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## Layered Frameworks: Thoughts on Japanese-ness and the Cosmopolitanism of Haruki Murakami

***Abstract:** This work joins the discourse on whether or not Murakami is a “pure” Japanese writer. However, it attempts to analyze the problem using a philosophical lens instead of a literary one. Using the concept of basso ostinato as articulated by Maruyama Masao and further emphasized by the thoughts of Kato Shuichi, this article attempts to pose a new way of looking at this question.*

**Keywords:** Haruki Murakami, cosmopolitanism, basso ostinato, Maruyama Masao, Kato Shuichi

### Introduction

There have been numerous works discussing the phenomenon of Haruki Murakami (Hansen, 2020; Wakatsuki, 2017). Since he is a popular writer—known globally through his translated works (Akashi, 2014)—Murakami joins an exclusive league of authors whose popularity may have overshadowed their potential contributions to literature, that is, the curse of the best-selling list puts into contention the possible depth of their literary “genius” (Wakatsuki, 2017). Stephen King, Anne Rice, Isabel Allende may be a few examples.

In his native Japan, Murakami has been generally viewed as a popular writer as opposed to being a serious one (Hansen, 2020). In this work, I attempt to contribute to the discussion by focusing on the tension between Murakami’s liberal use of Western cultural references contra his reflections on Japanese society. I believe that this spurs the debate, i.e. his free use of continental references muddies the discussion of whether he is indeed a “pure” Japanese writer. This work does not delve into the complexities of that purity or *junbungaku*<sup>97</sup> nor does it engage in literary criticism. Rather I analyze the Murakami framework or philosophy: how his utilization of pop

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97 純文学 translates to pure literature as opposed to popular literature. This means that pure literature is considered as serious and more literary (highbrow) as opposed to pop culture (low brow) (Streicher, 1998).

& high culture references grounds his deeper reflections of self and his own society. I believe that this layering methodology is similar to Maruyama Masao's concept of *basso ostinato* (Heisig, 2011, 927–928) and is reminiscent of Kato Shuichi's thoughts on Japanese literature and culture as well (Shuichi, 1979, 5). I try to explain that in this very process, which may appear as cosmopolitan, we may find the Japanese-ness that literary analysts seek in Murakami's works.

The first part of the paper examines some of the recurring themes in Murakami's work that pertain to this cosmopolitanism. I then analyze these themes using Maruyama Masao's *basso ostinato* and Kato Shuichi's thoughts on Japanese literature and culture. Lastly, I conclude with an explanation as to why the debate on pure literature and his cosmopolitanism is reductionist.

### On Cultural References and Popularity

There is a certain symmetry to the idea that Haruki Murakami, whose writings are peppered with pop and high culture references,<sup>98</sup> has become a global, cultural phenomenon himself (Wakatsuki, 2017). His global, commercial success is both a bane and boon. Murakami scholars have said that his popularity has actually prevented him from getting heftier literary accolades, including the elusive Akutagawa Prize as well as the Nobel Prize for Literature (Ibid.).

His humor, cultural references, and writing style have indeed transcended cultural barriers.<sup>99</sup> For now, permit me to loosely use the term *philosophy* to refer to these elements. While a literature expert might say that these are literary tools, my focus in this work is on his outlook—his perspective towards the world. Hence, the word philosophy or framework seem apt, but I do not mean to say that there is a dogma that may be easily identified here. Instead, there are certain motifs in Murakami's style of writing that allude to his *weltanschauung* or worldview. This phenomenological approach carries over to Murakami's attitude towards the literary world. There is an edifying expectation towards Japanese literary writers: that their works should continue the rich tradition of *junbungaku* or pure literature.<sup>100</sup> The author has

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98 Some examples of Murakami's work where he references Western music and movies: (*First Person Singular*, 2020, 50–125), (*1Q84*, 2011, 111, 507, etc.), (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, 2003, 5, 278, 499, etc.), (*The Elephant Vanishes*, 2003, 116–117, 139).

99 "In person, Murakami is charming and thoughtful, attentive to the nuances of the English language and gifted with a trans-cultural sense of humor" (Kelts, 2009).

