

The Context Project – The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle (Murakami)

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Focus: elements of Japanese culture and history

World War II: Manchukuo and the Nomonhan Incident

Before World War II, Manchukuo, a puppet state in Manchuria and eastern Mongolia, was colonized by the Japanese and used as a base from which to invade China. In the summer of 1939 a border dispute between Manchukuo and the Mongolian People's Republic resulted in the battle of Khalkhin Gol, also referred to as the Nomonhan Incident. This battle was the decisive engagement of the undeclared Soviet-Japanese Border War that was fought between the Soviet Union, Mongolia, and the Empire of Japan in 1939. This battle which was fought near the village of Nomonhan on the border between Mongolia and Manchuria resulted in total defeat of the Japanese 6th army. After the defeat of Imperial Japan at the end of World War II in 1945, Manchukuo's government was abolished, and many Japanese departed from the puppet state to return home to their homeland Japan.

The Allied Occupation (1945-1952)

The Allied Occupation of Japan occupies a unique place in the history of the world, being the only time an occupying force tried to democratize another nation by instituting sweeping political, social, and economic reforms. However, as many changes for the positive were instituted by the occupation forces, there were also many atrocities committed during this time period.

In the first 10 days of the occupation, over 1,000 rapes were committed. The Allied occupation forces suppressed news of these criminal activities, and forbade not only criticism of the U.S. and other Allies, but even the mention of censorship itself. The Japanese organized a brothel system to benefit over 300,000 occupation troops, in order to "through the special work of experienced women...create a breakwater to protect regular women and girls."

The collapse of the Japanese Empire meant reversal of its previous annexations, which meant that many Japanese living on previous Japanese territories were forced to flee or were expelled from their homes, displacing over 1 million Japanese settlers in total.

The 'Salaryman'

Salaryman (サラリーマン Sararīman) is the name that refers to the traditional white-collar worker in Japan. This man is usually part of a hierarchical corporation or bureaucratic government. The idea of the salary man initially began after World War II, when the country was in economic chaos. Working in a corporation offered stability and a middle-class wage. Today the Salaryman is stereotyped as working long hours and being extremely obedient to higher levels of authority. In his free time the typical Salaryman goes out for drinks with his coworkers, sings karaoke and enjoys playing Mahjong and Golf. He rarely spends time at home with his wife. *Datsusara* is a relatively modern concept that refers to a Salaryman quitting his job in order to find a more fulfilling career. During the 90's this phenomenon was especially prevalent as Salaryman quit their jobs to become writers, designers and restaurant owners.

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Kumiko is cast in the role of a Salaryman, while Toru quits his job and becomes a stay-at-home housewife. When the book was published, the lazy and unproductive archetype of Toru created by Murakami appealed to the younger generation of

Japanese youth frustrated with meeting expectations of being the traditional Salaryman and thus encouraged the idea of *datsusara*.

Group v. Individual

The concept of the group over the individual is especially important in consideration of traditional family structure, in which a family is usually comprised of many members, and married couples live with their in-laws. It is expected for the wife to move into the home of her husband's parents, adopting them as her new parents, and to bear children, preferably boys. Even if a couple should live away from their in-laws, it is very important to maintain good relations in any case.

Women

Perhaps because of the influences of Confucianism and Buddhism which combined to produce the Samurai-based feudalism which defined the role of women in society, Japanese women were traditionally expected to be completely subservient, dutiful, and discreet. The husband had supreme power over the household, and women were not even acknowledged as legally existent until late in the 19th century. It was only until after World War II that the role of women started changing with emerging women rights and increasing roles of women. Whereas women had previously been treated as base creatures up until the 20th century, the onset of the World War forced many women to take on several new jobs and replace the men (who had gone off to fight) as the breadwinners of the household. The war reshaped the roles of men and women to make the woman the dominant force in the family, along with increasing the number of Japanese women in the work force as well.

Geisha

A geisha, also known as a geiko or geigi, is a traditional female Japanese entertainer whose skills involve performing traditional Japanese arts such as classical music and dance. The word "geisha" is made up of two characters: *gei*, meaning "art", and *sha*, which means "person" or "doer" – thus, the most literal translation of the word *geisha* would be "artist" or "performing artist." Geisha offer a refined form of entertainment to their customers, trained to be skilled in the classical arts and dances. They are part of a high-culture and elegant world referred to as *karyukai* (the willow and flower world).

