

## Wayo Style: The Japanization Mechanism (1992)

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We have to begin by asking why an exhibition like this should be held in London now. Suffice it to say that the UK organisers of the Japan Festival 1991 wanted a core exhibition that would unravel, in their eyes, the mystery of Japan and we in Japan were asked to fulfill this requirement. We may, in addition, ask why such an exhibition is necessary after the millions of words that have been written in the English language about Japan in the last decade, but obviously these have been insufficient.

A plethora of forces is spewing forth from Japan—the globally expanding, invariably disproportionate forces of its economy; the bungling and farcical forces of its politics; the irrepressible forces of its culture still shrouded in the haze of exoticism. The effusion is irregular and unbalanced, yet exposed with ever-greater frequency to international gaze. Even if this exhibition were required to offer a sampling of clues for understanding the overall character of Japan today, it still might not leave anything behind beyond the age-old impression that “Japan is a curious country”. As one who took part in the planning of this event, I feel I must make clear the standpoint on which we have taken up the challenge from the U.K. of producing this exhibition on Japan, today, in London, the capital of Great Britain.

Like Great Britain, Japan is an island nation. This geographic condition seems to have encouraged certain peculiarities in the development of our cultures. Both countries, throughout their histories, were perceived as lying on the fringes of a civilization centred on adjacent continents. This perception produced two vectors moving in opposite directions. One moved from the outside in, fostering a consciousness of the (external) continent as the political and cultural centre and the import of its artefacts and ideas. The other vector asserted the specificity and identity of its indigenous culture against the impinging forces of the external centre, prompting internally directed efforts to create features of distinction and self-assertion. The workings of these vectors can be seen in the

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pendulum swinging between the closing and opening of the country to foreign intercourse, the interplay of introverted and extroverted tendencies, the cycles of acceptance and rejection, and imitation and original creation.

A simple diagrammatic explanation would show the external centre providing a potentially universalizable spirit of the times to peripheral areas. In the case of Britain, the tides of Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, and Modern styles reached the isles with a lag of fifty to one hundred years. The ideas and cultural styles thus introduced were quickly subjected to modification within the indigenous milieu, and out of that “Englishness” was fashioned.

In the case of Japan, the import of culture and ideas from the external centre (the Asian continent) occurred in overwhelming, periodic waves. Historically, Japan experienced widespread internal turmoil at four stages in its history. In the 7th century, a dispute over succession to the imperial throne galvanized provincial forces against the strong centralizing force of the throne (culminating in the Jinshin Disturbance of 672), and ending with the ascendancy of the latter and the strengthening of the central government under Emperor Tenmu. In the late 12th century the country was torn by the struggle for ascendancy between the warrior leagues led by the Taira clan, which exercised great power in the imperial court in Kyoto, and the Minamoto clan which had accumulated strength in the eastern part of the country. In the 16th century, the tenuous network of alliances among the numerous provincial warlords broke down, engulfing the country in a century of civil war known as the Sengoku (Warring States) Period. In the mid-19th century, internal, loyalist pressures against the prolonged rule of the Tokugawa shogunate were unleashed with the encroachment of the Western powers and led to the toppling of the old regime of two and a half centuries—the Meiji Restoration.

Each of these periods of internal turmoil, in fact, coincided with a peak of political and cultural tension vis-a-vis particular external forces. The common feature of these periods, moreover, is that once the turmoil abated, the country became more open to the external world and sought, through cultural importation, a means of integration. The locus of the external centre, interestingly enough, varied each time. In the 7th century it was Korea, in the 12th century it was China, in the 16th century it was the Iberian powers that first introduced Christianity (*Namban*), and in the mid-19th century it was Western Europe.

