

Global Reach of Japanese *Kayokyoku* and K-Pop: A Comparative Study through the Lens of Cultural Psychology, Focusing on Modesty, Holism, and Spirituality

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Abstract

While K-pop conquers global markets through strategic internationalization, traditional Japanese *kayokyoku* remains an enigma abroad—a paradox demanding explanation beyond simplistic market analyses. This groundbreaking comparative study, the first to apply cultural-psychological frameworks to both traditions, reveals how the profound Japanese concepts of *oku-yukashisa* (modesty), *shinrabansho* (interconnectedness), and *otodama* (sound spirit) create both artistic depth and cross-cultural barriers absent in K-pop's calculated global approach. Our analysis challenges conventional globalization paradigms by uncovering alternative pathways to international recognition exemplified by the unexpected renaissance of Japanese city pop. This phenomenon—where decades-old recordings suddenly captivate global audiences without marketing campaigns—demonstrates a profound truth: music embodying authentic cultural depth ultimately transcends strategic accessibility, revealing globalization's multidimensional nature. This study fills critical gaps in existing literature by illuminating how deeply embedded cultural values shape not merely musical expression but divergent trajectories of global cultural influence, advancing theoretical understanding of cross-cultural musical reception beyond Western-centric models.

Keywords: Japanese *Kayokyoku*, City Pop Renaissance, Cultural Hybridity, Aesthetic Transcendence, Music Globalization

Introduction

The global music industry has witnessed the remarkable rise of Korean popular music (K-pop) over the past decade, with acts like BTS and BLACKPINK achieving unprecedented international success. In contrast, traditional Japanese popular music, particularly the distinct genre of *kayokyoku* that flourished during the Showa era (1926-1989), has remained largely confined to domestic audiences despite Japan's significant cultural exports in other domains such as anime, fashion, and cuisine (Iwabuchi, 2002). This discrepancy presents an intriguing paradox: why has Japanese popular music not achieved comparable global reach?

This paper examines this question through the lens of sociopsychological and positive psychology frameworks, focusing on three distinctive Japanese cultural concepts: *oku-yukashisa* (modesty or reserve), *shinrabansho* (the interconnectedness of all things), and spirituality. By comparing Japanese *kayokyoku* with K-pop, we aim to uncover the cultural, psychological, and strategic factors that have influenced their divergent global trajectories. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how cultural psychology shapes artistic expression and global cultural flows. By examining how deeply embedded cultural values manifest in musical forms and their reception, we gain insight into the complex interplay between globalization and cultural specificity in the contemporary music landscape.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Japanese Kayokyoku and K-pop

Japanese *kayokyoku* emerged as a distinct musical form in the early 20th century, blending Western musical elements with traditional Japanese sensibilities (Yano, 2002). During the Showa era, it evolved into a sophisticated genre with distinctive melodic structures, lyrical themes, and performance styles. Stevens (2008) notes that *kayokyoku's* development was closely tied to Japan's modernization and cultural identity formation during the post-war period.

In contrast, K-pop's development followed a more deliberate, industry-driven path. Lie (2015) documents how Korean entertainment companies strategically crafted K-pop as a global product from its inception in the 1990s, with systematic talent development, marketing strategies, and stylistic choices designed for international appeal. Fuhr (2016) identifies this as a key distinction: while *kayokyoku* evolved organically within a national context, K-pop was conceived with global audiences in mind.

Cultural Psychology and Music Expression

Research on cultural psychology provides valuable frameworks for understanding these differences. Markus and Kitayama's (1991) seminal work on independent versus interdependent self-construals suggests that cultural differences in self-perception influence expressive norms. In high-context cultures like Japan, communication relies heavily on shared cultural knowledge and indirect expression (Hall, 1976), while K-pop has strategically adopted more explicit, low-context communication styles accessible to diverse global audiences.

Boer and Fischer's (2012) cross-cultural study of music preferences found that collectivistic cultures tend to value music for its social cohesion functions, while individualistic cultures emphasize personal expression and emotional regulation. This distinction may help explain the different approaches to musical expression in Japanese and Korean popular music.

Positive Psychology and Cultural Expression

From a positive psychology perspective, cultural differences in the conceptualization of well-being and emotional expression are relevant to understanding musical divergences. Uchida and Kitayama (2009) demonstrate that Japanese conceptions of happiness emphasize interpersonal harmony and balance rather than high-arousal positive emotions prevalent in Western and increasingly K-pop expressions.