Geisha are regarded as prostitutes by many, having been confused with the high-class courtesans of the Japanese Edo period from whom they evolved. The original geisha were men in the 17th century hired by these courtesans to perform at their parties. Even in the 18th century, when there came to be female geisha, there was always a strict distinction between geisha and prostitutes, with the former forbidden to sell sex. However, due to confusion in the late 18th century by officials who thought that prostitutes and geisha both sold sex and prostitutes who marketed themselves as 'geisha,' as well as the 'geisha girls' who were Japanese women dressed in kimonos and imitating the look of geisha working as prostitutes during the Allied Occupation of Japan, the image of the geisha as prostitutes has prevailed, especially in non-Japanese cultures. The term 'geisha girl' has become a general word for any female Japanese prostitute or worker in the Japanese night-time entertainment business in general, which has further contributed to the continuing misconception in the West that all geisha engage in prostitution.

In *Wind-Up Bird*, Malta and Creta Kano are examples of people who appear similar to the descriptions of the Japanese geisha. With their elaborate make-up and dress, it is easy to confuse their nature with that of geisha, especially as Creta in particular is/was a prostitute.

Hierarchies

Japanese society adheres to a rigid hierarchal power structure for society. In, respect for the elderly is especially emphasized; there are a variety of formalities used depending on whom is addressed – for example, a child would address an adult and a senior citizen in different formalities. In *Wind-Up Bird*, May Kasahara and Toru converse with each other normally and informally, although May is a teenage girl and Toru is a grown man.

Reiki

Reiki is a spiritual practice of healing developed in 1922 by Mikao Usui. After three weeks of fasting and meditating on Mount Kurama, in Japan, Usui claimed to receive the ability of "healing without energy depletion". Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation that also promotes healing. It is administered by "laying on hands" and is based on the idea that an unseen "life force energy" flows through us and is what causes us to be alive. The word *Reiki* is made of two Japanese words - *Rei* which means "God's Wisdom or the Higher Power" and *Ki* which is "life force energy," so Reiki is actually "spiritually guided life force energy." A treatment feels like a wonderful glowing radiance that flows through and around you. Reiki treats the whole person including body, emotions, mind and spirit creating many beneficial effects that include relaxation and feelings of peace, security and wellbeing. Many have reported miraculous results. One purification treatment administered by a Reiki healer may be prescription of a fast of only Reiki-charged water, like when Malta Kano describes eating and drinking nothing but water from the island of Malta for one week.

Cosmology

Japan has its own history of dreaming which has evolved over time. In the prehistoric Jomon period, people believed dreams were part of reality. In the sophisticated philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism were introduced and changed the social and mental system of Japan. The amalgamation of local and alien cultures occurred and supernatural beliefs prevailed. In this society dreams played a very important role, they provided meaning and purpose to everyday life. In the period when the Samurai class ruled Japan, the pragmatic thinking of the Samurai succeeded in fostering good preconditions for the receipt of scientific Western culture. Later the importance of dreams in Japan evolved in such a way that dreams may act as premonitions or connections to reality. Toru's dreams play a large role in *The Wind up Bird Chronicle* as a medium through which Toru connects to other characters.

Bakeneko

A *bakeneko* is a ghost-cat of Japanese folklore that is able to appear in disguise and has supernatural abilities. A cat may become a *bakeneko* in a number of ways: it may reach a certain age, be kept for a certain number of years, grow to a certain size, or be allowed to keep a long tail. There are many legends about the *bakeneko*. According to one, a cat was warming itself near the fire and set its tail on fire. The long-tailed cat then ran through the town, burning many buildings to the ground. As retribution the Emperor decreed that all cats should have their tails cut off. This echoes the reference to Toru's cat, Noburo Wataya, who returns to Toru with a

different looking tail. *Bakenekos* have also been said to morph into human beings or take on human characteristics. This is reflected in *Wind-Up Bird*, in the scene in which Malta Kano seems to have a cat tail as she jumps up onto a table in a very animalistic manner.

Other Facts

- the world's largest wig company (Aderans) is located in Japan
- the National Diet of Japan: Japan's bicameral legislature, the equivalent of our Congress
- *Reiki* sounds like Raki, which is a distilled drink uniquely of Crete
- Baseball has become a huge sport in modern-day Japan since World War II
- The suicide rate in Japan is the third highest in the world

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