Narrative Imagination in Japanese Fantasy and Animation Films:
A Dual Melody of the Value of Transcendence and Humanistic Resilience

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Abstract
Contrasting the struggles of various international film markets in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese cinema has achieved remarkable success in both domestic and international box offices in recent years. This paper conducts a narrative analysis of the top 10 most popular Japanese films, revealing trends in storytelling under the dominance of fantasy backgrounds and animated film genres. The analysis unveils the following narrative trends: Japanese youth facing extreme and surreal challenges exhibit passionate pursuit and uphold the ideals of righteousness and beauty in adversity, becoming a prominent feature of Japan's most popular films. Among these, the concept of the virtue of transcendence helps protagonists interact and collaborate with spirit, ghosts, divines, and animals in alien realms to beat evil. The youthful protagonists, compared to secular adults, exhibit a more open mindset, embracing diverse backgrounds, transcending ideologies, accepting different identities and appearances, and upholding the humanistic values of compassion, dignity, goodness, and the pursuit of truth. These narratives have been touching hearts of fans in Japan and worldwide, offering storylines that comforting experiences of mishaps such as prejudices, discrimination, natural disasters, pollution, class divisions, suffering, resentment, and loneliness. These healing narratives present a unique worldview of Japan: a dual melody of the value of transcendence and humanistic resilience in rhythm.

Keywords: Japanese Animation, Humanistic Resilience, the Most Popular Movies, the Value of Transcendence, Humanism of Citizens

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Introduction

Japanese cinema has achieved remarkable success in both domestic and international box offices in recent years and the Japanese movie market not only survives from the Covid-19 pandemic but also from the challenge of more OTT options among the trend of many shrinking international film markets. At The Japanese box office at the end of June, 2024, all top 10 movies are Japanese movies (Mojo Boxoffice, 2024). One can argue that Hollywood movie industries are under an unfriendly environment for U.S. domestic disputes; however, if we compare the Korean box office at the same time period with that of Japan, 5 out of Top 10 Korean movies are still Hollywood movies (Mojo Boxoffice, 2024). Japan is listed as the third biggest market by Box Office Revenues next to the United States and China (Flix Patrol). The Japanese anime industry propels Japan's film market to stand out alone. In addition, this industry not only has a large fan base domestically, but also attracted global audiences, creating a unique market in popular culture. Studies have shown interest about how most popular movies and dramas are related to the public sphere (Chen, 2023).The Japanese movie market meets the criteria to explore whether its most popular movies have a connotation of publicness. First, Japanese anime in its movie market carves out a niche market in popular culture. With a robust system of manga magazines and serialization platforms, the industries allow manga and anime to quickly receive market feedback, emphasizing the market's importance and making adjustments, thereby increasing opportunities for diverse creation and publication channels. Second, the government is open about its market. Thirdly, less inappropriate Japanese governmental influence to damage markets in terms of domestic competition for government funding. Fourthly, Japan is a society with free speech and free public discourse. Japan with a distinguishable cultural background could help understand how most popular movies could convey public connotation to its citizens and global audiences.

Perspectives of western humanism discuss the relationship between morality, capability, instrumental and terminal values to explore how human practice can promote the achievement of a better common goal for individuals and society. This approach aims to increase the number of people doing good while reducing the deterioration of society into negative aspects of human nature. Values, hierarchical needs and motivations linked with modes of behaviors are often used to explain why different kinds of souls of humans can help to achieve the pursuit of happiness through personal or social level not only by morals or competence but also by pursuit the beauty of the end states which could only achieve with a higher goal for new vision of the future. This study explores the narratives in the most popular Japanese movies to explain how the pursuit of happiness could be related to humanist perspectives manifested in these most popular movies.