Tsai et al. (2006) found that cultural ideal affect—the emotional states that people value and desire—differs significantly across cultures, with East Asian cultures traditionally valuing low-arousal positive states (calm, contentment) and Western cultures valuing high-arousal positive states (excitement, enthusiasm). K-pop has strategically aligned with the latter, while Japanese *kayokyoku* often embodies the former.

Globalization and Music Industries

Critical to understanding the divergent global trajectories are the structural differences in industry approaches. Jin (2016) documents how the Korean government strategically supported K-pop's global expansion as part of its cultural diplomacy efforts. In contrast, Condry (2011) notes that Japanese music industry structures have historically prioritized the stable domestic market over high-risk international ventures.

Technological and media contexts have also played crucial roles. Jung (2011) argues that K-pop effectively leveraged social media and digital platforms to build global fan communities, while Manabe (2008) observes that the Japanese music industry's slower adaptation to digital distribution models may have limited international accessibility.

Research Gaps and Contributions of the Present Study

Despite the growing body of research on East Asian popular music's global reception, several significant gaps exist in the current literature. First, while numerous studies have examined K-pop's international success (Jung, 2011; Jin, 2016; Lie, 2015), comparatively few have investigated the limited global reach of Japanese *kayokyoku*, particularly through cultural psychology frameworks. Existing studies on Japanese popular music (Stevens, 2008; Yano, 2002; Mōri, 2009) have primarily focused on historical development or domestic reception rather than international dynamics.

Furthermore, while significant attention has been given to the technical and commercial aspects of music globalization, the spiritual and philosophical dimensions remain under-explored. Oe's (2025) groundbreaking work, "Echoes of emotion: exploring otodama in music therapy," represents one of the few studies that delves into the spiritual essence of Japanese music through the concept of "otodama" (sound spirit). Her interdisciplinary approach, combining Eastern philosophical traditions with Western therapeutic frameworks, provides valuable insights into how Japanese musical traditions encode deeper spiritual meanings that transcend mere entertainment.

However, Oe's focus remains primarily on therapeutic applications rather than comparative cultural dynamics in global music markets. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how these spiritual dimensions—central to Japanese *kayokyoku*—interact with globalization processes and cross-cultural reception. While Oe (2025) establishes the profound connection between Japanese musical expressions and spiritual practices, our study extends this framework by examining how these spiritual elements simultaneously create depth and pose barriers to international reception when compared with K-pop's more strategically accessible approach.

Most significantly, while numerous studies have analyzed either Japanese or Korean popular music separately, there exists a striking absence of comprehensive comparative analyses

examining the dynamic interplay between these two musical powerhouses from East Asia. Our study addresses this critical gap by providing the first systematic comparison of kayokyoku and K-pop through cultural-psychological frameworks, offering unprecedented insights into how deeply embedded cultural values shape not only musical expression but also divergent pathways to global recognition. This comparative dimension is essential for understanding the complex cultural dynamics of music globalization in the 21st century, moving beyond Western-centric models to appreciate the nuanced interplay between Eastern musical traditions in the global marketplace.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs a comparative analytical framework drawing from cultural psychology, positive psychology, and globalization theories. The investigation centers on three key Japanese cultural concepts:

1. *Oku-yukashisa* (modesty/reserve): Analyzed through the lens of Hall's (1976) high-context versus low-context communication theory and Markus and Kitayama's (1991) independent-interdependent self-construal framework.
2. *Shinrabansho* (interconnectedness): Examined using Nisbett et al.'s (2001) theories on holistic versus analytic cognition and Uchida and Kitayama's (2009) research on cultural models of happiness.
3. Spirituality: Approached through Tsai's (2007) ideal affect theory and Seligman's (2002) positive psychology framework on meaning and transcendence.

This study employs a comparative analytical framework rooted in cultural psychology, positive psychology, and globalization studies. The analysis primarily draws upon existing scholarship concerning Japanese cultural concepts (*oku-yukashisa*, *shinrabansho*, and spirituality), high-context communication, and the contrasting characteristics of East Asian popular music industries. A critical review of relevant academic literature forms the basis of this comparative analysis, examining how these theoretical lenses illuminate the divergent global trajectories of Japanese Kayokyoku and K-pop.

Analysis and Discussion

Oku-yukashisa: Modesty and Expression in Music

Japanese culture highly values *oku-yukashisa*—modesty, reserve, and the beauty of restraint. This aesthetic principle manifests in *kayokyoku* through indirect lyrical expressions, metaphorical language, and emotional restraint. Yano (2002) observes that enka and *kayokyoku* often employ subtle allusions and seasonal references rather than direct emotional declarations, creating what she terms an "aesthetic of melancholy" that requires cultural knowledge to fully appreciate.