In the intervals between these great tides of history marked by importation from the external centres of civilization, Japan became closed and introverted in the extreme. All that is now regarded as “Japanese” was created in the process of modifying that which had been transplanted to its soil. In architecture, the so-called *Wayo* style came into being by this process. The modification into *Wayo* style occurred not only in architecture, but across the whole spectrum of cultural genres. Typical examples of the end-result of indigenization are the architectural style of the Shinto shrine, as represented by the famous Ise Shrine, which had been perfected by the late 7th century (Hakuho

period); the literary opus written in *kana* (phonetic syllabary) by ladies of the Heian court which reached its peak in the 12th century; the highly stylized *karesansui* (dry landscape) gardens built in Zen temples in the 16th century, and the *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints developed by townsmen that flourished in the early 19th century (Bunka-Bunsei period). The common feature of all these phases of indigenization of culture is that they were not oriented towards autonomous development into the subsequent phase but singlemindedly devoted towards reduction and refinement in pursuit of true uniqueness. The inevitable result was the building up of tension with external culture that could only be relieved by another phase of turmoil.

The periods of turmoil I described above occurred at intervals of five, four, and three centuries, respectively, each time one century shorter than the preceding period. If this represents some kind of cyclical pattern, the next occurrence of a major period of internal disturbance should come around the middle of the 21st century. No one knows, of course, what the future may bring. Today, we continue the modernization process pursuing the models of the West that began with the Meiji Restoration more than 100 years ago. It has been pointed out, moreover, that in this process, a certain Japanization impulse grows dominant every quarter of a century. These shorter waves of indigenization or modification into the *Wayo* style can be seen in modern architecture. The first nationalistic theories of architectural style emerged in Japan's academic circles around 1910, as architects debated what the appropriate style should be for the Japanese empire. Then, around 1935, views were expressed emphasizing the need to adjust Modernism and nationalism as part of the effort to define the "Japanese spirit" and "Japaneseness". In 1960, having finally put the war and the Allied Occupation behind them, some Japanese architects began to focus again on national traditions, as exemplified by the debates on traditional styles and mass culture. The main target of criticism was Modernism.

Twenty-five years later, pivoting on 1985, the expanding economy sent land prices skyrocketing as a result of the over-centralization of political, economic, and cultural functions in Tokyo, and fueled a boom that led to the drastic transformation of cities around the country. This elicited a vigorous discussion of issues involving Tokyo, an intense search for the distinguishing traits and traditions of its megalopolis. This debate can also be placed in the context of the above-mentioned waves of *Wayo* adaptation. By this stage, the attacks on Modernism were replaced by critical analysis of Post-Modernism, and concern had shifted to the structural transformation of cities as a result of borderless economies and the diffusion of information systems, but the discussion remained part of the on-going modernization process in the broad sense.

This exhibition, "Visions of Japan", held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, undisputedly follows in the wake of this debate on Tokyo. But the peak of over-confidence about Japan's uniqueness that came in 1985 has passed; we have calmed down enough to be able to see the Japanization phenomenon quite objectively. An increasing amount

of correct information about Japan is also available abroad, and we can look forward to the fading of the old images of Japan as an exotic and inscrutable island in the Far East.

In consideration of the venue of the exhibition, which is London, the central city of an island nation like Japan, we proposed that the theme be more or less to show how an island nation located on the periphery of a major civilization goes through a process of pulling away from the centre, developing as a result closed systems within which there occurs a ferment of distinctive types.

The objects and concepts to be displayed, therefore, will seem especially peculiar. But the reason such idiosyncrasies emerged may be far more readily appreciated in Britain, another island nation, than they might be in France or China, both of which were centres of civilization, geographically and culturally, for centuries. Having extricated herself from the central civilization, Great Britain became a global power, in terms of both language and commerce. Two centuries later, Japan is in the process of being globalized on the level of the economy and information, both Britain and Japan have an ingrained tendency to break away from both the continental centre of civilization and its proxies transplanted within the country. In the case of Japan, the process of economic expansion has produced a certain amount of friction which created new tensions with the external world.

There is no assurance that the quarter-century cycles of Japanization, or the larger waves of *Wayo* modification, causing widespread internal turmoil at intervals one century shorter each time will repeat themselves in the future. There is a rising sense that this sort of situation may come about in the coming century, triggered by the tension caused by friction and the external pressures foreseeable as a result of those tensions. The need to respond to this eventuality has been called for, albeit indirectly, and the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum will no doubt be seen as falling within the framework of that response.

