

LESSON 11:

J-POP, ANIME, AND MANGA: WHAT'S POPULAR IN JAPAN TODAY?

Introduction:

This lesson explores Japanese popular culture and its global connectedness, especially its impact on the United States. After defining popular culture and citing examples from the United States, students analyze lyrics from J-pop (Japanese popular music) and assess their universality. Working in small groups, students conduct research on a particular aspect of Japanese popular culture. Students synthesize their new knowledge by creating a catalog of Japanese popular culture using *manga* (Japanese comic) techniques.

Organizing Questions:

What can we learn about society and the individual?
What can we learn about global connectedness?

Objectives: At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be better able to:

1. Define popular culture and identify examples from the United States.
2. Research examples of popular culture in Japan today.
3. Apply *manga* technique to a presentation topic.
4. Analyze Japanese popular lyrics and assess their universality.
5. Synthesize knowledge through the creation of a catalog of Japanese contemporary pop culture.

Time Required: 3 class periods

Materials:

1. Selected Deai photo sheets:
 - Mizushima Yu: D04, D15
 - Oishi Kanta: D03, D04
 - Sakai Michi: P07, D12
 - Tamaki Shun'ichi: D11, D12, D13
 - Yoshida Kojiro: P04, D15, D19
 - Yamamoto Takayuki: D09
 - Yoo Yoo Jin: P05, D06

2. Copy for each group of “Morning Musume: With a Little Effort, Anyone Can Shine,” *The Japan Forum Newsletter*, no. 30 (September 2003), p. 13; available at http://www.tjf.or.jp/newsletter/pdf_en/NL30_JCN.pdf
3. Copy for each group of “One and Only Flower in the World: The Biggest Hit Song to Capture People’s Hearts in 2003,” *The Japan Forum Newsletter*, no. 32 (March 2004), p. 14; available at http://www.tjf.or.jp/newsletter/pdf_en/NL32_JCN.pdf
4. Copies of Handout 11-1, “Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture,” for all students
5. Examples of Japanese popular music (J-pop), *anime*, and *manga* (optional); students in your class may be collectors of these items, so consider asking the class to bring in examples to share with the class
6. Internet access
7. Print source material on Japanese pop culture (optional)
8. Posting paper and drawing materials

Procedure:

Day 1

1. Ask students to give examples of their favorite music, television programs, movies, games, books, or styles. Explain that these items are examples of pop culture. Help students develop an understanding of the term by analyzing its components: (1) *pop* is short for popular, meaning of the people, and (2) *culture* includes varied aspects of daily life, from the products people use to the patterns of their interactions to their perspectives or beliefs. Therefore, pop or popular culture refers to products, patterns of interaction, and perspectives of the people of a society at a particular time. Explain to students that pop culture is difficult to define because it is always shifting and because it encompasses so many aspects of our lives. Further, it means different things to different people. Share with students aspects of the following definition from the UC-Berkeley English Department Web site: “Popular culture has been defined as everything from ‘common culture,’ to ‘folk culture,’ to ‘mass culture.’ While it has been all of these things at various points in history, in Post-War America, popular culture is undeniably associated with commercial culture and all its trappings: movies, television, radio, cyberspace, advertising, toys, nearly any commodity available for purchase, many forms of art, photography, games, and even group ‘experiences’ like collective comet-watching or rave dancing...”
2. Point out that much of popular culture is grounded in commercial products, media, recreation, and technology. Write these four terms on the board or a blank overhead to keep students focused as they generate examples of pop culture in the United States. As students brainstorm aspects of U.S. popular culture, record responses under the four terms above, either on the board or the overhead projector. Students should be able to list items such as popular music and dance styles, various media performers, video games, cell phones, email, and instant messaging.

Ask students which, if any, of the items on the class list are influenced by Japan. Direct the discussion in order to cover the following examples of Japanese influence on U.S. popular culture: Hello Kitty products; *manga* (Japanese cartoon/comic-style books on topics ranging from romance to history); *anime* (animated entertainment, sometimes called “Janimation”);

Japanese *kanji* (characters derived from the Chinese language) on caps, t-shirts, tattoos, etc.; Pokemon characters; and Yu-Gi-Oh! (collectible card game), and the related *anime* series, video games, and merchandise. Ask students if they were aware of the Japanese origin of these aspects of U.S. popular culture.

