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Japanese Traditional Identities Combined with Western Individualism : The Representation of Miyazaki's Whisper of the Heart

著者 (英)	Koji Nakayama
journal or publication title	Language and Culture : The Journal of the Institute for Language and Culture
volume	18
page range	13-24
year	2014-03-15
URL	http://doi.org/10.14990/00000560

**Japanese Traditional Identities Combined
with Western Individualism**
—The Representation of Miyazaki’s *Whisper of the Heart*—

Koji NAKAMURA

Abstract

The protagonist, Shizuku, in “Whisper of the Heart” is a representation of the Japanese spirit combined with Western individualism. Miyazaki's animated films always impart a universal message to human hearts and each woman protagonist consistently has a strong spirit and identity, which can overcome the nihilism which is epidemically seen in Japanese conformist society. We can discover the universal charm of Miyazaki’s animated films which enliven our innate love, friendship, sense of justice, human solidarity and the awe for Nature. Through its production of “*Whisper of the Heart*” by Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli has amazingly attracted millions of Japanese people of all generations as well as lovers of the Ghibli series throughout the world. Why has it been loved by people in our ‘i-Phone-oriented’ technological society in Japan? It is quite fascinating to examine the meaning of the challenging spirit of this modern Japanese girl to commit herself of her own free will to develop her potential by overcoming the peer pressure of Japanese conformist society. This sense of independence and a challenging spirit to realize her dream by treasuring the whisper of the heart from elderly people are nothing but the Japanese spirit combined with Western individualism. The significance of this story is that Miyazaki has represented the protagonists, not in the world of fantasy, but in the very realistic world of a Japanese middle school in Tokyo. Japanese people have to listen to the whispers of human hearts among the protagonists in order to find who we really are in our computer-oriented society. This is because we are enabled to humanize ourselves again by listening to the whisper of Myazaki’s heart in the powerful waves of modernization and globalization.

Key Words: face-to-face communication, youth, love, independence and individualism

1. Introduction

It has been said that Oriental images, especially Japanese images, have been represented by the Westerners, as Said (1978) described, in terms of Orientalism, that is, a Western-centered concept of the Orient. One example is *Madam Butterfly*, the famous opera set in Japan and composed by Giacomo Puccini, and dramatized by David Belasco and performed in 1904 in Milano, Italy. Another example is *The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu*, a comic opera in two acts, with music by Arthur Sullivan and libretto by W. S. Gilbert, which opened in 1885, in London. These images of Japanese people are Westerner-centered representations of the Japanese people, which does not always represent accurately what Japanese people truly are, especially Japanese women.

Said (1978) argued that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself of against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self, defining Orientalism as a Western means of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. He presented the important hypothesis in his book, *Orientalism* as follows:

Without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage--and even produce--the Orient (Said, 1978).

It is true that Japan and the Japanese people had been represented in this way by Westerners in the 19th century as Japan opened her door in 1868 after her national isolation policy which had lasted nearly two and half centuries. In the process of Japan's modernization, Japan has been learning from the West in the name of *Wa Kon Yo Sai*, which means Japanese spirit combined with Western knowledge and wisdom. Consequently, Japan has become one of the economic giants and the best allied nation of the United States in Asia since the end of the World War II in 1945 through the pain and the tragedy of the Asian Pacific War, for which Japan had been deeply responsible in many ways. However, since the dawn of the 21st century, the Japanese artists, writers and film producers have tried to represent more genuine images of Japanese people and Japanese culture in their own original and creative ways. Today the representations of Japanese people and their culture by the Japanese themselves have been widely welcomed by Westerners and other Asians. One

of these influential and sensational representations of the Japanese is the world of Miyazaki's animated films. Hayao Miyazaki has been one of the most influential directors of Japanese animation in Japan. Let us explore the universal popularity and significances of Miyazaki's animated film in order to heed the Whisper of Miyazaki's heart.

