



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Citation for published version:

Sturt, Y 2007, 'Japanese Language and Culture in Spirited Away' pp. 1-12.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



1. What is J-Pop?

The 1990s witnessed the rise in popularity of J-Pop (i.e. Japan-Pop) as :

- Manga, (Naruto)
- music, (Hikaru Utada)
- animation (クレヨン新ちゃん), and
- video games (ファイナルファンタジー)

J-pop has now gained the world's recognition. For example, *Pokemon*, an animation (henceforth anime) TV series was broadcast in 65 countries with high audience ratings and translated into more than 30 languages.

The J-Pop industry in Japan had a total profit of \$12.5 billion in 2002, amounting to three and a half times the total value of Japanese television exports in the same year.

The J-Pop industry has not only become an increasingly powerful global commercial force, but it has also given rise to more opportunities to expose the Japanese lifestyle and culture, through popular channels of communication.

2. Miyazaki Hayao

Within the global phenomenon of pop culture, some influential figures, such as Hayao Miyazaki, have shown direct concern with what they perceive as the ever-fading national identity, and with the current state of Japanese society, where the conflicts between traditional and global values have brought some socio-cultural issues to the fore in daily life.

Film critics as well as researchers in the field of film, religious, anthropology, and Japanology paradigms, often point out that many of Miyazaki's works frequently explore ecological themes, at the same time cinematically revisiting ancient Shinto motifs and animistic beliefs.

'Spirited Away' won a number of awards, including a 2003 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film and a Golden Bear at the Berlin International Festival in 2002

3. The Japanese language

Unlike English, which is alphabet-based, and employs a single system of orthography, the Japanese orthography system is a mixed system of kana syllabaries (hiragana and katakana) and logographic kanji (Chinese characters).

In addition, Japanese text was traditionally written vertically - a string of kana or kanji was written from top to bottom, with a right-to-left order of lines. Nowadays, however, a horizontal writing format (reading from left to right), which is identical to English, is commonly used in the Modern Japanese society.

Thus, printed Japanese text is typically written in what is called as ‘kanji-kana mixed’ style where kanji (e.g. content words) and hiragana (e.g. grammatical particles and inflectional endings) are blended in one sentence using the horizontal writing format.

Let’s now see a tagline created for ‘Spirited Away’, and this demonstrates a typical kanji-kana mixed text. The first noun-post positional particle (pp) chunk is written in katakana-hiragana sequence; the second chunk contains a kanji and three hiragana letters; and the latter part of the sentence contains a kanji-pp-kanji (i.e. 不思議の町) sequence that is followed by a string of hiragana letters.

トンネルの向こうは、不思議の町でした。
(lit. trans. “*Beyond the tunnel was a mysterious town*”)

In Japanese orthography, kanji is the logographic component of Japanese orthography, and these characters were borrowed from Chinese around 5th century AD. After adopting Chinese characters, Japanese gradually started using kanji only for phonemic purposes, in order to express the pronunciation of native words. In this way, kana syllabaries were developed as the phonetic component of Japanese orthography around 9th century.

In Modern Japanese, katakana is mainly used to transliterate loan words other than Chinese, as well as being used to express onomatopoeia, while the main function of hiragana is to write grammatical items such as post-positional particles and inflectional endings.

Hiragana is also used to indicate the pronunciation of a kanji by appearing on the right or above the given kanji according to the way the text is written; vertically or horizontally. It is important to note that orthographic representations may disambiguate material that is ambiguous in the spoken language.

For example, many kanji words include sound cues and semantic information that are not available in the corresponding spoken forms, so that, for example, readers of kanji can visually differentiate the pair of homophone kanji compounds /ki.ki/, which also share an identical high-low (HL) pitch pattern, by their different visual forms (/ki.ki/ 危機 ‘crisis’ and /ki.ki/ 器機 ‘equipment’). Here the meaning of each compound is directly obvious from its visual form. This means that the readers’ visual kanji recognition skills play a crucial role in the reading comprehension of printed Japanese, because the Japanese language has an infamously large number of homophonic kanji words.