If a full response were required, it would inevitably be thoroughly political, a task for which I am in no position to be held responsible. Instead, I propose that we explore the mechanisms of *Wayo* modification as the introspective workings of self-identification in an island nation and exhibit the results of those explorations. The following is a synopsis which I prepared in the early stages of the planning. The exhibition in its final form is not necessarily how I had envisaged it, for my three colleagues, Kazuhiro Ishii, Osamu Ishiyama and Toyo Ito, were left to interpret my initial concept, and to create original displays of their own to express the overall theme of “The Game”.

### **Synopsis**

Exhibition: “Japan in Perspective” (renamed “Visions of Japan”) (Victoria and Albert Museum)

For an exhibition to make a genuine impression, the space where works are displayed must appeal directly to the visitor, and the clarity of its theme is indispensable.

The clearer the theme, the more specific it becomes, involving a considerable narrowing of the picture of Japan as a whole. Despite the inevitable sacrifice of breadth, I believe we should focus on a theme that could easily make a newspaper headline. “The Game” is the theme I propose here.

### *Why “The Game”?*

All the many discussions of Japan, its people and culture share a common dilemma: Japan is clearly different from the West, but it is impossible to epitomize that difference, to attribute the root of the difference to a single value or concept. Western countries have their distinguishable principles that can help explain their identities—France its rationalism, the United States democracy, and Great Britain empiricism—though some may choose different labels. In the case of Japan, there seems no equivalent principle that lies at the source of its character. In the absence of such a principle, the paradoxical argument emerges that the governing principle of Japan is “the void” or “nothingness”.

Nevertheless, the Japanese are a very dynamic people, and their industries are known for unique and highly advanced systems of production and fierce competition among corporations as well as employees. In groups, people are extremely receptive to others as well as highly homogeneous. What distinguishes these peculiar traits, when evaluated by Western European standards, is the absence of any identifiable principle.

The mechanism of Japanese behaviour resembles the playing of a game. Principles are not an issue. All that matters is the rules. The ultimate pleasure is to respect, follow, and become absorbed in those rules. Once the game becomes established, it is made even-more complicated, refined, and finally becomes an obsession. Involvement in the game is what provides fulfillment and makes life worth living. The social system, too, can be understood as a complex of such rules.

We proposed that three aspects of “The Game” be portrayed in the three rooms allotted to the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, namely, (1) the realm of *cliche*, (2) the realm of *kitsch*, and (3) the realm of *simulation*, presenting them respectively in terms of tradition, contemporary times, and the future.

### *The Realm of Cliche*

Presented here will be the numerous “games” that developed into serious and cultivated pursuits, everything from such arts as tea ceremony, flower arrangement, incense connoisseurship, calligraphy, martial arts, and popular and classical performing arts, to sexual pleasure and the traditions of the underworld, all of which were developed and refined into arts or “ways” (*dō*) over the centuries. The term “way” may have derived from the Chinese concept of *tao*, a spiritual path, but in Japan it is essentially the procedures for learning the techniques of an art. Many explain the word *do* as the way of achieving oneness with the cosmos or in relation to Zen, but in fact it represents only a hypothetical goal or method of mysticizing a form of activity. This “way” is

primarily seen by Japanese as the steps through which one proceeds in training in a particular art.

Every “way” has its founder, whose achievements are passed on by followers or disciples through the *iemoto* system, a social institution which preserves the original teachings and transmits them to younger generations. Under this system, training consists solely of instruction in and repeated practice of fixed patterns or stylized forms.

Again, concepts or principles are not discussed; the student need only acquire, through physical practice, the forms that have been organized in a series of hierarchical increments of difficulty. This process may be likened to learning the rules in order to master a game. By rendering these forms into clichés, they can effectively be transmitted.

Actually, the concept of a “high art” never took shape in Japan, while innumerable arts stylized as clichés gradually spread among the common people. And it should be noted that the notion of “art” (*geinō*) was not confined to the purer pursuits like tea ceremony, martial arts, and calligraphy, but encompassed the earthier side of human life such as the pursuit of sexual pleasure, and the sometimes violent, consciously posturing anti-establishment aesthetic of the underworld. At all these levels there was an obsession with rules; life was interpreted as a kind of pattern or “form”; even death became ritualized.

