

“BEWAIL THE CURRENT – EMBELLISH THE PAST”: THE ROLE OF  
NOSTALGIA, TRADITIONALISM, AND THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY J-POP

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## Abstract

This thesis puts together approaches from musicology, area studies, and media studies to analyze how contemporary J-pop deploys nostalgia, traditionalism, and the past in ways that extend and transform postwar Japanese musical trends. While studies on nostalgia and traditionalism have been well explored in Japanese music in the postwar era, their role in contemporary J-pop remains underexplored. Through the analyses of three primary case studies, REOL's "YoiYoi Kokon," Wagakki Band's "Tengaku," and BAND-MAIKO's "Gion-chō," this study identifies deeply ambivalent uses of *furusato*, imagined nostalgia, idealization of the past, and estrangement. The feeling of estrangement manifests as two versions of "homelessness," one that either looks for the comfort of the past, such as the *furusato*, or one that looks forward to the future, a feeling of "homesickness," with both indicating a feeling of dissatisfaction and dislocation in the present. Ultimately, this research suggests that contemporary J-pop builds upon inherited musical and cultural elements to novelly explore nostalgia through the universal language of music.

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks .....	7
Working Considerations .....	11
Chapter Outline .....	12
Chapter 1: The Emergence of Nostalgia, Traditionalism, and the Past in Japanese Music.....	14
Yamada Kōsaku and <i>Gagaku</i> .....	14
Scott W. Aalgaard and “Homesickness” .....	24
Christine Yano and the Elements of “ <i>Furusato</i> ” .....	26
Chapter 2: The Use of Nostalgia and Traditionalism in Contemporary J-pop .....	32
REOL’s “YoiYoi Kokon” and Dissidents of Imagined Nostalgia.....	34
Onew-P’s “Hannya Shingyō Poppu”: Can Miku be a Monk? .....	40
Wagakki Band’s “Tengaku” and Japan’s Overseas Image.....	43
BAND-MAIKO’s “Gion-chō” and the Modern <i>Furusato</i> .....	49
Conclusion .....	57
References.....	60

## Introduction

Modern Japanese cultural identity has been continually shaped by dynamic interactions between domestic traditions and foreign influences. Ever since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 opened Japan to rapid Westernization, the nation has grappled with how to modernize while continuously looking within itself and back along its history. The Meiji era slogan *wakon yōsai*, or “Japanese spirit with Western learning,” encapsulated this balancing act, an official policy of preserving pre-modern values and customs while incorporating Western advancements.<sup>1</sup> In practice, this meant that everything from literature and education to music and art was caught between old and new. It created a rich cultural sense of self in which pre-Meiji aesthetics coexisted with increasingly European-styled novels, and idioms of *gagaku* court music were arranged for Western-styled symphonies. This blending allowed Japan to maintain and constantly morph its musical soundscape during Japan’s rapid transformation due to Westernization.<sup>2</sup>

As time went on, the end of World War II caused a shift in Japan’s perception of its own traditionalism and Western influence in the prewar days. This is evident in the shifts seen in the postwar music produced in Japan. The Japanese folk and rock music movements of the 1960s and onwards showed a longing for something that was likely altogether non-existent. As Scott W. Aalgaard states, “What the singers of the Homesick Blues are ‘homesick’ for is what, in their

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<sup>1</sup> Nozomu Kawamura. “The Historical Background of Arguments Emphasizing the Uniqueness of Japanese Society.” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, no. 5/6 (1980): 44.

<sup>2</sup> Kawamura, 60. Kawamura discusses in the notes how Japan hoped to create Western progress without affecting the Japanese spirit or core culture, which she argues had failed.

eyes, ‘Japan’ can be, not what it may have been in the past.”<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, the genre of *enka* 演歌 was tackling an idea closely related to homesickness, being nostalgia. Christine Yano argues that “The enticement of *enka* is that it suggests a forum for collective nostalgia, which actively appropriates and shapes the past, thereby binding the group together”<sup>4</sup> Yano goes on to qualify the function of nostalgia, saying that “The amnesiac quality of nostalgia continually surprises. It selects which details to obscure in order to naturalize memory, history, and identity and then build its own phantasmic utopia.”<sup>5</sup> The feelings of nostalgia and homesickness prevailed in these popular music genres in postwar Japan as a way to look back upon a time where Japan was not dependent upon the United States. Yano ties the rise of this feeling with an ethnocentric ideological tool called *nihonjinron* 日本人論, or theories on the uniqueness of being Japanese, which underpins *enka* ideology in its representations of Japanese national culture.<sup>6</sup>

Although this thesis focuses on contemporary pop music, the constructed or imagined creation of nostalgia, homesickness, and general idealization of the past in Japan extends beyond just the field of music. Cultural and psychological studies discuss how characteristics of *nihonjinron*, which are presented as timeless Japanese cultural essences such as *wa* 和 (harmony), *aidagara* 間柄 (interdependence), and *amae* 甘え (dependency) are instead recent inventions.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Per F. Gjerde and Miyoko Onishi argue that the past was becoming an idealized space with this quote:

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<sup>3</sup> Scott W. Aalgaard, *Homesick Blues: Politics, Protest, and Musical Storytelling in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2023), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Yano, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Yano, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Yano, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Per F. Gjerde and Miyoko Onishi, “Selves, Cultures, and Nations: The Psychological Imagination of ‘the Japanese’ in the Era of Globalization,” *Human Development* 43, nos. 4–5 (2000): 216–26. The text quotes a handful of scholars across different fields, including Tetsuo Najita, H. D. Harootunian, Naoki Sakai, and Takeo Doi.

Over the past several decades Japanese have shown vast capacity to create an idealized past. Even more apparent has been their effort to establish this past as an ideological basis for present conceptions of Japanese state and people ... Ideas about the ethos of the Japanese, echoing ideas of prewar *kokutai*, have appeared in the works of government-sponsored academics and newly founded institutions for the study of Japanese culture and history (Scheiner 1998).<sup>8</sup>

This shows that the idealization of the past extends beyond music and highlights prewar Japan specifically as the target of this idealization. These aspects are pervasive in music and ideology through the end of the Shōwa era, but how does it manifest itself in music in the present day?

This thesis has two chapters that will analyze three contemporary musical case studies in order to explore how the idealization of the past and imagined nostalgia is represented in J-pop. The first case study is REOL's "YoiYoi Kokon" (2015), a song in the band's catalogue that leans heavily on Japanese musical idioms and deploys Japanese nostalgic visuals in the official music video.<sup>9</sup> This song is also notable for being much different than the rest of the songs appearing on the album, the only song of which utilizing those Japanese musical idioms.<sup>10</sup> To contrast this, the second case study is of Wagakki Band's "Tengaku" (2013), which is a re-orchestration of a Vocaloid song of the same name. Wagakki Band takes the original rock band instrumentation — electric guitars, bass guitar, and drumset — and adds a handful of Japanese traditional instruments that individual members specialize in.<sup>11</sup> The concept of the band is designed around this premise, as *wagakki* 和楽器 means "Japanese instruments," in which all of their compositions are based around, along with their use of *shigin* 詩吟, the practice of reciting

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<sup>8</sup> Gjerde and Onishi, 221.

<sup>9</sup> REOL, *YoiYoi Kokon*, YouTube video, 4:30, posted by "Reol Official," November 12, 2015, <https://youtu.be/8IK6eLTNV1k>

<sup>10</sup> See *Last.fm*, "REOL — SIGMA," accessed August 4, 2025, <https://www.last.fm/music/Reol/SIGMA>. "YoiYoi Kokon," placed at track 3, stands in stark contrast to the rest of the album if listening in order.

<sup>11</sup> Yuko Suzuhana, "【Wagakki Band】 Tengaku 【VOCALOID】," YouTube video, 4:22, October 12, 2013, <https://youtu.be/Q2meWkWqc-I>.

Chinese poetry, vocal stylistics.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the third case study, BAND-MAIKO's "Gion-chō," (2019) shows the construction of the modern *furusato* 故郷, or hometown, and auto-Orientalism. This band, as alter egos of the rock group BAND-MAID,<sup>13</sup> don the image of the *maiko* 舞子, or apprentice *geisha* 芸者 (Japanese female entertainer)/*geiko* 芸子 (Western Japan female entertainer), to create rock music that blends with traditional Japanese instruments, such as the *koto*, *shakuhachi*, and *shamisen*. In order to understand what elements make up Japanese musical idioms and ideas, Yamada Kōsaku's *Inno Meiji* (1921) will be analyzed to give background knowledge on how Japanese musical ideas are represented and composed within hybridity with Western music.

These case studies may help elucidate how Japanese traditionalism is presented to the globalized world and what aspects of Japanese music are used to evoke the feeling of traditionalism or nostalgia, ranging from language use to instrumentation to vocal technique. Although there is no stable, singular idea of what an idealized past may be in the minds of Japanese musicians, the resulting analysis can show how these postwar ideas continue into the present day and how they have morphed over time.

An important aspect of this analysis is understanding that prewar Japanese culture was the target of the imagined nostalgia, but as implied, this timeframe did not house these purely Japanese cultural essences as described above. The hybridization of Japan was already well

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<sup>12</sup> See their official band site, Wagakki Band, "Biography," accessed August 4, 2025, <https://wagakkiband.com/biography>. In Japanese, they write 「詩吟、和楽器とロックバンドを融合させた新感覚ロックエンタテインメントバンド。」, meaning "A novel type of rock entertainment band that combines *shigin*, Japanese musical instruments, and rock band aspects."

<sup>13</sup> See BAND-MAID's site, BAND-MAID, "Discography," *BAND-MAID Official Web Site*, accessed August 5, 2025, <https://bandmaid.tokyo/discography/page/2>. BAND-MAIKO is the moniker associated specifically to their performances and compositions of the album of the same name.

along the way starting early in the Meiji era (1868 onwards) and showed no signs of slowing down. As Miriam Silverberg observes in her analysis of Japan's mass culture in the early twentieth century leading to World War II, "the discovery of multiplicity: a capitalist mass culture both propagated and challenged by the dominant ideology of the state" was a fundamental reality of Japanese modern life, even as authorities tried to impose a unified national spirit.<sup>14</sup> The target of idealization was already a healthy mix of Japanese and Western culture, but still drew the attention of musicians with the prevailing theme of *furusato* 故郷, or hometown, emerging as its own genre. *Furusato* is core to general idealization of prewar Japan, focusing on the rural aspects of Japan, being "nostalgia, pleasant scenery, local dialect, compassion, camaraderie, motherly love, enriching lifestyle—are described as qualities endemic to the countryside."<sup>15</sup> This shows an importance to the spatio-temporality of idealization, being not only in prewar Japan but located in the rural areas that were seemingly more prevalent in prewar Japan. There is a close tie between *furusato* and *nihonjinron*, described by Yano as "us-ness"<sup>16</sup> and by Jennifer Robertson as "we-feelings."<sup>17</sup> Understanding why this timeframe and space is idealized in music will help contextualize why certain themes and musical ideas prevail about imagined nostalgia in the present day, as I will describe further on.

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<sup>14</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Robertson, "Furusato Japan: The Culture and Politics of Nostalgia," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 1, no. 4 (1988): 502.

<sup>16</sup> Yano, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Robertson, 494. Robertson discusses the term *furusato-zukuri*, or home/native-place making, as "political process by which culture, as a collectively constructed and shared system of symbols, customs and beliefs, is socially reproduced."

## Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology combining qualitative literary analysis, musicological analysis, and historical-cultural critique. A close analysis of music will be conducted in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 for the musical case studies. This involves both close listening, lyrical close readings and translations, and, in Chapter 1 specifically, score analysis of composition. For early twentieth century art music, I will examine pieces such as Yamada Kōsaku's symphonic works to identify where Japanese traditional elements, such as pentatonic scales and usage of traditional instruments like the *koto* 琴 or *hichiriki* 箏, are fused with Western classical structures and orchestrations. I will also analyze the rhetoric around these pieces as part of the musicological context. For contemporary music, the focus will be on J-pop music of the 2000s and beyond, which entails analyzing song lyrics, musical style, and performance modality. Musicological study in this context also means engaging with concepts of performance and media studies.

Although these are the main forms of analysis, the underlying ideas of both are tied to understanding the spatio-temporality of music. Thus, the historical contexts and understanding of ideological shifts are an important underpinning to the research above. Although there is risk in applying contemporary musical ideas anachronistically, I will attempt to present findings and ideas on music respective to their timelines. Lastly, this thesis places prewar and postwar Japan as distinctive timeframes of musicianship and composition, however, there are musical aspects that are transhistorical in nature.

In summary, the methodology is qualitative and interpretive and rooted in textual and musical close reading/listening techniques common in literature and music scholarship, which all

are considered in their relative positions spatio-temporally. By combining text, sound, and context, this study creates a well-rounded and holistic understanding of how the Japanese soundscape is constructed, in this study, to sound nostalgic.

This thesis builds upon ideas put forth by Aalgaard and Yano on how nostalgia and particularly the imagined past is represented in Japanese music from the postwar onwards. The idea of nostalgia within music in general has been explored in-depth, with studies on how nostalgia is associated with different emotions and reception of music, such as studies seen by Frederick S Barrett et al.,<sup>18</sup> Sandra Garrido and Jane W. Davidson,<sup>19</sup> and Callum Davies and Bill Page et al.<sup>20</sup> Along with discussions on how the past is viewed in nostalgia, these studies also discuss how aspects of nostalgia transcend in music transcend past the lived timeframes of listeners, as Davies and Page et al. state when examining their findings:

Perhaps, future work should exclude preferences for tracks released before respondents were born, as this appears to muddy results – and while we acknowledge that fashion moves in cycles of rediscovery and rebirth, people are unlikely to hold actual nostalgia (as opposed to mere admiration) for eras they didn't experience.<sup>21</sup>

Barrett et al. also mentions the salience of nostalgic feelings per song, showing the participants in their study agreed that certain songs simply felt more nostalgic in its composition beyond just personal connection to the music or the emotional state of the listener at the time of hearing the music, stated as “This does not rule out the possibility, however, that music-evoked nostalgia is a

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<sup>18</sup> Frederick S. Barrett et al., “Music-Evoked Nostalgia: Affect, Memory, and Personality,” *Emotion* 10, no. 3 (2010): 390–403.