1. Effect of the direction of writing

Here, a spacious long shot shows some surrounding traditional elements. For example, the bridge is painted with traditional read, and the name of the bathhouse 油屋 ('abura-ya', lit. oil-house) is written from the right to left on the signboard, which is less and less used in modern Japanese society.



Figure 1: traditional Japanese settings (a bridge and a signboard)

Next, six frames are taken from different sequences, but show the surrounding atmosphere of the inside of the bathhouse. The frames also contain following eleven Japanese words¹, and all the words, except the seventh word 御よやく (see Figure 3) in the right-to-left horizontal writing, are written in the traditional vertical direction.



Figure 2: bath house sequence

Figure 3: bath house sequence

1. よもぎ ('yomogi', a yomogi herb)
2. うず湯 ('uzu-yu', lit. whirl bath)
3. 大湯 ('oo-yu', lit. big bath)
4. 大入 ('oo-iri', house full)
5. 大福帳 ('dai-fuku-choo', an account book)
6. 春日様 ('kasuga-sama', deity enshrined at Kasuga Shrine in Nara prefecture)
7. 石神様 ('ishigami-sama', lit. stone god)
8. 御よやく ('go-yoyaku', reservation)
9. 賃借 ('chinshaku', lease)
10. 葬儀 ('soogi', funeral)
11. 回春 ('kaishun', lit. revolve-spring: rejuvenation)

These words can be divided into three major semantic fields of ‘bath’, ‘god’, and ‘business’. For example, items 9 (賃借) and 10 (葬儀) on two notebooks in Figure 6 indicate the daily life of the bathhouse, so that this frame alone indicates that even in this strange world, people need money and they meet their end too like people in this world. The extensive use of the vertical traditional writing mode of kanji in the film successfully enhances related visual elements such as the image of traditional settings.



Figure 4: bath house sequence



Figure 5: bath house sequence



Figure 6: bath house sequence

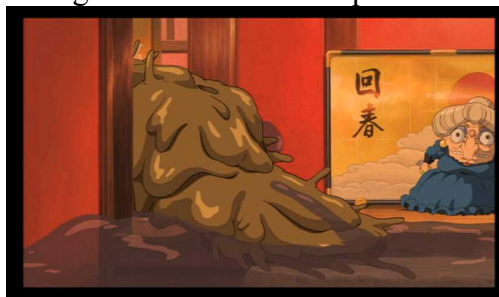


Figure 7: bath house sequence

2. the use of old fashioned kanji

It should also be mentioned that in the same line of this writing-direction effect, some kanji are written in their old form that were discontinued after the series of kanji simplification reforms in 1946. For example, the kanji ‘mushi’ (insect), the old form 蟲 is used in stead of the simplified version 虫 in **Figure 8a**. Two versions are etymologically separate kanji before the reform – the former covers ‘small insects’ as well as ‘frog’, ‘slug’, and ‘spider’, all of which are featured in the film as non-humanoid characters. The simplified version (虫) now covers wider lexical domains of ‘insects and reptiles’ as two lexical meanings are amalgamated into one for the new version. The film maker cleverly exploits the historical change of this particular kanji in order to create nostalgic visual text with a hint of his character development process for the film. In short, these examples demonstrate that the language of *mise en scène*ⁱⁱ creates a cinematic effect on the viewer to hold a very traditional Japanese feel to it.

3. Word play of homophonic kanji

The frame in **Figure 8b** presents two single kanji words 油 (‘abura/yu’, lit. oil) and 湯 (‘yu’, lit. hot water) - the kanji ‘oil’ (油) is very visible on the flag as if indicating the value of this element, while the juxtaposed kanji ‘hot water’ (湯) on the chimney appears considerably fair. This helps the viewer to recognize the compositional balance created by the visual effect. In addition, if this frame is seen by a native speaker of Japanese, the viewer immediately retrieves the meaning and the sound of

each kanji. As indicated above, kanji ‘oil’ 油 has two readings ‘abura’ (Japanese reading) and ‘yu’ (Chinese reading), and if the Chinese reading is taken, a pair of kanji become homophonous words, ‘yu’. This cinematic frame, thus, offers the viewer to see a visual play on words through a linguistic manipulation of homophonous kanji 油 and 湯.