Literature Review

Fiske (2010) differentiates between mass culture and popular culture. The former is usually criticized for it represents the idea that the cultural "products" from industrialized, capitalist society may manipulate the audience; in contrast, the latter as Fisk emphasizes how people can subvert these products to create their own meanings and messages. However, this study argues that people as consumers and the public are not creating messages just for resistance; in contrast, the public may need symbols that represent them as the public, the nationals, and the identities they are in need of. Scholars have distinguished values related to further belief, attitudes, knowledge or action. The public in a republic needs to create a state of happiness with sovereignty within a geographical area protected by law and the defense. Values are

discussed how both end states of existence as a society or a person could both achieve their goals. Scholars use the Rokeach Value Survey to measure social and personal values by terminal values and instrumental values; the former indicates end states of existence and the latter explains modes of conduct through which people could achieve their goals in their lifetime (RVS; Rokeach,1973). Instrumental values are preferable modes of behavior as means to motivate, cultivate, and achieve the terminal values; in addition, both have personal and social components. This study will use the concept of a means (instrumental values) to an end (terminal values) to analyze the context in this study. Please see the Table 1 below.

Table 1: A Means (Instrumental Values) to an End (Terminal Values)

Terminal Values	Instrumental Values
Wisdom	Intellectual
Freedom	Capable
Self-respect	Honest
A sense of accomplishment	Responsible
A world at peace	Imaginative
Equality	Independent
A world of beauty	Broad Minded
Inner harmony	Logical
Family security	Ambitious
Social recognition	Helpful
Happiness	Courageous
An exciting life	Self-controlled
A comfortable life	Loving
True friendship	Forgiving
Mature love	Cheerful
National security	Polite
Pleasure	Clean
Salvation	Obedient

Table 1 is remade by the author and is edited from the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS) [Database record]. Rokeach, M. (1973). APA PsycTests https://doi.org/10.1037/t01381-000a and listed by Winchester, Maxwell. (1999).

Concepts of values are related to Aristotle's' assertions about how ethics and action are related to happiness and the soul of humans. In this study, self-actualization of the hierarchical needs from Maslow are also applied (1971). Maslow amended his model, placing self-transcendence as a motivational step beyond self-actualization with important consequences for understanding of worldviews regarding the meaning of life and the motivational roots of altruism, social progress, and wisdom (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Table 2: A Rectified Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Motivational level	Description of person at this level
Self-transcendence	Seeks to further cause beyond the self and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience.
Self-actualization	Seeks fulfillment personal potential.
Esteem needs	Seeks esteem through recognition or achievement.
Belongingness and love needs	Seeks affiliation with a group.
Safety needs	Seeks security though order and law.
Physiological (survival) needs	Seeks to obtain the basic necessities of life.

Table 2 is remade by the author and is edited from Mark, Koltko-Rivera (2006). Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification. Review of General Psychology, 10(4), 302-317, P.303 cited by Venter, Henry & Venter, E. (2010)

In addition, Schwartz (2012) identifies ten basic personal values from a circular structure that reflects the motivations each value expresses the conflicts and compatibility among the ten values (Figure 1) that helps explain different modes of behavior.
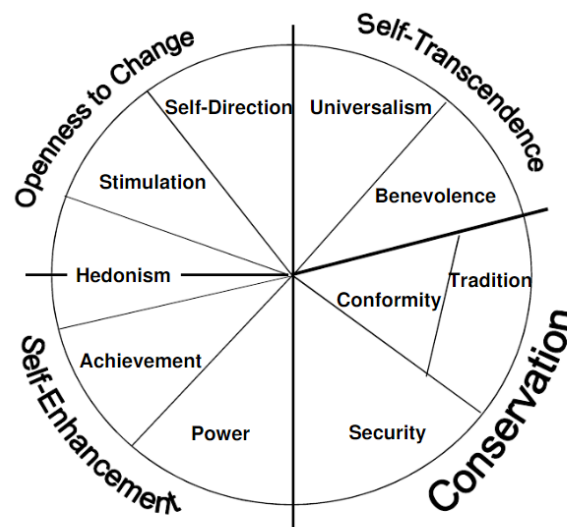

Figure 1. Theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value Retrieved from Figure Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An Overview of the Schwartz theory of Basic Values. p.9