<sup>19</sup> Sandra Garrido and Jane W. Davidson, *Music, Nostalgia and Memory: Historical and Psychological Perspectives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Chris Davies et al., “The Power of Nostalgia: Age and Preference for Popular Music,” *Marketing Letters* 33 (2022): 681–92.

<sup>21</sup> Davies et al., 689.

function of specific musical attributes of individual songs, such that these songs would elicit nostalgia in all listeners.”<sup>22</sup>

Closely related to nostalgia in music is the previously mentioned Japanese idea of *furusato*, or the hometown. The image of *furusato* within Japan has been shown to be heavily related to the countryside, estrangement,<sup>23</sup> and images of an “old village.”<sup>24</sup> Millie Creighton discusses how popular songs and poems in the postwar era utilize these feelings and incorporate them into their works, stating that “The sense of estrangement underlying the nostalgic quest for *furusato* is the theme of many popular songs and poems that poignantly lament the loss of communal belongingness”<sup>25</sup> and described as a “sense of homelessness” by both Robertson<sup>26</sup> and Creighton.<sup>27</sup> It will become apparent in the research that follows that estrangement and “homelessness” is the salient feeling appearing in contemporary J-pop. Robertson states that homelessness is a “postmodern condition of existential disaffection: nostalgia for the experience of nostalgia,”<sup>28</sup> but I argue that this definition is challenged by Aalgaard’s notion of “homesickness,” placing homelessness as a feeling of estrangement that can be either past-oriented or forward-looking. Yano discusses as well that *furusato* is tied heavily to the

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<sup>22</sup> Barrett et al., 401. They go on to conclude that certain songs appear to be generally nostalgic over others as participants in the study overall agree with each other on what songs sound nostalgic generally.

<sup>23</sup> Millie Creighton, “Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry,” *Ethnology* 36, no. 3 (1997): 239–54.

<sup>24</sup> Robertson, 497. See also Munesuke Mita. “Kindai Nihon no shinjō no shinboru no jiten.” In *Ryūkōka no himitsu*, Zōhohan ed., edited by Kata, K. and Tsukuda, S., (Tokyo: Bunwa Shobō, 1980), 220–25.

<sup>25</sup> Creighton, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Robertson, 497. See also Hideo Kobayashi, “Kokyō o ushinatta bungaku,” in *Kobayashi Hideo shū, Chikuma gendai bungaku taikei*, vol. 43 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, n.d.), 288. Robertson uses this as an example of an author in the prewar era that could not conceptualize the idea of “old village” or *furusato* aspects due to being born and raised in Tokyo.

<sup>27</sup> Creighton, 243–44.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson, 497.

countryside through the representation of *enka* singers from particular parts of the countryside as shown by a weekly television series called *Enka no Furusato* (The Hometown of Enka).<sup>29</sup>

While these images of *furusato* and nostalgia in music are prominent in *enka* as discussed by Yano and Robertson,<sup>30</sup> the soundscape of nostalgia and past idealization is prevalent in other Japanese musical genres. For example, when discussing the *gagaku* musician Tōgi Hideki, Terence Lancashire quotes a fan in response to Tōgi’s music, saying “as Togi has already said in his thoughts about the classical, . . .there is embedded within me a Japanese DNA. I felt a strange sense of nostalgia [on hearing your music]' (Hisumiko 2000).”<sup>31</sup> Lancashire goes on to quote Stokes, saying that Tōgi’s concerts have become musical events “which construct fictive senses of collective identity,”<sup>32</sup> showing ties between created nostalgia and *nihonjinron* as mentioned by Yano and also seen in *gagaku* composition and appreciation as well. The effects of imagined nostalgia show how Japanese city pop, an early form of J-pop, has entered the “nostalgia cycle” in the present day, where the feeling evoked by the music “can be understood as people’s nostalgia for past musical types or some particular songs.”<sup>33</sup> This appreciation of Japanese city pop, originating in the 1970s and 80s, is shown to have had a resurgence in the West through social media, such as TikTok, as “automated nostalgia,” or the collective experience of

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<sup>29</sup> Yano, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Robertson, 496.

<sup>31</sup> Terence Lancashire, “World Music or Japanese? The Gagaku of Tōgi Hideki,” *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003): 35.

<sup>32</sup> Lancashire, 35. See Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Berg, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> ManWai Chen, “The Resurgence of City Pop and the Nostalgia Cycle: Impacts on the Music Industry and Modern Culture,” *Highlights in Business, Economics and Management* 23 (2023): 1212–16.

constructing cultural aesthetics.<sup>34</sup> This is another indicator of the importance of distance experienced in Japanese nostalgia, both spatially and temporally.

These studies are key to understanding how the imagined past is represented in Japan through music and how contemporary J-pop may build upon and use the general feelings of *urusato*, nostalgia, and musical ideas explored or amplified through genres such as *enka*, *gagaku*, and early forms of J-pop.

### **Working Considerations**

Due to the gap between the Japanese and English languages being so wide from each other, along with the fundamental differences in musical style and soundscape, there are instances where I must use my constructed interpretation of the music and lyrics to translate them into words and into English, respectively. Although I attempt to approach the musical analysis with diligence and care, there are inevitable biases that come through due to some ideas within lyrics when translation hinges on semantic interpretations of obscure metaphors or cultural ideas, and at times instead require direct translation due to lacking the ability to contextualize their meanings within the narrow space of song lyrics and lines. Instances of musical untranslatability appear in discussion of Japanese musical styles that have little or no correspondence with Western musical styles, such as Japanese work and fishing songs, which I leave in their Japanese lexis due to clunkiness in translation. Along with this, the scales often used in early composed Japanese music can only be shown on paper but not heard and

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<sup>34</sup> Satomi Sugiyama and Nello Barile, “Japanese City Pop and Gen Z in the US: Happy, Calm, and Automated Nostalgia,” *Continuum* 39, no. 3 (2025): 425–38.

automatically understood. Thus, the sounds from Yamada Kōsaku's works referenced later in the first chapter can only be imagined, as the translation from musical notation to an imagined sound can be very difficult for those who are not familiar with how Japanese pentatonic scales function independently of the music or simply cannot hear the pitches in their mind.

Another aspect is my bias towards Vocaloid adjacent J-pop, seen with both REOL and Wagakki Band originating in the Vocaloid music community. This creates the possibility of coming to conclusions that are prevalent only in Vocaloid originating J-pop. There are likely many cases of past idealization and imagined nostalgia that manifest in various aspects of contemporary J-pop, but I believe looking at the section of J-pop in this study can still inform us of how these ideas are composed and represented in the present day. Focusing specifically on J-pop also risks generalizing or essentializing different artistic outputs by J-indie artists, which may represent different views than those presented in J-pop. I hope to one day draw on both J-indie and J-pop artists ideas to develop a holistic view of contemporary Japanese musicianship on these topics.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 discusses the background of Japanese music in the modern era, focusing on Yamada Kōsaku's *Inno Meiji* (1921). Through analyzing *Inno Meiji*, we can define what elements of *gagaku* music are present in Japanese symphonic music and how Yamada utilizes those elements within a larger Western structure of music composition. With this as a baseline, other examples such as Yamada's *Triumph and Peace* (1912) and the Japanese national anthem *Kimi ga yo* (1880) are used as comparisons in how those *gagaku* aspects emerge and are utilized in Japanese music. Along with this, this chapter will look at Aalgaard's study of Nagabuchi

Tsuyoshi and idea of “homesickness” in postwar Japanese rock and folk music,<sup>35</sup> along with Yano’s tracking of nostalgia and the *furusato* through *enka* music in postwar Japan.<sup>36</sup> This will help contextualize how nostalgia utilizes concepts from prewar *gagaku* music and the *furusato* is represented in contemporary music.

Chapter 2 is focused on analyzing REOL’s “YoiYoi Kokon,” Wagakki Band’s “Tengaku,” and BAND-MAIKO’s “Gion-chō,” looking at the musical, lyrical, and visual aspects of both productions. The goal is to discuss how various aspects of Japanese traditionalism and nostalgia emerge through the J-pop soundscape. Along with these primary case studies, I briefly look at a Vocaloid song utilizing traditionalism, “Hannya Shingyō Poppu” 般若心経ポップ (2010) by Onew-P, which utilizes a Buddhist sutra for the lyrics. Through analyzing these, we can see how contemporary J-pop uses nostalgia and traditionalism, and how this may compare to previous musical genres’ presentation of these ideas.

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<sup>35</sup> Scott W. Aalgaard, *Homesick Blues: Politics, Protest, and Musical Storytelling in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2023).

<sup>36</sup> Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

## Chapter 1: The Emergence of Nostalgia, Traditionalism, and the Past in Japanese Music

The goal of this chapter is to give background knowledge and historical context on how various elements of traditional Japanese music, such as *gagaku* 雅楽 (court music) and *min'yō* 民謡 (folk music) combine with other aspects of nostalgia, such as the notion of *furusato*, homelessness, and homesickness, to create the idea of postwar imagined nostalgia and past idealization through traditionalism. This starts with the development of *gagaku* elements being used in Western-styled compositions through Yamada Kōsaku, which then leads to the development of traditional elements in Japanese music and its relationship with culture and nostalgia, mainly following Aalgaard's and Yano's research. This chapter will be a useful precursor in understanding how and why contemporary J-pop artists use nostalgia and the past through these traditional elements.

### Yamada Kōsaku and *Gagaku*

Japan's musical landscape underwent large transformations from the Meiji period onward, and these also have been documented in musicology, ethnomusicology, and historical research. In the late 19th century, as Western music theory and instruments entered Japan, the very term for music, *ongaku* 音楽, was assigned to define Western music.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have studied the Meiji government's introduction of Western music education, for example, the adoption of singing and Western instruments in school curricula, as part of nation-building.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shūhei Hosokawa, "Ongaku, Onkyō / Music, Sound," *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 25 (2013): 9–20.

<sup>2</sup> Rinko Fujita, "Music Education in Modern Japanese Society," in *Studies on a Global History of Music: A Balsan Musicology Project*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Routledge, 2018), 140.

Early Japanese composers trained abroad and started creating a new repertoire that blended European techniques with Japanese traditional characteristics, such as Japanese traditional instruments and scales. A key figure is Yamada Kōsaku (1886–1965), who may be regarded as a forefather of Western-style symphonic music in Japan. Yamada’s career has been well documented.<sup>3</sup> After studying in Germany, he returned to compose pieces like the Symphony in F major *Triumph and Peace* (1912), notable for its incorporation of a Japanese pentatonic motif into a Western symphonic structure.<sup>4</sup> He went on to write operas and further compose art music that attempted to create a distinctly Japanese classical soundscape.

Research on prewar Japanese music shows that composers often faced a dilemma of how to be modern and Western-trained musicians while infusing their work with domestic idiosyncrasies. This creates a musical echo of the *wakon yōsai* ideology, meaning “Japanese spirit with Western knowledge.” After World War II, the musical narrative shifted with the American occupation and the influx of American popular music and new media. Historians like Yano and Aalgaard have examined how jazz, rock, and later pop influences were adopted and adapted by Japanese musicians and how emergent genres constructed prewar soundscapes.<sup>5</sup> For example, the *enka* 演歌 ballad genre emerged postwar as a consciously nostalgic, traditional-sounding popular music, often described as expressing the hometown, or *furusato*, sentimentality of Japan, even though *enka* itself was a modern creation based off *ryūkōka* 流行歌 stylistics, or

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars of note that I use in this thesis are Okunami Kazuhide, Katayama Morihide, Goto Nobuko, and Liam Hynes-Tawa.

<sup>4</sup> Past notes. “Kōsaku Yamada, Symphony in F ‘Triumph and Peace’ — Ulster Orchestra/Takuo Yuasa.” YouTube video, 36:10. Posted September 5, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY7He5w\\_5cY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY7He5w_5cY).

<sup>5</sup> Christine Yano, “Inventing Enka: Definitions, Genres, Pasts,” *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 29. Here, Yano refers to how “sounding Japanese” developed for *enka* throughout the modern era, where she goes more in-depth in a later chapter of her book.

Japanese pop songs with Western influences, the dominant music genre of Japanese between the 1920s and World War II.<sup>6</sup>

The development of modern music starting in the twentieth century onwards coincides with markedly different events within Japan and Western countries. The immediate difference between these two spheres is that the Western spheres, consisting of Europe and America, are often seen as a conglomerate when compared directly to Japan, a single country. While it is difficult to generalize all the countries at once, the majority, such as America, Germany, France, and so on, have been interacting with each other in a technologically advancing world consistently over time. Japan, however, entered its modern era via the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a relatively clear entrance into a realm of the Western world after hundreds of years of *sakoku*, or government-forced isolation. This somewhat late arrival into an already modernizing world developing from industrialization caused the Japanese government to attempt catching up with the rest of the modern world, which was involved in a mass culture change due to sudden changes from life under the shogunate to the restored Emperor.<sup>7</sup> Due to these sudden changes in culture, such as moving into urban centers from the countryside, introduction of cultural mores via ideas such as Americanism and consumerism,<sup>8</sup> we can see this as an early indicator of

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<sup>6</sup> See Itoigawa City Museum of History and Folklore. “Mikaze ga sukushi shita yūmeina kakyoku.” Archived April 16, 2009.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090416041324/http://www.city.itoigawa.niigata.jp/sisetu/rekimin/sakusi02.htm>.

