

Analysis of the Japanese Iyashikei Films and the Culture Behind These Films

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ABSTRACT

The theory is to analyze the Japanese Iyashikei Films and the culture behind these films. The author chooses *our little sister*, *little forest*, and *Kikujiro's summer* as exemplars to analyze the plot. Except the analysis on the content of the film, knowledge in psychology, communication, and sociology is also used to summarize the elements in Japanese Iyashikei films and how these elements heal negative emotions of the Japanese. It can be concluded that the historical, cultural, and social factors together result in an extremely stressful life of the Japanese people. Consequently, they tend to find something that can ease their misery brought by the stress. The Iyashikei films then come to life and hit the screen. The present of natural scene, food, and family relationship is a feature of Iyashikei films. These scenes and themes are regarded to be healing. The reason also lies in the cultural and social background.

Keywords: Japanese Iyashikei film, narrative, psychological trauma elements analysis, culture background

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, Iyashikei, as a new label, is gradually attracting public interest. Among many film genres, Japanese Iyashikei films stand out with their unique style. In addition, it is wildly popular in Japan because they treat and comfort Japanese psychological trauma and have increasingly important impact. However, a challenging problem that arises in this domain is that only few researches focus on the the relationship between the psychological trauma of Japanese people and their preference to this kind of film. Most of the researches in this field were aimed at analyzing them independent. Therefore, in this paper, the Japanese psychological trauma caused by cultural, historical, and social reasons were analyzed. Besides, the emergence of common elements in Iyashikei films were also introduced in this paper through analyzing three films-- *our little sister*, *little forest*, and *Kikujiro's summer*. Moreover, how these common elements heal the psychological trauma of Japanese people were analyzed. In order to do this research, the author combined sociology, psychology and film studies. In addition, the historical and cultural background of Japan, the psychology of Japanese people, and the Japanese healing films were covered in this analysis.

2. THE DEFINITION OF IYASHIKEI FILMS

The word Iyashikei originated in Japan. Iyashikei is Japanese for "healing", a term originally used for anime and manga which created with the specific purpose of healing or soothing the audience. In 1999, Iyashikei became the word of the year and be selected in the award Shingo-ryukogo-

taisho, an award for the most popular words of the year chose by public. Iyashikei refers to any music, novel, film, food, etc. that can relax the mind, calm and soothe the emotion. Iyashikei films has appeared under the popular of this kind of culture. It tends to be more ambiguous and impressionistic like can give people some spiritual comfort during their sadness. The Iyashikei films have the element to heal audience can let them release their sadness and pressure in social life.

3. INTRODUCTION OF IYASHIKEI FILMS

Our little sister, *little forest*, and *Kikujiro's summer* are kinds of typical Iyashikei films and will be analyzed later. From film language perspective, Iyashikei films have fresh color tone, soothing soundtrack and low degree of saturation, and beautiful light and shadow. Using its shooting skills and aesthetic effects to let audience feel relaxed and heartwarming.

From plot perspective, we can see two very salient features in the Iyashikei films: non-dramatic plot structure and the omission of narrative process. The conflicts in the Iyashikei films are usually weakened. Usually, there is no critique to the current social situation, no great suspense and dramatic conflict, and no sex and violence in the Iyashikei films. The quotidian things happened in daily life dominates the story, while the occasional events or moments in characters' life which can change a character's fate are often avoided or brushed aside. This narrative method limits the story's exaggerated drama to the greatest extend. Iyashikei films always have an opening ending to give audience a certain amount of imagination. In addition, the development of Iyashikei films' plots is always slow and bland, the language

they used is artless and simple. It is very different from the Hollywood sci-fi blockbusters. It pays more attention on how to depict the trivial details in life; uses details to show the real-life scene and true feelings of characters in the films. From this kind of film, audience can see their own pain, but they can also afford the solutions to audience's pain. Audiences follow the films to grieve, to solve. They provide the ability help people get rid of negative emotions, this is why they are called *Iyashikei* films.

