even within Metropolitan Tokyo, for example, the audience at residential movie theatres and the audience at downtown movie theatres laughs at different points of the same film, and it occasionally happens that where the latter laughs the former weeps. Such difference is also seen between major cities in different provinces. As far as Japanese films are concerned, the audience stratum supporting exclusively the films of particular major production companies have developed fairly distinctively. To make a rough grouping, the Shochiku films have more female audience among their supporters, whereas the Toho films more middle aged men and women, and the Toei films more small boys and girls. Since fans of a particular star concentrate on the films featuring the star, the audience may also be divided into strata each supporting the films starring particular actors.

Thus, as compared with popular songs, motion pictures as a mass medium have more stratified audience. This stratification has intensified the psychological effect of films on the movie audience, because the audience concentrates on the films of certain companies catering to its taste, or on the films featuring certain actors, strong psychological bonds are established between the audience and the films.

Nevertheless an amazing similarity is observed between Japanese popular songs and films when the mode of expression and the content of Japanese motion pictures are examined after the manner in which the content analysis was made of popular songs.

First, more films with tragic themes and fewer films with happy endings are found among Japanese films than among foreign films. Especially in the 'Mom' ('mother' story) films stressing maternal love to an extreme (on sometimes in films with a paternal love theme) and in the 'tear jerkers' (hard luck" story) which are deliberately produced to make Japanese women weep, a rarity in foreign movies, is Japanese masochism more clearly revealed than in popular songs.

'Mom' and 'tear' films are advertized with phrases like 'Will really put you in tears', 'A handkerchief will be presented at the theatre entrance to the first 1000 customers', 'You will weep several times as hard' (since several roles, e.g., real mother, foster mother, step mother etc. are, depicted in the film). A foreigner would find these phrases inconceivable.

Mostly with a stereotyped woman as the heroine of their themes, such films depict agonies of a mother who, with her illegitimate child before eyes, cannot name him because of her social status; or the self-sacrificial spirit of an 'obscure' woman who gives up her own love and helps her man marry a daughter of a 'good family' to promote his career. There is something in common between this and the psychology of a woman of the feudal age as depicted in Kabuki dramas who controls her sorrow biting her Kimono sleeve. At this the audience (particularly middle aged women) compare themselves with the heroine and feel consoled by

the thought that 'I am better off than she', or the audience identify themselves with the heroine feeling that 'There are people just like me.' In such stories no positive solution is usually given, and only the receding sight of the back of a lover or a beloved child concludes the stories. There is not a streak of brightness or hope. Darkness is before the heroine and she will crouch forever watching the receding figure and weeping, or even holding back her tears and smiling. Her silent weeping and efforts to keep back tears throw the audience into a sort of ecstasy in a culmination of Japanese masochism.

In unsolved tragedies like these, no positive efforts or hopes in life are included; only resignation and fatalism are emphasized. In this respect, films of this type have a social psychological basis similar to that of popular songs.

Not only among these 'Mom' and 'sob' movies but also among love story films there are many that have, as their themes, lovelornness, life long parting, bereavement, and disappointment in love.

Secondly, Japanese films like Japanese popular songs have an appendage of nature descriptions as found in traditional literary works. Such descriptions, however, are not of the kind that are conducive to a beautiful harmony of nature and man, the latter becoming part of the beauties of nature. In an attempt to supplement inadequate psychological descriptions with fragmentary nature descriptions, leaves fall and the moons rise over the pampas grass field too frequently. In other words, as with popular songs, human feelings disappear vaguely into natural scenery as in an illusion. Where the psychological energy is suppressed and weak, intense expression of opulent feelings became rare. Under the circumstances recourse is had to nature whereby nature is made to speak for man. Thus the Japanese films and popular songs share their vocabulary to a considerable degree.

Thirdly, there is a group of films such as cheap comedies or 'sword-rattlers' with an impoverished, pathetic gayety comparable to that of Japanese drinking songs. In such films characters slip and tumble, or the hero makes a clean sweep of swarming enemies but they do not evoke a laughter which is wholesome, much less have any polished irony or constructive cheerfulness.

Just as popular songs have a feudalistic gloominess despite their apparent cheerfulness, as do comedy films and sword-rattlers reveal nothing but a reversed facet of masochism. The psychological inclination to respond to the behavior of those losing out and to applaud at the end of a slain chivalrous man is also a manifestation of Japanese masochism. Expressions like 'Death-defying (desperate)', certain death (for one's life)', 'apology by death (atonement for one's fault with one's life)', and 'clear one's name through death', all of which abound in the term 'death', frequent in their appearance and characteristic of the sword-rattling films.

In this manner efforts are made in films as well as in popular songs toward the distorted canalization of the psychological energy of the masses; the epitome of such feudalistic psychological pressure being 'Mom' and 'sob' films.

Along with popular songs Japanese films are classed as mass entertainment,

notwithstanding that they have little to give to the masses and serve only to confine the psychological energy of the masses within warped frames or to store it up under pressure.

They are far from being a recreation in the true sense of the word intended to re-create the psychological energy of the masses into something wholesome.

Thanks to the mass media, mass entertainments are including today many more communicatees than ever before; the above mentioned psychological pressure becomes heavier all the time and the strain greater and greater.

The current popular songs and films in their sad mood are running completely counter to the primary role of entertainment, that is, to provide the masses with adequate psychological release and thereby to relieve the pressure of their pent-up energy. This in, the final analysis, is based on the fact that the structure of Japanese society itself still contains too much of feudalistic admixtures adverse to the democratization of the whole society.