In contrast, K-pop tends toward explicit expression, with clear emotional messaging and direct communication. Kim (2013) notes that K-pop lyrics, even when in Korean, are structured to convey meaning through straightforward emotional declarations and repetitive key phrases that can be understood even with limited language comprehension. This difference reflects Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context (Japanese) and low-context (globalized K-pop) communication styles.

Performance styles similarly reflect these differences. Stevens (2008) describes how *kayokyoku* performers often exhibit restraint in physical expression, with subtle gestures and

controlled movements conveying emotional depth. This contrasts sharply with K-pop's highly choreographed, visually dynamic performances designed for maximum impact regardless of linguistic or cultural barriers (Oh & Lee, 2013).

These expressive differences create varying accessibility barriers for international audiences. While K-pop's explicit performance style transcends language barriers, *kayokyoku*'s appreciation often requires deeper cultural context, limiting its cross-cultural transferability.

Shinrabansho: Holistic Worldview and Musical Integration

The Japanese concept of *shinrabansho*—the interconnectedness of all things—reflects a holistic worldview that influences musical composition and thematic content. *Kayokyoku* frequently incorporates natural imagery, seasonal references, and cyclical themes that reflect this interconnected perspective. Mōri (2009) observes that Japanese popular music often positions human emotions within broader natural and cosmic contexts, creating meaning through relationship rather than individual expression.

This holistic approach extends to musical elements. *Kayokyoku* frequently integrates traditional Japanese scales, rhythms, and instrumental colors with Western musical structures, creating what Atkins (2001) describes as a "syncretic musical form" that resists easy categorization. This complexity rewards deep listening but may present barriers to casual international audiences.

K-pop, by contrast, has evolved toward what Fuhr (2016) terms "strategic hybridity"—incorporating globally recognizable elements from various musical traditions, particularly American hip-hop, R&B, and EDM, while maintaining distinctive Korean elements primarily in visual and cultural markers rather than musical structure. This approach creates immediate accessibility while retaining distinctive identity markers.

These different approaches to musical hybridity reflect what Nisbett et al. (2001) identify as cultural differences in cognitive orientation. The holistic thinking prevalent in Japanese culture tends to emphasize relationships between elements and contextual significance, while K-pop's approach aligns more with analytic thinking that separates elements for strategic recombination.

Spirituality and Emotional Expression

Japanese *kayokyoku* often engages with spiritual concepts like *mono no aware* (pathos of things), *wabi-sabi* (imperfect beauty), and *yugen* (profound grace), creating emotional depth through contemplative, often melancholic expressions. Yano (2002) argues that these aesthetic principles create a distinctive emotional landscape that values nuance and transience over cathartic expression.

In positive psychology terms, this reflects what Seligman (2002) identifies as meaning-oriented well-being—finding fulfillment through connection to something larger than oneself. Japanese music often emphasizes emotional complexity and the bittersweet nature of existence rather than straightforward positivity.

K-pop, conversely, has increasingly embraced what Tsai (2007) identifies as high-arousal positive emotional states—enthusiasm, excitement, and empowerment—that align with globalized youth culture values. Oh and Park (2012) document how K-pop's "feel-good" emotional landscape creates accessible positivity that transcends cultural boundaries while still incorporating Korean cultural elements.

This difference in ideal affect shapes not only musical content but also performance practices and fan engagement. While *kayokyoku* often creates intimate, reflective listening experiences, K-pop has pioneered what Kim (2018) terms "participatory fandom"—creating energetic communal experiences through choreography, fan chants, and social media engagement that generate shared positive emotions across cultural boundaries.

Industry Structures and Global Strategy

Beyond cultural factors, structural differences in industry approaches have significantly influenced global reach. Jin (2016) documents how Korean entertainment companies implemented systematic globalization strategies, including:

1. Training performers in multiple languages
2. Developing content specifically for international markets
3. Leveraging digital platforms for global distribution
4. Collaborating with international artists
5. Creating easily recognizable visual and musical signatures

In contrast, the Japanese music industry has historically prioritized its large domestic market. Condry (2011) notes that complex licensing structures, physical media focus, and domestic-oriented marketing have limited international accessibility of Japanese music. Stevens (2008) argues that the industry's emphasis on physical goods and control over distribution channels has created structural barriers to global penetration.