4. POPULARITY OF *Iyashikei* FILMS

Like *Shoplifters* won *the best film* of the 71st Golden Palm Award at Cannes Film Festival, *Okuribito* won the *best foreign language film award* at the 81st Oscars and the best film of the 32nd Hong Kong Film Awards. Japanese Yahoo movie channel gave *our little sister* a rating of 3.95 out of 5. It also acquired 7.5 on *imdb*[1]. *Little forest* got 7.8 on *imdb*[1]. In *douban*, a Chinese film review website, nearly 350000 Chinese people have seen *little forest*, more than 500000 Chinese people have seen *Kikujiro's summer* and liked it[7]. *Okuribito*, the box office up to \$75,945 in USA during the opening weak[1]. Therefore, this kind of films is not only popular in Japan, but also accepted in all over the world. The main reason for their popularity was that they helped Japanese to release negative emotions and rejuvenate themselves.

5. THE REASON FOR THE EMERGENCE OF *Iyashikei* FILMS

5.1. *History reason*

Why Japanese need to be healed is mainly due to their history. In the 1990s, after Japan entered the era of industrialization, the terrible economic bubble triggered economic crisis. In Japan, these ten years are all called 'The lost decade'. Broken economy, fallen housing market, and crashed stock market etc. left the whole nation in a state of anxiety. What is worse, Japanese companies, which always use lifelong tenure, began to lay off employees. However, in the traditional Japanese household, men work outside and women take care of the whole family. Under this circumstance, many families lost their income and had huge pressure. Everyone lived in a depressed atmosphere. The indifferent personal relationship and little sense of belonging in family also increased their confusion. Except for these fluctuations of economy, the impact of some natural and man-made disaster like Hanshin-Awaji-daishinsai and Japanese Aum Doomsday Cult coupled with the spread of apocalyptic predictions for century made the whole society became more and more afraid as well. At that time, Japanese society became turbulent, people pursued a peaceful and stable life to the largest extend. In this case, people need something warm to relieve their pressure and make them feel relaxed. Hence, *Iyashikei* culture arose to

help people get rid of their negative emotions like anxiety, depression, disappointment and so on.

5.2. *Social Reason*

Nowadays, as a rapidly developing modern country, Japan makes the work monotonous and dull due to fully industrialized mode of production. Although Japanese economy is developing rapidly, everyone has lots of assignment to do and lives under huge pressure. Additionally, urbanized apartment life makes Japanese independent and lonely; high advanced technology makes people immersed in electronic products while lacking of communication; small territory, dense population, frequent earthquake, nuclear radiation makes Japanese people sensitive and vulnerable. All of these have added up to make interpersonal relationship more alienated and indifferent. Under this high-pressured culture, most Japanese suffer from both physical and mental stress, which make the personal relationship more callous as well than before.

5.3. *Cultural Reason*

Behind the healing *Iyashikei* system lies the profound cultural background of the Japanese nation, which reflects a unique survival value and reflects the evolution and development of Japanese social consciousness. The defeat of World War II dealt a great blow to the Japanese. Their cognition of their own country and history was overturned and they could not get social recognition, which made Japanese feel sad. War crimes have left the Japanese with a sense of self-doubt. Hiroshi Minami, the famous pioneer Japanese social psychologist, wrote in his book that 'In the Japanese self, the external 'ME' consciousness is particularly strong, too concerned about the other people's views of the consciousness affects the whole of self-construction. Because the external 'ME' consciousness is too strong, the inner 'I' am suppressed, forming a negative self. '[2]'. The 'I' and the 'ME' are terms central to the social philosophy of George Herbert Mead, one of the key influences on the development of the branch of sociology called symbolic interactionism. Japanese pay more attention on imaging how other people will think of them, want to live their own lives into the eyes of others. So, they are always too nervous.

Hiroshi Minami refers that 'Japanese sense of self-inauthenticity', and believe that the reason why Japanese people were regarded as lacking subjectivity, lacking self-establishment, lacking self-assertion and lacking self-initiative, etc., was all caused by self- inauthenticity. The cultural and psychological characteristics of the Japanese summarized by him, such as group dependency consciousness, only paying attention to the position of individuals in the group, conformity, and stereotyping of behavior, are also due to a sense of authenticity which individuals want to obtain. At the same time, the loss of traditional family function and the indifference of

interpersonal relationship aggravate the emptiness of the young generation. They need something heartwarming to heal themselves.

