

April 21, 2023

Breaching borders through language:

A hidden narrative on Japanese musicians through ONE OK ROCK

“The Beginning” is a cultural artifact that cultivates historical change in the Japanese music industry, as it was used in a monumental Rurouni Kenshin film that depicted events during the Meiji period in Japan and gained international attention. “The Beginning” was the representation of a new beginning for Japanese musicians to aspire to work abroad.

Following the success of the song “The Beginning,” ONE OK ROCK became symbolic as it was the first Japanese band to make it big abroad. Therefore, ONE OK ROCK’s story portrayed through “The Beginning” embodies Japanese musicians’ will to breach the borders they were confined in—Japan—to expand themselves globally as musicians and develop their music through the use of the English language. ONE OK ROCK is adjacent to the formation of typical bands; however, set with a global perspective.

ONE OK ROCK is a Japanese band started in 2005 in Japan by a group of high school friends. As a band, their primary goal was to become the first Japanese band to be recognized abroad. In the past Japanese bands have tried to incorporate internationally but did not have as much success. Therefore, ONE OK ROCK wanted to bring this title home to Japan and to be recognized abroad. In their career, they hit this milestone in 2012 with their single “The Beginning” from their sixth album *Jinsei Boku=*, which landed them concerts outside of Japan and musical festivals outside of Asia. After the success, the band started to release music in Japanese-English and full English. This album brought ONE OK ROCK worldwide popularity after “The Beginning” was selected as a soundtrack for the live-action adaptation of Rurouni

Kenshin. The song “The Beginning” peaked at #2 on the Billboard Japan Hot 100 and stayed for 45 weeks.

Japanese musicians were at a disadvantage before “The Beginning” because Japan’s growth in the music industry was limited by the Edo Period, or the isolation period, which stifled their access to music from outside influences. Consequently, this hindered Japanese musicians’ growth overseas as their music was confined to Japan. Shuko Watanabe writes in *American Music Teacher*, that when the samurai took over the Japanese government, it brought isolation and the deep burial of the foreign influences, namely Western and Christian, that Japan had incorporated into their culture, and is the reason why we can see the decrement of Japan’s music industry (Watanabe 24). Watanabe draws attention to the developments of how Japanese history affected the potential growth of these musicians because later on, he states, “after the samurai reign had fallen and government ship of Japan returned to the emperor, Japan started to rebuild,” meaning that Japan was greatly behind leading countries and therefore could not compete with them. This puts Japanese musicians under the constraints of just being able to work in Japan because no other route was possible for them yet. Therefore, “The Beginning” shows the departing point where Japanese musician’s tactics in music excelled through the incorporation of English in their music. This resulted in Japanese musicians’ first time breaking free from the borders of Japan. Thus, Japan’s history was no longer a hindrance to ONE OK ROCK, and it had become an international sensation. Hence, Japanese musicians desire to go abroad.

“The Beginning” represents Japanese musician’s desire to go overseas for musical growth and to promote representation of Japan. During an interview with Quetic, a Japanese music media source, Taka, the lead vocalist of ONE OK ROCK, speaks about his initial motivation for wanting to work abroad in Japan. Taka stated that as a band they felt that there was a limit to the

works they could create in Japan and release to the world– hitting an inspiration block. ONE OK ROCK, in particular, hit the roadblock because they tried to reach a global audience by focusing on the English language in “The Beginning,” where only one lyric was in Japanese. From this point on, the band and Taka felt that they would no longer be able to compose any more music within Japan and needed a change of atmosphere. Japanese musicians being trapped within Japan and their desire for music growth explains the reasons why they would follow the footsteps of ONE OK ROCK to go abroad, to grow as a person through spirituality, age, and musical growth.

Likewise, this phenomenon simultaneously represents how a big aspect of a Japanese musician’s career plays with spirituality, age, and musical growth. Just as ONE OK ROCK’s spirit was down at one point in their career, older Japanese musicians experienced the same limitations. According to a Cambridge University Press post in 2017 by Koji Matsunobu that contains testimonies of musicians, “a man who was 70 years old explains his spiritual transformation is marked by a series of life-changing circumstances such as the loss of his wife, and this transformation coincides with his musical growth”(Matsunobu, 1101). Matsunobu is sharing the experience of an elderly Japanese musician participant who practices spirituality and correlates the loss of his wife as a cause for gaining growth in his music. We can similarly tie this to the change in Japanese musicians' experience and environment that can impact their music and inspiration for music, hence often why Japanese musicians look towards the bigger scope of abroad. After the success of “The Beginning,” most of ONE OK ROCK songs are in English. This change is inevitable for Japanese musicians to promote their music overseas. Accordingly, some people may argue against “The Beginning” as representative of Japanese musicians.