Narrative Analysis

Two kinds of most Popular Movies: Box office of a nation's movie market and local movies in the global market are measured. In this study, the former is measured as the highest-grossing films in Japanese box office; in contrast, the latter is the highest-grossing Japanese films in global box office. In total, 20 movies are collected and finally only 11 movies were analyzed in this study after the author deleted the repetitive Korean films and Hollywood films, the values of which are not the interest of this study. The seven movies are selected as the highest-grossing films in Japanese box office in order: *Demon Slayer: Mugen Train, Spirited Away, Your Name, One Piece Film: Red, Princess Mononoke, Howl's Moving Castle,* and *Bayside Shakedown 2*. Another five movies are added to be analyzed in this study as they

are listed as the Top 10 highest-grossing Japanese films in global box office: *Suzume, The First Slam Dunk, Ponyo, Jujutsu Kaisen 0,* and *Weathering with Yo*u. These 11 movies are considered the text selected by Japanese or by global moviegoers who appreciated public humanism reflected in Japanese movies.

Three Hollywood movies are in the Top 10 box office in the Japanese movie markets: *Titanic, Frozen,* and *Red, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* Two out of three Hollywood movies are in the genre of fantasy and the other is in the genre of disaster (Please see Table below). Humanism values, civility, and civic virtue are used as the structure to analyze the 11 movies listed as the context of most popular Japanese movies. Schwartz's theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value are applied to this study.

Table 3: Movies analyzed as the most popular movies in this research

Highest-grossing films in Japan		Highest-grossing Japanese films	
Demon Slayer: Mugen Train	2020	Demon Slayer: Mugen Train	2020
Spirited Away	2001	Spirited Away	2001
Titanic	1997	Your Name	2016
Frozen	2014	Suzume	2022
Your Name	2016	**The First Slam Dunk**	**2022**
One Piece Film: Red	2022	One Piece Film: Red	2022
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	2001	Howl's Moving Castle	2004
Princess Mononoke	1997	Ponyo	2008
Howl's Moving Castle	2004	Jujutsu Kaisen 0	2021
Bayside Shakedown 2	**2003**	Weathering with You	2019

Notes: Movies in the gray highlighted cells are from Hollywood production. Names of Movies with bold-faced characters are not in the genre of fantasy. The Name of a movie in italics is the only live-action movie. Years are listed as when a movie was released in Japanese movie theaters.

Table 4: Analysis of heroes from movie genres, crises, values as a means to an end/ motivational types

Movie name	Movie Genre	Crises protagonists facing	Action of protagonists	Values of protagonists
Demon Slayer: Mugen Train	Animated dark fantasy action	The demon king makes strong ghosts to kill humans	The team of Demon Slayers has a hope of killing the demon king since two adolescents' special fates	1. Self-transcendence: universalism/ benevolence 2. Conservation: Safety/Tradition 3. Self-enhancement: achievement/ power 4. Openness to change: self-direction, stimulation
Spirited Away	Animated fantasy	A kid tries to save her parents when they are turned into pigs by a witch.	A 10-years-old girl encounters spirits and witches but wins her parents back with perseverance.	1. Transcendence of selfish interests as for spirits, friends, colleagues. 2. Openness to change: self-direction, stimulation
Your Name	Animated romantic fantasy	Two high schoolers swapped their bodies and one of them found the other was dead years ago	A high school male student saves his lover through time travel but forgets her name.	1. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his lover 2. Openness to change: self-direction, stimulation
Suzume	Animated coming-of-age fantasy adventure	Supernatural worms cause earthquakes after being released.	Suzume refuses to let the one she loves to sacrifice himself by turning a keystone.	1. Self-transcendence: universalism/ benevolence 2. Conservation: Safety/Tradition 3.Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his lover
The First Slam Dunk	Animated sports	A high school basketball team tries to win a national championship with only a slim chance.	The team won a semifinal as the most glory moment they ever have	1. Power and achievement--social superiority and esteem 2. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery

One Piece Film: Red	Animated musical fantasy action-adventure	An idol singer tries to save her fans in miseries by trapping them in her world forever.	Disastrous results caused by pirates, troops, and the singer but later her fathers and friends save her and she and her father repair their relationship.	1. Hedonism and stimulation--a desire for affectively pleasant arousal; stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery 2. Power and achievement--social superiority and esteem
Howl's Moving Castle	Animated fantasy film	A young milliner cursed to become an elderly woman but encounters a wizard, Howl, who traded his heart with a demon.	The milliner saves the handsome wizard by lifting the curse on him.	1. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to one's in-group 2. Self-transcendence: universalism/ benevolence 3. Conservation: Safety/Tradition
Ponyo	Animated fantasy film	Identity crisis as a goldfish desires to become a human girl	A five-years-old boy gives a promise to take care a goldfish who later turns into a human.	1.Benevolence and tradition--devotion to one's in-group 2. Universalism and benevolence-- enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests
Jujutsu Kaisen 0	Animated dark fantasy	Crisis of curses killing humans	A young sorcerer promises himself as a sacrifice to Rika, a cursed spirit and finally kills another evil sorcerer.	1. Power and achievement--social superiority and esteem 2. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery 3. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to one's in-group 4. Universalism and benevolence-- enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests
Bayside Shakedown 2	Crime comedy	a passionate detective fights with the bureaucratic culture	Refusing to be merged into this red tape culture through the eyes of a detective	1.Self-direction and universalism--reliance upon one's own judgment and comfort with the diversity of existence 2. Universalism and benevolence-- enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests;

Findings

This paper conducts a narrative analysis of the top 10 most popular Japanese films, revealing trends in storytelling under the dominance of fantasy backgrounds and animated film genres. The analysis unveils the following narrative trends: Japanese youth facing extreme and surreal challenges exhibit passionate pursuit and uphold the ideals of righteousness and beauty in adversity, becoming a prominent feature of Japan's most popular films.

Among these, the concept of the virtue of transcendence helps protagonists interact and collaborate with spirit, ghosts, divines, and animals in alien realms to beat evil. The youthful protagonists, compared to secular adults, exhibit a more open mindset, embracing diverse backgrounds, transcending ideologies, accepting different identities and appearances, and upholding the humanistic values of compassion, dignity, goodness, and the pursuit of truth. These narratives have been touching hearts of fans in Japan and worldwide, offering storylines that comforting experiences of mishaps such as prejudices, discrimination, natural disasters, pollution, class divisions, suffering, resentment, and loneliness.

These healing narratives present a dual melody of the value of transcendence and humanistic resilience in rhythm. The 11 movies all reflect the ideas of humanism which usually contain not only instrumental values but also terminal values. This implies that the spirit of most popular movies in Japan is not applied to mass society theory which usually considers the audience as victims of the media which implies the negative impact to the society.

Ten out of the 11 movies are animated except for *Bayside Shakedown 2* with a strong style of satire with its origin of a TV drama . Nine of the 11 movies are in the genre of fantasy with two exceptions Bayside Shakedown 2 and The First Slam Dunk. All main protagonists are young people, teenagers or even children as in Ponyo. Four movies (*Spirited Away, Princess Mononoke, Howl's Moving Castle*, and Ponyo) were directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and three (*Your Name, Suzume, and Weathering with You*) were directed by Makoto Shinkai. Both directors are anime masters and they explain 7 out of 11 most popular movies in Japan.

With other two talented young people portrayed as the ones who want to change the world but start to constrain (*One Piece Film: Red*) or to kill people (*Jujutsu Kaisen 0*) with endings in which their family and friends stop the crises. The top one title belongs to *Demon Slayer: Mugen Train* breaking many records in Japanese and global movie markets. Except *Bayside Shakedown 2* as a satire, live-action movie and *Ponyo* as a movie for children, all other 9 movies have made their fans touched or cried.

Conclusions

The results show it is possible that the box office of a nation's movie market can be regarded as a way to reward civic and social virtues by the public as consumers and later the public as consumers may push their local movies in international markets to share their values globally. Through narrative analysis, the meanings of most popular movies are able to convey public connotations. These healing narratives present a unique worldview of Japan: a dual melody of the value of transcendence and humanistic resilience in rhythm.

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