100 "His style was instead seen as a threat to the rich tradition of *jun-bungaku* (pure literature) and it was in this environment that Miyoshi Masao, for example, called Murakami's (along with Yoshimoto Banana's and other new writers) works 'disposables'" (Hansen, 2020).

shown his disregard for such expectations.<sup>101</sup> Murakami deliberately rejects the methods and traditions of *jūbungaku* (Murakami and McInerney, 1992; Murakami, 2010; Strecher, 2014). His (indeed very untraditional) celebrity, now a global phenomenon, is one result of the storytelling method Murakami has developed to replace this traditional model (Strecher, 2018).

This anti-traditional model is precisely why his Japanese-ness is put into question.<sup>102</sup> Even though almost all of his stories are set in Japan and all his main protagonists are Japanese, audiences across the globe easily seem to identify with the ennui that his heroes face. I argue that his cultural references—both high and pop—ground these existential questions. Every time Murakami talks about the Beatles or jazz, he is able to set a mood that makes it easier for his readers to connect to his heroines and heroes. In addition, Murakami does not simply refer to musical pieces and book titles for the sake of showing his vast knowledge of culture.<sup>103</sup> It seems as if he uses these as tools to draw in the reader and it helps to show that our worlds (i.e. the character and the reader) are the same. Thus, the otherworldly setting does not alienate the reader because the Beatles are playing in the background.<sup>104</sup>

Murakami also uses classical music to usher shifts in mood and even place. For example, in *1Q84*, he uses Janáček's Sinfonietta to somehow transport his heroine, Aomame, to that “other” world (Murakami, 2011, 3–9). In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie* was not simply the perfect music to listen to while cooking pasta, it was also setting the mood that strange events are about to transpire (Murakami, 2003, 5–7). He uses music to not only set the tone but to change the tone, it helps the reader realize that they have entered a different sphere. Without these

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101 “I was a black sheep in the Japanese literary world,” Murakami recalls—partly because his books, with their absence of any sense of being rooted in Japan, and their multitudes of American cultural references, were seen as “too American-like” . . . But anyway, by and by I got my own style. Not Japanese or American style—my style” (Murakami, 2018).

102 “unlike his peers, Murakami could not be accepted as a ‘Japanese’ writer because he failed the test of ‘Japaneseness’ by refusing to establish a clear sense of opposition between ‘Japan’ and ‘everything else.’ Clearly, as Ichikawa’s reflections suggest, literary authenticity in the Japanese tradition requires, a priori, a sense of ‘Japaneseness’ on the part of the writer” (Wakatsuki, 2017).

103 “Music is an indispensable part of my life . . . When I’m writing I usually have some Baroque music on low in the background—chamber music by Bach, Telemann, and the like” (Murakami, n.d.).

104 “But I can’t always see the borderline between the unreal world and the realistic world. So, in many cases, they’re mixed up. In Japan, I think that other world is very close to our real life, and if we decide to go to the other side it’s not so difficult. I get the impression that in the Western world it isn’t so easy to go to the other side; you have to go through some trials to get to the other world. But, in Japan, if you want to go there, you go there” (Murakami, 2019).

grounding tools, it may be difficult for some readers to follow that Murakami's characters have fallen down the rabbit hole.

His references show a cosmopolitanism and worldliness that are not traditional for the Japanese sensibility. This is part of the reason why his critics in Japan argue that his works are too American (Wakatsuki, 2017). I counter that one cannot refer to pop culture without appearing American. However, his interests are culturally varied so the argument for his cosmopolitanism has more foundation compared to his Americanism. His penchant for classical music, for example, belie these Americanism claims. He, himself, talks about this tension present in his writings, we well as in his approach towards his popularity.

I think transcultural exchange is the most important thing right now," he adds, resting his hands lightly on the table between us. "I know that because I lived in many countries. When I was in America in the early '90s, Japan was rich, and everyone talked about it. But we didn't have a cultural face. And I thought: Somebody should do something. I have to do something for Japanese culture. It's my duty. I've been getting more popular in Europe and America, so I am in a position to be able to talk to people directly, and exchange opinions. That's a great opportunity. Only a few people can do it. And I'm one of them. (Kelts, 2009)

To talk of duty as a representative of Japan shows that he is rightly aware of his position as a cultural icon. Since he is a consumer of culture himself—as an avid fan of various genres of music—he must be well aware of the power and potential of this position. But, has he undermined his own stature as a Japanese writer because of his cosmopolitan views and interests? This is an interesting question to ask in the face of these accusations but is outside the scope of this paper. It is almost as if the universality of his narratives, as evidenced by his cultural references as well as the familiar themes of ennui his characters suffer from, are the reasons why he is not considered as espousing a pure Japanese spirit.

