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In the Hollywood hit of 2003, *Lost in Translation*, Tokyo is the backdrop for a tale about modern-day angst and cultural dislocation. As shot by the film's director, Sofia Coppola, the screen fills with scene after scene of a searingly beautiful Tokyo: neon-lit Shinjuku, a pristine sushi bar, the quietude of a temple, a nightclub's jagged excesses. All of this is filtered through the perspective of two American travelers who are as lost in this foreign culture as they are in their personal lives back home. Strangers when they first meet, the two connect over shared insomnia and malaise. Both are reluctant visitors to a country that neither one is interested in; both find Japan utterly strange. Yet the strangeness inspires not only gaffes and gaps in cultural (mis)communication but also intimacy between the two. By the time they part, Japan has acquired a new attractiveness and meaning for them. Yet neither character exhibits greater knowledge or understanding of the country: they are as clueless as when they first checked into their hotel. Indeed, the film's audience shares the same position, as strangers "lost" in a culture that, while quirkily and sensuously beautiful, is foreign and outside "translation."

In 2004 ABC aired an episode of the long-running children's television show, *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, with a story that referenced Coppola's

movie. Titled "Lost and Found in Translation," this story of a cross-cultural encounter is played with a twist: here the protagonists will not only lose but also find their way in(to) a different culture. The episode opens in the United States with the rangers—teenagers who morph into superheroes to fight alien monsters and defend the earth—in their everyday garb, working on a social science project comparing two cultures. On television, they discover a program from Japan that turns out to be a version of *Abarangers* (that season's variant of *Power Rangers*) dubbed into English. Two of the three Americans are riveted, fascinated by the cyborgian upgrades and fighting stances of the Japanese rangers. But the third dismisses the foreign show as inauthentic, saying that they "got it all wrong" and discounting the enemy as a "guy in a rubber suit." His pals, however, remind him that it's just a TV show and urge him to use his imagination. Sitting back and watching more, he gets into the action and admits that it's "kinda cool." The episode ends with a message about cultural difference voiced by the new convert. "We're not so different after all, just a slightly different interpretation." Returning to his homework assignment, he announces the title to the others: "Japanese versus American Culture—Closer Than We Think."

THE GLOBAL MARKET IN JAPANESE YOUTH PRODUCTS HAS SKYROCKETED. THESE EXPORTS NOW EXCEED WHAT HAD BEEN THE LEADING INDUSTRIES IN JAPAN'S POSTWAR ECONOMY, AUTOMOBILES AND STEEL.

Both the above stories, produced by U.S. cultural industries in the new millennium, feature Americans who are discomforted in their encounters with a foreign culture. In both cases, that culture is Japan; in both cases, the discomfort is dispelled. The reasons for this, however, are different. In the former, a blockbuster movie for and about adults, the characters are dislocated from home in a cultural milieu they feel lost in. But, in what has been called a love story, the couple uses the alienness of Japan to bridge their own personal alienation in the company of one another. And, in this, the setting could be anywhere, reviewers have suggested, and Japan acts more figuratively than literally to signify a sense of dislocation in the world at once uneasy and potentially pleasurable. The story line in "Lost and Found in Translation"—an episode for a children's television show featuring kids—is quite different. Here, the tale is set in the United States, where the foreignness Americans confront is on the screen instead of the street. Fictional and unreal, the ranger escapades constitute popular culture: something that American youth take very seriously. And it is in these terms that the U.S. rangers

on the show come to read and appreciate the differences of their Japanese counterparts. Bearing a style that the Americans find cool in its own right, the show's cultural logic doesn't defy translation as much as yield a different interpretation.