The Itoigawa City Museum of History and Folklore states that Shimamura Hogetsu’s piece “Katyusha’s Song,” which was performed during the play *Resurrection* originally written by Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, is considered to be Japan’s first *ryūkōka*, saying that “「学校唱歌でもなく、西洋の賛美歌でもない、日本の俗謡と西洋歌曲の中間のような旋律」と指示されていました。日本の流行歌第1号ともいわれています。” In English this is “‘A melody that is neither a school song nor a Western hymn, but instead somewhere between Japanese folk and Western music.’ It’s also said that this is Japan’s first pop song.”

<sup>7</sup> Kozo Yamamura, “Success Illgotten? The Role of Meiji Militarism in Japan’s Technological Progress,” *The Journal of Economic History* 37, no. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 113–135

<sup>8</sup> Miriam Silverberg, “Japanese Modern within Modernity,” in *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2006), 13–48.

postwar *furusato* sentiments, focusing on the movement of people from the rural to the urban and the feelings of estrangement that this brought about.

While the Western sphere has had relatively rich musical growth, especially starting in the Baroque era and onwards in its complexity and appreciation,<sup>9</sup> Japan has focused primarily on music as a function to events such as court rituals and theater, through *gagaku* 雅楽, or court music, and its interactions with Japanese performative theater.<sup>10</sup> As LeRon James Harrison discusses in “‘Gagaku’ in Place and Practice: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Place of Japanese Imperial Court Music in Contemporary Culture,” *gagaku* was used for many court ritualistic performances using chanting and the many classical Japanese instruments in their repertoire, such as the *shakuhachi* 尺八. Although this did interact with performative theater developing later in the Heian era, such as *noh* 能 and *kabuki* 歌舞伎 theater (twelfth century AD), the musical components of *gagaku* has largely remained unchanged to this day, and consistently has a focus on ritualistic court events or a focus on religious chanting of Buddhist tales and sermons, such as the *Tale of the Heike*.<sup>11</sup> A notable deviation from this is the Japanese folk songs used in work, rather than ritual. These are often referred to as *min'yō* songs, but there is another related term as well, *kiyari* 木遣り, meaning “work chant,” along with a few related genres I will mention later. While the original folk songs that lived on were often ritualistic or religious in their use, these songs carried on through work, often carrying the themes of rice production or

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<sup>9</sup> Crystal Kirgiss, *Classical Music* (Mankato, MN: Black Rabbit Books, 2004), 6.

<sup>10</sup> LeRon James Harrison. “‘Gagaku’ in Place and Practice: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Place of Japanese Imperial Court Music in Contemporary Culture.” (*Asian Music* 48, no. 1, 2017), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Frederic, *Japan Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 78.

fishing.<sup>12</sup> This, however, still indicates a secondary role of the music, as it was designed to be sung while working, either to keep the workers in time with another or for morale purposes.

At the beginning of Meiji era Japan, the strange new idea of Western music was just being introduced and the term *ongaku*, or music,<sup>13</sup> was being assigned to describe Western music, and as time went on, essentially all music. *Ongaku* was originally a term found in a Chinese chronicle from 239 BCE and may have been used by Japanese people starting in the late 700s CE as a way to refer to non-Japanese music, such as Chinese or Korean music, albeit only sporadically.<sup>14</sup> Although the term existed throughout Japan's history, its usage is seemingly most popular historically when referring to foreign sound.

To coincide with rapid modernization, the Japanese government tried to instill the new idea of Western music within their youth, explained by Rinko Fujita here: "With regard to music education, singing was included as part of the curriculum of elementary schools, and playing musical instruments was defined as part of the middle-school curriculum."<sup>15</sup> Fujita explains that under the slogan *bunmei kaika* 文明開化, or "civilization and enlightenment,"<sup>16</sup> the Meiji government wanted to modernize the country to a world-class standard, which included the appreciation and understanding of Western music.

Japanese musical history has transformed vastly since its inception in the early court days. As mentioned previously, Japanese art music started its roots in ritualistic, religious, and

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<sup>12</sup> William P. Malm, "Folk and Popular Musical Arts," in *Traditional Japanese Music and Musical Instruments* (originally published by Tuttle Company, 1959; repr., Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2000), 262.

<sup>13</sup> Rinko Fujita, "Music Education in Modern Japanese Society," in *Studies on a Global History of Music: A Balsan Musicology Project*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Routledge, 2018), 140. This source quotes a handful of studies in the original text.

<sup>14</sup> Hosokawa, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Fujita, 140.

<sup>16</sup> Fujita, 141.

theatrical performances, serving as a supportive composition to the main functions. Once Japan opened to the West in 1868, this *gagaku* did not go away and grew alongside the new Western influences and education, seen with the opening of musical institutions of Tokyo Fine Arts School and Tokyo Music School in 1887.<sup>17</sup>

The first generation of Japanese composers that went abroad to study in Europe could learn aspects of Western harmony hands on with composers at various conservatories and then return to Japan to compose their own music integrated with a Japanese soundscape. As an example, one of the most influential in this generation of Japanese composers was Yamada Kōsaku, a Tokyo native that studied abroad in Germany as a composer. A note is that Yamada spent two years conducting the New York Philharmonic starting in 1918. His involvement with the music scene in America made him more well-known throughout the world, thus offering more recognition of his works. His pieces are early examples of how early twentieth century Japanese composers combined *gagaku* idioms within a Western musical structure.

One example is Yamada's Symphony in F *Triumph and Peace* (1912), which is a piece that shows his studies under German composers, namely its nineteenth century inspired style of Romanticism, a style more evocative of emotional themes but also notably that was falling out of style by the time he wrote it. Notably, there have been links shown between the *gagaku* elements in the Japanese national anthem, *Kimi ga yo*, and those that appear in Yamada's works such as *Triumph and Peace* and *Inno Meiji*. It becomes apparent through the study below that *Kimi ga yo*

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<sup>17</sup> "A Brief History of the University," Tokyo University of the Arts, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.geidai.ac.jp/english/about/a-brief-history-of-the-university>. A note here is that the Tokyo Fine Arts School was focused on mostly visual arts rather than music, but still focused on preserving traditionalist values while offering education on Western ideas and incorporating them, elaborated here <https://gacma.geidai.ac.jp/> in Japanese. Tokyo Music School focused exclusively on music education, but particularly on new Western ideas and compositional styles/idioms, seen in various archive reports in Japanese as well: <https://archive.geidai.ac.jp/en/8067/>. More can be found here in this 2017 pamphlet issued by Tokyo University of the Arts' Department of Global Arts: <https://ga.geidai.ac.jp/webjournal/GAPamphlet2017.pdf>

had a noticeable influence on these compositions by Yamada and may extend to more of his as well.

It is important to understand that *Kimi ga yo* was already a mixture of *gagaku* and Western compositional structure. *Kimi ga yo* was originally written using Western instrumentation and rhythmic structure in 1869, written by Irish musician John William Fenton. This version was subsequently replaced by Japanese composers Yoshiisa Oku and Akimori Hayashi, but soon their version was arranged with Western style orchestration along with *gagaku* elements by German composer Franz Eckert in 1880, which is still the official national anthem used in the present day, showing that the national anthem itself was an outcome of musical hybridity.<sup>18</sup>

Moving back to Yamada's *Triumph and Peace*, Goto Nobuko argues that "Considering that [Yamada] was composing this symphony at the time of the Meiji–Taishō transition while in Berlin, it would not be surprising if he embedded *Kimi ga yo* into this piece as a subtle reference to the Japanese Empire, with no sense of exoticism."<sup>19</sup> Through Okunami Kazuhide's analysis, he shows that Goto specifically mentions of the popular *gagaku* piece "Chiyo ni Yachiyo ni" (千代に八千代に) as the basis of *Kimi ga yo*, which is then reproduced in Yamada's *Triumph and Piece* through identical note patterns and shared scale structures, known as the *ritsu* 律 scale, a traditional Japanese pentatonic scale.<sup>20</sup> Incorporated in the piece as well is the use of the

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<sup>18</sup> Hermann Gottschewski, "Hoiku shōka and the Melody of the Japanese National Anthem *Kimi ga yō*," *Journal of the Society for Research in Asiatic Music* (東洋音楽研究), no. 68 (2003): 1–17.

<sup>19</sup> Nobuko Goto, *Yamada Kōsaku: Tsukuru node wa naku umu* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2015), 96. Japanese quote: 「折りから山田が＜交響曲 へ長調＞の作曲に没頭していた最中に、明治から大正に改元された。ドイツ帝国の首都ベルリンにいて、彼が日本帝国を象徴する国歌のメロディを、けっして異国趣味を感じさせぬ巧妙な手法で最初の交響曲のモットーに編みこんだとしても不思議でない。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>20</sup> Kazuhide Okunami, "Kosaku Yamada's 'Kimigayo': The Melody of the Japanese National Anthem in 'Symphony in F Major "Triumph and Peace"' (1912) and 'Sinfonia "Inno Meiji"' (1921)," *Japan Women's University Journal* 31 (2020): 65–80.

traditional Japanese pentatonic scale called the *yō* 陽 scale, showing Yamada's interest in including various *gagaku* scales within larger Western structures.<sup>21</sup>

Yamada's inclusion of Japanese scales came before the usage of Japanese traditional instruments, which then appears in his piece in remembrance of the passing of Emperor Meiji, *Inno Meiji* (1921). This piece has been studied extensively, including an excellent musicological in-depth analysis by Liam Hynes-Tawa.<sup>22</sup> Hynes-Tawa analyzes the musical structure, and the meanings of how certain instruments and scales represent Japan before and after meeting the West. A section of particular interest is as follows:

The form of the previous Japan, which had not yet connected with the stimuli of the outside world, is represented by the sound of muted violins. Then Japan, which has been submerged in a peaceful sleep until now, quietly opens its eyes and, along with causing its true form to surface, begins to lead toward a yearning for all manner of things.<sup>23</sup>

Hynes-Tawa, Katayama Motohide,<sup>24</sup> and Okunami all agree that Yamada is evoking *gagaku* elements through the composition, even through Western instruments such as violins using cluster chords to represent the *shō* 笙, a bamboo mouth organ.<sup>25</sup> Other elements, such as the combination of *furisuzu* 振り鈴, Japanese handbells used at Shintō rituals, along with the

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<sup>21</sup> Kōsaku Yamada, Symphony in F "Triumph and Peace", performed by Ulster Orchestra, conducted by Takuo Yuassa, YouTube video, 36:10, posted by "Past\_notes," September 5, 2014, accessed March 6, 2025, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY7He5w\\_5cY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY7He5w_5cY). The section of note is Movement I. Moderato

<sup>22</sup> Liam Hynes-Tawa, "Yamada Kōsaku's *Inno Meiji*: A Portrait of Modern Optimism," in *Modeling Musical Analysis*, edited by Kim Loeffert and John Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 76–85.

<sup>23</sup> Hynes-Tawa, 81. Japanese quote is from Yamada directly, see Yamada Kōsaku 山田耕筰. (1921) 2017. Sinfonia "Inno Meiji." Tokyo: Hustle Co. Japanese quote: 「未だ外界の刺激に接しない前の日本の姿は弱音を付したヴァイオリンの音によって現される。やがて今まで平安な眠りに浸っていた日本が静かに目を開けて真の姿を浮き出させてくると共に、新しいものに対するあてもない憧れを導き出す。」

<sup>24</sup> Morihide Katayama. *Sengo Sakkyokuka Hakkutsu Shūsei* liner notes. Japan Columbia (Nihon Koromubia 2015): 15.

<sup>25</sup> Okunami, 73. Note that Okunami mostly is working with the solfège notation (Do-Re-Mi etc.) while Hynes-Tawa and Katayama use letter notation (A through G).

*ritsu* scale give a “rural color.”<sup>26</sup> Beyond just using the *ritsu* scale, there are more direct references to *gagaku* elements from *Kimi ga yo*, similar to Yamada’s *Triumph and Peace*. The line from *Kimi ga yo* corresponding with the lyrics “Yachiyo ni sa” is almost exactly replicated near the beginning by flute, bass clarinet, and viola, along with the *furisuzu* accompaniment, with only the last note being shifted a semitone lower.<sup>27</sup> In contrast with the depictions of the West and Japan so far, the dramatic entrance of the *hichiriki* 篳篥, a traditional Japanese double-reed flute, late into the piece can be a representation of honoring the passing of the Emperor Meiji, with the text on the score showing “*Langsam, wie ein Trauer-marsch*” (Slowly, like a funeral march).<sup>28</sup> Although this section does not linger for long, it is notable due to the *hichiriki* being at the forefront of the composition, being the first Japanese instrument in the piece to carry the melody forward. Also notable is the lack of the *ritsu* scale or similar ideas motifs from *Kimi ga yo*, as the music utilizes the C minor scale for the first and only time with limited chord movement, providing an incredibly dark soundscape which highlights the difference between the *hichiriki* wailing above the simple but mournful Western orchestration below it.

In 1941, *Inno Meiji* was performed during wartime Japan and Yamada’s own comment on his piece after the performance follows:

When I performed *Inno Meiji* in celebration of the tenth anniversary this time, I made a pleasant discovery, even to my own surprise. It was that the entire piece permeated a strong Japanese tone. When I originally composed it, I did not particularly intend to create a Japanese-sounding piece, I simply put down the music that came to mind onto

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<sup>26</sup> Okunami, 74. In Japanese, 「冒頭部分から登場する振鈴は『田園的な色彩』。」 This can be translated as “In contrast, the bells that appear at the beginning give a ‘rural color.’”

<sup>27</sup> Okunami, 75-76.