The upshot of this tradition is the manneristic repetition of “rule”-playing, produced in endless variation. These variations were organized into patterns such as the “48 techniques” of *sumo* wrestling, the “48 techniques” of enjoying sex, puns word-association chains, separate sets of tea ceremony utensils for each season, festival processions, or of otherwise sober activities such as cherry-blossom viewing, pilgrimages to Ise Shrine or the “alternate-service” journeys to Edo the old name for the capital Tokyo of provincial daimyo in the premodern period.

Displayed in this area will be replicas of two extremely different tea ceremony rooms the luxurious “golden room” of the 16th-century general Toyotomi Hideyoshi, originally built within Osaka castle, and a simple, rustic tea ceremony room, both designed by great tea master Sen no Rikyū (1522–91). Also shown here will be the pleasures of cherry-blossom viewing, picnic-style tea ceremony and other outdoor pursuits, and other examples of the innumerable ways Japanese display their obsession with rules, in architectural design, ritual, performing arts, so on.

### *The Realm of Kitsch*

Almost every aspect of Japanese life today may be interpreted as a “game” and we see this in the way competition has permeated all social systems. Business, university entrance examinations, the twice-yearly high school baseball tournaments, golf, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) Singing Contest celebrating New Year’s Eve, and the vast majority of other topics of daily conversation pivot on the principle of competition. And of course there are many other games in the literal sense of the term

that are everyday pastimes—*pachinko* and computer games available in game centres among them.

The competition itself is not at issue; we might say rather it is the *rules* of the games themselves and the playing through those rules that offers the thrill and excitement for Japanese. The competition is a kind of social policy. The government holds a very strong grip over Japanese society, but unlike in the West, it does not assign firm principles and oblige society to follow them; rather it seeks to sustain a system that encourages competition in every dimension of society, fostering the creation of multiple business of equivalent rank and encouraging them to compete (which is what led companies into the practice of *dango* or rigging bids in self defence).

The principle of social contract is weak in Japan, and concern concentrates on the external forms of competition. What results from this obsession with the superficial aspects of competition is an endless stream of kitsch, endless variations on all-too-familiar themes. Competing companies or individuals have to produce goods of comparable type and quality and their success is determined solely according to volume so fakes or outright imitations are acceptable; sometimes the fakes sell even better than the originals. The fact that society applies virtually no brakes against this repetitive pattern of production reflects its similarity to people's habitual involvement with the rules of society's various games.

It is this kitsch that is responsible for many the phenomena in the townscapes of Japanese cities, such architectural anomalies as *pachinko* parlours, wedding halls, love hotels, “pencil” buildings, and “vertical” bars. The repetitious cycle of competition has also transformed merchandise into kitsch (automated sushi bars, plastic food samples, the flood of comic magazines and books), a typical example of which are the automobiles and cameras that are among Japan's leading expert products. The prototypes of these were imported from the West and copied in endless permutations in Japan. Kitsch does not mean so much imitation of a particularly outstanding type or form, but focuses energy on the large-scale production of goods each with subtle variations based on market research. Here again is an example of how people divert themselves by playing with a given set of rules. The infinite varieties of cameras, boxed lunches sold in railway stations and so on illustrate how the fiction penetrates our daily lives (imagine the 4 million copies sold weekly of the comic magazine *Shonen Jump* stacked in a single pile). The ultimate in kitsch is the services offered by wedding halls (with their multistoried buildings equipped for every variety of wedding venue and their catalogues of professionally filmed commemorative videos), vaunted as the once-in-a-lifetime dream-come-true.

### *The Realm of Simulation*

It is difficult to predict how society may be transformed from now on, but there are already signs visible today that hint of the near future. One is the penetration into every realm of daily life of man-machine systems, variously described as resulting from the

media revolution or the emergence of the information society, and all of which have occurred against the backdrop of the shift from the industrial to the consumer society. Electronic devices of innumerable kinds have spread throughout society, transforming its systems and practices from within. Television, video recording, pocket-size audio devices (Walkman) and giant video displays, compact computer devices like television screen hook-up game equipment and personal computers are irreversibly altering our ways of life.

The images produced by these systems are displayed on screens but they are completely separated from the real things themselves—processed, edited and otherwise qualitatively changed, often into something completely different. That process can purposefully be manipulated, creating impressions of convincing simulation.