I use these two tales of imaginary encounters between Americans and Japan/ese to reflect on the rise of manga, anime, video games, and various play trends around the world, including the United States. Starting in East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and other parts of the world such as Western Europe, Russia, Peru, and the United States in the early to mid-1990s, the global market in Japanese youth products has skyrocketed. Called the country's GNC (gross national cool) by the American reporter Douglas McGray (2002), these exports now exceed what had been the leading industries in Japan's postwar economy: automobiles and steel. Having tripled in the past decade—a time of a nagging recession precipitated by the bursting of the Bubble economy in 1991—the industry of cool culture is bringing much-needed capital to Japan, both real and symbolic. Taken seriously these days even by the Japanese government, which hopes to channel it as a form of "soft power," J-cool raises questions about what precisely the nature of its appeal is around the world; what, if any, influence it is having on global culture; and how exactly "Japan" figures in any of this. Concentrating on the United States here because of how its own cultural industries have dominated the global imagination, I consider how Japanese properties are entering not only the marketplace and play habits of U.S. kids but also the imaginary of Americans more generally. In a place where storytelling has been so ethnocentric, the omnipresence of Japanese cartoons on Saturday morning TV, for example, and the shelves of manga sold in chain bookstores like Borders (many printed right to left in Japanese style) are striking. Does this really represent a shift, however, from the global (cultural) power of Americanization? Further, what do we make of the fact that this fad, so driven by youth, is also so incomprehensible to American adults, that "culture" here comes in the register of virtual, fantasy worlds, and that J-cool trades in an image of Japan more imaginary than so-called real?

The influence of Japan on American pop culture is hardly new. *Godzilla*, of course, was a huge hit in the 1950s, with its endless sequels and incarnations that have survived until the new millennium. Japanese television shows like *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer* have been broadcast on regional stations since the 1960s, Japanese metal robots and transformers have sold in American toy stores since the early months after World War II, and entertainment technology such as the Sony Walkman and Nintendo Game Boy has

been so popular with American kids as to become almost ubiquitous. Since the 1990s, however, there has been a palpable shift in not only the number and types of Japanese youth properties imported to the United States but also their mainstreaming into American youth culture.

The example of "Lost and Found in Translation" is illustrative. It was broadcast in the twelfth season of *Power Rangers* on U.S. television, a show based on the Japanese *renjaa* series that has aired on Tôei television since 1975. Acquiring rights to its U.S. broadcast in 1985, Haim Saban—a U.S.-based entrepreneur—tried for eight years to interest a U.S. television network in the show. All refused on the grounds that it had a foreign flavor and a kitschy aesthetic that wouldn't catch on with American kids (whose tastes, it was thought, were more sophisticated). When Margaret Loesch, who had been raised on Japanese television shows, signed it on for Fox Kid's Network, however, *Power Rangers* became an immediate success: it outranked all other children's television programs in the United States and soon became the number one children's program internationally. But to appeal to American kids, the network deemed it necessary to transform the show and reshot all the scenes when the rangers are ordinary (in-the-flesh) teenagers with American actors in a California studio. Splicing the Japanese action scenes when the rangers have morphed into warrior costume with the American footage and renaming the hybrid *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, the network not only reinvented the show but Americanized it. Indeed, as one Saban executive said to me in a 1996 interview, *Power Rangers* is "an American classic." Several people in the children's entertainment business have confirmed that a Japanese show like this could never have been mainstreamed on network TV in the United States with actors who were Asian instead of American or with credentials that openly announced their origins as "made-in-Japan." Indeed, most of the American youth I interviewed about the program in the late 1990s never knew it originally came from Japan.

Power Rangers started as an American/Americanized show in 1993. Eleven years later the episode "Lost and Found in Translation" aired with what would appear to be a notable shift. While the show is still reshot with American actors and reculturalized to appeal to American tastes, explicit reference is now made to the fact that there is also a Japanese version of *Power Rangers*. From a show that once was entirely Americanized, a nod is now made to its Japanese counterpart. And this shift is self-consciously acknowledged in the episode's title, which proclaims—for itself and for its audience of American youth—that it has "found" a way not to be "lost" in the world of cultural/Japanese difference. Implicitly, a contrast is being made with the adults as

clueless about Japan as those in *Lost in Translation:* an attitude that has accompanied the J-craze in the United States where adults have remained mystified by the appeal, nature—and by association—the Japaneseness of play fads like *Pokémon*. Virtually all but one of the adults I interviewed at the height of U.S. "pokémania" in 1999, for example, proclaimed not only ignorance but utter mystification as to the very logic of this fantasy-world. "I simply don't get it," I heard time and time again from parents bemused by children fixated on collecting stacks of pokémon cards or spending hours with Game Boys trying to master virtual landscapes to capture all 151 (and now over 300 with later game editions) of pocket monsters.

JAPANESE TELEVISION SHOWS TODAY ARE BROADCAST IN THE UNITED STATES WITH OVERT SIGNS OF THEIR JAPANESE ORIGINS IN PLACE. RATHER THAN TEMPLES, CHOPSTICKS, OR JAPANESE SCRIPTS BEING ROTOSCOPED OUT THEY ARE HIGHLIGHTED AS THE VERY HOOK TO REEL KIDS IN.