Some may argue that “The Beginning” may not be a good cultural artifact to represent Japanese musicians because since their music is mostly in English when they go abroad, they

may not be considered Japanese anymore. While some Japanese musicians do use English for most of their music, that does not remove the fact that they are Japanese and could be representative of their country through their music. Take, for example, in *Japanese Studies*, a scholarly interview conducted by Gordon Mathews to 32 musicians about what it means to be Japanese; he concluded that many musicians saw Japaneseness as a cultural essence that transcended past and present[...] Japanese had lost their culture but could reawaken to it”(Mathews 340). In other words, Mathews states that out of the 32 musician participants, the most common response was that Japaneseness was never lost because the musicians always had it. Therefore according to testaments, we can tell that musicians' nationality never is lost; it is ok for them to represent their people the way and method they deem best, and that does not make them any less Japanese. In this case, “The Beginning” is a great cultural artifact used to represent Japanese musicians because it comes with a rich culture and was the beginning of Japanese musician expansion. We see this initially happening through friend connections of one of ONE OK ROCK’s members.

ONE OK ROCK became an international sensation because of Rurouni Kenshin's theme song, “The Beginning,” given to Taka by his friend’s negotiation. Thus, resulting in Japanese musician representation overseas. The article called “ONE OK ROCK Taka, Thoughts on Best Friend Sato Takeru” talks about how the relationship between two friends generated the expansion of ONE OK ROCK internationally. According to Cinematoday, the artist Taka landed this big promo because of his friendship with an actor who negotiated that if they(Sato Takeru) were allowed to play the lead role in the film, they would ask Taka from ONE OK ROCK to produce the theme song for Rurouni Kenshin. That was the beginning of it all, ONE OK ROCK took on the role of making the theme song of Rurouni Kenshin. Sequentially, ONE OK ROCK

had the overseas market in mind and produced the theme song of Rurouni Kenshin in English and Japanese. Cinematoday mentions to express Japan's unique samurai world in English lyrics Taka translated the original Japanese song into almost fully English except for one Japanese phrase. Cinematoday states that initially, ONE OK ROCK's target audience was set internationally; hence, their reorganization of the original all-Japanese song converted all into English except for one sentence. Therefore, Taka's friendship with Takeru Satoh derived the international sensation of ONE OK ROCK that upvoted Japanese musician representation through the diversifying lens ONE OK ROCK took when considering Rurouni Kenshin. We see the use of English Language tactics to send messages through "The Beginning."

Rurouni Kenshin's theme song "The Beginning" depicts Japan's Meiji period and ONE OK ROCK's message to an international audience simultaneously through the use of the English language. The film takes place in the Meiji period where samurai (Japanese ninjas) had control of the Japanese government. A kingdom ruled by human beings living in the wild, full of danger, because no government was around. "The Beginning" being in English and partially in Japanese helps contribute to the relationship of overseas being able to relate to the song. According to Oricon Music, "The lyrics of ONE OK ROCK, from then to now, consistently express dissatisfaction with adults and the world, as well as their big dreams[...] This was the origin of the current lyric style, which is almost entirely in English with only a few lines of Japanese in the chorus"(Oricon Music). Oricon Music states that ONE OK ROCK's style of music derives from the want of a changing atmosphere—to work abroad and personal experience with Japanese society. ONE OK ROCK like other Japanese musicians trying to make it big abroad, battled the internal fight against the norms of the Japanese adults of staying in Japan as a musician and not venturing. ONE OK ROCK rebelled by opting for their lyrics to be majorly in English to gain a

chance of recognition abroad to achieve their dreams of reaching musical growth and expansion during “The Beginning”. This rebellion during “The Beginning” demonstrates why their song had a double connotation for both representing the movie and the audience being able to sympathize with the song. “The Beginning” used appealing strategies in their message.

The concepts of favor gaining, double connotation, and appeal to pathos are present in “The Beginning” through the use of the English language when looking at the film's point of view. Take, for example, these four lyrics from “The Beginning”:

Just give me a reason to keep my heart beating (line 1)

Don't worry, it's safe right here in my arms (line 2)

As the world falls apart around us (line 3)

All we can do is hold on, hold on (line 4)

“The Beginning” by ONE OK ROCK has a heart-wrenching tone throughout the music video—high-pitched and fluctuating, causing emotion. These four lyrics in English are a representation of the meaning of the song—the samurai's will to fight, protect, and never give up. In the film *Rurouni Kenshin*, we have a samurai called Kawakami Gensai who is living through the war in Japan. Line 1 In the music video, we see a steady tone, and is a representation of Kawakami Gensai having a reason to keep on living—keep protecting Japan and loved ones from danger—hence, his desire to keep his heart palpitating. In line 2, we see the fall of tone of the English Language when we get to “Don’t worry” and then return to higher intonation; this line ties to Kawakami’s arms representing a safety blanket—because by his katakana(Japanese sword)he is protecting the innocent citizens of Japan. In the music video there is constant fighting and war scenarios fought by Kawakami. On account of that, in line 3, the tone turns convincing through the intermixture of lowering the tone after “apart” and rising steadily after