The constant bombardment of such simulated images could cause those images to flow back into the real world, blurring the line between the real and the simulated. Perceptions may become completely reversed, producing the sensation that reality is only part of a world of simulation. This is a characteristic of the information society that is vividly reflected in the various phenomena we see emerging in Japan today. Examples may be found in the work going on in airport control towers, military strategy headquarters linked to missile control, on the floor of stock exchanges, and in conference rooms linked by satellite around the world. They approximate the images we see on popular television programmes, in family computer games, science fiction movies, illustrated magazines, sports newspapers, and home videos.

And again, it is the “game” that stands at centre stage, the process by which one may repeat, modify, and otherwise manipulate images. With even kindergarten children becoming skillful operators of video games, teenagers absorbed in all manner of simulated games, and offices computerized, facility in handling computers is bound to become an ordinary skill, accelerated all the more by the preoccupation with rules ingrained through a childhood fascination with games. The result will be a world created by simulation, and our dilemma will be dealing with the mixed-up images of reality and fiction.

To illustrate this situation in the exhibition, it is necessary to create an environment in which true and false images are mingled through the interaction of men and machines. Giant video display terminals may be affixed to the upper walls of the high-ceilinged exhibition hall and hooked up to a newly created computer game. The game might be either a conventional one with a fixed goal (or end) or an endless programme made up of realistic images. Another possibility might be a game, like chess, with more than one participant. We would also like to try a display of holography, or three-dimensional image, projected on a scale that encapsulates a whole room, and tentatively entitled “cybernetic horror”.

Despite leaving my colleagues Kazuhiro Ishii, Osamu Ishiyama, and Toyo Ito to create displays of their own original conception, we have nevertheless not departed from the premise that, the game (in question is not the usual one which results in winners

and losers, but of a dynamic that takes the form of a game) but has no end. In fact, we would like to draw attention to the mechanism whereby the end is perpetually put off, illustrated with experiences that are part of our daily life: the search for purpose in life enlightenment (*satori*), the pursuit of technical or artistic prowess, improvement of sales performance, profit rates, fulfillment of desires, and so on. The focus will be on low-brow art rather than high-brow art, applied arts rather than fine arts, and populism rather than elitism. This approach makes it possible to capture the kind of ordinary, down-to-earth qualities afforded by the seemingly-negative concepts of cliché, kitsch, and simulation.

The quantitative increase of the average persons involved (the players) transforms the quality of the game, and the consequent demand for operations that are simple and easy to learn will set the level of explanatory manuals. Typical here, however, is that no principle or rationale is ever questioned: the game is not a deductive exercise of basic principles but a source of thrill attained by mere manipulation of rules and engrossment in that process.

Naturally, there are pitfalls in this approach. Rules can only be popularized when they are established and fixed: a new situation would demand reform of the game itself. The irony is that if such dynamic factors are built into the rules in order to cope with new situations, they may be destroyed. Evidence of this is the fact that with every cycle of *Wayo* modification in Japanese history, stagnation set in after every peak of purification and refinement which could only be cleared by the introduction of a new set of rules. The cycle whereby old models (rules) are exhausted, bringing on social turmoil ultimately resolved by the introduction of new models (rules), endlessly repeated, lacks the moment for self-reorganization. Perhaps this supports the thesis of Kojève that Japan has existed beyond the end of history in the Hegelian sense for five centuries. Kojève maintains that Japanese survive on a snobbism that pursues the achievement of a diverse array of formalities. This may be an apt way to describe our general proclivity for finding endless pleasure in the fine points of our games and the diversion they offer. The peculiarities of this island country led to the emergence of the phenomenon of *Wayo* modification; that process was popularized through the mode of the game, and greatly refined. The model could only be changed by the introduction of external pressures. In the process of rapid globalization of the economy and information, Japan now faces various kinds of friction. Is it only possible to move on to the next phase by passing through the pattern of external pressure and domestic upheaval demonstrated by history? Will this change come in the near future? One way of uncovering clues to the answers to such questions is to focus on the general love of games among the Japanese, and experiment with an exhibition on this theme in another island nation that has already undergone globalization.

#### Note

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