<sup>28</sup> Hynes-Tawa, 82. See also Kōsaku Yamada, *Inno Meiji*, performed Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Takuo Yuasa, YouTube video, 18:29, March 25, 2020, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://youtu.be/W3Lrdxj7bco>. The entrance of the *hichiriki* is at 13:38, quite late into the piece. The howling, mournful sound of the instrument is juxtaposing itself heavily with the Western orchestration in the background.

the staff paper. But when I heard it performed again later, I realized how distinctly Japanese it sounded. This was especially apparent in the very beginning of the piece.<sup>29</sup>

Okunami goes on to state that due to the wartime, aspects of the music such as the inclusion of the “Oriental color” started to seem more like a “Japanese color” and that the segments that have *Kimi ga yo* motifs became more vivid in representing “Japan.”<sup>30</sup> In addition, I believe that this starts to show how elements of Japanese nostalgia start rooting themselves within music. The ideas of *gagaku*, *Kimi ga yo*, the emperor, rural life, and peacefulness all seem to be intertwined in musical composition, especially in Yamada’s case. It seems like World War II has started to recontextualize how *gagaku* elements are perceived and that the distance in time between when Yamada first wrote *Inno Meiji* can be indicative of early forms of imagined nostalgia. The importance of distance in time and space can be evocative of *nihonjinron* ideas such as *kokoro* 心, in this case “the heart of Japan,” which represents “the essence of the culture and satisfies the nostalgic and primordial feeling of the now modernized, urbanized Japanese living in a technologized, internationalized, and globalized world” as explained by Harumi Befu.<sup>31</sup> This will continue in the postwar era, as seen with Aalgaard’s research on “homesickness” and Yano’s research on nostalgia and *furusato*.

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<sup>29</sup> Okunami, 75. Japanese quote: 「今度私が十周年を慶祝して演奏した「明治頌歌」に就いて自分ながらも故に愉快的な発見をしました。それは曲全体が強い日本調で蔽はれてみると云ふことです。作曲をする場合には特に意識して日本調を出さうと試みた譯ではありませんが、頭の中を去來した音楽を五線紙の上書き並べて、出来上りを演奏して見ると日本的な調子が強いのです。殊に曲のはじめの部分などはもつともそれが現れてみますが—。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>30</sup> Okunami, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), 56.

## Scott W. Aalgaard and “Homesickness”

Aalgaard defines “homesickness” specifically as an antithesis to “restorative nostalgia,” or the imagined, idealized past that I have talked about previously. He states that “singing the Homesick Blues does not mean indulging in restorative nostalgia (Boym 2001, 41-48) for a reified national Thing (Žižek and Herscher 1997, 64), resurrecting or returning to a past, pure, and usually imaginary “home” that has been lost —far from it.”<sup>32</sup> A core aspect of homesickness is its close tie to politics and protest, which galvanizes change or a break from status quo. Aalgaard is showing that imagined nostalgia is not the end goal of those who sing the “Homesick Blues,” examples from his work being folk icon Takada Wataru, singer-songwriter Kagawa Ryō, and rock superstar Nagabuchi Tsuyoshi.<sup>33</sup> His definition of “homesickness” is excellently substantiated, but I also believe that there is an overlap with the ideas of imagined nostalgia. If we recall, the *furusato* genre within *enka*, its hallmark signs were depicting the countryside, estrangement, and the feeling of the “old village.” Something that comes along with the idea of estrangement is the physical movement from the countryside to the city, which is described as a feeling of “homelessness,” which Jennifer Robertson defines here: “Because villages and cities have lost their distinctiveness as social environments due to the urbanization of the former, the nostalgia provoked by estrangement from an “old village” has become thin and insignificant (*kihaku*). There is no particular place to “go home” to; consequently, there is no particular place to feel nostalgic toward.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Aalgaard, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Aalgaard, 18-19. Here he is giving an outline of his book, with the musicians being focused on in their own “Tracks” or chapters, being Track 2, Track 3, and Track 5, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> Robertson, 497. See Hiroshi Minami, “Nihon no ryūkōka,” in *Ryūkōka no himitsu*, Zōhohan ed., ed. K. Kata and S. Tsukuda (Tokyo: Bunwa Shobō, 1980), 146.

I believe this notion of homelessness and Aalgaard's "homesickness" share a similar space, where the dissatisfaction with the present is being looked for in opposite directions. Homelessness is a result of having no real nostalgia for a place to call home, specifically a place that fits the definition of the *furusato*, and thus instead requires the complete imagining of nostalgia to construct a *furusato* that does not exist. Aalgaard states that *enka* is often seen as a locus of "'Japanese' national imagining" but also exists to tell stories of everyday life.<sup>35</sup> This is where I believe the important intersection of homesickness and homelessness lies for this thesis, which focuses on how individual artists use the ideas of imagined nostalgia, idealization of the past, and traditionalism within their songs rather than it being generalized as simply a collective "Japanese collective imagining." The feelings of homelessness, homesickness, and estrangement in the digital era manifest uniquely among various artists and how they represent their feelings through their compositions, either through aspirational homesickness or nostalgic homelessness.

It must be noted that Aalgaard ties homesickness and politics/protest together within music. Aalgaard importantly positions the American occupation of Japan as an essential introduction of Western genres to Japan, along with how protests arose from the result of the occupation. Many jazz singers postwar were women, and the gaze upon those singers were often American servicemen, and this caused the flourishing of Western music performed by Japanese women due to the consumption of the music by American men.<sup>36</sup> While these genres flourished in the Japanese musical scene, the spaces created in Japan due to the American occupation started to spark a fair amount of dissidents and protests.<sup>37</sup> As the genres themselves were adopted

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<sup>35</sup> Aalgaard, 154.

<sup>36</sup> Aalgaard, 30–45. The quote is on page 30, but the entire chapter is an essential discussion on how the occupation positioned gender roles in music and music appreciation.

<sup>37</sup> Aalgaard, 48.

due to the occupation, they were also in turn used as the medium to disseminate critique of the occupation. This is highlighted with the concert performed by Princess Princess, a girl's rock band that was formed in 1987, where the performance of the concert was in a location still partially occupied by American forces, Yokohama North Dock. The band's performance was anti-occupation and opposed the American military bases, as places inaccessible to Japanese people even within Japan. Notably, Aalgaard describes these partially occupied cities as "displacing the potential for protest and replacing it with pleasure."<sup>38</sup> Not only does this show the importance of utilizing these spaces to speak out through music, since protests could not, but also the feeling of homelessness and homesickness that arises intensely from the effects of occupation. This was no longer a feeling of having "no home" to go to in the *furusato* sense, but in the entirety of Japan. Urban centers, now touched by America's occupation, slowly became a point of estrangement, and the use of imagined nostalgia in music for a prewar time or for a better future, although already very hybridized, starts to become an understandable conclusion in the world of music.

### **Christine Yano and the Elements of "*Furusato*"**

Moving to the history of *enka*, Yano tracks its development from the Meiji era onward. *Enka* is the abbreviated form of *enzetsu no uta* 演説の歌, or oratorical song, which originated in antigovernment protest songs in the 1880s.<sup>39</sup> This type of speech-song focused more on disseminating their message than developing a musical genre, though the use of music gave their

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<sup>38</sup> Aalgaard, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Yano, 31.

movement a broader appeal. Another aspect of interest is the instrument usage of *enka* in the Meiji era, which stemmed from its stylistic forerunners’— *min’yō* 民謡(folk song), *naniwa-bushi* 浪花節/*rōkyoku* 浪曲 (narrative song), and *kouta* 小唄(a ballad form)—usage of the *shamisen* 三味線, or three-stringed Japanese lute.<sup>40</sup> While most of these old *enka* songs and related genres used the traditional Japanese instrument, the introduction of the violin into *enka* in 1907 created a new genre of *enka*, called *baiorin enka* バイオリン演歌, or just violin *enka*. This carried the feeling of a more prestigious sound in the genre, due to the fame and prestige of the Western instrument in the musical world and allowed more attention to be brought to the genre and sell more sheet music.<sup>41</sup>

As Japan entered the Taishō era (1912-1926), contemporary *enka* has its roots in the emergent *ryūkōka*, or popular music, genre that became incredibly well-known throughout the country.<sup>42</sup> Yano argues that this becomes the primary target of postwar imagined nostalgia, stating “Contemporary Japan nostalgically reconstructs the Taishō as the period during which modern urban Japanese culture, with its mix of prewar innocence and appetite for the latest fads, began.”<sup>43</sup> Aspects of interest from this timeframe were Western instruments taking the major compositional role in *ryūkōka* while also maintaining the use of Japanese pentatonic scale, showing that the usage of a prevailing *gagaku* or *min’yō* element in a song was one of the keys to representing the past or nostalgic feelings. As Yano says, “Popular songs recalling lost loves and distant hometowns became one of its most widely consumed products.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yano 32-33.

<sup>41</sup> Yano 32.

<sup>42</sup> Hiroshi Minami, *Shōwa Bunka, 1925–1945* (Tokyo: Keisei Shobō, 1987), 469.

<sup>43</sup> Yano, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Yano, 35.

Following this, the Shōwa era (1926-1989) was an incredibly turbulent timeframe in Japanese history, let alone in music. The sheer length of the era and World War II occurring in the middle of it allows us to divide the era into three timeframes: prewar, wartime, postwar. An aspect of prewar music that is particularly notable is the inclusion of *geisha* 芸者, or female entertainers, into the *ryūkōka* zeitgeist of the 1930s and beyond. Instead of singing mostly the previously mentioned *kouta*, *geisha* started singing *ryūkōka* songs to compete with café waitresses and bar hostesses, but also infused the popular music genre with motifs present in *kouta* and *min'yō* songs, such as traditional scales, vocal techniques, and related elements.<sup>45</sup> This mention of vocal techniques is important due to incorporation of a distinct operatic style of vibrato and pitch usage used in traditional Japanese songs. A study by Ichiro Nakayama and Masuzo Yanagida shows that traditional Japanese vocal techniques/stylistics are quite distinct from their comparison with Western *bel canto*,<sup>46</sup> showing that the vibrato used in a wide range of Japanese traditional music that can be distinguishable due to it being much deeper and time to reach a steady pitch.<sup>47</sup> The vocal stylistics present in traditional Japanese music can be seen as another traditional “instrument” with how it shapes and contours the music, which will be relevant in the J-pop case studies further on.

The early ideas of *nihonjinron* become apparent here due to the relation of traditional musical elements, such as *gagaku* and *min'yo*, with nationalism and the previously mentioned *kokoro*. This leads to the Japanese government supporting prewar traditional sounding music due

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<sup>45</sup> Yano, 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Bel canto* originates from Italy and is strongly associated with the country, but prevailed in Europe for many centuries, see Robert Toft, *Bel Canto: A Performer's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Ichiro Nakayama and Masuzo Yanagida, “Introduction to Database of Traditional Japanese Singing with Examples of Comparative Studies on Formant Shifts and Vibrato among Genres,” *Acoustical Science and Technology* 29, no. 1 (2008): 58–65.

to “feudalistic themes len[ding] themselves to a nationalistic ideology.”<sup>48</sup> It is important to note that while I focused on the rapid inclusion of American music in postwar Japan when discussing Aalgaard’s “homesickness,” the influence of popular American genres, such as blues and jazz, due to the urbanization and consumption of music from abroad due to new technology, were already prevalent in this prewar timeframe leading to World War II. During World War II, the sentimentality and sadness present in these popular songs were banned along with American genres but were still secretly enjoyed and composed in private.<sup>49</sup> This marks the start of the prewar to postwar shift, where the adoption of Western genres resurfaced aggressively in the postwar but still had different prevailing traditional Japanese elements to anchor themselves into the Japanese postwar reality, such as a guitar song using the *yonanuki* ヨナ抜き pentatonic scale,<sup>50</sup> which is based on the *gagaku* scale *ryo* 呂.

The theme of this time shows the emergence of yearning for the *furusato* as a genre, where the ideas of loneliness lead to the feeling of homelessness, as Mita Munesuke says this theme “began to change from the loneliness of separation from the hometown, to the even deeper loneliness of people without a hometown, [the loneliness] of living truly alone.”<sup>51</sup> This leads to the inherent anachronism created for *enka* in the postwar period, similar to how timeless Japanese cultural essences are in reality modern inventions as mentioned in the introduction. *Enka* has “historical precedents yet was only identified as a separate genre in the postwar period: the music sounds “old,” but the genre itself is young.”<sup>52</sup> This is where the *nihonjinron* ideology

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<sup>48</sup> Yano, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Yano, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Linda Fujie, “Popular Music,” in *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989): 205.

<sup>51</sup> Munesuke Mita, *Social Psychology of Modern Japan*, trans. Stephen Suloway (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992), 104.

<sup>52</sup> Yano, 41-42.

comes in full swing, where the genre of *enka*, the ideas of the *furusato*, and the nostalgic past take a prominent position in the new postwar genres as a means of creating a “Japanese sound.”

*Enka* thus has two subgenres leading into the present day. Starting in the Heisei era (1989-2019), there is a categorical split between *do-enka* ど演歌 and *mūdo enka* ムード演歌. *Do-enka*, or “real” *enka*, are predominantly representing a male voice, though Yano notes that both sexes did sing it. This subgenre is attempting to be evocative of original *enka*, or *enzetsu no uta*, from the early Meiji era, that being more recitative in its singing than melodic and employing narrative inflections common to spoken speech rather than song. This is most in line with the previously mentioned government approved nationalistic music from the prewar and World War II timeframe, the genre is evocative of *nihonjinron* ideals due to its nationalistic associations in the postwar timeframe. *Mūdo enka*, conversely represents a female voice (again, Yano notes both sexes sing this subgenre), inspired by the blues genre but still incorporating traditional melodic singing techniques indicative of *enka*, such as intense vibrato usage. A cornerstone of this genre is its constant use of melancholic genre indicators, through lyrics and singing stylizations, such as vibrato-like crying, along with use of the minor Japanese pentatonic scale, whereas *do-enka* used any form much more freely.<sup>53</sup> The use of vocal stylistics and various pentatonic scales seems to be a cornerstone of music composition in Japan that would invoke feelings of nostalgia or traditionalism, which continues into the present day in J-pop as seen in the following chapter.