Explain that although perhaps not a traditional leading economic, political, or military giant, Japan nevertheless has tremendous cultural impact and influence globally through the spread of its contemporary or popular culture. In some cases this influence is long-standing: for example, the widespread impact of Hello Kitty since it was first launched in 1974 and the popularity of Pac-Man video games when introduced in 1980 and the continuing nostalgia surrounding them.

3. Organize students into small groups and distribute several photos to each group for analysis. Ask students to find examples of Japanese popular culture in the photos that differ from the U.S. examples listed earlier, as well as examples of similarities. (*Fewer differences are depicted than similarities. A difference might be the uniquely Japanese practice of using glue to achieve a baggy-sock look. Possible similarities include checking email and using technology, talking and text messaging on a cell phone, reading manga, listening to music, enjoying trendy clothing and accessories, enjoying aroma therapy, etc.*) Students should note that some photos also show the influence and popularity of U.S. popular culture—Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse figures, McDonald’s, etc.
4. Next, explain that students, working in their small groups, will be exploring an aspect of Japanese popular culture—J-pop (Japanese popular music). If you have any J-pop CDs, you may want to play a song for the class to launch this section of the lesson. J-pop radio stations that broadcast over the Web can be found at <http://jpopmusic.com/jpopradio/>, which is another alternative for finding samples of this kind of music.
5. Distribute one copy each of the two handouts you have downloaded from the Internet—“Morning Musume: With a Little Effort, Anyone Can Shine” and “One and Only Flower in the World: The Biggest Hit Song to Capture People’s Hearts in 2003”—to each group. Point out to the students that one of the groups, Morning Musume (Morning Daughters), is composed of teenage girls who did not make the final round of a star/idol search type of TV program, another aspect of popular culture shared by the United States and Japan. Ask each group to carefully read the handouts and then focus on the lyrics given for two songs by Morning Musume and one by SMAP. Then, ask each group to decide if any of these songs are similar to hits in the United States and offer examples, details, and reasons for its answers. Allow time for each group to present its decision. As a class, discuss the idea of the global appeal of certain lyrics and sentiments such as those expressed in these three songs. Remind students that perspectives or beliefs, such as belief in a positive future or the value of the individual, are parts of popular culture. If time and interest permits, discuss the idea of global popular culture.

Day 2

1. Teachers should review the definitions in the **Teacher Background Information**, “Japanese Pop Culture Vocabulary,” and share with students as

appropriate in this portion of the lesson. Convene class by asking students to sit in small groups from the previous day. Explain to students that the class will be creating a *manga*-style Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture, with each small group focusing on a particular topic. Distribute Handout 11-1, "Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture," and go over the instructions with students.

2. To help students choose topics, ask them to think of all the examples of popular culture that they generated in earlier discussions and saw illustrated on the Deai photo cards. Which would their group like to research? Potential research topics could include: Hello Kitty products, *manga* (Japanese cartoon/comic-style books on topics ranging from romance to history), *anime* (animated entertainment, sometimes called "Japanimation"), Pokemon characters, Yu-Gi-Oh! (collectible card game), video games, Dance Dance Revolution, and Cosplay (costume play – *anime* and *manga* fans dress as their favorite characters). Other topics are permissible with teacher approval. After completing the research, each group's contribution will be a brief narrative explaining the topic as well as illustrations utilizing the *manga* technique in storyboard style. (Explain to students that they can find information and examples of *manga* styles at the two Web sites they will be visiting.) As appropriate, students should note and explain whether the aspect of Japanese popular culture they researched is popular in the United States.
3. Allow time for students to conduct their research and prepare their catalog pages. Two student-friendly web sites at which they can begin their work are listed on the handout. You may also want to provide print resources on Japanese pop culture. The presentations will be most effective if students make their pages on large sheets of posting paper.

Day 3

1. Allow time for each group to present its topic for the Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture. If time permits, students will extend their research by locating examples of U.S. influence on popular culture in Japan today.