### **On Purity and Layering Frameworks**

Kato Shuichi's classic work entitled *A History of Japanese Literature* is the encyclopedia of Japanese literature, covering all forms and genres. His impressive work ensured his status as a cultural critic (Kato Shuichi on Everything—one of Japan's Last Renaissance Men 2020). For the purposes of this essay, I refer the reader to his description of Japan's literature, culture, and aesthetic values:

It has never been simply the case of one particular form and style being influential in one period only to be succeeded by a new form in the next. In Japan, the new did not replace the old, but was added to it. (Shuichi, 1979, 4)

I view Shuichi's apt description as "layering" frameworks.<sup>105</sup> By this, I mean, that as Japan is exposed to new waves of thought or foreign forms of art, they add some parts of it to what they currently have or accept it and tweak it to suit their own tastes and utility. This process of intertwining and enmeshing until the old becomes novel—results in something that is still familiar—but, for all intents and purposes, is already different. As Shuichi says, "the old is never lost, there is a considerable unity and continuity in Japanese literary history. At the same time, since new is always being added to old, with each new age literary forms and aesthetic values become more diverse and multifaceted." (Shuichi, 1979, 5). This comment by one of their foremost literature and cultural intellectual is at odds with the purity claim of traditional sects and groups.

Shuichi further claims that while China has to contend with conflicts when the old faces the new, this is not the case in Japan: "the expectation was not that the old should be replaced by the new, but that the two should co-exist" (Shuichi, 1979, 5). This peaceful co-existence is in keeping with the way Japan embraced modernity and their attitude towards technology. Shuichi stresses that this is apparent even in modern Japanese society where "there is a love for all things new" even while it remains "extremely conservative." At this point, I wish to share that Shuichi is not alone in these views. It is also shared by political philosopher and public intellectual Maruyama Masao.

In his essay, *In Search of a Ground* (1984), Maruyama explores the problems inherent in looking for a foundationalist Japanese worldview.<sup>106</sup> He underscores that there is a tendency to commit two major mistakes in the pursuit of understanding Japanese thought. The first mistake is to look at Japan's intellectual history only as an amalgamation of "distorted foreign ideas." That is, to think of Japan as merely importing innovations and novel ways of thought, then claiming it as their own. The second mistake is when people "search for a 'homegrown' Japanese way of thinking, independent of what is considered 'foreign thought'" (Heisig 2011, 923). Maruyama, like Shuichi, questions the adherence to a pure concept of Japanese-ness. Since both methodologies are questionable, how then are we supposed to approach the study of Japanese thought or how do we assess someone like Murakami?

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105 In a forthcoming journal article, I discussed the same idea, using Kato Shuichi's concepts on this matter and Maruyama Masao's *basso ostinato* to describe Japan's culture.

106 His two translated works such as *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics* (1963) and *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (1974) have more or less reiterated and reexamined this theme and problems in various ways.

Maruyama agrees with Shuichi in saying that once foreign ideas infiltrate Japanese shores, “they underwent certain changes and even sweeping ‘correction’” (2011, 924). He posits that Japan does not merely consume whatever is new and foreign. These elements become something that the Japanese can comprehend and then it is redesigned, reworked to adhere to their circumstances as well as their aesthetic and moral framework.

A good example is Japan’s concept of democracy. In Maruyama’s essay entitled *Thought and Behavior Patterns of Japan’s Wartime Leaders*, which is found in the translated collection, of essays *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, he explains in detail how the Japanese notion of democracy might be “an inverted form of democracy.” (1969, 113) In another essay, *Nationalism in Japan: its Theoretical Background and Prospects*, he reiterates this point by saying that “So long as democracy remains for Japan a lofty theory, an edifying doctrine, it will continue to be an indigestible import.” (Ibid., 152) Maruyama uses this idea to argue for the problems inherent in Japanese modernity and political attitude, indicating that the Japanese do not truly understand, let alone practice, “true” democracy. The development of an autonomous and rational Japanese modern citizen is necessary for democracy to flourish but this was not the case in Japan due to outside pressures and internal conflict.

