

JAPAN 2021



THE
NATIONAL
LOTTERY



Japan 2021: Over 100 years of Japanese Cinema is a UK-wide film season supported by National Lottery and BFI Film Audience Network.



Viewing Japan from Scotland

The British Film Institute's support for screening films from 100 years of Japanese Cinema offers a great opportunity to discover something about the culture of Japan. Viewed from the Inner Hebrides, Japan must seem a long way away and sometimes a rather mysterious culture. But is it really so strange? If you know one or two important points about Japanese history and geography many of the aspects of Japan as seen in the films of the country make more sense. But first, what's the best way to start to think about the links we already have with Japan?

If you look at a global map, noting the position of the islands of Britain and Ireland and the Japanese archipelago, you'll notice that Japan is also group of islands separated from a continental land mass by a relatively narrow strait. It's around 40kms from Dover to Calais and just over 200kms from Busan in South Korea

to Fukuoka in Japan by ferry. The Japanese archipelago has nearly 7,000 islands with 430 of them inhabited. Scotland has 900 islands and 118 are inhabited. So, if you live on an island in the Hebrides, wondering if the ferry service will be reliable this week, there are quite a few Japanese thinking exactly the same thing.

There are two geographical factors that are different, however. Japan is East of the Asian land mass and most of the country is further south than Scotland. This means weather systems that are more extreme as well as more prone to the linked natural phenomena of earthquakes and *tsunami*. Japan is also roughly double in size and population compared to the UK. To put this in perspective, the most southerly of the five main Japanese islands is Okinawa, over 1500kms flying distance from Tokyo and nearer to Taiwan than to the next main island in Japan.

The Japanese migrated from mainland Asia to the islands long before recorded history, but after repelling Mongol invaders in the 13th century, Japan was never occupied by anyone else until the Americans led the Allied Occupation in August 1945. Apart from the presence of a few Portuguese missionaries and Dutch traders, Japan was an insular nation and even now it is perhaps the only major nation which has not experienced the development of significant migrant communities.

Similarly the number of Japanese migrants is relatively low and mostly in South America. Perhaps the most significant date in Japanese history is 1868 which marked the restoration of the Emperor of Japan and ended the 250 year regime of the Tokugawa family shogunate. For all those years while Europeans and then Americans had been pursuing an industrial revolution and 'modernising' society, Japan had remained a traditional and feudal society. Once 'opened' to Western ideas Japan, astonishingly, caught up the West within 40 years. It's this period that Scotland (and England) really began to notice Japan for the first time. When the Japanese wanted a modern navy where did they look to first? To Clydeside of course, to buy their first modern warship, the *Chiyoda* in 1890. A few years later they ordered battleships from Newcastle and Barrow-in-Furness.

It was in the late 19th century that the British and the French in particular became interested in Japanese art or '*japonisme*'. An exchange began. Europeans found out about Japanese woodblock prints and Japanese artists used European ideas to re-imagine Japanese theatre and, after, 1895 cinema. This partly explains why Japanese culture in the 20th century developed with traditional Japanese ideas alongside Japanese developments of European ideas. In Japan people drive on the left and the railways, are also organised on the original British model with some American influences. Both baseball and rugby were imported in the late 19th century and developed in the 20th. But Sumo wrestling is still considered as the national Japanese sport and *pachinko*, a Japanese version of the American arcade game of flipping metal balls into slots to win a prize, is an important form of amusement as well as a form of low-level gambling tolerated in a society where organised gambling is illegal. Football was amateur in Japan before 1992 and the development of the J League but now we are familiar with a Japanese presence in major international tournaments. We are also aware of Japanese players in UK football and the J League as an option for players and managers looking for a new challenge.