This pair of homophonous kanji also provides an example of semantic distortion. An antonym of ‘hot water’ (湯) is ‘cold water’ (水 ‘mizu’), whereas the conceptually distant ‘water’ and ‘oil’ are matched in Figure 8. In Japanese, we use a metaphor involving ‘water’ (水) and ‘oil’ (油) to imply ‘two things are incompatible as oil and water’. Similarly, a typical associative word for ‘oil’ is ‘sell’ as an idiomatic expression ‘abura wo uru’ (lit. idle one’s time away) is made of these two words. This linguistic collocation may enforce the cinematic concept of the bathhouse ‘abura-ya’ as a place where all the supernatural beings come to relax and unwind.



Figure 8: play on words



Figure 9: foreign element

In this frame, two contrasting linguistic elements, 油 in kanji, and CAFE in Roman characters, are evident. The viewer can see a Western element in the surrounding setting of the traditional Japanese location.

4. Iconography

Next, the static image in **Figure 10** presents an example of iconography. This shot recreates an authentic entrance atmosphere of a Japanese bathhouse. In the centre of the frame, there is a traditional doorway curtain across the entrance. The curtain is usually indigo blue and features the kanji 湯 (‘yu’, lit. hot water) or the corresponding hiragana ゆ (‘yu’) like this image. In Japan, shops and restaurants use a doorway curtain to indicate their specialties, and its function as an iconography – ‘the business is open’. Through this iconography, the creator can economically deliver multiple messages to the audience.



Figure 10: iconography

5. Writing error? Or what?

This section investigates two frames taken from a sequence of the mysterious town, which provides an ample examples of linguistic items that are partially altered or made them less legible by hand writing. For example, in **Figure 11**ⁱⁱⁱ, the centre of the attention should be a sequence of kanji and hiragana on the signpost of the town's arcade. It is strange at first sight. Then, by a close look, we can find that the right most kanji is a mirror image of 会, and two hiragana letters と and う are handwritten such a way that they also look symmetrical.



Figure 11: reverse image of kanji



Figure 12: ambiguous kana sequence

A sequence of hiragana as represented in each paper lantern in **Figure 12** creates weirdness and ambiguity. If one starts reading the sequence from either the left (お-で-い ; o-de-i) or the far right (い-で-お; i-de-o), it would not make any sense. However, it is assumed that most of the Japanese audience can identify the intended sequence (i.e. お-い-で) from the right to left reading without making much cognitive effort. First reason is that the sequence o-i-d (おいで) is a real word 'come here', thus, it makes sense. Secondly, this reading is simultaneously reinforced non-linguistically by the gesture of a ghost figure at the centre (i.e. its movement of the right hand) in this shot. It is a common gesture that is used in Japan when people beckon to somebody.

Here is the summary:

1. **The utilization of the traditional vertical writing.**
2. Language of film (e.g. colour, props, symbolism, etc.) creates a cinematic effect of reality and authenticity.
3. **The use of old fashioned pre-simplification kanji to add an archaic flavour.**
4. **The manipulation of homophonic effects of kanji to create a visual pun.**
5. **The use of mirror image of a kanji (non-words) to create an uncertainty atmosphere.**
6. Non-linguistic device (e.g. gesture) simultaneously reinforces linguistic elements to arrive at the intended meaning.

In summary, today's lecture demonstrated that the cinematic language and the manipulation of Japanese orthography strongly communicate the viewer that what they are seeing is not the same world where we live.

言霊信仰

1. The traditional concept of kotodama

2.1 Example 1: the Nihon Shoki (日本書紀 Chronicle of Japan, completed in 720)

An episode taken from the Nihon Shoki - the Emperor Jimmu asked a fisherman who he was, and in return the fisherman revealed his identity by saying “Your servant is the deity of this land. My name is Uzuhiko” (Plutschow, *ibid*: 154). In early Japanese history, such name revelations often led to peaceful surrender and submission instead of confrontation or battle. Thus, the act of name revealing was considered fundamental to ritual diplomacy. It is interesting to note that this classical definition of kotodama and Miyazaki’s remark in his interview approximately share the same viewpoint. This comparison may suggest that Miyazaki’s view of Shinto is authentic, and this will be manifest at a thematic level in the film. In this light, the following sections demonstrate how a modern adaptation of the ancient concept is manifested in the cinematic contexts.