Using Yamada, Aalgaard, and Yano suggest what indicators of Japanese music are most prevalent when exploring nostalgia, the past, and traditionalism. The key takeaways are: *gagaku*

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<sup>53</sup> Yano, 42-43. Note that this is from Yano’s own fieldwork, where she stipulates that she held this study in Tokyo during her time there, likely sometime within the 1990s leading up to the publication of this essay in 2002.

and *min'yō* elements, such as traditional Japanese instruments, scales, and vocal stylistics; in combination with these, there are focuses on the nation, such as the emperor or opposition to American occupation/military bases and anachronistic creation of traditional genres; and the general imagined feeling of home, through the *furusato* genre, feelings of homelessness via estrangement to the present in some capacity. These all contribute in a way to create imagined nostalgia and idealization of the past through the use of traditional musical elements. While this was the case historically, what can be said about contemporary J-pop artists that use these elements in their songs?

## Chapter 2: The Use of Nostalgia and Traditionalism in Contemporary J-pop

What is J-pop? As Jayson Chun puts it, it would be too easy to just say the J in J-pop stands for “Japan” and is just pop music created in Japan and sung in Japanese.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this also may be the prevailing assumption among those unaware of American influence on Japanese music in the postwar era to the present day. As discussed above, there was a wholesale adoption of American music and its genres during the occupation and beyond, such as jazz, blues, rock, and folk, which then had their styles incorporated with Japanese music such as *enka* and *kayōkyoku*, a subgenre of *ryūkōka* translated as “standard Japanese pop” or could be called “Shōwa-era pop.” It is evident that J-pop is not something that can be defined as solely Japanese but rather a product of hybridization, and it became “a national label of something transnational.”<sup>2</sup> The label J-pop itself came about from the trend of adding the “J” prefix to denote its Japanese identity, or a “Japanese version of something trendy.”<sup>3</sup> Both Chun and Csaba Toth give a list of powerful female J-pop icons that led to the prominence of the genre, with Chun listing Amuro Namie and Utada Hikaru<sup>4</sup> and Toth listing Shina Ringo and Misia,<sup>5</sup> along with both of them sharing Ayumi Hamasaki. It is evident that J-pop owes its growth to numerous sources, with women at the forefront of pushing forward new ideas in music, as was evident with Princess Princess’s protest rock performance at Yokohama North Dock 1989.

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<sup>1</sup> Jayson M. Chun, “What Is K-pop and J-pop (Part 1): J-pop Roots REMIX,” *Pop Pacific: IIAS The Blog*, first posted March 23, 2023; updated April 26, 2024, <https://blog.iias.asia/pop-pacific/what-k-pop-and-j-pop-part-1-j-pop-roots-remix>.

<sup>2</sup> Chun, para. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn S. Stevens, *Japanese Popular Music: Culture, authenticity, and power*. Routledge: New York, 2008; Mori Yoshitaka, “J-pop: from the ideology of creativity to DiY music culture,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Volume 10, Number 4, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Chun, para. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Csaba Toth, “J-Pop and Performances of Young Female Identity: Music, Gender and Urban Space in Tokyo,” *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 16, no. 2 (2008): 111–29.

J-pop has come to mean a lot of things, ranging from perennial idol groups such as AKB48 and Morning Musume, to rock bands such as ONE OK ROCK and Mrs. GREEN APPLE, and hip-hop artists such as CLIFF EDGE and PUNPEE. The incredibly vague nature of the term “J-pop” allows its multiplicity to be used in the artists’ favor. The weight of the word *enka* might bring forth specific connotations and feelings, like nostalgia, *furusato*, postwar, prewar, *nihonjinron*, and so on. There is a certain expectation of a soundscape, message, or a theme that arises with certain genres, but J-pop is unconfined by that weight due to its sheer breadth. Thus, artists are mostly able to produce music in highly varied ways without the feeling that they may need to conform to the strictures of genre, and this is evident with the case studies of this chapter.

REOL’s “Yoiyoi Kokon” is a huge departure from the rest of their album “Sigma” (2016), orchestrating a song using many traditional Japanese instruments, entire lyrics composed in classical Japanese, and music video visuals of traditional Japanese images and festivities. A lyrical analysis of the song elucidates why this overt use of traditional elements comes to pass. Wagakki Band’s “Tengaku” is a reorchestration and, in a way, reimagining of Yuuyu-P’s Vocaloid song of the same name.<sup>6</sup> Their eight-person band adds their own spin on the original rock song, adding traditional instruments, *shigin* vocal stylistics, and traditional Japanese aesthetic in their music video. A look into their origins, their aspirations, and their style of orchestration may elucidate the appeal or reason for combining traditional elements with J-pop. A quick look into “Hannya Shingyō” by Onew-P lets us see how Zen Buddhism infiltrates Vocaloid music and kawaii J-pop soundscapes, while still respecting the vocal stylistics of

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<sup>6</sup> Yuuyu, “【Kagamine Rin】 Tengaku 【Orijinaru】 ,” video, 4:35, August 12, 2009, Nico Nico, <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm7918983>.

Buddhist chants through Hatsune Miku’s now dated digital voicebank. Lastly, a look at BAND-MAID’s side-project, BAND-MAIKO and their song “Gion-chō” shows us how the combination of rock, traditional instruments, traditional images and *geisha* fashion, and lyrical content come together to use J-pop as a vehicle for modern *furusato* and potential auto-orientalism. Through these case studies, we can see how each artist uses nostalgia, traditionalism, and the past in J-pop in a multitude of ways.

### **REOL’s “YoiYoi Kokon” and Dissidents of Imagined Nostalgia**

REOL’s “YoiYoi Kokon” 宵々古今 was released in 2015 as a single, and the album “Sigma” released in October 2016. They were a J-pop group consisting of singer Reol, producer Giga, and artist/video director Okiku. The song’s title can be read as “Every evening, past and present,” where of note *yoiyoi* is an obsolete word meaning “every evening” first seen in the Nara era (710-794) poem anthology *Man’yōshū* 万葉集.<sup>7</sup> The use of this classical Japanese term is a glimpse into REOL’s utilization of classical Japanese and traditional tropes within their song.

While most of their music in the album this song was released in, “Sigma,” takes heavy roots in EDM (electronic dance music) and mostly stays there, “YoiYoi Kokon” is a large anomaly not only within this album, but within the J-pop scene overall. The song utilizes many unique ideas, namely the full usage of the no longer spoken classical Japanese language, along with usage of traditional Japanese instruments such as the *koto* 琴, a large, plucked instrument

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<sup>7</sup> Manyōshū Navi, “Manyōshū Dai jū-kan 2349-ban Uta / Sakusha, Genbun, Jidai, Uta, Yaku,” Manyōshū Navi (website), May 3, 2021, <https://manyoshu-japan.com/11229/>.

vaguely similar to a harp laid on its side, the *shamisen* 三味線, a guitar-like, three-stringed instrument with Chinese roots, and *taiko* 太鼓, a large drum beaten with wooden sticks. These all serve prominent roles in the music, along with festival chanting in the music and classical Japanese imagery in the official video, such as images of *uchiwa* 団扇, traditional Japanese hand fans, and silhouettes of Japanese dancers wearing traditional garb and performing festival dances like *bon-odori* 盆踊り, or bonfire dances.

There are many aspects of this song that showcase a large amount of respect to traditional Japanese culture in its representation, but there is a considerable importance in how these ideas of traditionalism are viewed through the lyrics. In his studies on how Japanese music are methods of storytelling and his textual analysis of Japanese postwar music, Scott W. Aalgaard argues that “in a sort of feedback loop (Novak 2013), storytelling always promises/threatens to flow back into the world: disturbing, recalibrating, sometimes reinforcing its epistemological structure.”<sup>8</sup> While Aalgaard is focusing on anti-war sentiments persisting through Japanese soundscapes, he shows that there was a radical shift in Japanese lyrical ideas due to phenomena such as the American occupation of postwar Japan, the introduction of rock and blues from this resulting cultural exchange, and so on. The dissidents of the Japanese public showed that they were homesick for a Japan that never really existed prewar, and this was exemplified by the fusion of Western music meeting Japanese lyrical storytelling. This framework can then be applied to the content of “YoiYoi Kokon”’s lyrics, where it utilizes traditional instruments, classical Japanese language, and traditional Japanese images to clash with the lyrical content in a critique of imagined nostalgia.

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<sup>8</sup> Scott W. Aalgaard, *Homesick Blues: Politics, Protest, and Musical Storytelling in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2023), 7.

Below is a segment of the lyrics from REOL's "YoiYoi Kokon,"- leading from the introduction until after the post-chorus:

[[Pre-verse instrumentals, usage of the *shamisen* and *taiko* isolated until EDM synths and drums come in with lyrics. *koto* arpeggiations occur along with images of *tori* gate shrines]]

らっしやいな 平は成り  
時が来た 正しい夢現 夜もすがら  
<sup>3</sup> 変わりゆくことに恐れなし  
のっぴきならないのは御免

Come on in, peace has become  
Time has arrived, a righteous reverie all through night  
<sup>3</sup>To undergo change, there shan't be consternation  
To be gulled without escape, I sternly refuse

<sup>5</sup> 手毬唄歌い 君達が誘う  
<sup>6</sup> 悪人に後ろ髪を惹かれても  
進むべきなり

<sup>5</sup>Sing the little girls' nurseries, and you all will allure  
<sup>6</sup>Even as the villain lures the back of my hair  
I shall move forward

[[Pre-chorus, returns to intro style of traditional instruments, *taiko* highlighted, video images contain Japanese *koi* fish, along with festival dancers and traditional festival chants as ad-libs]]

流行り廃りの憂き世なら  
信ずる者はただ、君だけと

Crazes then atrophies, should here be so lamented  
The trusted one, is told, to be only, you

[[Chorus, first time song leaves the tonic, associated with movement and dancing. Focus lies on EDM instrumentals, but festival chanting takes foreground (see parentheticals). Imagery continues]]

<sup>10</sup> 踊れ騒げや 呑めや歌えや  
案ずることなどないな  
此の世人の世は恨めしい  
雪駄はちゃらちゃら 愛し  
縋って眩んで満身創痍で  
<sup>15</sup>(それぞれそれぞれ)  
<sup>16</sup> 今を嘆いて昔を粧しても  
君の心の内 流る涙川  
<sup>18</sup> それじゃ敵わん 何処にいても  
<sup>19</sup> めくるめく舞台に君を連れて

<sup>10</sup>Rage in dances and jeers, drown in drinks and songs!  
Matters to ponder about, are amiss  
This world, mortal's world, ruefully cursed –  
Rings, the winter sandals – but, adored  
We cling on, blinded, cuts thousandfold  
<sup>15</sup>*Sore, Sore, Sore, Sore!*  
<sup>16</sup>Should you bewail the current – embellish the past,  
even so  
Your spirit within – torrents the rivers of tears  
<sup>18</sup>That's just indomitable – Wherever should you lie,  
<sup>19</sup>To be brought, is you, to the ever-turning stage

[[Post-chorus, music before lyrics takes an EDM approach, sits back on tonic again while visuals return to *taiko* drummer silhouettes and *uchiwa* fans]]

あまりてなどか人ぞ悲しき  
21 身勝手なのが世の理か  
万人持つ理想 虚像の偶像  
俗な答えなどはあらざらむ

Why, this overbearance of humanly woes  
21 Self-indulgence be the world's principle?  
A myriad's borne ideals – A mirage of idol statues  
An answer for the commonly – Therein, lies none.<sup>9</sup>

“YoiYoi Kokon” lyrically is telling a story about people who are enjoying a festival or party. While it is not explicitly stated in the entirety of the lyrics, it seems to be a discussion on the people in general and their attitudes at a Japanese festival, due to the assistance of the instrumentation and visuals. A large theme of the work is the tension between change and the status quo. In line 3, “To undergo change, there shan’t be consternation,” the first incident of stress between past and present/future is shown. At this point in the song, the music has already undergone a vast shift between the use of traditional instruments like the *shamisen*, *taiko*, and what sounds to be a *kokiriko* 小切り子, a cord of wooden slats that sound similar to a snake’s rattle, to an EDM style beat. Thus, the lyrics and music are synergistic here in the message they are giving.

In line 10, “Rage in dances and jeers, drown in drinks and songs,” starts the chorus of the song and showcases the main setting and description of people at the setting as festival-goers. We can see in line 15 the transcription of festival chants, often used specifically in the previously mentioned *bon-odori* dances, where the chants are utilized not only to help keep rhythm with the various movements of the dancing, but also as a communal encouragement of unity, as we can translate *sore* as “like that!” or something similar. *Bon-odori* started becoming prominent in

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<sup>9</sup> REOL, *YoiYoi Kokon*, YouTube video, 4:30, posted by "Reol Official," November 12, 2015, <https://youtu.be/8IK6eLTNV1k>. All Japanese lyrics and English lyrics provided by Reol Official. The original, classical Japanese lyrics in the song are in the description, while the English are offered as closed captioning. Of note is that the video itself has the modern Japanese translation of the lyrics instead of the classical; this is likely to allow a broader audience to understand the lyrics with modern grammar and vocabulary. Also, superscripted are line numbers of importance for ease of reference.

1930s Japan, originating from the Buddhist scripture *Ullambana Sutra*, and the dance is performed during the *Obon* お盆 holidays in late Summer.<sup>10</sup> As Barbara B. Smith puts it, “There are so many regional variations of the Bon-Odori that exceptions to generalization may be cited.”<sup>11</sup> She goes on to explain that *bon-odori* are regional folk dances, which shows a connection in local rooted traditions that can be associated with the *furusato*, not dissimilar to how *min'yō* folk songs and *enka* are associated to the genre.