Extension and Enrichment:

Explain to students that cell phones, *keitai*, are an important part of Japanese popular culture, especially for teenagers. Part of the reason behind this popularity is that the phones are capable of sending brief email messages. Explain to students that text-messaging via cell phones is now so popular that teens are sometimes called *oya yubi sedai*, the "thumb generation." Provide students with a copy of "Keitai (Mobile Phone): Essential Item for Keeping in Touch," *The Japan Forum Newsletter*, no. 21 (June 2001), p. 6 (available online at http://www.tjf.or.jp/eng/ce/cepdf/N121_JCN.pdf) or direct them to the online version. Using this as well as other sources, such as the photo cards and Internet, ask students to compare Japanese cell phone usage and patterns to the United States. Are there differences? What might account for these?

Teacher Background Information: Japanese Pop Culture Vocabulary

The following words describe various aspects of Japanese pop cultural influences or U.S. trends that first appeared in Japan.

Anime: Japanese Animation, as in animated films. In the United States, *anime* is sometimes referred to as Japanimation. *Anime* examples include the feature films *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* as well as series such as *Sailor Moon*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Tenchi Muyo*, and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

CCG: Collectible Card Game. Examples include *Pokemon* and *Yu-gi-Oh!*, but it is not limited to Japanese *anime*. Western science fiction and series such as *Star Trek*, *Babylon Five*, and *Lord of the Rings* also have their versions of these games.

Cosplay: Costume play. Fans of *anime* and *manga* attend conventions where they dress like their favorite characters.

DDR: Part arcade game, part aerobic exercise, DDR (short for Dance Dance Revolution) is an interactive video arcade game that has players dancing to syncopated music as arrows direct their steps on a grid beneath their feet.

Enka: Popular musical style reminiscent of "traditional" Japanese music. It combines western instruments with Japanese scales and vocal techniques. Performers often wear kimonos. *Enka* is popular with older Japanese and many of the songs focus on lost love and nostalgia. It could be seen as the Japanese equivalent of country-and-western music.

Idol (or *aidoru* from *aidoru kashu*: idol singer): Teen pop star of the flash-in-the pan, manufactured variety. *Idoru* was chosen as the title of a science fiction novel about a virtual pop star (literally, manufactured).

J-pop: Abbreviated term for Japanese pop music

Kawaii: Cute. The ultimate example of *kawaii* is Hello Kitty, which isn't just for stationary and stickers anymore. Hello Kitty products permeate Japanese society. Recently *kawaii* was a fashion statement as school girls and women into their 30s dressed to look young, sweet and innocent. In Japan, *otonappi* or "adultish" fashions now counter the *kawaii* movement as some women choose to look sophisticated.

Kittler: Hello Kitty fan.

Manga: Comic books. In Japan comic books are not just for kids. All kinds of illustrated stories are produced for all kinds of people. The Japanese government has been known to use manga to explain new policies.

Mecha: Robots featured in *anime*.

Source: The Teacher Background Information is adapted from *Japanese Pop Culture Vocabulary, Internet Guide* (Bloomington, IN: National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies, 2003), <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/iguides/popvocab.htm>.

Parasite single: Young single adult who lives rent-free with his or her parents and generally spends his/her income on fashion, entertainment and travel. The phenomenon has been seen all over the world, but is greatly discussed in Japan. The term was coined by a Japanese scholar.

Print Club (sticker photos): Small photos with a sticker backing and often whimsical borders. They can be taken at sticker photo booths at the mall or with a special camera.

Otaku: Obsessive fan. In North America this word has been co-opted by fans of *anime* and *manga*. Notes one writer at the site Jpop.com, "People in North America will use the term pretty freely and if not anything else, jokingly. We laugh and say sure there are lots of *anime otaku* in America, but in Japan people would find the word derogatory, referring to an outcast of society.

Shinjuku: The large entertainment, business and shopping district around Tokyo's Shinjuku Station. This area could be compared to Times Square in New York City.

Visual Kei: Glam-rock inspired style of appearance adopted by some Japanese bands. Band members wear make up, dyed hair and fantastic costumes.

Yakuza: Gangster. *Yakuza* is a popular genre of film. Many contemporary Japanese films imported to the United States use *yakuza* characters and settings.

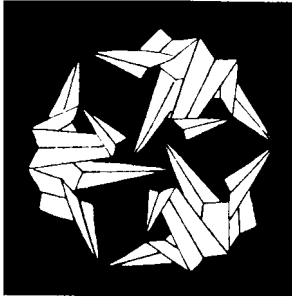
Supplemental Resources:

"'Anime'—Japan's Animated Pop Culture" (Special Feature), *Nipponia*, no. 27 (2003), pp. 4-16, <http://jin.jcic.or.jp/nipponia/>.