2.2 Example 2: Kotodama belief among Modern Japanese people

For most people in post-war Japan, the ‘practice’ side of Shinto became restricted to communal activities, such as making wishes at the local shrine, or enjoying seasonal festivals. It is this communal side of Shinto that plays a key role in Modern Japanese life, and so the borderline between Shinto practices and Japanese culture has now become psychologically as well as sociologically indistinguishable.

Many Japanese people consciously or unconsciously believe that what one utters will be realized - good words will bring positive outcomes to the speaker or even the society the speaker belongs to, whereas taboo words will harm people or bring disasters. For example, Japanese people attending a wedding ceremony take pains not to mention a taboo word such as ‘separating’, ‘breaking’, and ‘finish’ for obvious reasons. In this view, the notion of kotodama is one in which the word itself possesses a power.

2.3 Example 3: Name depriving sequence in Spirited Away in 2001

The concept of kotodama has a significant role in the Miyazaki anime ‘Spirited Away’. In his interview, Miyazaki said that “A word has power”, “In the world into which Chihiro has wandered, to say a word out of one’s mouth has a grave importance”. These remarks indicate that the director is influenced by a Shinto way of thinking, and kotodama seems a key concept underlying his film making processes.

In **Figure 1**, Yu-baaba, the owner of the bathhouse asked Chihiro to write her name (荻野千尋) on the contract document. Then in **Figure 2**, she takes three characters from her name. First, the two characters (荻野, *ogi-no*) comprising Chihiro’s surname are removed, and then the third character 尋 (*hiro*) of 千尋 (*Chi-hiro*) is taken away. As a result, the only remaining character 千 (*chi*) of 千尋 (*Chi-hiro*) is now read as 千 (*Sen*). In this way, 千尋 (*Chi-hiro*) becomes 千 (*Sen*). This visual sequence helps the viewer to establish the story-line, because by sound (pronunciation) alone, it is not clear why ‘Chihiro’ becomes ‘Sen’. But by reading her name in kanji, and knowing the two readings of ‘sen’ and ‘chi’ of a given kanji (千), the viewer can clearly understand the

impact of this sequence. Three kanji characters are now on her hand in **Figure 4**. After that Yu-baaba shouts the girl's new name 'Sen', and she also demands Chihiro to answer her immediately. Chihiro then said 'hai' (yes). This is the moment when kotodama power is manifested, and so Yu-baaba's charm starts working.

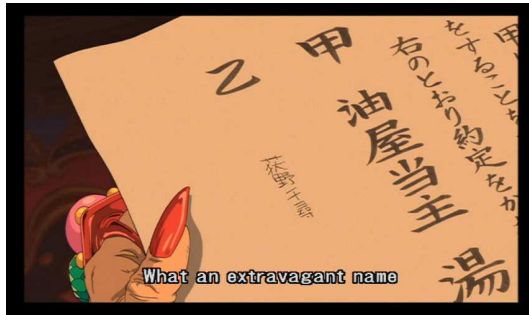


Figure 1: the importance of name



Figure 2: the name depriving sequence



Figure 3: the name depriving sequence



Figure 4: the name depriving sequence



Figure 5: the importance of name

The frame in **Figure 5** was taken from the very beginning of the film. This is a rare case of linguistic material presented on a static image being translated into English. So, the viewer can read the message in the English subtitle. According to the 'Code of Good Subtitling Practice' proposed by Carroll and Ivarsson (1998), all important written information in the images such as signs, notices, etc. should be translated and incorporated wherever possible. Having considered the fact that other Japanese orthography was left untranslated, we can easily imagine that these seemingly unimportant props contain some 'important written information'. Indeed, the card reappears after Chihiro has started to work in the bathhouse. At this time, she is already accustomed to her new name and the identity as Sen, and she almost forgets her real name. Then in the following sequence shown in **Figure 6**, the card is reused to remind Sen her true identity.