“around.” In addition, the video scenes connect to everyday life as a battleground for Kawakami, and to him, it is a representation of walls crumbling apart because everything is in chaos—constantly being on guard triggers his fighting spirit to never give up. In line 4, we see the intonation initially normal, then when we get to “on,” the n is extended, and when we get to the next “hold on,” we see an emotional rise of tone and elongation—emphasis—of this lyric. Furthermore, line 4 represents the ongoing fight in the Meiji period, where people like Kawakami can only try to survive during the war, thus embodying his never-ending fighting spirit. In particular, ONE OK ROCK portrays this whole song to be heart-wrenching as their tone fluctuates to appeal to the listener’s pathos; they are simultaneously giving emotion and a message that the samurai life during the Meiji period was difficult, and gaining favor the tone methodology to the English Language hence, why the international audience would analyze this music video as a similar message close to home.

Just as “The Beginning” represented Kawakami’s fighting spirit, the international audience gained an insightful message as well—human hardship and survival. These lyrics could be interpreted by the overseas audience as an ordinary human going through hardships and trying to live day by day by never giving up and protecting their loved ones. These meanings of the lyrics and film tied together pull on the strings of human emotion just as ONE OK ROCK’s goal has been all along—to gain their audience’s favor. In particular, “The Beginning” brings a sense of authenticity to its audience, emotion, and relatability that caused this song to be a hit along with the film: depicting the film with its diction, strategy of English, and the Japanese singer’s intonation which spurt emotion and truthfulness. An article from Oricon Music called “First Album No. 1 ONE OK ROCK Why is it so popular?” talks about the reasons ONE OK ROCK is popular and the methods they use to attract their international audience. According to Fumiyaki

Kurebashi, “Taka knows people's sorrows and sufferings by suffering, hurting, and working harder than anyone else.” Kurebashi states that the lead vocalist himself knows human emotions very well and could relate to his audience on a personal level. Therefore, when composing this song, Taka and the other band members used this skill to release emotion in both tone and meaning through “The Beginning,” which expanded their message to both audiences successfully. The messages and strategy of these Japanese musicians were what made them break the barriers they were once confined in and are an indication of what future Japanese musicians might want to do to reach stardom.

In conclusion, ONE OK ROCK’s “The Beginning” was the actual beginning for Japanese musicians to have the opportunity to begin working outside of Japan—making ONE OK ROCK the first Japanese Band to make it big abroad. “The Beginning” represents Japanese musicians’ breaching the borders they were confined to through the manipulation of the English language in clever ways to find growth as musicians abroad. “The Beginning” gives us an insight into how the first Japanese musicians were able to become an international success. In particular, we saw these Japanese musicians’s music adapting to the change that it meant to seek an international audience. The versatility found through Japanese musicians shows that, like ONE OK ROCK achieved international success, other Japanese musicians can follow in their footsteps. However, as seen through “The Beginning,” to achieve this is hard. ONE OK ROCK did this through connections, and change of their music composition, but it may not be as easy for the Japanese musicians to follow. We need people to know what Japanese musicians have to do to reach international musical success. Through studying cases such as these, we can foresee and help predecessor Japanese musicians reach success, and let their stories be known to a wider audience.

Works Cited

- Watanabe, Shuko. "Japanese Music: An East-West Synthesis." *American Music Teacher*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1991, pp. 24–52. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43538821>. Accessed 29 Mar. 2023.
- Mathews, Gordon. "Fence, Flavor, and Phantasm: Japanese Musicians and the Meanings of 'Japaneseness.'" *Japanese Studies*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004, pp. 335–350, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371390412331331582>.
- MATSUNOBU, KOJI. "Music for Life: a Japanese Experience of Spirituality, Ageing and Musical Growth." *Ageing & Society*, vol. 38, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1100–1120., [doi:10.1017/S0144686X1600146X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X1600146X).
- Kurebayashi, Fumiyaki. "First Album No. 1 ONE OK ROCK Why Is It so Popular?" *Oricon.co.jp*, 22 Feb. 2015, www.oricon.co.jp/special/47715/.
- Ishizumi, Yuka. "[Interview] What Is the Motivation behind ONE OK ROCK's Global Activities?" *Qetic*, 9 Feb. 2015, qetic.jp/interview/oneokrock/125742/.
- "ONE OK ROCK Taka, Thoughts on Best Friend Sato Takeru." シネマトウデイ(*Cinema Today*), 31 May 2021, www.cinematoday.jp/news/N0123766.
- Moriuchi, Takahiro. "The Beginning." ONE OK ROCK, A-Sketch Inc. 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hh9yZWeTmVM>
- "Genius Romanizations – One Ok Rock - the Beginning (Romanized)." *Genius*, <https://genius.com/Genius-romanizations-one-ok-rock-the-beginning-romanized-lyrics>.