

LESSON NOTES

All About #10

Top 5 pop culture things/icons you need to know about Japan

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GRAMMAR

All About Japanese Pop Culture

Japan is a country rich in pop culture that has started to gain recognition and popularity throughout the world. As popular culture changes quickly and drastically, we focus this lesson on the most recent pop culture. Please keep in mind that we wrote this lesson in 2009.

Popular Music

You might be surprised to learn that Japan boasts the second largest music industry in the world after the United States. Pop music is especially popular in Japan, although you can find all sorts of music in Japan done by Japanese artists, including rock, rap, hip-hop, reggae, and more.

Two groups in Japan that have enjoyed long-standing success are **Dreams Come True** and **Southern All Stars**. Dreams Come True is a duo made up of a vocalist and a bassist that has been around for over twenty years and spawned dozens of hit songs. Southern All Stars is composed of five members, two of which are husband and wife. They have enjoyed success with numerous top-ten singles and sixteen number one albums.

When it comes to female pop acts, three big names come to mind: **Ayumi Hamasaki**, **Namie Amuro**, and **Hikaru Utada**. Ayumi Hamasaki broke into the Japanese music scene with million-selling albums in the late '90s and has remained a huge seller ever since. Her musical style as well as fashion style seem to change with every record she releases, and many view her as a fashion leader, with many young girls copying her style. Namie Amuro became popular around the same time in the '90s as Ayumi Hamasaki. Namie Amuro is known not only for her strong singing voice, but also for her fast, high-energy dance moves that she pulls off while singing. Hikaru Utada debuted in Japan in 1999 when she was fifteen years old. Raised in both Japan and the United States, Utada is bilingual in both English and Japanese, and she records songs in both languages. Her debut album, *First Love*, is the highest-selling album in Japanese history, selling over seven million copies in Japan alone.

When it comes to male pop acts, a majority of them come from a talent agency known as **Johnny's Entertainment**, which trains and promotes male idol groups in Japan. Members of groups that belong to Johnny's Entertainment are known for being able to not only sing but also dance and act, making them well-rounded performers. Among the most well-known groups are SMAP, V6, Arashi, and Kinki Kids, with SMAP being the most recognizable. All five members of SMAP have become huge celebrities in their own rights, hosting their own TV and radio shows, regularly appearing in advertisements, and acting in numerous television shows and movies.

Popular Movies

Both imported Hollywood movies and domestic Japanese movies enjoy great popularity in Japan. Hollywood blockbusters such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the *Harry Potter* series, and the *Spiderman* series drew millions of moviegoers to theaters around the country. Recently, however, the popularity of domestic Japanese movies has been on the rise, with the annual box-office revenue for domestic movies hitting an all-time high in 2008.

Of the top Japanese films of 2008, the highest-grossing title was the animation film *Gake no Ue no Ponyo* ("Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea"), which world-renowned animator Hayao Miyazaki directed. **Hayao Miyazaki** is very well-known not only in Japan but throughout the world for his collection of animated masterpieces he makes through his

production company Studio Ghibli. Some of his famous works include films such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Spirited Away*, which was the first anime film to win an Academy Award.

Popular Television

When it comes to Japanese television, some of the most popular genres are ones you won't often see abroad. This is especially true of the variety genre. **Variety shows**, true to their name, feature a variety of different content - cooking segments, comedy segments, skits, and quizzes are just some of what you'll find on a typical Japanese variety show. Variety shows often feature a large panel of currently popular celebrities and sometimes a studio audience.

Quiz shows that feature contestants (who are almost always celebrities) answering questions on numerous subjects, such as science, history, math, the Japanese language, pop culture, and so on, also enjoy great popularity. Reality shows that have experienced a surge in popularity in the West are almost nonexistent.

Japanese dramas are also very popular among Japanese people of all ages. Japanese dramas follow a quarter system, which means a majority of dramas only run for one season for an average of ten to twelve episodes. Unlike in the West, once a drama finishes its initial run, it ends for good. Exceptionally popular dramas may come back for a second season or more, but this is not common. Many current dramas running in Japan are adaptations of popular movies, comics, or animated shows. At the same time, foreign-made dramas enjoy their fair share of popularity. Television networks broadcast titles such as *24*, *Prison Break*, *Lost*, and *Heroes*, and they are widely available for rental at video stores around the country.

Popular Foreigners in Japan

There are many recognizable foreigners in Japan. Alongside the major movie stars and celebrities known all over the world are a handful of foreigners widely known in Japan yet virtually unknown in their home country.

One foreigner who has recently become a big hit in Japan goes by the name of **Jero**. His real name is Jerome White, Jr., and he is an African-American singer who was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has gained popularity singing *enka*, a traditional type of pop music that is especially popular among older people. The unique combination of Jero's background and age (twenty-six at the time of his debut) and the traditional Japanese music that he sings has drawn a lot of attention from the Japanese public and media.

In recent years, Japan has experienced a boom in the popularity of Korean entertainment, known as *hanyū*. It all started with the wildly popular Korean drama *Fuyu no Sonata*, which aired on NHK, *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, in 2004. This drama started a Korean entertainment phenomenon and made big stars out of the two leading actors, **Bae Yong Joon** and **Choi Ji Woo**. This has led to an influx of Korean entertainers in Japan, such as chart-topping boy band **Tōhōshinki**, male solo artist **Ryu Siwon**, and many more.

Foreigners have also made an impact in the world of Japanese sports. Two notable examples in the sumo world are **Kotoōshu** (from Bulgaria) and **Asashōryū** (from Mongolia). Both have drawn a lot of attention as foreigners who participate in the traditional sport of sumo.

Popular Japanese Men/Women Abroad

Quite a few Japanese people have made a name for themselves abroad in the worlds of entertainment, literature, and fashion.

Actor **Ken Watanabe** became a recognized name after appearing alongside Tom Cruise in the 2003 war film *The Last Samurai*. Takeshi Kitano gained worldwide attention as a filmmaker with the extraordinary success *Hanabi*, a film that went on to win numerous international awards.

Author **Haruki Murakami** is one of the most recognized names when it comes to contemporary Japanese literature. His works have been translated into thirty-four languages, and his stories have earned him acclaim and several awards, including the Yomiuri Prize and the Franz Kafka Prize.

Issey Miyake is the most well-known Japanese designer in the world, and he is considered the first Asian designer to gain worldwide recognition. Born in Hiroshima in 1938, he established the Miyake Design Studio in 1970 and started showing his clothing lines at the Paris collections in 1973. He is known for his designs that combine textile designs of the East with production methods and modern technology of the West. Today, you can purchase Issey Miyake's designs all around the world.

Popular Sports Figures

Baseball is arguably the most popular sport in Japan. The United States introduced baseball, or *yakyū*, as the Japanese know it, during the early Meiji Period. One of the most popular names of the Japanese baseball world both in Japan and abroad is **Ichiro Suzuki**. Ichiro Suzuki joined the Seattle Mariners in 2000, a move that many watched with great interest, as he was the first Japanese position player to play regularly for a Major League Baseball team. Other familiar names in baseball include **Hideki Matsui**, who plays for the New York Yankees, and **Daisuke Matsuzaka**, who plays for the Boston Red Sox.

In the figure skating world, **Shizuka Arakawa** made headlines when she received a gold medal in the 2006 Winter Olympics, a first in the event for a Japanese skater. These days a lot of global attention is on **Mao Asada**, who currently ranks third in the world in the International Skating Union World Standings for women.