Figure 6: kotodama power sequence



The English sub-titles tell us exactly how powerful kotodama is. In particular, the

third and the fourth frames in Figure 19 enclose the core of the kotodama power phenomenon:

Figure 6-(3): ‘Yubaba rules others by stealing their names’

Figure 6-(4): ‘You’re Sen here, but keep your real name a secret’

Figure 6-(5): ‘She almost got mine. I’d nearly turned into Sen.’

The reason why Chihiro needs to hide her true name is that her act of name-revelation makes kotodama (the power of words) active, and by doing so she must surrender both her name and herself, thus ending up losing her true identity. Through the study of this sequence, we can safely conclude that the director Miyazaki must have created this film with a deep understanding of historical, literal and socio-cultural Shinto tradition in Japan

Most of today’s lecture dealt with ideological issues with regard to Spirited Away. The ancient Shinto notion of kotodama was discussed, and we saw its modern adaptation in ‘Spirited Away’. We focused on the underlying theme of the film, and how kotodama power manifests itself to the viewer. Although the act of name-revelation has lost its meaning for most Japanese people today, the redefined concept of kotodama is nevertheless widespread among people in modern Japanese society. In other words, ‘kotodama’ often shapes the Japanese way of thinking not through the use of ritual language, but as a general cultural belief or socially practiced common knowledge. In this way, some Shinto rites have lost their strong religious orientation; as a consequence they have become the fact of Japanese life and culture.

ゆ
湯 湯←→水 湯←→油 油を売る：無駄な時間をすごす idle one's
time away
春迎

おなま様
おしら様
おおとり様
あなが様
春日様
のの様 (ののさん、のんのさん)

め めめ (タテ) 生あります (タテ) め塩め
目
正月元 (旦)
大入 (タテ) 大人にも見える
眼精疲労 (タテ)
三千眼 (タテ)
茶 (CAFÉ との連結で茶屋：遊行・飲食させる)
唇 肉 骨 皮 脂 頭 蟲 むし(タテ)
鬼 呪 長虫 天 貧 (食と紛らわしい) 山 稻荷 (カンバン)
狗肉 dog flesh 犬
豚丁横丁通 大いに飲み食い 由自 (右書き)
飢えと食う会 (会←裏返し) 場市

CAFÉ カフェー？ 明治末・大正の遊びの場
おいおいおいおい %左から読むと意味を成さない。右から読んで真
ん中の部分のみ読むと「おいでおいで」と読める。絵を見ると実際「おいで
おいで」をしている。

年季明け (タテ) 外の世界へ出て行くこと 82 serve out one's term of
service
父役 兄役 163 三竦 (蛇、蛙、ナメクジ) recoil from a snake
大入り (タテ)
回春 (タテ)
しずかに (タテ)
賃借 (タテ)
葬儀 (タテ)
交際求ム (タテ)
清潔・整頓 (タテ)
大福帳 (タテ)

ちひろ

千

千尋

ニギハヤミコハクヌシ

坊

湯婆婆 二人の名前をくっつけると「銭湯」=風呂屋 a bathhouse;

銭婆

中道

海原電鉄 行きっぱなし

中道

極端に走らない中道・真実の道

湯婆婆と銭婆を結ぶ中間道

生と俗

あの世とこの世

沼の底 Swamp Botom

ⁱ There are actually 12 words, if we count 逢仙湯 as a word. To my best of knowledge, it seems a created non-word. Thus, I excluded this kanji compound from the list.

ⁱⁱ Mise en scène (lit. put into the scene) is originated in the theatre. In Film Studies, the term is understood as everything that appears within the frame (e.g. setting, props, costume and make-up, lighting, and special effects).

ⁱⁱⁱ We can also identify some single kanji such as 天 (the sky, the heavens), 蟲 (insects), 呪 (spell, curse), 鬼 (demon), and 皮 (skin) in this frame.