2. The Challenge of Miyazaki's Animated Films

Miyazaki's animated films have consistently imparted a significant message to human hearts, and each woman protagonist consistently has a strong will, spirit and identity to cultivate her own life based on her own decisions. All the protagonists try to honestly face up to any difficulty in life and try to overcome it in order to sort out a possible and workable solution which involves warm human interactions and love. Also, Miyazaki has demonstrated the awe and respect for nature and God in his series of animated films. Yokota (1999, p.43) stated as follows:

“The wisdom that Miyazaki presented was that the god would help a young man, if he tried hard to help someone. The hero always entered into a critical situation to save the life of the people and heroine.”

Miyazaki made every effort to leave the wisdom of nature and human being for the future generations through his animated films which always deal with the issues of human hearts, love and feelings.

Globally, we have learned from the voices of the participants in the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) training from the former Yugoslavia, especially Croatia that not a few children who have been mentally and physically hurt by direct or structural violence during the civil wars have been encouraged and healed by watching the series of Miyazaki's animated films. They said that not a few children who lost their parents during the civil war have been mentally cured and saved especially by the positive and challenging attitude of a Japanese young girl blessed with a good family in a peaceful society far from wars and terrorism. It is very good for many children and people of the world who are suffering from the scourge of wars to think about Miyazaki's peaceful world in Japan. Actually I also heard that those who suffering from the continuous trauma of PTSD in civil wars and irreparable pains of losing their loved ones in the

aftermath of direct violence could see the morning light of tomorrow when they become aware of the existence of a healthy and charming girl with a good family living in a peaceful society blessed with love and affection in Japan. Miyazaki's animated films give us a power to live on and teach us the importance of relating to people and loving them as a basic reason to be living as a human. We are born to love and to be loved, not to kill and to be killed. We are children of God's great family. That is part of the significance of Miyazaki's animated films which can bring us back to the basics of human life and human dignity, which are guaranteed fundamental human rights in a peaceful and secure society.

3. The Significance of *Whisper of the Heart*

As for the significance of *Whisper of the Heart*, Miyazaki tried to represent the protagonists, not in the world of fantasy, but in the very realistic world of a Japanese middle school in Tokyo. As everyone knows, Miyazaki has always used the original places he has visited in person as the locations of all his animated films. The town where Shizuku and Seiji live in is a real town along the Keio electric train line near Tamagawa, a suburb of Tokyo. The romantic last scene where Seiji wanted to show a morning light to Shizuku in the dawn is located on a hill in 2-chome, Sakuragaoka, so you can find this original place where you can also enjoy the morning light of Tokyo, which could be seen as symbolizing another positive message, namely the morning light of young people living in Tokyo. The actual places of the story and the reality of the town touch the hearts of the audiences more than the world of imaginary fantasy could.

Through *The Whisper of the Heart* we can discover the universal charm of Miyazaki's animated films which enliven our innate love, sense of justice and human solidarity. Consequently, through the production of "*Whisper of the Heart*" by Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli has amazingly attracted millions of Japanese people of all generations as well as lovers of the Ghibli series throughout the world by causing each member of the audience to compare and contrast their own actual life with the lives of the characters in Miyazaki's animated films representing Shizuku and Seiji's way of life. Miyazaki's "*Whisper of the Heart*" is so refined, subtle, simple, realistic, fantastic and inspiring that many viewers repeatedly tend to go back to where we used to be. We could visit again the good old days of our own innocent youth when we have become tired of our busy and net-work oriented society. We need to stop and heed the whisper of the heart from

all the main characters of the story.

4. Shizuku, Japanese Spirit Combined with Western Individualism

It is quite fascinating to examine the meaning of the challenging spirit of Shizuku, a modern Japanese girl who commits herself of her own free will to develop her potential by overcoming the epidemic nihilism caused by economic depression, unemployment and social uncertainty in 1990s. As a matter of fact the year 1995, when Miyazaki produced “The Whisper of the Heart,” Japanese people were obsessed with social uncertainty and fear involved in the subway attack by occult terrorists, serious unemployment caused by economic depression and bankruptcy of major banks. It is significant to know that “The Whisper of the heart” was released in all the movie theaters in Japan the next year in 1996, as if Miyazaki gave a morning light at the end of the long dark tunnel in which many Japanese people had lost confidence and gumption to dream their dreams.