But what of the 'islands culture' in Japan? Apart from waiting for ferries, what else is shared by Scottish and Japanese culture? Japan is a maritime nation and the sea plays an important part in Japanese life. Although the main Japanese islands are quite large, they each have a central mountainous core – 75% of the whole country is mountain, forest and fast-running streams. Most of the population live in a narrow coastal strip that is also required for arable crops. Land is at a premium in Japan – something reflected in traditional house-building styles. It also means that most people live within a relatively short distance from the sea and that a traditional diet involves fish and vegetables. The quality of fish and its presentation, especially in raw fish dishes such as *sashimi* or *sushi* is important. Presentation is everything in Japan from a restaurant meal of many carefully chosen dishes to both expensive and inexpensive items in a department store or local shop. There are also well-known meat dishes including *ramen* noodles and *yakitori* (grilled skewered chicken pieces). Oddly, in the West, Japanese food has become popular in large eating

establishments such as the Wagamama chain whereas in Japan most restaurants and bars are quite small and you might eat at the bar counter. If you are in a bar you might drink one of the celebrated Japanese whisky brands. The first Japanese distillers visited Scotland to learn the art in the late 19th century and commercial production began in the 1920s. There are nine distilleries and in the last twenty years, Japanese whisky has begun to compete with leading Scottish whiskies at international tastings.

But if the sea provides fish and makes travel possible around Japan it also brings danger. The islands of Japan are actually the peaks of mountain ranges, many of which are volcanic in origin and part of what is known as the Ring of Fire running along the coastal areas of the Pacific in the Americas and East Asia. The archipelago is the result of shifting tectonic plates which have helped to produce the topography of Japan but also to threaten its stability with the associated risks of volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and *tsunami*. Low-level earthquakes are common in parts of Japan but major volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and *tsunami* occur two or three times a century. Two of the most notable, that are referenced in various Japanese films, are the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 and the Fukushima earthquake and *tsunami* of 2011. The Kanto region includes the sprawl of Tokyo and the 1923 quake started fires which swept through the wooden buildings of the city. Over 100,000 people died and much of the city was destroyed. Fukushima is the site of a nuclear power plant. The biggest earthquake ever recorded in Japan had its epicentre off the coast of Honshu, north of Tokyo and triggered a *tsunami* that killed 18,000 and wiped out several small towns. It also breached the defences of the nuclear plant and created a nuclear meltdown disaster. Although there were limited casualties at the nuclear plant, the local area became an exclusion zone and many people were displaced and lost their livelihoods.

These natural disasters have been exacerbated by other factors. The end of the Pacific War in Japan in 1945 was terrifying with American fire-bombing of cities followed by the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The two large cities were reduced to rubble and the survivors, who became known as

hibakusha (literally “atomic bomb-affected people”) became an outcast group as little was known about radiation poisoning. The American occupation which began a few weeks later censored reports on the aftermath. The fear about nuclear power spread throughout Japan and it has remained in the form of peace movements and anti-nuclear war movements. It surfaces in popular media, most famously in the 1954 film *Gojira* (*Godzilla*) about the sea monster that may have been awakened by nuclear tests and the *manga* (graphic novel) by Hiroshima survivor Nakazawa Keiji, *Barefoot Gen* serialised in 1972-73.

If the sea links the *tsunami* and nuclear tests, it has also seen the impact of pollution in the effects of chemical discharges which led to toxic build-ups of mercury in fish and shellfish caught locally off the town of Minamata on the coast of the third-largest island Kyushu in 1956. Something similar happened in 1965 concerning fish in polluted waters in the Agano River basin near the west coast of Honshu in 1965. A documentary made in 1971 about the ‘Minamata disease’ suffered by those who had eaten the fish became an important element in both local and international campaigns for control of pollutants and for a period had an impact on sales of canned fish worldwide. The Japanese concern about sea food stocks to exploit has also caused controversy in other ways. Japan has consistently flouted the International Whaling Commission’s regulations regarding whales caught for ‘scientific purposes’ and in 2021 is expected to have caught more than 300 whales. In 2009 a controversial American documentary *The Cove* investigated the ‘drive hunt’ of dolphins in the small town of Taiji on the south west coast of Honshu. Taiji has been a whaling port for many years and the drive hunt pushes large numbers of small cetaceans into the bay. Many are killed for their meat, others are captured for sale to dolphinariums around the world. Such drives are legal in Japan but there have been allegations that Taiji ‘kills’ exceed official quotas. There is a suggestion that dolphin meat may also be contaminated with mercury. A similar practice is still carried out in the Faroe Islands.