Chiba, Hitoshi, "Cool Japan," *Look Japan*, vol. 49, no. 566 (May 2003), pp. 6-10, www.lookjapan.com.

"Japanese Anime Keeps Taking the World by Storm," *Japan Now*, vol. 3 (2003), p. 8, www.us.emb-japan.go.jp/jicc/index.htm.

McGray, Douglas, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* (May-June 2002), <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>.



Handout 11-1

Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture

Your class is going to create a Catalog of Japanese Pop Culture. The catalog will be produced in comic-book style. Each group will pick a topic to research and prepare a storyboard for their page, as well as a narrative explaining their page.

Step 1

With your group, choose one or two topics in which you are interested. You may want to choose a broad activity such as video games or a specific example of the category, such as Dance, Dance Revolution. Examples of topics you might research include:

- *Manga*
- *Anime*
- J-pop
- Collectible card games
- Video games
- Fashion trends
- Cosplay

Your topic must be approved by your teacher before you can begin your research.

Step 2

Research your topic. The following websites are good places to begin your research.

- Trends in Japan (<http://web-japan.org/trends/index.html>). Web Japan presents this online magazine about contemporary Japanese culture. The “Evolving Trends” section features articles about *anime*, cell phones, fashion and other topics.
- Kid’s Web Japan: Culture Corner (<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/culture.html>). This site features some of the latest fads in Japan for Japanese middle school students. The “What’s Cool in Japan” section contains articles on music, fashions, games, toys and other topics.

Some of the questions you should try to answer in your research are:

1. Describe this form of pop culture.
2. Who enjoys this form of pop culture?

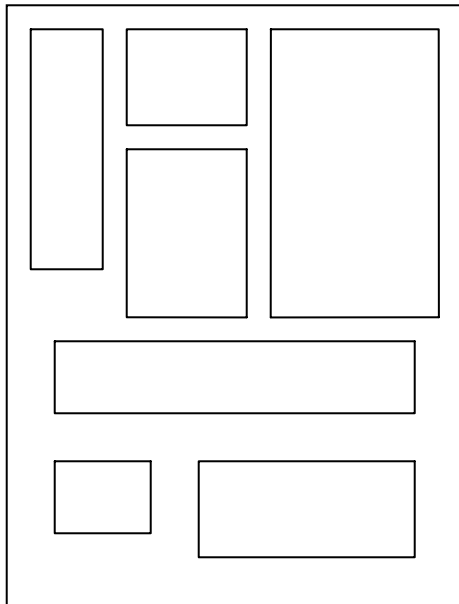
3. How would you explain the popularity of this form of pop culture?
4. Does this form of pop culture involve a product that is sold commercially?
5. Does this form of pop culture involve patterns of interaction among people?
6. Does this form of pop culture reflect a perspective or belief? For example, video games might reflect a competitive perspective.
7. Is this form of pop culture popular in other nations, such as the United States?

Step 3

The final step in your project is to prepare your narrative and storyboard. The storyboard and narrative should provide answers to some of the questions above.

Storyboard

Your storyboard should contain at least six “squares.” In Japan, *manga* are read right to left. You may want to prepare your storyboard in this fashion. *Manga* artists often do not divide the page into equal-sized squares. A *manga* page might look something like this:



Don't worry about making your storyboard look like it was drawn by a professional *manga* artist. You can find examples of *manga* art at the two web sites listed above. Here are a few tips:

1. *Manga* characters often have large almond-shaped eyes with triangle highlights. Other facial features, including the mouth, are often small.
2. Characters' heads and limbs are often large compared to their bodies.
3. *Manga* artists tend to use clean lines without a lot of ornamentation or shading.
4. Emotions are often expressed through symbols rather than facial expressions. For a U.S. audience, for example, love might be expressed with a heart symbol.
5. Text is placed in “balloons.”

Narrative

Remember, your narrative should be a written explanation of your storyboard. Use the seven questions listed above to guide research about your topic; try to answer them in your narrative. You may also want to include information that you learned about that you did not work into the storyboard.