What's more, the traditional aesthetic concepts from Japanese society culture called *mono no aware* is a literary conception put forward by Motoori Norinaga, a famous philosopher in Edo period, which means when people contact with the external world, they see something inspire their emotion and feeling to let them happy, sad angry, etc. Cognitive object and cognitive subject produce harmonious aesthetic feeling. As time goes by, the beauty of 'mono no aware' deeply influence Japanese appreciation of aesthetics. Thus, their endemic *Iyashikei* films must have strong sense of unique feeling of *mono no aware*, which is also fundamental reason why Japanese *Iyashikei* films are different from the films from other countries.

Thus, due to the history reason, social reason, and cultural reason, the Japanese desire for spiritual healing has provided an invisible impetus for the formation the *Iyashikei* culture and laid a certain foundation for the germination of *Iyashikei* culture. They cannot afford the consequence by using radical ways, because it often accompanied by the danger of physical harm. So, they use comfortable and stable way to achieve the healing.

6. COMMON ELEMENTS OF *Iyashikei* FILMS

6.1. Elements of natural scenery

Iyashikei films, which can help Japanese relieve stress, pays special attention on how to present the beautiful scenery of nature visually. Sea and Forest constitute the main environmental elements of the *Iyashikei* films. For one thing, the brightly colored, fresh and natural scenery in the films brings the audience a pleasant and comfortable enjoyment from the sensory level. For another thing, these desirable natural sceneries allow audience who are busy with their daily lives to escape from the real boring life for a while, immerse themselves in the plot of the film and receive further healing. This kind of films also convey a philosophical about life. If your psyche is hurt by real life, there are still plenty of natural scenery available anywhere in this world can heal you.

Additionally, the reason why this scenery appear is not only due to visual function, further philosophical ideas are deeply rooted in the national culture of Japan and aesthetics of the eastern world. 'The Japanese always have a deep nostalgia for the land that nurtured them. However, in addition to this universal emotion, the Japanese have a particularly strong awareness of the beauty of nature. All parts of Japan are far from the sea no more than 70 miles; high mountains and mountains can be seen. In Japan, there is plenty of rainfall, lush forests, and green grass. Seasons make the scenery more colorful. The earliest Japanese literature has enthusiastically sang seascape peaks, chanting the beauty of forest valleys. The Japanese are even more enthusiastic

about sightseeing and tourism, almost reaching the point of being crazy and destroying places of interest' [3]. Thus, they inherit the love for nature, they always have a deep attachment to the land where they grow up. Due to the temperate monsoon climate, it rains all year around, so we can see forest and high mountains everywhere. Forest can give people a feeling of peaceful and mild, while sea can give people a feeling of vast and extensive. Because of the landscape of Japan, sea has a very significant position. Japan's magnificent island scenery and frequent meteorological disasters have been accompanied by the survival and development of this nation, so that people love and worship the beauty and power of the nature.

However, after entering the modern industrial city, what we see is the squeeze and isolation of living space. The traditional wooden houses are replaced by skyscrapers made by concrete. People who live in cities cannot have an imitate contact with nature. Land has become a space resource that needs to be fully utilized instead of a source of life associated with human emotions. Under this contradiction, people will more likely to seek a kind of healing, close to nature and return to nature. Plants and animals from nature and bring people emotion power, natural features such as forests and sea also make people feel comfortable and safe. The creation of natural space can make people calm their fast-paced minds. In the opening of *little forest*, we can see large patches of green on the both sides of the road, giving audience primitive impulse to escape the busy life and return to nature. Color psychologist found that color green is the most soft, positive color among the 100000 colors. When a lot of green plants appear, people will get psychological gentle and calm. This natural scenery also highlights a leisure, which slows down the pace of the film and creates a leisurely atmosphere to experience the changes of natural life quietly. This kind of psychological flexibility inspire the soft and positive side of human nature and generate a healing aesthetic experience. In *Our Little Sister*, sea carries a lot of memories. Sea stands for wide, calm and external. The nature scenery soothes people's inner selfishness, stress and noise, gives people warmth and strength. Blue color tone can make audience feel calm, Japan's pink sakura make people delightful. PANTONE Color of the Year 2016 - Rose Quartz & Serenity 'As consumers seek mindfulness and well-being as an antidote to modern day stresses, welcoming colors that psychologically fulfill our yearning for reassurance and security are becoming more prominent. Joined together, Rose Quartz and Serenity demonstrate an inherent balance between a warmer embracing rose tone and the cooler tranquil blue, reflecting connection and wellness as well as a soothing sense of order and peace.' [4]