If one looks from this historical perspective and then analyzes closely, one can discern a pattern emerging. At first, Maruyama used the term “stratum” to refer to what he argues as the persistence of Japanese-ness despite outside influences. This geological metaphor of stratification captures not only the addition of foreign influences but more importantly, it alludes to the continuity and fundamentality of this developmental pattern. The *old stratum* conveys a sense of grounding, even as layers of thoughts and influence are placed on top of it. However, this very foundationalism is something that Maruyama wrestled with. Thus, he turned towards music to find a different word, which is better suited for what he had in mind to describe Japanese-ness. He preferred the term, *basso ostinato*. “Basso ostinato—in English, “ground bass”—refers to the obstinate repetition of a low sound ... It is a specific sound but not *necessarily* the main melody” (2011, 927–928).

Maruyama’s use of a musical metaphor shows how he is also struggling with succinctness and clarity: To encapsulate the development of Japanese thought with a single word is impossible but one must start somewhere.<sup>107</sup>

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107 “Maruyama argues that despite Japan’s reliance on foreign inspiration for its political and historical values, what has been imported has always been modified to fit aversion to transcendence, speculative theory, and absolute moral principles grounded beyond the existing social order.” (Heisig, 2011, 922)

The term *basso ostinato* will at least provide a jumping-off point. It was able to capture his thought process on this matter because, as he explains, “I had found, it seemed, the image I was looking for to express the ‘essentially Japanese’ as a kind of obstinately repeated pattern of thinking and feeling.” (2011, 928) Despite the methodological problems he encountered with these reflections on Japanese intellectual thought, he was able “to show there is a recurrently repeated tone *within* the patterns of change themselves, that is, in the *way* in which the changes take place.” He then states that this “alacrity with which people adapt to changes in the outside world has become a part of ‘tradition.’” (2011, 928) If this is how tradition becomes cemented as a ground for the identity and essence of a nation or a people, then this is not simply a matter of purity of the cultural artifacts themselves that should be the focus, instead, it is how these are produced, consumed, appreciated, rejected, and dissected that becomes that tradition.

Maruyama adds that “The idea was that, in spite of numerous historical changes, there is a ‘Japanese spirit’ that has remained unaltered since ancient times, and that Japan’s historical development amounted to no more than different manifestations of this Japanese ‘essence’ (2011, 929).” Based on my reading of *In Search of a Ground*, Maruyama seems hesitant to use the term ‘essence’; hence, his use of *basso ostinato* instead. The musical term was able to somehow capture the consistency and persistence of that elusive Japanese-ness without dogmatically saying that there is one.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussions abovementioned, what we call homogeneity and purity is not as simple as the critics claim. This may also be applied to the discourse on Haruki Murakami’s Japanese-ness.

In this article, I showed how Murakami uses transcultural references to ground the reader even as he lets them peek into otherworldly realms. It is an oversimplification to say that he is too Western because of his love for jazz, for example. It is fairer to use the term cosmopolitan where his interests are concerned. His cosmopolitanism then may be viewed in two senses: the first is his obvious transcultural appeal to readers from all over the world and the second pertains to his cosmopolitan views, which may be seen in his consumption of culture both high and low. It would be interesting to study later how these relate to one another.

When we closely examine some of the recurring themes in Murakami’s work that pertain to this cosmopolitanism, there is a literary purpose or utility which is an author’s license to use as he sees fit. These motifs, which are a

part of his writing method or a process, may be loosely seen as his framework for viewing the world or, more accurately, a way for him to present his world through his writings.

Kato Shuichi's thoughts on Japanese literature and culture already sets how this discussion is not as simple as it seems since Japanese thought has always been enmeshed and intertwined with foreign ideas. He even goes as far as to say that what is Japanese is actually a result of these combinations and interactions. Using Maruyama Masao's term *basso ostinato*, gives us a more nuanced concept to work with, that is, even as this so-called "Japanese essence" interacts with outside influences, an obstinate sound persists and remains throughout this process. If we apply this concept to Murakami's works, what we should look for then is that tenacity, that persistence of tone, which might pertain to his Japanese-ness. If this is indeed the case, while his readers enjoy his cultural references, his critics should attempt to see past them if they wish to answer the question of his Japanese-ness.

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