Shizuku acts like a morning light with a subjective and positive attitude towards her future, albeit not a few young Japanese have been suffering from social withdrawal syndrome affected by material and technological affluence and the social and parental pressure of Japanese society. Shizuku seems to have overcome the negative peer pressure of Japanese conformist society by showing her utilitarian and expressive individualism to become a writer at the age of 14 in the context of Robert Bellah's individualism (1985), the habits of hearts of North Americans.

Shizuku is able to express herself bravely and act herself based on her own decisions among her friends and family, as if she were a typical young Western girl. The surprising fact is that Shizuku's family neither controlled her nor ordered her, respecting her decision and her own responsibility, which is quite different from the typical hovering Japanese parents today, who tend to control their children with too much expectation and pressure. Shizuku's father always sees his daughter as an individual mature person and lets her do whatever she chooses to do based on his trust and love for her. Also, Shizuku's mother is a quite challenging and independent mother who develops herself as a graduate student to pursue her own aim and dream rather than giving lots of expectations and pressures to her daughters. Shizuku's elder sister, a straight A university student, has decided to leave her home to live independently by obtaining scholarships and part-time jobs, unlike some parasite daughters in Japan. Shizuku's father loves

reading and he works for a traditional city library, which also has influenced Shizuku in terms of the value of reading books rather than playing with computer games and mechanized communication devices.

It is true that Shizuku seems to be a modern girl with her own opinion and a sense of independence; however, she also has a traditional Japanese attitude to respect elderly people and to live in harmony with people around her, greeting them politely and modestly. For example, look at her modest attitude and respect for Mr. Nishi, the grandfather of Seiji. We are very much impressed by Mr. Nishi's love and support for Shizuku based on the experienced wisdom of his life and romantic memories. The existence of Mr. Nishi seems to be a visible incarnation of the director Miyazaki himself.

One evening when Shizuku happened to visit Nishi's curiosity shop, named Chikyuya, which means "The Earth Shop," he said to Shizuku, "You and Seiji are an unpolished original stone which will be able to shine in the future." This is also the whisper of Miyazaki's heart to young people who have great potential and possibility, which should be heeded by all the audience today. This is a very encouraging and powerful message from the sound elderly people to the sound youth in any society and any age.

Another charming happening occurred one evening when the beautiful harmony of "Country Road" was played by Seiji's violin and Mr. Nishi's Cello together with his music friends with their musical instruments. On top of that Shizuku sang "Country Road" in Japanese lyrics translated by herself. This was one of the most touching scenes symbolizing the power of inter-generational harmony and trust. This harmony involving music and people is quite universal and it attracts audiences of all ages, nationalities and cultures. This is also the human harmony, namely Miyazaki's whisper of the heart, which should be heeded by all the people who feel lonely without human interactions due to modernization and computerization. We should take time to smell the roses and enjoy face-to-face communication with our family members, friends and neighbors in each community.

Shizuku's sense of independence and challenging spirit to realize her dream by treasuring the whisper of the heart by elderly people are nothing but the Japanese spirit combined with Western individualism, which in Japanese is called *Wa Kon Yo Sai*. 和魂洋才 has been an energizing power to modernize Japan since 1868 and to rebuild Japan from the ashes of war since 1945. Shizuku has brought back the spirit of *Wa Kon Yo Sai* to Japanese people who

are losing face to face communication and interaction, confidence, trust and identity at the mercy of human loneliness caused by technological modernization and globalization.

5. Loneliness of Modernization warned about by Soseki and Miyazaki

Why has the story of *The Whisper of the Heart* been loved by people in our 'i-Phone-oriented' technological society in Japan? Why have the personal relationships and interactions between Shizuku and Seiji, Shizuku and her family and Shizuku and an old man, Nishi, touched our hearts? As everyone has noticed, there is not a single telephone conversation between Shizuku and Seiji by cell phones, not even by regular telephones connected to the wall of the kitchen. Rather, we have seen face to face conversations between them and found a mutual trust which has been tested and proved by their two month-separation between Japan and Italy.