These industry approaches reflect deeper cultural orientations. Markus and Kitayama's (1991) distinction between interdependent (Japanese) and independent (Western) self-construals may explain these divergent strategies. The Japanese industry's focus on deep relationships with domestic audiences aligns with interdependent values, while K-pop's expansion strategy embraces more independent-oriented global marketing approaches.

Another Perspective for Japanese Pop Music

Building on Schottmann's (2024) analysis, let us examine the intricate landscape of Japanese popular music. Schottmann investigates the history, social functions, and aesthetics of Japanese city pop, particularly addressing why this genre incorporated American aesthetics from the 1950s and 1960s. Through a historical examination tracing back to the Meiji era, through the "Popular Song" period, and into the Occupation era, Schottmann contextualizes the American aesthetic elements present in city pop.

According to Schottmann's framework, city pop can be understood through several key dimensions. First, the genre reflects the lifestyle and economic prosperity of Japan's urban middle class during the 1980s (Yano, 2002). Second, its musical composition draws from various African American musical traditions, including jazz, blues, rock, funk, disco, soul, and R&B (Atkins, 2001; Boer & Fischer, 2012). Third, city pop's visual aesthetics deliberately

incorporate 1950s-60s American West Coast imagery, such as Art Deco hotels, palm trees, and classic American automobiles (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012).

Schottmann argues that these aesthetic choices are rooted in the "Westernization equals progress" ideology that began in the Meiji era and the romanticized view of America formed during the Occupation period. Most significantly, Schottmann concludes that the American aesthetic elements in city pop represent not mere imitation of American culture, but rather Japan's unique reconstruction of "America" (Inoue, 2018). This perspective suggests that city pop expresses not America itself, but an "American-style affluence" reinterpreted through a Japanese cultural lens (Mōri, 2009; Ugaya, 2005).

This interpretation invites us to reconsider Japanese popular music not as derivative, but as a sophisticated cultural hybrid that reflects Japan's complex relationship with Western influences while maintaining its distinct cultural identity.

The Global Rediscovery of City Pop: "Mayonaka no Door" and Japanese Musical Identity

The concept of city pop proves immensely valuable in understanding the essence and merit of Japanese kayōkyoku (popular music). Within this context, a particularly fascinating phenomenon is the sudden global popularity of Matsubara Miki's "Mayonaka no Door (Stay With Me)."

This 1979 city pop classic experienced a global renaissance around 2020 through social media platforms like TikTok, being "rediscovered" decades after its release. Through Schottmann's (2024) analytical framework, we can understand this phenomenon not as mere coincidence, but as evidence of Japanese city pop's unique cultural hybridity resonating with contemporary global listeners.

"Mayonaka no Door" perfectly embodies the characteristics of Japanese city pop that Schottmann identifies. It features sophisticated arrangements incorporating jazz and R&B elements, lyrics centered around urban nightlife, and most significantly, reflects the sensibilities of Japan's urban middle class during the period of economic prosperity in the 1980s.

What's particularly intriguing is why international listeners are drawn to this song. Despite not understanding the Japanese lyrics, they connect with its musicality and atmosphere, perceiving a "retro-futuristic" appeal. This represents a case where what Schottmann describes as "American-style affluence reinterpreted through a Japanese cultural lens" has acquired new meaning in contemporary global society.

The sudden international popularity of "Mayonaka no Door" demonstrates that city pop is not simply an imitation of American culture, but an original musical genre transformed by Japan's unique sensibilities. Ironically, the image of "America" that Japan constructed in the 1980s is now being received in today's global market as authentically "Japanese."

This phenomenon illustrates the circularity of cultural influence while highlighting the universal appeal of Japanese popular music. Through the lens of city pop, the global success of "Mayonaka no Door" serves as evidence that Japanese music, while influenced by Western

traditions, has digested these influences and created new cultural value that transcends borders and time.

Implications and Discussions

This analysis reveals that the limited global reach of Japanese *kayokyoku* compared to K-pop stems from interconnected cultural, psychological, and strategic factors:

1. **Expressive norms:** Japanese *kayokyoku*'s high-context communication style, emphasizing subtlety and cultural specificity, creates higher barriers to cross-cultural appreciation than K-pop's more explicit, accessible expression.
2. **Cultural values:** The emphasis on *oku-yukashisa*, *shinrabansho*, and traditional spiritual aesthetics creates depth but requires greater cultural knowledge for appreciation, while K-pop strategically balances cultural specificity with global accessibility.
3. **Industry approaches:** Different industry structures and market orientations have reinforced these tendencies, with Korean companies deliberately pursuing global audiences while Japanese industry structures have prioritized domestic markets.
4. **Psychological orientation:** Differences in ideal affect and emotional expression align K-pop more closely with globalized youth culture's preference for high-arousal positive emotions, while *kayokyoku*'s emotional complexity requires greater engagement.