At line 16, “Should you bewail the current – embellish the past, even so, Your spirit within – torrents the rivers of tears.” This line directly supports the hints of change as the core theme of the song and starts touching on the ideas of homelessness mentioned in the previous chapter. As we see with lines 18 and 19, “That’s just indomitable – Wherever should you lie, To be brought, is you, to the ever-turning stage,” the feelings of finding relief in the past through an over-reliance on imagined nostalgia and imagined traditions lead us towards the estrangement reminiscent of the *furusato*. It seems here that REOL is using this soundscape to instead encourage those who use these feelings for the past to instead feel more so homesick in Aalgaard’s sense, to represent your “indomitable” self in your “ever-turning stage,” and not some collective vague idea of past tradition.

It is no surprise that the vehicle of this message is presented through a festival and incorporates *bon-odori* elements. In an interview with ETMG, Giga-P, the producer, says his favorite song of the album is “YoiYoi Kokon,” stating “I’ve always liked game music, so I like tribal (ethnic-style) sounds that get the crowd excited at live shows. I’m satisfied with it.”<sup>12</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara B. Smith, “The Bon-Odori in Hawaii and in Japan,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 14 (1962): 36.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Fukuryū, “REOL, zenshinkei o yusaburu 1st arubamu ‘Σ (Shiguma)’ intabyū,” *Fanplus Music*, October 20, 2016, <https://music.fanplus.co.jp/special/2016100844143a234>, para. 8. Japanese quote: 「ゲームミュージックが好きだ

crowd environment and use of ethnic-style music, likely referring to folk elements and traditional Japanese instruments, are closely tied with both *bon-odori* and *urusato*. The dance and event itself do not need to be occurring to incur those same feelings, it is apparent that the soundscape and visual images can insert a listener into the space of their hometown.

In the same interview, Reol, the singer and lyricist, is told that “YoiYoi Kokon” stands out due to its use of classical Japanese, and she says “I have a fetish for words and phrases. That’s why I stuck with using classical Japanese in “YoiYoi Kokon.”<sup>13</sup> The illuminating part is when Reol discusses another track on the album, “Chiruchiru” ちるちる, where she says “It has an old-fashioned feel to it, where the visual color usage reminds me of the Meiji and Taishō eras. It has an image of a literary girl.”<sup>14</sup>

While we cannot assume the intention of the song, it becomes evident that various images, sounds, and literary motifs represent the past to their group. There is no indication of imagined nostalgia or traditionalism in how they discuss the music, and the song itself supports that. The music itself and the lyrics may seemingly clash, but in reality, it seems that REOL’s song is about using these aspects of traditionalism to bring everyone together, with feelings of homelessness, estrangement, or homesickness, and to embrace their shared culture communally towards continual change, rather than settling on an imagined past.

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ったのでライブでも盛り上がるようなトライバルな（民族系の）音が好きなんです。満足しています。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>13</sup> Fukuryū, para. 9. Japanese quote: 「私には言葉遣いや言い回しにフェチがあるんです。それもあって「宵々古今」では古語にこだわりました。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>14</sup> Fukuryū, para. 9. Japanese quote: 「古い感じというか、映像的な色使いも明治・大正時代みたいな。文学少女みたいなイメージですね。」 English translation is my own.

## Onew-P's "Hannya Shingyō Poppu": Can Miku be a Monk?

Vocaloid is another genre of J-pop that utilizes voice synthesizer technology which can create vocals to be used in songs without a real-life singer. It was originally released in 2004 but started its rapid ascent in popularity starting in 2007. This is when the VOCALOID2 soundbank was released, with Crypton Media's "Hatsune Miku" and Internet Co.'s "GUMI" as the prominent mascots of both programs releasing in 2007<sup>15</sup> and 2009 respectively.<sup>16</sup> The most revolutionary aspect of Vocaloid is its availability to the masses, as it offers artificial singer software for around the price of \$200 depending on the program and version. Due to its affordability, Vocaloid producers needed nothing more than music producing software and samples plus their choice of Vocaloid, with which they could create entire orchestrated songs with lyrics and a singer without requiring them to interact with the music industry. This technological improvement ushered artists to use Vocaloids when starting their careers, posting videos of their songs on various video streaming platforms, especially YouTube<sup>17</sup> and Nico Nico Douga.<sup>18</sup> Often these videos would have images, storyboards, and even music video properties to them, including choreography, visual storytelling, and simple things such as karaoke lyrics for the watcher to follow along with.

Onew-P's "Hannya Shingyō Poppu" 般若心経ポップ, or "Heart Sutra Pop," was released in February 2010, during a time when Vocaloid was finding its footing as a genre and

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<sup>15</sup> Hiroyuki Itoh. "Interview with Crypton Future Media President Hiroyuki Ito." Interview by Akiko Takahashi. <http://internet.watch.impress.co.jp/>. Internet Watch, 12 Mar. 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Internet Co., Ltd, "Megpoid (Meguppoido) | Kabushiki Gaisha Intānetto." September 2010, <https://www.ssw.co.jp/products/vocal/megpoid/info/index.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Onyū. "'Hatsune Miku' Heart Sutra Pop [with PV]." Video. Niconico, September 3, 2010. <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm11982230>.

<sup>18</sup> Note that there are many uploads of this song on YouTube, but none that are officially associated with Onew-P as far as I can tell. See ShowaCoolJapan, "[JPOP/ZEN] Hatsune Miku: Heart Sutra in Japanese [Eng/Sub] AMV," YouTube video, 2:44, posted October 11, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjWZz839T8w>, as an example.

starting to accrue fans. The song is about the Buddhist sutra *Hannya Shingyō*, or Heart Sutra, of which the title comes from. In addition, the song's lyrics are exactly the same as the Japanese version of the sutra, developed thousands of years ago.<sup>19</sup> This is mixed with kawaii, or cute, electronic pop that serves as the background of Hatsune Miku's chanting. While the vocals get increasingly melodized corresponding to the harmonic structures of the song, we get a glimpse of the Buddhist chanting vocal stylistics that invoke the soundscape of Buddhist music with an isolated vocal snippet at the very start of the piece. We are also greeted with the image of a Buddhist monk sitting with Hatsune Miku in the room while she is chanting (who also eventually adopts Miku's hairstyle in the video), along with the use of *suzu* 鈴, or bells, at the end of set phrases in the sutra. The video itself has over three million views, showing that it has substantial reach over time. We might ask, was Buddhist-inspired music popular in the Vocaloid scene at the time due to the song's popularity?

A study of the 100 most popular songs of the 2007-2011 timeframe, the years of the VOCALOID2 soundbank being the stable Vocaloid release, shows that 41 songs discuss romantic love, 29 songs are about *ikidzurasa* 生きづらさ, or the pain of living,<sup>20</sup> and the rest being character songs, funny songs, etc.<sup>21</sup> While it is difficult to categorize, "Hannya Shingyō Poppu" might be a part of the funny song category that was flourishing at the time, as the concept of Hatsune Miku reciting a famed Buddhist sutra with pop music might come across as

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<sup>19</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014). Also see Hannya Shingyō (般若心経)," *Vocaloid Wiki* (Fandom website), accessed August 3, 2025, [https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/%E8%88%AC%E8%8B%A5%E5%BF%83%E7%B5%8C\\_\(Hannya\\_Shingyōu\)](https://vocaloid.fandom.com/wiki/%E8%88%AC%E8%8B%A5%E5%BF%83%E7%B5%8C_(Hannya_Shingyōu)). for the collated fan lyrics of the Vocaloid song.

<sup>20</sup> Such as those of suicide, mental health issues, or death.

<sup>21</sup> Lien Quynh Pham, "Modern Japanese Youth's Ideologies As Seen in Vocaloid Music – Focusing on the Period From 2007 to 2011," in *The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2024: Official Conference Proceedings* (Kobe, Japan: The International Academic Forum [IAFOR], 2024), 1–10.

humorous. Nonetheless, it is evident that the song was quite unique for its time and the reason for its creation is unclear. What we do know, however, is that the song inspired other songs of the same type during its time. In an old blog post, the author of the blog says “unprecedented Heart Sutra boom” due to the song.<sup>22</sup> They note that the Buddhist monk Semimaru-P 蟬丸 P, who interacted with the music culture on Nico Nico Douga at the time and uploaded Buddhist lectures, did his own “Buddhist altar equipment” cover of the song.<sup>23</sup> The traditional element of the song crossed over to a real Buddhist monk who did a cover of the song using Buddhist musical equipment, which further increased its notoriety while calling attention to the mutual respect between the Vocaloid music and Buddhist music present in both versions.

While the reasons why the song was created are a mystery, the song itself reached many people at an early stage of Vocaloid’s development. With over three million views, it is highly likely that Onew-P’s song reached people who had never heard of the Heart Sutra, or even the possibility that they never heard of Buddhism. The song has used the budding era of Vocaloid popularity to expose listeners to an aspect of traditional Japanese culture and literature that may otherwise never have happened. We do not know if this was the intention, of course, but a comment flying by the screen humorously says, “Best way to get people to listen to/read the Heart Sutra,” which it is very likely that this was many people’s first exposure to the sutra, especially in the West. Conversely, there may be Buddhist practitioners or monks, such as those

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<sup>22</sup> “Deta! ‘Hannya Shingyō Poppu’ ga tsuini Shin’uchi ‘Semimaru P’ o shōkan.” Blog post, September 7, 2010. <http://vocaloid.blog120.fc2.com/blog-entry-6695.html>. Japanese quote: 「般若心経ブームを巻き起こしているよ  
うで。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>23</sup> Semimaru P, “【Butsugu de】 Hannya Shingyō Poppu 【Tataite mita】 ,” video, 2:43, September 6, 2010, Niconico, <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm12017331>.

who practice along with Semimaru-P, that encountered Vocaloid music for the first time due to someone sharing it with them, or just by chance online.

This type of interaction between J-pop and traditionalism shows the nature of music and how it evolves beyond its original release. As Takada Wataru puts it, “once [music's] out in the world there's not a goddamned thing you can do about it.”<sup>24</sup> What may have been a fun project about a humorous combination of Buddhism and Vocaloid has now cemented itself as not only a part of Vocaloid musical history, but also incredibly, Buddhist musical history. This shows how J-pop artists can use traditionalism within their songs not only in a fun, unique, and educational way, but also one that avoids overt use of nostalgia.

### **Wagakki Band’s “Tengaku” and Japan’s Overseas Image**

Wagakki Band 和楽器バンド is a group that combines *shigin* (recitation of Chinese poetry), rock band elements, and traditional Japanese instruments in their own compositions and covers of other songs. *Wagakki* itself is a loaded term itself, meaning “traditional Japanese instruments,” as Henry Johnson argues “Any effort to define exactly what makes an instrument ‘traditional’ is problematic, not least of all when an instrument is considered from both a cultural-historical and contemporary-political perspective.”<sup>25</sup> Johnson reveals through his study that there are two types of traditional at work with *wagakki*: one being traditional in terms of their actual history and the other being their historic connection, or in other words, old

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<sup>24</sup> Aalgaard, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Johnson, “‘Sounding Japan’: Traditional Musical Instruments, Cultural Nationalism and Educational Reform,” *Perfect Beat* 12, no. 1 (2011): 15.

instruments versus newly invented traditional instruments.<sup>26</sup> The pertinent aspect of *wagakki* history is the year 2002 and the beginning of compulsory education required by all public schools<sup>27</sup> to require some training in *hōgaku* 邦楽, or traditional Japanese music, which encapsulates *wagakki* as well.<sup>28</sup> Up until 2002, Johnson argues that Japan had become unfamiliar with their traditional instruments:

This situation has often led to Japanese traditional music being viewed in terms of ‘otherness’ within Japan. ‘At the close of the twentieth century, the sounds of koto, shakuhachi [end-blown flute], and shamisen have become markers of the exotic both inside and outside Japan’ (de Ferranti 2000: 39; see also Hughes 2008; Mathews 2000: 30; Lande 2007: 38–50; Wade 2005).<sup>29</sup>

Knowing this, we can place Wagakki Band’s “Tengaku” 天樂 (2013) and their VOCALOID ZANMAI ボカロ三昧 (2014) album in the appropriate historical space. As this was just over ten years after *wagakki* and *hōgaku* became part of the average Japanese citizen’s education, the usage of the instruments was still likely a new and foreign sound to be hearing much of in J-pop. Out of the eight members, four of them specialize in particular *wagakki*: *koto*, *shakuhachi*, *tsugaru-jamisen* 津軽三味線 (a *shamisen* that originates from the Aomori prefecture of Japan), and *taiko*.<sup>30</sup> This is not including, of course, the one who brought the group together, *shigin*-styled singer Suzuhana Yuko. These traditional elements all foreground the

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson notes this, but it is important to note that private schools, especially those dedicated to the arts, already had this compulsory education in place.

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, 18. See also Hugh de Ferranti, *Japanese Musical Instruments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Played by Ibukuro Kiyoshi, Kaminaga Saisuke, Ninagawa Beni, and Kurona, respectively. The rock band musicians are as follows: Machiya (guitar/side vocals), Asa (bass guitar), and Wasabi (drumset). See Wagakki Band, “Biography,” *Wagakki Band Official Website*, accessed August 3, 2025, <https://wagakkiband.com/biography>, for more information.

reorchestration of “Tengaku.”<sup>31</sup> The piece deviates immediately from the original Vocaloid song, with an extended *shakuhachi* solo which leads into a short *shamisen* solo before the song proper begins. Throughout the song, the band constantly adds onto the original song with their use of traditional instruments but never detracting from the rock band instruments or even from each other. At 3:14, the band completely remakes the guitar solo from the original song into a blazing *shakuhachi* solo which then melds into a duet with a newly composed electric guitar solo, showing how well *wagakki* and Western instruments can complement each other as melodic duos and not just in harmonic roles. The original Vocaloid voice, being of Kagamine Rin, is replaced with Suzuhana’s intense *shigin* style of singing, using the deep vibrato associated with Japanese traditional singing styles as seen previously.<sup>32</sup>

This musical reorchestration works in tandem with the visuals of the video to enhance the traditional Japanese effect. The band adorns various styles of *kimono* 着物, *yukata* 浴衣, and *haori* 羽織, all of which being traditional Japanese clothes of assorted styles and purposes. Along with this are constant images of brush strokes and calligraphy (along with *kanji* appearing on some performers’ bodies), Suzuhana’s *ougi* 扇 (folding fan), and autumnal motifs from traditional Japanese poetry, such as *momiji* 紅葉, or red autumn leaves, and *tsuki/gekkō* 月/月光, or the moon/moonlight.<sup>33</sup> All of these elements come together to give an overwhelming feeling Japanese traditionalism, but what do the band members think of their music?