Then why have the main characters of the story been away from cell phones and involved in more direct and humanistic conversations? Although there are some personal conflicts, differences of opinions and sad feelings, the audience seldom see the main characters of the story feeling lonely or alienated from human relations.

Observing from the viewpoints of baby boomers who were born right after the World War II without mobile phones and computers, contemporary Japanese people seem very lonely in personal interactions and relations. This has been caused by modernization and mechanization, which tend to prevent traditional human relationships and interactions among baby boomers.

Soseki Natsume (1867-1916), the most famous Japanese writer in Meiji era, warned of the loneliness of modernization at the cost of freedom and egoistical existence in his famous novels. His personal identity crisis is implied in the following words uttered by Sensei, the main protagonist in *Kokoro*: "You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves." (*Kokoro* P.30).

Soseki himself warned about the issue of individual freedom as follows: "Individual freedom is, without a doubt, at the heart of individualism, which serves as a foundation for the happiness of human beings. But this freedom rises and falls like a thermometer according to the prosperity or poverty of the country (p.54). Soseki continues as follows:

Lately we have talked a lot about Ego and awareness of oneself, using these terms to describe the self. We must recognize that there are many serious dangers. Some people, while insisting that we rigorously respect their Ego, take no account of the Egos of others. I am firmly convinced that if we look at things fairly and if we have a sense of justice, as we develop our own individuality to attain happiness we must at the same time guarantee to others the same freedom as we grant to ourselves. Unless we have reasonable cause, we must not be in any way an obstacle to the development of the individuality of other people, in their own way, allowing them to attain happiness.

(Soseki, p.45-46, *My Individualism and The Philosophical Foundations of Literature*)

What Soseki warned through Sensei's voice in *Kokoro* in 1914 can be another warning to Japanese people in the 21st century, particularly those who are suffering from the phantom of loneliness in highly developed Japan with high technology and the highest suicide rate in the world. (30513 suicides in 2011 and more than 30000 suicides for the 14 consecutive years since 1998) Soseki seems to have predicted today's human loneliness and alienation caused by highly advanced technological society and globalization more than 100 years ago.

There are some similarities between Soseki and Miyazaki. Soseki represented himself by writing and warning of the issues of modernization to Japanese people, by exploring the abyss of human hearts and transient human attitudes through the series of his novels published in the *Asahi Newspaper* in 1914 just one century ago. Miyazaki represented himself by composing the animated films in order to enliven the original human hearts, human interactions and human feelings which have been hindered and alienated by computerized technologies, such as cell phones, i-Phones and computerized gizmos in modernization and globalization. As Soseki warned us of the issue of loneliness in modernization one century ago at the dawn of the 20th century, Miyazaki is reconfirming to us the value of face-to-face humanistic interaction among people today through the voices of the protagonists in *Whisper of the Heart*.

While industrialists and economic entrepreneurs are inclined to be obsessed with massive productivity, profitability and efficiency in modernization, some literary geniuses instinctively become aware of the threatening human crisis

and loneliness involved in human greed. While people living in a modern society appreciate economic growth and technological innovation, some geniuses like Soseki and Miyazaki can sense the loss of our humanity, face-to-face communication and neighborhood concern. Soseki in the Meiji era and Miyazaki in the Heisei could see through the contemporary society from relatively distant angles and could sense what we are truly losing at the cost of the blessing of modernization.

6. Why Does *Whisper of the Heart* Attract People of the World?

At the age of 14, Seiji, who decided to become a master luthier (a violin maker), is testing out his skills in Italy. Shizuku, who has been in love with him and inspired by him, wants to be as devoted to her dream of becoming a writer as Seiji is to his dream in Italy.

There is no fantasy in this story. The story focuses the wonder of ordinary life by the meeting up of nice people regardless of whether they are old or young, and Shizuku's mental growth through her romantic love in a very realistic junior high school setting in a suburb of Tokyo in the 1990s. Shizuku shows a positive attitude towards the issue of her future by working hard to solve it and overcome it by herself through her own will. Shizuku searches for her hidden gift as she both lives and creates a wonderful fairy tale of adolescence.