6.2. Elements of Food

Food is also an important element in *Iyashikei* films. The lure of good food is often the simplest and most effective way to heal a wide range of mental illness. Because there are two material in people's body. One is called 5-hydroxy tryptamine, it relies on chemicals in the brain to survive, which can be altered when people are depressed. Thus, 5-

hydroxy tryptamine can help calm the mood and relieve anxiety, lead to a happy mood. Food is the most immediate external symbol of naturalness of life. The existence of food is to meet the original desire of people. Stimulated by psychological negative emotion, human need is reduced to their most primitive desire for food. Japanese's respect for food reflects their gratitude to nature. The Japanese believe that nature is god, and all nature gods must be worshiped. Food is the gift from nature to human beings. Indirectly understand nature through food has become a unique aesthetic concept in Japanese culture. The plum wine in *our little sister* and various delicacies in *little forest* show the beauty of the food and the richness of the nature. Food is the most immediate external symbol of the naturalness of life.

In the *little forest*, when growing tomato, heroine is not only novel with vigorous seeds and branches, but also feel the fragility of life. This is the state of life expression from natural objects, and it is also a representation of her own life state. In the process of eating, it is no longer a relationship between people and food, but an emotion exchange between two creatures. Therefore, food contains great healing power. In *little forest*, food not only serves as a medium for the heroine to feel the nature, but also serves as an important factor to maintain the relationship between herself and her mother. In the process of processing food materials, heroine does the same work as her mother. Thus, she can deeply understand the state of mind when her mother suddenly ran away from home and dissolve prejudice and misconception to her mother. In addition, food also represents heritage. Food in the films which have healing function always has an emotional component, it is not only a material, but also a bond to maintain the emotional connection between people. A family sitting together enjoying food is also a time to enjoy warm family time. In *our little sister*, every summer girls make plum wine, which is taught by their grandmother. In the process of picking green berries and making plum wine together, the younger sister and sisters gradually opened their hearts.

A theory from food psychology show that people can adjust mood through wholesome food in the life, and eliminate bad mood. One reason is food can make people happy. The detailed depiction of cooking in the film, as well as the characters' appreciation for food, make people's hearts calm down and relax. Food stimulates the release of dopamine, which in turn promotes healing. Another reason is empathy, which means people will be happy when they see other people happy. According to a new study from the University of Essex, looking at pictures of someone being loved and cared for can reduce the brain's response to threat. The study found that when people are shown images of other people receiving emotional support and affection, the amygdaloid nucleus, brain's threat monitor, subsequently stopped responding to pictures or words with threatening expressions. Seeing the respect and love of the film's protagonist in handling food, such simplicity and purity can also arouse the audience's inner peace and ignite their love and hope for life.

6.3. Elements of Family Relationship

The reconstruction of family relationships is also a remarkable feature of Iyashikei films. With the rapid development of society and the rapid accumulation of economy, Japanese people, Japanese families, and Japanese traditional culture also suffered unprecedented turbulence and great changes. The pursuit of wealth and power engender people's desire for money. After the Second World War, in order to improve their lives and get more pay, Japanese came to the cities hope to seek better survival. 'At the end of the war, about half of the Japanese lived in the countryside; but by 1989, most people lived in cities. In the pre-war years, three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) of large families were considered an ideal family. However, there may be a big gap between facts and ideals. In the early post-war period, families (parents and children) became the norm, and 'large families' were considered outdated. Young couples leave their parents behind and move to the city for new industries'. [5] But their life in the city life is not satisfactory. After a period of rapid economic growth and the bursting of the bubble economy in the 1990s, urban homelessness is on the rise and unemployment in middle age is on the rise. A general sense of disappointment and numbness led to a growing breakdown in traditional family relationships during this period.