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<sup>31</sup> Wagakki Band (avex). “Wagakki Band / Senbonzakura,” YouTube video, 3:48, posted January 31, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_xTet06SUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_xTet06SUo).

<sup>32</sup> Ichiro Nakayama and Masuzo Yanagida, “Introduction to Database of Traditional Japanese Singing with Examples of Comparative Studies on Formant Shifts and Vibrato among Genres,” *Acoustical Science and Technology* 29, no. 1 (2008): 60.

<sup>33</sup> See Yoshiaki Shimizu, “Seasons and Places in Yamato Landscape and Poetry,” *Ars Orientalis* 12 (1981): 1–14.

An interview with Vocaloidism at Anime Expo 2015 gives some important insights on the origins and intentions of their music, especially from the album VOCALOID ZANMAI:

***How did Wagakki Band start? Why did you guys decide to collaborate and how did you decide on the members?***

Yuko: I was a shigin (recitation of traditional Japanese poems) performer and traditionally shigin is accompanied by the koto (harp) and the shakuhachi (flute). However, since it is a traditional form of performance, it's not very well known even in Japan, especially among younger audiences. We wanted to do something different, so we started talking to our wonderful friends, the artists and performers, and asked them whether we could mix up traditional music and rock music to create something that even younger audiences in Japan would find interesting. And then we want to see if we could bring it out to the entire world.<sup>34</sup>

As suspected, the younger audiences were likely not accustomed to the *wagakki* quite yet after the 2002 changes to education, but *shigin*'s vocal stylistics would likely be just as foreign to young listeners in Japan as the instruments, especially its inclusion in J-pop. Suzuhana also mentions that their goal was to bring their music to the world, which we will see as pertinent in a more recent interview further below. Another insight given to us in this interview is as follows:

***Your video "Senbonzakura" on YouTube has millions of views, many of these views are from Western viewers, how do you feel about foreigners listening to your music and discovering Japanese culture?***

**Yuko:** I feel really happy that we sorta became the window for the world's audience to peek into the Japanese culture quite easily. And I'm glad to be part of it.

**Kiyoshi:** Traditional Japanese musical instruments aren't some things that people think of as "cool", not even in Japan. However, by delivering them in a way that *is* "cool" to audiences both inside and outside Japan, we have been able to elevate these instruments to something that's "cool" and I'm very happy about that.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Stephieku, "Interview with Wagakki Band at Anime Expo 2015," *Vocaloidism* (blog), July 10, 2015, <https://vocaloidism.com/2015/07/10/interview-with-wagakki-band-at-anime-expo-2015/>, para. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Stephieku, para. 5.

Suzuhana and Ibukuro (*koto*) both touch on how their music can be used as a conduit of Japanese culture as seen by the rest of the world, but also how they had to become “cool” in Japan first. As seen in the comments of the song mentioned in the question, Wagakki Band’s cover of “Senbonzakura” 千本桜<sup>36</sup> (original by Kurousa-P 黒うさ),<sup>37</sup> we see this sentiment being shared amongst fans in both Japanese and English. A commenter in Japanese says:

At the time, Wagakki Band just did covers of Vocaloid songs online, which weren’t really popular. They didn’t just cover songs though; they arranged them in a way that gave a strong Japanese feeling to them while leaving the good aspects of the original songs. Their use of Japanese instruments and Japanese costumes, and their eye-catching visuals along with the *kanji* written on their backs sent out shockwaves.<sup>38</sup>

Another commenter in English says “I love when traditional and modern music are combined. It creates such a unique sound!” and another in Japanese says “There are so many comments saying “I love Japan” and as a Japanese person myself, I am so happy.”<sup>39</sup> Many more comments of all these types proliferate on just the YouTube page alone, and it shows how impactful the combination of *wagakki*, traditional images, and Vocaloid/J-pop were in both Japan and then people’s perceptions of Japanese music and culture.

In another interview with Billboard Japan about their original album REACT (2019), we see another aspect of Wagakki Band’s worldview:

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<sup>36</sup> Wagakki Band (avex). “Wagakki Band / Senbonzakura,” YouTube video, 3:48, posted January 31, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_xTet06SUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_xTet06SUo).

<sup>37</sup> Kurousa P. ““Hatsune Miku’ Senbonzakura (Orijinaru Kyoku PV)” Video, 4:04. Posted September 17, 2011. Niconico. <https://www.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm15630734>.

<sup>38</sup> Wagakki Band (avex). Japanese quote: 「当時ネットのみで、浸透しているとは言えなかったボカロをカバー、ただカバーするだけでなく原曲の良さも残しつつ和をさらに強くしたアレンジ、使用する楽器は和楽器、かつ衣装も和で統一、目を惹くビジュアルに背中に書かれた漢字、全てが衝撃だった。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>39</sup> Wagakki Band (avex). Japanese quote: 「I love Japan っていうコメント多くて日本人の自分からすると凄く嬉しい。」 English translation is my own.

With these four songs [from REACT], you'll be delivering your music to listeners not only in Japan but also all around the world. During your live shows you said that "music is a universal language," but what do you hope for overseas listeners to be attracted to?

Suzuhana Yuko: We want to show what Wagakki Band is and what Japanese music is. As anime and Japanese pop culture have spread around the world, more people understand the Japanese language than ever before. Of course, we plan to sing in English to make it easier to understand, but on the other hand, it would be great if we could encourage people from overseas to sing in Japanese, just like we listen to English songs and sing along.<sup>40</sup>

It is evident that over time, Wagakki Band still hopes to use traditional Japanese elements in music in order to make aspects of Japanese culture accessible to the world. The idea that "music is a universal language" seems to permeate their compositions and their thoughts on their own music. They do not talk about traditionalism as a way to create nostalgia for the past nor idealize their use of traditional Japanese instruments but instead focus on how they can use those instruments to appeal Japanese music and culture to the rest of the world. In a way, Wagakki Band helps morph traditional images associated with the prewar *furusato*, the images of the rural hometown and the idealized past, into images of a culturally aware but global Japan. While the return of *wagakki* into Japanese education in 2002 may have started uneasy and foreign, Wagakki Band helps repair the image of *wagakki* and the nostalgia of an idealized past<sup>41</sup> by

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<sup>40</sup> Takuto Ueda, "Wagakki Bando shinshō 'REACT' intabyū—Tōkyō kara sekai e." *Billboard JAPAN*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.billboard-japan.com/special/detail/2838>, 2, para. 10. Japanese quote: 「『これら4曲を掲げて日本だけでなく世界のリスナーへ音楽を届けていくわけですが、ライブでは音楽は世界共通語だとおっしゃっていましたが、海外リスナーにはどんなところに魅力を感じてもらいたいですか?』  
『鈴華ゆう子：和楽器バンドとはこういうものだ、日本の音楽はこういうものだと見せたいです。アニメとか日本のポップカルチャーが世界に広がって行って、日本語が分かる人が昔に比べて増えたので、もちろん伝わりやすいように英語で歌っていかうとは思っていますが、逆に私達が英語の歌を聞いてまねして歌ったように、海外の方が日本語で歌ってくれる状況が作れたらいいですね。』」 English translation my own.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, 26.

creating music that represents Japan abroad through its tradition rather than its imagined tradition.

As a final note from another interview with BARKS, discussing the band's hiatus starting in 2024, Suzuhana says "I think there's nothing easier than maintaining the status quo. Maintaining the status quo is comfortable, so it's incredibly hard to leave it behind and take new challenges."<sup>42</sup> Although she is not discussing their music directly, this mindset is synergistic with the ideas present in REOL's "YoiYoi Kokon." It is easy to sit and find comfort in the past, but undergoing change is necessary, just like traditionalism in Japanese music.

### **BAND-MAIKO's "Gion-chō" and the Modern *Furusato***

Keeping the discussions on *wagakki* in mind, we arrive at the last case study of BAND-MAIKO's "Gion-chō" 祇園著 (2019). BAND-MAIKO is a side-act, or perhaps a spin-off, of the band BAND-MAID, a rock band of maid-cosplaying musicians comprised of the same members.<sup>43</sup> The side-act started off as an April Fools prank in 2018 with a remake of one of their BAND-MAID songs, "secret MAIKO lips" (2018), but garnered a great amount of positive reception which inspired the group to create a mini-album as BAND-MAIKO, including its sole original composition "Gion-chō."<sup>44</sup> The members are guitarist/vocalist Kobato Miku 小鳩ミク,

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<sup>42</sup> BARKS, "Wagakki Bando intabyū vol. 8: Suzuhana Yūko 'Watashi ni wa bando no hi o kesanai sekinin ga aru,'" BARKS, October 28, 2024, <https://barks.jp/news/539798>. Japanese quote: 「現状維持ほど楽なものってないと思っていて。現状維持って居心地いいから、それを捨てて新しい挑戦をするってよほど大変なんですよね。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>43</sup> See Aaron D. Horton, "Gender and Non-Conformity in German and Japanese Metal Music and Subculture," in *German–East Asian Encounters and Entanglements*, ed. Joanne Miyang Cho (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), 247–68.

<sup>44</sup> BARKS. "【Intabyū】 BAND-MAIKO 'Meido-fuku mo maiko-sugata mo Nihon no bunka.'" April 2, 2019. <https://barks.jp/news/837423>.

vocalist SAIKI, guitarist KANAMI, drummer AKANE, and bassist MISA. While this alter ego is only reflected in their mini-album of the same name, BAND-MAIKO is focused on cosplay of *maiko* 舞子, or a young apprentice to *geisha*, which follow similar fashion and mannerisms to *geisha*, or more likely *geiko* 芸子 in this case, which were Western Japanese *geisha* usually hailing from Kyoto.<sup>45</sup> The title “Gion-chō” carries an immense weight—it simultaneously calls forth the famous opening lines of the Japanese classic *The Tale of the Heike*<sup>46</sup> and a prominent *geiko* district in Japan’s history as a district of Kyoto.<sup>47</sup>

Calling forth these strong Buddhist and historical *geiko* images in just the title alone shows the band’s commitment to the act, as they start the song with a deep bow while dressed as *maiko* in what seems to be an ornate temple.<sup>48</sup> The band wears clothes, hairdos, and makeup associated with *geiko* and throughout the song, many popular Kyoto tourist spots appear with the band members either participating in a scene or posing in front of the landmarks, like a bamboo forest or a traditional street in Gion. Along with these landmarks, the band members participate in *sadō* 茶道, or Japanese tea ceremony, showing another facet of traditional Japanese culture that they are representing. While the music incorporates the *shakuhachi*, *koto*, and *shamisen* when listened to, there is no indication of the band members playing the instruments in their video, which draws the focus more towards the rock elements of the song, which is where

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<sup>45</sup> For more information, see Jan Bardsley, *Maiko Masquerade: Crafting Geisha Girlhood in Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> “祇園精舎の鐘の聲、諸行無常の響き有り。沙羅雙樹の花の色、盛者必衰の理を顯す。驕れる者も久しからず、唯春の夜の夢の如し。猛き者も遂には滅びぬ、偏に風の前の塵に同じ。” English translation from Helen Craig McCullough: “The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”

See Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *The Tale of the Heike* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>47</sup> See Bardsley, 82-110.

<sup>48</sup> BAND-MAIKO, “‘Gion-chō’ (Official Music Video),” YouTube video, 4:05, posted April 1, 2019, <https://youtu.be/umSt7oMUMcs>.

BAND-MAIKO differs from Wagakki Band most noticeably. This indicates a difference in focus and purpose in the usage of traditional instruments, seemingly serving a secondary role in the song to add some traditional or “Oriental” color. Instead, interest lies in specific lyrics seen throughout the song, which I will list the relevant sections below:

[Intro]

<sup>1</sup>おいさよいやさ (あんさんのもと)

<sup>1</sup>Heave-ho, heave-ho (heading over to you)

<sup>1</sup>おこしやす おおきに

<sup>1</sup>Welcome and thank you

[Verse 1]

<sup>4</sup>祇園町

<sup>4</sup>Gion-chō

[Pre-chorus 1]

<sup>2</sup>花かんざしの彩りは

Colors of “hana kanzashi”

<sup>4</sup>京はおぼろ夜

<sup>4</sup>In Kyoto’s misty moonlight,

[Chorus]

<sup>1</sup>切り開かな あかしまへん

<sup>1</sup>You have to cut your way through,

[Verse 2]

<sup>3</sup>結い上げた日本髪

<sup>3</sup>Bundled-up Japanese hair

<sup>3</sup>うなじの二本足

<sup>3</sup>Two lines on the nape of your neck

<sup>3</sup>白に映える紅

<sup>3</sup>The alluring scarlet against white makeup,

[Pre-Chorus 2]

<sup>2</sup>魂こめた だらり帯

<sup>2</sup>“Darari obi”, suffused with spirit

<sup>2</sup>うちの心 カランコロソ

<sup>2</sup>“Kara koron” from my heart

[Bridge]

<sup>2</sup>お座敷遊びの心得

<sup>2</sup>The understanding of “ozashiki asobi”

<sup>2</sup>千社札でご挨拶

<sup>2</sup>Greetings with “Senjafuda”

[Post-Chorus]

<sup>4</sup>きょうび懐かしい故郷で

<sup>4</sup>Nowadays, in my nostalgic hometown

<sup>4</sup>かにかくに祇園に恋し

<sup>4</sup>Missing various things from Gion

<sup>4</sup>歴史を誇る古都へと

<sup>4</sup>To the ancient city proud of its history

[Outro]

<sup>2</sup>われしのぶに誇りを持って

<sup>2</sup>Proud to have “ware shinobu”

<sup>2</sup>いつかの襟変えを胸に

<sup>2</sup>To one day “erigae” in mind,<sup>49</sup>

In the segments above, I have superscripted the lyrics in four categories: superscript 1 are references to classical Japanese or Kyoto dialect; superscript 2 are words specific to *maiko/geiko* culture; superscript 3 are the fashion descriptions of *maiko/geiko*; and superscript 4 are references to hometown/*furusato*, Kyoto, an old city, and general nostalgia or romanticization of Gion/Kyoto.

