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Globalizing Japan

“Swallowtail Butterfly”

“Swallowtail Butterfly” creates a unique image of Japan in a global perspective. It takes the multiculturalism present in Japan and brings it into focus as a main theme of the storyline. Most of the main characters are from unique multicultural backgrounds or have ambiguous ethnic roots. The dislike native Japanese show towards “Yentowns”, the immigrants come to earn money, mirrors the Japanese mindset that Japan is a homogenous country, rejecting many ethnic groups as being truly Japanese. This mindset is difficult, because Japan is not homogenous, and many people of different ethnic backgrounds make their homes in Japan. To marginalize these people creates disparity. The movie attempts to address this disparity by focusing on the immigrants to Japan, the so-called “Third Culture Kids”, instead of the Japanese people, showing their lives to be various, meaningful, and tied to Japan just like any ethnic Japanese. Ageha, one of the main protagonists of the movie, can be said to be a true child of Yentown, truly a “Third Culture Kid”. With her vaguely defined ambiguous citizenship, it is never certain where she is originally from. She speaks fluent Japanese, but even this does not necessarily indicate her true ethnicity. Her cultural, linguistic, legal, geographical, and ideological fluidity showcase the nature and transcultural freedom the residents of Yentown possess.

Certainly, watching “Swallowtail Butterfly” was a unique experience, especially without subtitles. I’m not entirely sure if the director meant for it to be viewed with subtitles or not, but I felt that though it was less comprehensible without subtitles, it also replicated how many of the characters in the actual movie must have felt dealing with the various language barriers. For me, I understood all the English, a fairly large portion of the Japanese, and none of the Chinese; I think many characters had similar experiences to varying degrees in the movie amongst the big melting pot of peoples present in Yen Town. This mix of languages the movie was filmed in served to address the growing globalization of Japan and reflected the hybrid identities of the characters of Yen Town.

In the movie, the Japanese call the immigrants “Yentowns”, a homonym for Yen thieves, as a derogatory name. This is similar to the widespread use of “Half” to describe those Japanese people who have a significant percentage of foreign descent. Just as “Yentowns” create an image of dirty thieves in the movie, “Half” makes it seem as if these part-Japanese people are incomplete, though now days this has been recognized by some and a trend has started to move towards calling these part-Japanese “Double”, implying that their dual heritage adds to them. “Gaijin” is also similar to the use of “Yentowns”. “Gaijin” is a rude way of calling a foreigner, but it is very widespread in Japan. In my experience it is rare to hear the more polite “Gaikokujin”. This labelling of groups that the Japanese consider “other” is really brought into focus with the use of “Yentowns” in the movie.

The “Third Culture Kids”, considered to be “other” by many Japanese in the movie, produced from the melting pot of Yen Town are like many people in Japan with hybrid identities today. Half and nikkeijin and other cultural minorities are not insignificant and have a real impact

on Japanese society, just as the “Yentowns” in the movie have a real impact on Japanese society. The existence of these people cannot be ignored and disproves the myth of Japanese homogeneity. Japan wants to be homogenous, to identify as uniquely Japanese, different from all other peoples and countries, but it isn’t pure, there is influence on Japan that is different from traditional Japanese thought from within Japan itself, and “Swallowtail Butterflies” really brings this to the surface and attempts to examine the implications of Japan as a multicultural society. The native Japanese attempt to beat down the increasing multiculturalism they are experiencing by separating the immigrants from native Japanese, but ultimately this doesn’t work. Though these foreigners are unwelcome or labelled as “other”, in the movie and in real life, their presence signals a permanent shift towards multiculturalism in a globally oriented world. Pushing aside foreigners in the movie is ineffective; the “Yentowns” become as much a part of Japanese society as native Japanese people. The immigrants form their own vibrant communities, pushed to the outskirts of Japanese society, but they cannot be pushed out completely. Interestingly, though the Japanese dislike the immigrants in general, they do gain from their presence, just as modern Japan benefits from being a multicultural society. The gain deals more with pop culture and diversity in community in the movie, but in real life things beyond pop culture and even the intangible benefits of the experience of many cultures coming together to form a unique culture, such as scientific ideas and knowledge and new perspectives can be more easily exchanged in a society geared towards multiculturalism.

The movie really explores how music can bridge cultural boundaries. Glico rises above being a “Yentown” to become incredibly popular. Her status as foreign makes her seem mysterious and interesting and helps create the popularity she achieves. This foreign influence on pop culture can be seen in the real life Japan as well. Many elements of foreign pop culture catch on in Japan. However, in the movie, Glico is told she needs to become “more Japanese” to become a pop star and essentially cut ties with her past to succeed. This suggests a level of continued muffling of foreign influence, at least within the movie universe and possibly reflecting on modern consumption of pop culture. Glico is “Japanized” to suit Japanese society.

From the perspective of United States citizen growing up in the very diverse state of California, it is interesting that Japan tries to ignore the multiculturalism that is present within its society. However, despite California fully acknowledging its ethnic diversity, there is still discrimination towards ethnic groups present and lower-class immigrants throughout US history have never really been looked favorably upon. So to an extent I think “Swallowtail Butterfly” addresses an issue of marginalization of immigrants that is present on a global scale, not simply within Japan, though I do think Japan is particularly stubborn about recognizing immigrants as true members of Japanese society. Furthermore, of all the races represented in the film, there are no Koreans; I think this detracts from the film’s bid for a focus on multiculturalism a bit. While it is reasonable that not all ethnic groups are represented, Korea is very close to Japan, and in Japanese society there are actually quite a few Korean immigrants and residents and the like in real life. In that light, it is strange that there are none present in the movie, giving the multicultural Yentown a ring of falsehood. Beyond this issue, the movie was excellent and a very fascinating representation of possible manifestations of multiculturalism in Japan.