In today's society, the cause of the collapse of the modern Japanese family is also the expansion of people's desire, only from the desire for money into their own desire. Traditional family values are increasingly impacted by individualism. Selfish individuals and widespread infidelity have become a prominent problem in Japanese families. Facing an uncertain future and harsh reality, the Japanese people with great pressure become indulgent and evasive. As a result, cheating behavior and selfish parents are common in Japanese society. In *our little sister*, the father's infidelity and the mother's remarriage not only destroyed their family, but also left the bad style to the next generation. The older sister fell in love with a married man, and the younger sister often met strange boyfriends when she was drunk. In *little forest*, the family is directly incomplete, the daughter does not know who is her father, also does not know the man which her mother bring home in her childhood, then the mother inexplicable run away is to let her confused.

In this social context, the Iyashikei films capture the inner trauma of Japanese society timely. Its plot is devoted to showing the breakdown and repair of Japanese family relations. Showing family and individual breakdown is not the end but the prerequisite. In the film, with the development of the plot, the gradual repair of family relations virtually heals people's inner trauma, which is the basis of healing.

According to Japan's famous scholars, psychoanalysts indigenous health, study, forms the core of the Japanese social structure, interpersonal relationship of the Japanese rely on mental state, although dependent psychology especially young man kind generally exist in humans, but in Japan, dependent psychology is not weakened along with the growth of the age, but all along are recognized by the

society. In traditional Japanese society, people depend on each other for peace and security. It is realistic for the Japanese to live in an interdependent relationship and they need a sense of security. According to Takeo Doi, Japan's famous academic, psychoanalyst and author, said that 'One need only refer to Japanese history for proof that, far from being valueless, it has provided a driving force behind a large number of cultural values. Nor are these cultural values something of past, but live in the Japanese of the present day'[6]. The core that forms the Japanese social structure and interpersonal relationship is the psychology of dependence. Although dependent psychology especially young man kind generally exist in humans, but in Japan, dependent psychology is not weakened along with the growth of the age, but all along are recognized by the society. In traditional Japanese society, people depend on each other for peace and security. It is realistic for the Japanese to live in an interdependent relationship and they need a sense of security.

One of the most important means of reconstructing family relationships is to extract the poetry of life from the trivial things like eating, chatting and walking. As Tadao Sato said: 'Japanese folk films focus on dinner scenes and other trivialities of daily life because they most vividly show a family in love without consciousness.' [6] The four sisters' emotional harmony in *our little sister* is also accomplished by eating and chatting with them at the table. Echo the importance of food in the previous paragraph.

In many of the *Iyashikei* films, by reconstructing the role of the father, the family relationship is reconstructed. This is useful for reconstructing the dependency. In *Kikujiro's summer*, Kikujiro's attitude toward the unexpected acceptance of the temporary father task ranges from indifference to the child's meticulous care. In *our little sister*, the father who cheated their mother erstwhile is also forgiven in four sisters' conservations and memories. It represents a remedy for the lack of patriarchy in Japanese society. The story of healing seems simple, quotidian and casual, but it is the basis of dependence.

The element of family relationship gives Japanese who lack of family warmth but longing for family warmth a belief that what is lost will come back in another form. All the broken family the *Iyashikei* films showed usually have an happy ending in the end. All the characters get what they want to get. Their minds gradually settle down, broken family relationships were gradually repaired. This gives Japanese people a lot of courage and confidence to meet their own situation and solve the problems.

7. CONCLUSION

Behind the application of these three elements lies the strong cultural background of the Japanese nation, which reflects a unique survival value and reflects the evolution and development of Japanese social consciousness. *Iyashikei* films are good at telling various life stories and getting the audience to step into a self-identity that is full of

expectations. Because human beings tend to construe the meaning of life by constructing stories and listening to other people's stories, self-identity is also constructed through emotion exchange with other people, with history, with cultural traditions. Through other people's story in the film, audience can compare their own life situations by these stories, and think about themselves by discovering the neglected details in their lives. In this process, some significant content, including subjective intention, that is worth being explored in personal life, exert the important influence on interpersonal relationship, the turning point of life course, particularly cherished memories, and the meaning of the complex connection between the content and relationship network, etc. Audience can complete understand and be mentally released from the stress or miseries of life.

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