In contrast to such adult confusion are the attitudes of youth who, in the face of more and more Japanese properties entering the U.S. market and claiming trendy popularity, are both more comfortable with and even active proponents for a Japanese style identified as the latest in "cool." As I was told recently by (another) Saban executive, Japanese television shows today are broadcast in the United States with overt signs of their Japanese origins in place. Rather than temples, chopsticks, or Japanese scripts being rotoscoped out (or rice balls being altered to appear as doughnuts—devices still used in the U.S. broadcast of *Pokémon* cartoons, nonetheless), they are highlighted as the very hook to reel kids in. Such signs of Japaneseness signal, in part, an authenticity that is taken even further by avid fans of anime and manga whose preferences for the nontranslated or dubbed originals are driving the study of Japanese language in university (and high school) classes across the country. Sought and fetishized is some rubric of cultural/Japanese difference.[1] For example, in *Duel Masters*—the newest media mix of card game, cartoon show, manga, video game—the keyword of this play universe is *kaijûdô*, or "the way of monsters" (*dô* for "the way," as in the way of bonsai or the way of karate, and *kaijû* for monsters). Players aim to become *kaijûdô* masters by learning to manipulate their cards, strategies, and moves in order to battle, and defeat, the powerful monsters ruling five magical worlds. As one of the official guidebooks puts it, players must adopt a samurai-like code of discipline and resoluteness: "I make no excuses. My actions are my voice. . . . I have no enemies." It further explains that "when most anime is imported

to the U.S., nearly anything Japanese gets changed or dubbed over. This is untrue with *Duel Masters*. While battling, characters shout out their commands in Japanese, giving *Duel Masters* a much more distinct Eastern flavor" (Wizards of the Coast 2004, 5).

What do such play figures—*kaijûdô* as played by American kids in a gameset peppered with Japanese, or U.S. power rangers viewing their Japanese counterparts on split (American/Japanese) TV—tell us about the issues I've laid out in this chapter? One observation to make here concerns the juxtaposition but not jumbling together (or eradication altogether) of different cultural codes. Immediately before the *Duel Masters* guidebook claims that the inclusion of Japanese commands gives a "distinct Eastern flavor," it has noted the card game resembles the U.S.-made *Magic: The Gathering* and adds that the same American company, Wizards of the Coast, has, in fact, produced it. As the anime and manga come from Japanese creators (produced by Shôgakakan and Mitsui-Kids), *Duel Masters* is a joint production, distributed—as is now commonplace for such Japanese products that get exported to the West—differently in Japan/Asia versus in the United States and all territories outside Asia. In terms of production, this (as well as other U.S./Japanese fare such as *Power Rangers* and *Pokémon*) represents a model of global power different from that associated with Americanization. The property is jointly produced, differentially distributed, and culturally mixed. Unlike McDonaldization, with its Fordist formula of one size fits all or even with the globalization it now travels with—a global commodity that gets localized differently in differing locale—the J-craze is both "Eastern" and not, a globalized fantasy whose intermixture of the foreign and familiar is not localizable in/to any one place.

As a twenty-two-year-old American male put this from the fan's perspective, what is appealing to American youth about Japanese cool today is its utter sense of difference. "It could be Mars," for the strangeness of the setting, story lines, and characters. But equally important is knowing that this all comes from a real place: from a Japan that actually exists, which inspires some fans at least into learning about Japanese culture, language, or history. "Japan" signifies something important here, but the signifier is shifting: a marker of phantasm and difference yet one anchored in a reality of sorts—a country Americans can study and visit. So fantasy and realism are both at work here, the one serving as the alibi for the other in what Roland Barthes (1957) describes as the construction of myth. Japan's role in the current J-craze among American youth is mythic: a place whose meaning fluctuates between the phantasmal and real, the foreign and familiar, the strange and

everyday. Many fans of Japanese anime, manga, card games, and toys I have talked with in the United States voice their attraction in similar terms: of having their imaginations piqued by the complexity and strangeness of an alternative (non-American) fantasy world equally enjoyable for the fluency they strive to master in it (by learning some Japanese, downloading pirates of the Japanese originals, acquiring knowledge about the cultural references). The first part of this is not so different from the depiction of foreignness in *Lost in Translation*—a quirky and bizarre otherworld. But, in contrast to the adult perspective taken in the film, American youth-fans of J-cool want to be "found" rather than "lost" in this terrain (by keeping the edginess of its difference yet acquiring the savvy of a global traveler/citizen to speak the language).