Seiji's positive attitude towards the issue of his future by taking the challenge to become a violin maker in Italy is very rare in Japan. But it is quite challenging and fascinating for him to find his determined dream in a school career-oriented Japanese society where not a few young Japanese people go to university without clear aims. What impresses us is that both Shizuku and Seiji made critical decisions about their futures and bravely went for it.

The point is that it is true that Shizuku has been much affected or rather inspired by Seiji's way of life and his attitude towards his future as a violin maker in Italy; however, she was never ever transformed into or pretended to be what is called a man's favorite subordinate women. In other words, she never ever changed her own identity for the sake of her love for Seiji. She never acted as Seiji's favorite type of girl. Shizuku consistently tried to explore her own potential by writing her own novel and also tried to develop herself subjectively in egalitarianism, like shaking hands, which represents an idea

that “Neither hand is the upper hand.” They have been blessed with human trust and love. This attitude of Shizuku is nothing but Western individualism and represents a new woman unlike conservative, traditional and subordinate Japanese woman.

I believe Shizuku’s attitude and her voices must be Miyazaki’s whisper of the heart to young Japanese young women today, which is consequently and equally transmitted to Japanese young men, urging them to be ambitious and challenging as new egalitarian men in an international society.

Shizuku completed her novel at the cost of her mid-term test and learned that she had to study more in high school in order to become a better writer in the future. She could do her best in writing her novel as Seiji had already walked ahead of her by taking on the challenge to go through an apprenticeship in order to become a violin maker in Italy. For baby boomers, apprenticeship in Japan has made Japan what she is today. Miyazaki might have questioned the hollowing of Japanese industries today due to insufficient apprenticeship, and particularly too many university graduates without apprenticeship. In France, for example, most children will decide quite early whether they really love studying or not, and they tend to decide their future by themselves by the time they become 15 years old. This is why apprenticeship is still highly evaluated in the UK, Germany, France and Italy even now.

Furthermore, the sincere attitude towards life and romantic love is really vital in the age of Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, high unemployment and negative views of life are also consequences of the bubble economy, symbolizing nihilism without fostering each individual dream of life. It seems that through *The Whisper of the Heart*, Miyazaki has reconfirmed and demonstrated the blessing of living today for tomorrow among young people at the dawn of the 21st century. This is a story written for young Japanese people to have their own individual dreams without losing Japanese harmony and respect for others.

7. Conclusion

The title of *The Whisper of the Heart* has special implications for us today. It is Miyazaki’s whisper of the heart to Japanese people, especially young Japanese people through the whisper of the hearts by Shizuku and Seiji. Miyazaki’s *Whisper of the Heart* is a strong message to today’s people who have been

pressed by time and controlled by computerized on line networks and computerized gizmos.

The significance of this story is that Miyazaki represented the protagonists, not in the world of fantasy, but in the very realistic world of a Japanese middle school in Tokyo. Japanese people have to listen to the whispers of human hearts among the protagonists in order to find who we really are in our computer-oriented society. It seems that some Japanese people born before baby boomers sometimes question, “Where have the Japanese people and their hearts have gone?” Today in the wake of modernization and computerization, not a few people have already become addicted to the computerized gizmos, such as i-phones, cell phones, and tablets on the train and streets and they are no longer Japanese who can sense *Mono no Aware*. We used to be aware of the transience of the beautiful seasons and natural phenomena and “*Mujokan*”, the philosophy that there is no eternity in everything and everyone will die. Miyazaki seems to have humanized us so that we can enjoy our five senses as a living humanity.

The message of this touching animated film expresses Hayao Miyazaki's ideal for young Japanese people who wish to overcome nihilism in this computerized and affluent society which hinders them from dreaming their dreams. Even now Japanese young girls and boys can learn wisdom and something priceless from the text book of each elderly person. If we look at Shizuku's cheerful but courteous attitude towards Mr. Nishi, the old man, the owner of the curiosity shop, we can easily understand the value of the traditional and respectful Japanese attitude towards the elderly who have wisdom about life. The lesson of *Whisper of the Heart* is that life is a tough master, but it is a good teacher for everyone as long as we have face-to-face human interactions and relationships without losing our own dreams in life.

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