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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### JAPAN'S NEW POPULAR CULTURE

Despite the proliferation of Japanese television, video games, and video cassette recorders, most Western works on Japanese culture still sketch a society of dedicated aesthetes, variously arranging flowers, sipping green tea, plucking the three-stringed *samisen*. A few books indicate, however, that popular pastimes are more contemporary and less refined.

Kuwabara Takeo, a scholar of French literature, analyzes his country's cultural shifts during the last 150 years in *Japan and Western Civilization* (1983; Columbia, trans., 1984). Any study of Japan's "mass" society must take into account the appeal of *pachinko* (a form of pinball), golf driving ranges, and *karaoke* (empty-orchestra) bars, where patrons sing along to the latest pop tunes. "We can no longer pretend," Kuwabara asserts, "that Japan's ancient artistic traditions represent our contemporary culture."

Truly popular amusements began to emerge during the 17th century. The unification of Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868) brought stability and nurtured the growth of an urban merchant class. These townsmen supported new varieties of "theater, painting, and prose fiction, all of which, while drawing heavily on Japan's aristocratic cultural tradition, evolved as distinctly popular, bourgeois forms of art." So writes H. Paul Varley, a Columbia University Japan scholar, in his survey of *Japanese Culture* (Praeger, 1973; Univ. of Hawaii, rev. ed., 1984, cloth & paper).

Sir George Bailey Sansom, one of the most respected Japanologists, supplies a more comprehensive

chronicle of these times in *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (Cresset, 1931; Stanford, rev. ed., 1952, cloth & paper). Among other theatrical entertainments, kabuki enjoyed a large audience. Sansom notes that "not only did the plots and languages of the plays affect contemporary behavior and speech, but the dress and conduct of the actors . . . dictated the fashions of the day."

Those interested in the modern form should turn to *Kabuki* (Kodansha, 1969), a lavishly illustrated volume by Gunji Masakatsu, one of the foremost authorities on the subject. Though television, radio, and cinema have thinned the ranks of kabuki viewers, roughly 1.5 million still attend performances every year.

Like kabuki, sumo wrestling had its professional origins during the Tokugawa era. Free-lance samurai, or *rōnin*, turned a rite at Shintō shrines into a commercial attraction by staging matches on street corners. The wrestlers now train in 30 different "stables" and compete in 11,000-seat indoor arenas. Patricia L. Cuyler traces the evolution of *Sumo* (Weatherhill, 1979) and argues that its unique combination of the sacred and profane—"the observance of ritual added to the spectacle of 300-pound giants slamming into each other—makes this indigenous wrestling form the national sport of Japan."

During the late 19th century, the Emperor Meiji opened his country to the West and declared: "It is our firm wish that you, our subjects, change your way of dress and your manners." His countrymen responded by taking their first lessons in the waltz and the quadrille (1884), exchanging

toasts at their first beer hall (1899), and drinking coffee at their first café (1911). Edward Seidensticker, a noted author and translator, relates these developments in **High City, Low City** (Knopf, 1983), a survey of life in Tokyo from 1868 to 1923.

**Japanese Popular Culture** (Tuttle, 1959; Greenwood, 1973) received its next dose of Westernization during the U.S. Occupation (1945–52). According to the Japanese authors of these 15 essays—edited by sociologist Katō Hidetoshi—the Americans influenced everything from “the desirable shape for a woman’s bosom” to nightclub names (Metro, Hollywood, and Chicago) and advertising slogans (“Kiss-proof lipstick—Now popular in America”).

The Japanese, however, retain only those foreign elements that suit their sensibilities. So argues George Fields, an advertising executive who sums up his Japanese experiences in **From Bonsai to Levi’s** (Macmillan, 1983). A case in point is the failure of instant cake mixes. General Mills based its marketing strategy on the fact that Japanese could use their rice cookers to bake cakes. But housewives balked because, as Fields observes, “the cake mix ran the danger of contaminating the rice”—the staff of life.

One import that the Japanese have adopted as their own is baseball. Yet, while the 12 Japanese major league teams may play the same game as their 24 U.S. counterparts, the way in which they play it is profoundly different. Few American teams would emulate the behavior of the Yakult Atoms (now the Yakult Swallows), who lined up on the first base line, removed their caps, and bowed to their fans to apologize for their

12th straight loss.

In **The Chrysanthemum and the Bat** (Avon, 1983, cloth & paper), a look at Japanese baseball, Robert Whiting notes that tense games can reveal a side of the Japanese not often seen. After one loss to the hated Yomiuri Giants, irate fans of the Hiroshima Carp pelted the Giants’ bus with rocks, cans, and beer bottles.

Although the Japanese still seldom give vent to such outbursts in public, the portrayal of violence in their books, magazines, and movies has steadily increased. Growing in popularity are macabre mysteries and detective stories. A sampling is in **Japanese Golden Dozen** (Tuttle, 1978), edited by Ellery Queen. Japanese commuters are especially fond of these tales, which annually sell more than 20 million copies.

This obsession with mayhem appears in a society known for its low crime, suicide, and divorce rates. Actor and film critic Ian Buruma ponders this paradox in **Behind the Mask** (Pantheon, 1984), which traces the Japanese imagination from the myths of creation to the present day.

More than anything else, Japanese popular diversions supply an escape, one no less governed by strict conventions than the tea ceremony or flower arranging. When Japanese company men go on their regular group binges, they regress into almost childlike behavior: Some are fed by hostesses wielding chopsticks; others dance around in their underwear. By the end of the evening, observes Buruma, “emotions have been vented, the play is finished, the hierarchy restored and nothing remains the next morning except . . . a headache.”