What should we make of the connection between whaling and pollution and the threat posed by nuclear weapons? Japan has had a long history since 1945 of accommodating US armed forces and US nuclear weapons, although for much of the time this was

secret because it violates aspects of Japan's stance as a non-nuclear power. Japan find itself in a useful location for American deterrents aimed at both North Korea and China, just as Faslane is a convenient base for British nuclear weapons aboard submarines targeting Russia. In both cases the nuclear presence prompts local opposition. US military controlled Okinawa after the end of the Allied Occupation of the other main islands in 1952. This ended in 1972 when control returned to Japan, but there are still several US bases on the island (and others elsewhere in Japan). The environmental and ecological questions about whaling and the pollution of fishing waters in Japan have some parallels in debates about fishing quotas in Scottish waters and about the health issues of farmed fish and the environmental issues associated with climate change and the acidification of Scottish waters.

Finally, in this discussion of aspects of Japanese life that are similar or very different to life in the Western Isles, we should turn to religion. As in many modern societies, a significant percentage of the Japanese population identify themselves as having 'no religion' but in practice most Japanese take part in some aspects of Buddhism and Shinto. Buddhism came to Japan via China and Korea in the 6th century and it has had a major influence on Japanese culture. As the world's fourth largest religion, Buddhism is an 'organised religion' but it has tended to develop differently across large parts of Asia and because of Japan's isolation it has taken distinctive forms such as the presence of imposing temples and statues of Buddha which attract large crowds. Japanese adapted teachings and philosophies from Chinese and Korean traditions and also developed original 'schools' of thought. Perhaps the most well-known in the West is 'Zen' which has been popularised through its association with Japanese samurai warriors, emphasising control and restraint. At various times during the Tokugawa period, Buddhism was used by the shogunate to organise and control people's lives but today for many observance may be restricted to temple visits and funeral and memorial rituals. A *butsudan* is an often ornate Buddhist shrine to ancestors still found in many households where photographs of deceased loved ones are the focus. Traditionally daily rituals associated with the

butsedan were the task of the eldest male, the 'head of the household'. Now, with the changes in Japanese society, if the practice is still observed it may well be the eldest woman in the household.

Shinto is not an organised religion, although during the period of militarism in the 1930s leading into war, Shinto ideas were used by the the state to encourage/pressurise the population to support the 'Imperial project' of Japanese expansion. Shinto is concerned with the idea that spirits/gods known as *kami* exist in the natural world, in particular locations and associated with trees, water etc. In order to represent *kami* for worship, there are many public Shinto shrines across Japan. There are also smaller shrines within households and the *kamidana* is analogous to the Buddhist *butsedan*. The *kamidana* must be place above eye level on a shelf. Visiting both temples and shrines is a common holiday practice.

If we turn to Japanese films, many of the historical events and cultural practices described in these notes are referenced. The most popular films in Japan over the last twenty years have included many *anime* created by Miyazaki Hayao one of the founders of the Studio Ghibli production company. *Anime* in Japan are not made only for children but for general audiences. The films were introduced to the international market by Disney which has dubbed the soundtracks into English, which automatically reduces the 'Japaneseness' of the originals. Fortunately most of the available DVDs include both languages. Miyazaki and the other animators at Studio Ghibli are marvellous artists and up until recently most of their *anime* productions have been hand-drawn rather than computer generated. Miyazaki has drawn upon ideas found in traditional woodblock prints so the films are often very beautiful and conform to traditional Japanese art forms, even if the content is often modern. The most familiar Miyazaki protagonist is a girl or a young woman and she is sometimes an eco-warrior as in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), the film in which Miyazaki engages with Japanese history, proto-feminism, the Shinto spirits of the mountains and forests and draws parallels with the ecological disaster we face today. But films like this are not simple stories about good and evil. Characters have good and bad traits, their actions are sometimes contradictory. You may

have seen *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Ponyo* (2008) in the programme of films from Screen Argyll. The first offers an exploration of moral values for the benefit of a young girl who finds a bath-house where many *kami* of all kinds come to bathe. *Ponyo* is inspired by Hans Christian Anderson's *Little Mermaid* and explores complex questions about the sea and Japan's approaching ecological disaster – all through the tale of a small boy and a tiny sea spirit who wants to experience being human. Some of Miyazaki's work on this film refers to the seascapes presented on woodblock prints from the early 19th century. But he also raises the questions about care for the elderly and the relationships between the youngest and oldest in Japan – a key issue for the ageing Japanese population.

We will try to cover some of these points in the Illustrated Talk and also show short clips from the two other feature films in the programme, *Godzilla* (1954) and *Our Little Sister* (2015).

Roy Stafford 29 November 2021