At work here is a new kind of global imagination, or new at least in the way it differs from an older model of Americanization. Joseph Nye has defined the latter in terms of what he calls soft power, the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments," which "arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (2004, x). Power of this nature comes from inspiring the dreams and desires of others through projecting images about one's own culture that are broadly appealing and transmitted through channels of global communication (such as television and film). Thus far, only the United States has had the soft power—in the strength of its cultural industries and the appeal of a culture that has translated around the world as rich, powerful, and exciting—to dominate the global imagination. But not only is America's soft power ebbing today because, in part, of the global unpopularity of such U.S.-led initiatives as the Iraq war, so too is the desirability—even in the United States—of a more monolithic, monochromatic fantasy-world. As the film critic A. O. Scott wrote recently about the 2004 Toronto film festival, the global currency of films made in India, China, South Korea, and Japan is increasing, defying the prediction that Hollywood "would take over with its blockbuster globalism dissolving all vestiges of the local, particular and strange" (2004, 86).

As Scott sees it, Hollywood is stuck in making movies that, while technologically impressive, project "counterfeit worlds" that spectacularize fantasies out of sync with the lived emotions of people in the twenty-first century. By contrast, movies filmed and produced elsewhere (his example is *The World*, by the Chinese director Jia Zhangkhe) are often smaller scale but more emotionally real. Stories of ordinary people struggling to make it in Beijing, Seoul, Calcutta, Taipei, where they are both dislocated and at home in these cities in jagged transition, project "the anxious, melancholy feeling of being

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simultaneously connected and adrift" (Scott 2004, 86)—a state deeply recognizable to postindustrial subjects the world over. Of course, Hollywood filmmaking embedded with attractive images of American culture remains ever popular both at home (though theater attendance has slipped in recent years) and even more perhaps overseas (where revenues for films like *Titanic* are much greater). But, as the film critic Charles Taylor observes, what characterizes the emotional condition of the millennial era is "being in a world where the only sense of home is to be found in a constant state of flux" (quoted in Scott 2004, 86)—a state conjured up through mobility, nomadism, travel, the foreign. This is a descriptor, in fact, of *Lost in Translation* and also of much of the J-craze so popular in the United States today from the continual battles/dramas of the *Power Rangers* and *Sailor Moon* to the nomadic travels of the portable *tamagotchi* and would-be *Pokémon* masters.

With this, I make three final observations. The first, certainly well known already, concerns the diminishment, even collapse, of American soft power as the hegemonic center of global culture (what Iwabuchi Kôichi [2002] has called the "recentering of globalization"). The second is about new models of the global imagination today that, in the case of J-cool and its popularization around the world, carries an attractive power, but not one that is driven by or generates an attraction in others for the actual place or culture of the producing country. "Japan" does register in all this: itself a recent shift from the time when Japanese cultural products were marketed worldwide by "deodorizing" their roots (a cultural influence that a number of Japanese critics have referred to as invisible colonization and Iwabuchi (2002, 33) as cultural deodorization. But, as described above for American youth, it is not so much Japan itself as a compelling culture, power, or place that gets signified (despite the fact that this is precisely what the Japanese government is trying to capitalize on in all the rhetoric and attention currently given to Japan's new "soft power" in the globalization of J-cool). Rather, "Japan" operates more as signifier for a particular brand and blend of fantasy-ware: goods that inspire an imaginary space at once foreign and familiar and a subjectivity of continual flux and global mobility, forever moving into and out of new planes/powers/terrains/relations.

This is my third observation about the relationship between Japanese toys and the global imagination: that the current popularization of J-cool

around the world is best understood in terms of its fantasy formation that, in turn, lends itself so productively to capitalistic marketing in the new millennium. As I argue elsewhere (Allison 2006), key here are the two qualities of polymorphous perversity: continual change and the stretching of desire across ever-new zones/bodies/products, and techno animism, the foregrounding of technology that animates spirits, creatures, and intimacies of various sorts. What emerges is a fantasy of perpetual transformation (humans who morph into rangers, icons that "grow" into virtual pets) that, extended into the cyber frontier, promises (new age) companionship and connectedness, albeit in a commodity form. Resonant with the fluctuation, fragmentation, and speedup facing postindustrial youth across the world, such a fantasy also becomes addictive, compelling players to keep changing and expanding their play frontiers through a capitalism of endless innovation, information, and acquisition.