These findings suggest that global reach in popular music is not merely a function of quality or cultural "soft power" but depends significantly on the alignment between cultural expression, industry strategies, and global audience expectations. This analysis should not be interpreted as suggesting that *kayokyoku* should adopt K-pop strategies. Rather, it highlights how different cultural values create distinctive artistic expressions with different relationship to globalization. The preservation of *kayokyoku*'s distinctive aesthetic maintains important cultural diversity in global music while exemplifying alternative approaches to musical expression and emotional communication.

Conclusion

Cultural Identity and Authenticity

This study has examined the complex cultural positioning of Japanese city pop through historical, sociological, and aesthetic lenses. Our analysis reveals that city pop represents far more than a derivative musical genre; it embodies Japan's sophisticated negotiation with Western influences while maintaining its distinct cultural identity. This quality fundamentally distinguishes it from K-pop's more deliberate internationalization strategy.

The historical trajectory from the Meiji era's "Westernization equals progress" ideology through the Occupation period's American cultural dominance created fertile ground for city pop's emergence in the 1980s. Yet, as demonstrated in our analysis, the genre transcended simple imitation. Instead, Japanese musicians and producers engaged in a creative process of cultural reinterpretation, selectively incorporating elements of African American musical traditions and American West Coast aesthetics while infusing them with uniquely Japanese sensibilities.

Comparative Analysis with K-Pop

The case of Miki Matsubara's "Mayonaka no Door" and its recent global rediscovery illustrates the enduring relevance and universal appeal of city pop beyond its original cultural and temporal context. While K-pop's international success stems from deliberate strategies to

minimize cultural barriers, the unexpected global embrace of Matsubara's work decades after its creation reveals a different path to cross-cultural resonance—one based on artistic authenticity rather than market calculation. This phenomenon challenges conventional narratives of cultural influence that position Western music as the center and non-Western music as peripheral. It demonstrates how Japanese artists transformed borrowed elements into something distinctively new, creating a musical form that would eventually circle back to influence global music trends decades later.

Spiritual Dimensions of Music

By integrating Oe's (2025) profound exploration of "otodama" with our comparative analysis, this study illuminates how spiritual dimensions of music—often overlooked in globalization studies—significantly influence cross-cultural reception. While Oe examines the therapeutic power of Japanese musical traditions through an interdisciplinary lens, our research extends this understanding to the global marketplace, demonstrating how these spiritual elements create both depth and barriers in international contexts.

Implications for Cultural Globalization

The theoretical implications of this study extend beyond Japanese music scholarship, inviting us to reconsider models of cultural globalization that too often presume unidirectional flows from West to East. City pop exemplifies what might be called "transformative appropriation"—a process through which cultural borrowing becomes a vehicle for innovation rather than imitation. This framework provides a more nuanced understanding of transcultural musical phenomena, acknowledging both the reality of Western influence and the creative agency of non-Western artists.

As global interest in Japanese popular culture continues to grow, city pop stands as a compelling case study in how cultural hybridity operates at multiple levels—musical, visual, and conceptual. While K-pop conquered international markets through strategic accessibility, Japanese kayokyoku and city pop have achieved something arguably more profound—a growing global appreciation for their artistic integrity and cultural authenticity. The genre's contemporary resonance with international audiences suggests that its distinctive blend of familiarity and otherness, nostalgia and futurism, strikes a chord in our increasingly interconnected yet culturally diverse world. This success demonstrates that cultural specificity itself can become a source of universal appeal when executed with artistic conviction.

In conclusion, city pop represents not just a chapter in Japanese music history but a sophisticated engagement with questions of cultural identity, influence, and innovation—questions that remain vitally relevant in our global age. Its legacy challenges us to move beyond simplistic notions of cultural authenticity and instead appreciate the creative possibilities that emerge when cultures engage in dialogue across borders and across time. The growing international recognition of Japanese popular music reminds us that true artistic universality often emerges not from diluting cultural specificity but from expressing it with such conviction and artistry that it transcends its origins to speak to listeners across cultural boundaries.

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