Starting with superscript 1, lines such as “おこしやす おおきに” and “切り開かなあかしまへん” are indicators of Kyoto accent or *Kansai-ben* 関西弁, Western Japanese dialect, which comes from a complicated evolution of classical Japanese over time.<sup>50</sup> Guitarist and vocalist Kobato Miku 小嶋ミク says in an interview with BARKS in 2019 that “All the lyrics for [BAND-MAIKO] were written using the Kyoto dialect.”<sup>51</sup> Invoking the feeling of “oldness” and relating it to Kyoto seems to be a pervasive theme in their album, as the opening lines of their song “Ansan” is mentioned to come from the *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (759 CE), widely considered the first Japanese poem anthology: “I wondered if we should include the lines until the last moment, but actually I quoted them from the *Man'yōshū*, originally written in Kyoto.”

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<sup>49</sup> Japanese lyrics from BAND-MAIKO, “‘Gion-chō’ (Official Music Video),” YouTube video, 4:05, posted April 1, 2019, <https://youtu.be/umSt7oMUMCs>. All English translations are my own, with *maiko/geiko* specific culture and paraphernalia romanized to maintain the semantic qualities of the lyrics.

<sup>50</sup> For the development of Japanese dialects, see Samuel Robert Ramsey, “The Old Kyoto Dialect and the Historical Development of Japanese Accent,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 157–75.

<sup>51</sup> BARKS, 1, para. 7. Japanese quote: 「今回のアルバムの曲の歌詞は全部、京ことばで書いたんですっぽ。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>52</sup>The language use itself is well-studied while simultaneously casting Kyoto as a place of distant history, giving rise to feelings of estrangement and nostalgia once again.

Superscript 2 goes over specific items or cultural practices associated with *maiko/geiko*, which I will list translations of here in the order they appear:

花かんざし “Hana kanzashi”: hairpin with ornamental flowers;  
だらり帯 “Darari obi”: a type of loosely fitting and long *obi* 帯, or *kimono* sash;  
カランコロン “Karan karon”: the sounds of *pokkuri* 木履, or wooden geta;  
お座敷遊び “ozashiki asobi”: private *geisha* entertainment  
千社札 “Senjafuda”: stickers/placards that are now used as business cards;  
われしのぶ “Ware shinobu”: the first hairstyle a *maiko* wears, a bun with a red cloth;  
襟変え “Erigae”: a *maiko* turning into a *geisha*.

The band members adorn or encapsulate all of these aspects of *maiko* in “Gion-chō” besides “Senjafuda.” These appear in the lyrics more and more progressively towards the end of the track, both after the visual description of *maiko* about halfway through the song and as the song becomes progressively more nostalgic and the visuals show us more of Kyoto/Gion. This is a skillful way to incorporate more aspects of nostalgia and traditionalism as we encounter more images of the *furusato*, causing the listener to create an inseparable bond between the images of the *maiko* and the world of the past.

In superscript 3, we see descriptions of *maiko/geiko/geisha*, specifically what can be immediately noticed by any outside viewer, such as their makeup, hairdo, and exposure of the nape. Kobato says that “We learned that [*geiko/maiko*] are important jobs that require determination and passion, so we wanted to convey the wonderfulness of *maiko* through “Gion-

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<sup>52</sup> *BARKS*, 2, para. 5. Japanese quote: 「台詞は最後まで入れるか迷ったんですけど、実際に京都で詠まれた万葉集から引用してますっぽ。」 English translation is my own.

chō,” through things like their respect for traditional Japanese culture and their beautiful conduct.”<sup>53</sup>

It is apparent that BAND-MAIKO wants to portray *maiko* in a way that encapsulates their culture and physical features, but this way of paying homage could be considered within the realm of auto-orientalism. Harumi Befu describes this as “a process of accepting the Orientalism of the West (Said 1978) by the very people who are being Orientalized. Psychologically a masochistic process, it signifies acceptance and internalization by the Orientalized people of the denigrated, racist definition given by Orientalizers.”<sup>54</sup> *Geisha* in general is one of the premier Orientalized and exoticized icons in Japan by the West,<sup>55</sup> and the focus on the aesthetic aspects of exoticism, such as bonsai trees, *geisha*, and Zen Buddhism, is described by Steven L. Rosen as “romantic Orientalism.”<sup>56</sup> The way BAND-MAIKO represents *maiko* show an alignment with both of these ideas of Orientalism, describing the superficial aspects of *maiko* through an othering and exoticizing gaze as seen in superscript 3, and highlighting all the aspects of *maiko* within Japanese culture that makes them different than the rest of Japan, as seen through superscript 2. Kobato says that “I think people who like *maiko* will like [this album] even more,” showing that the *maiko* as an exotified or even fetishized object arises through the auto-

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<sup>53</sup> BARKS, 1, para. 8. Japanese quote: 「覚悟や気持ちが求められる大事なお仕事であることを知ったので、日本の伝統文化を大切にしたい気持ちや美しい所作だったりとか、「祇園町」を通して舞妓さんの素晴らしさを伝えたかったですね。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>54</sup> Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001), 175. See also Harumi Befu, “Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, and the Japanese Identity,” in *Japanese Identity: Cultural Analyses*, ed. Peter Nosco (Denver: Center for Japan Studies, Teikyo Loretto Heights University, 1997), 10–32.

<sup>55</sup> Anne Allison, “American Geishas and Oriental/ist Fantasies,” in *Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia*, ed. Louisa Schein and Purnima Mankekar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 298–315.

<sup>56</sup> Steven L. Rosen, “Japan as Other: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict,” *Intercultural Communication* 4 (November 2000): 2.

Orientalism of the song.<sup>57</sup> This altogether places *maiko* in a spatio-temporality evocative of a traditional past, which is ascribed to them not only from the auto-Orientalism apparent in the song, but also from their placement of Kyoto as the nostalgic past, as seen in superscript 4.

Superscript 4 shows lines that are particularly about creating an “old” or nostalgic feeling about either Kyoto or Gion. Gion and Kyoto are mentioned early into the song with some visual descriptions, but the majority of the feelings of nostalgia and past idealization come from the post-chorus section. The song directly mentions *furusato* and nostalgia in the line “きょうび懐かしい故郷で,” (“Nowadays, in my nostalgic hometown.”), though the song uses the pronunciation *kokyō* instead, which may have been done to fit the rhythm better or to avoid the ideological weight behind *furusato* as a phrase, but that remains unclear. It is evident, however, that lines such as “かにかくに祇園に恋し” (“Missing various things from Gion”) is calling forth a strong feeling of estrangement, homelessness, and *furusato*, creating the idealized space of Gion as a place of past comfort that we can no longer return to, but instead communally imagine. This last line mentioning Kyoto/Gion says “歴史を誇る古都へと” (“It’s an ancient city proud of its history”). We should note that BAND-MAIKO is playing the role of *maiko* in their song and this side-project of their band, they are not actually *maiko* nor are they from Kyoto, as they are Tokyo-based.<sup>58</sup> This definition of Gion/Kyoto as a place proud of its history is ascribed to it from the outside, creating the sense of auto-Orientalism and romantic Orientalism, through the outside gaze towards Kyoto.

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<sup>57</sup> BARKS, 2, para. 10. Japanese quote: 「舞妓さんが好きな人はさらに楽しんでもらえるんじゃないかと思えますっぽ。」 English translation is my own.

<sup>58</sup> See Emiri Aoki, “Maid in Japan — Japanese Rock Group BAND-MAID to Debut Overseas at Sakura-Con,” *Northwest Asian Weekly*, March 11, 2016, <https://nwasianweekly.com/2016/03/maid-japan-japanese-rock-group-band-maid-debut-overseas-sakura-con/>.

Is Kyoto the modern *furusato*? BAND-MAIKO pays homage to the culture to *maiko* and Kyoto but also Orientalizes both through placing them in the past. The feelings of estrangement present in the placement of Kyoto as distant, not only in physical space but also in time, causes it to take on the qualities of the ideas of the prewar *furusato*. The song uses traditional elements to present a “positive cultural nationalism that is the current *Nihonjinron*”<sup>59</sup> that showcases an internalized Orientalism. It is difficult to say what the goal of the song truly is, whether it was designed to commodify the image of Japan, Gion/Tokyo, and *maiko* through auto-Orientalism is unclear, as Michael Bourdaghs argues, “even in highly commodified pop music, there is ‘a constant struggle at the meeting point of production and consumption between the evocation of entrenched codes and the insinuation of alternative meanings.’”<sup>60</sup>

Unlike REOL’s future-oriented critique or Wagakki Band’s focus on global outreach, BAND-MAIKO’s “Gion-chō” consciously romanticizes the past, illustrating that some contemporary artists do continue to construct a modern *furusato*, such as Kyoto, for modern audiences. The images of the *furusato* and the way it is performed here have some similarities to the past. The *geisha* of prewar Japan had to use their talents to sing *ryūkōka* instead of their usual *kouta* to change with the times but still weaved the *furusato* into their performances of the music. As if recreating this, BAND-MAIKO takes traditional music and the culture of *maiko* to create an aura for Kyoto as the modern *furusato*, posing the question: what if *maiko* performed J-pop?

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<sup>59</sup> Befu, 191.

<sup>60</sup> Michael K. Bourdaghs, “The Japan That Can ‘Say Yes,’” in *Sayonara Amerika, Sayonara Nippon: A Geopolitical Prehistory of J-Pop, 196–222* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 221.

## Conclusion

This thesis traced how contemporary J-pop uses nostalgia, traditionalism, and the past as integral aspects to both composition and performance. The analysis of Yamada Kōsaku and the development of *gagaku* shows its nascent effects on nostalgia, traditionalism, and the past from the Meiji era to World War II. The in-depth look at Yano's tracking of *enka* from the Meiji era onwards shows the creation of idealized spaces in the past, *furusato*, and how musical elements were evocative of it. Similarly, a look at Aalgaard's research on postwar "homesickness" opens complex avenues in how the feelings of estrangement, or homelessness, that were tied to the imagined nostalgia of *furusato* can be remediated as forward-looking and denouncing of the pull to create in imagined, idealized past to return to through nostalgia.

We can see manifestations of these dynamics in the contemporary J-pop case studies that were analyzed. REOL's "YoiYoi Kokon" shows how the feelings of homelessness and imagined nostalgia are staged before disarming them by inspiring pushing through the status quo. Onew-P's "Hannya Shingyō Poppu" remediates the Buddhist "Heart Sutra," showing how a fun project can invite interest and access to tradition. Wagakki Band's "Tengaku" offers a reorchestration of a beloved Vocaloid song, one that focuses squarely on the performance and integration of traditional Japanese instruments with pop culture in a way that repairs the historical weight of these instruments in Japan along with making facilitating their appreciation globally. BAND-MAIKO's "Gion-chō" focalizes the aesthetics and signifiers of *maiko* and Kyoto, creating apparitions of a "modern *furusato*" that is both respectful and knowingly staged, showing that use of nostalgia in music can edge towards auto-Orientalism. I argue that through these case studies, we can see that contemporary J-pop artists use *furusato*, imagined nostalgia,

traditionalism, idealizations of the past, and the twoness of homelessness in distinct approaches that are deeply ambivalent.

The prevailing theme that arises is the feeling of estrangement that arises in the main case studies, the “homelessness” that is evocative of the past, such as *furusato*, and the future, the driver of “homesickness.” This is mediated using nostalgia and traditionalism, with the idealization of the past and galvanizing towards change as being the principal evocations seen in the contemporary J-pop analyzed here. In short, the contemporary J-pop soundscape uses nostalgia as a medium through which artists and audiences both can explore feelings of estrangement, whereby embellishing the past, the artform finds novel ways to critique, remediate, and even escape the uneasiness of the present.

Potential future avenues for research include a deeper dive into the composition of the music in this study, both historically and contemporaneously. This includes using music theory to rigorously dissect commonalities or divergences, how they transformed and why. In addition, also looking at the lyrical compositions of the pieces and what aspects of Japanese literature, both modern and pre-modern, are invoked through the composition and performance of the lyrics. Tied with this is looking at the development of nostalgia, traditionalism, and the idealization of the past in Japanese literature throughout particularly the prewar to postwar timeframe as a comparative study to the development of these ideas in music. These interdisciplinary topics of research could bring together fields that are regrettably often studied in isolation of one another.

In addition to the above, this study’s framework could be applied to other cultures as well, especially South Korea due to the emergence and incredible global popularity of K-pop. I hope that the use of music helps invite others into looking deeper into cultures or fields that they

are not used to, have not heard of, or simply can enjoy more through the idea of music as a universal language and its broad appeal.

Ultimately, the use of nostalgia has always found its way into Japanese music, and while the way its incorporated has changed over time, in the end it has created a medium of self-expression, with moments of dissatisfaction and dislocation. Nostalgia, traditionalism, and the past have become a focus for new art to flourish and create dialogues in music. This suggests that there is an inherent value, an innate urge to create and perform these songs and stories that cover a multitude of ambivalent reasons. Regardless of the reason, contemporary J-pop gives a platform to this dialogue, in a way that many people can engage with it: through music. In this way, this medium for the discussion of estrangement—this homelessness—arising from nostalgia can also feel like “home.”

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