If, indeed, the nature of today's global culture is shifting away from one dominated by the United States, it makes sense that cultures more on the periphery would take the lead in a new kind of decentered global imagination: one premised on dislocation and flux and on "losing" but also "finding" one's way in a terrain of endless change and regeneration. In the case of Japanese pop culture, what could be called its national imagination—mass fantasies reflecting the times intended primarily for domestic versus global sales (as so many manga and anime artists claim is their primary target, as was also true of the original *Pokémon* game designed for Japanese boys)—is filled with the same theme of uprootedness and disconnectedness. The 2004 television anime *Môsô Dairinin (Paranoia Agent)* by Kon Satoshi, for example, traces the parallel, and colliding, paths of two adolescents, both riding the cusp of making and losing it in mainstream society. One, a young woman and the successful designer of the latest fad in cute toys, is cracking under corporate pressure to come up with a successor. The other, a teenage boy and former star baseball player (and popular kid) at school, gets accused of being the latest youth killer (the *shônen batto*, a roller skater who attacks with a bat). In this story, fantasy toys and violent acts run together (the designer gets attacked by the killer, and the boy's reality disintegrates into violence), standing for both phantoms and real humans, imaginary play pals and corporate cannibalism.

The protagonists in *Môsô Dairinin* are characterized by yearning, loss, and the struggle for recognition. The same could be said of the less obviously edgy (and globally distributed) *Pokémon:* nomadic characters on the eternal quest to be the world's greatest pokémon master. This path is always somewhere

but nowhere and full of conquests but also contests that never end. There is something promising but also chilling in this capitalistic dreamworld. For, while the drive to progress is ever present—winning more battles, keeping *tamagotchi* alive longer, getting (and getting) additional pokémon—one can never actually or definitively reach the goal, given that it is a frontier stretching continually further—into more Power Rangers toys, countless Pokémon Game Boy games, never-ending Sailor Moon play equipment. This is the formula for capitalism, of course: endless desire and deferment coming together in a cycle of consumptive repetition. And, in this, there is nothing new or particularly promising. Indeed, as noted in a 2003 report by Hakuhôdô Research Institute on Japanese youth (Hakuhôdô Seikatsu Sôgô Kenkyûjo 2003), a sense of "paralysis" about the future and interest in nothing beyond the immediacy of consumption characterizes girls (but less so boys) who have grown up in the anxious years of the post-Bubble (the report labels them the "*shûkuri sedai,*" or "sugar generation"). Such a paralytic sensibility is part of the capitalistic imagination at play in the properties described in this chapter and exported far beyond Japan.

But there *is* something more promising and possibly new(er), as well, in the imaginative strategies that Japanese toys like *Pokémon* bring to the lives—both fantasy and real—of children who play with them in the United States and elsewhere. Continually morphing and disassembling (and reassembling) its parts is the signature of a *Sailor Moon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* play world: one that offers kids a way to deal with—and learn how not to get stuck in—a world/identity premised on flux. This, too, though, could be said of most Marvel comics produced in the United States. More distinctive in the Japanese brand of morphability is techno animism that involves two components. First is the high degree of interactivity in the equipment that makes fantasy play ever more personally customizable and also prosthetic: games that get carried in one's pocket and whose (electronic/virtual) portal to the world is continuously open. Second is the profusion of polymorphous attachments: of nomadic humans finding new kinds of transhuman attachments whether with digitalized pets, iconicized pokémon, or monsterish trading cards. And kids I know, both in Japan and the United States, admit to finding in all of the above not only hours of great pleasure but also a fantasy world that has sustained and nourished them through what are often tough and lonely times.

Finally, of course, there is the significance/signification of Japan in the creation of a global imagination no longer dominated (or at least not so completely) by the United States. The attractive power at work here may be less for a real place than for the sense of displacement enjoined by the post-

industrial condition of travel, nomadism, and flux—generated and signified here by somewhere not-the-United States but within the orbit of the globally familiar. Still, American hegemony is getting challenged in the symbolic, virtual medium of fantasy making. And, in this, I see a positive contribution being made to the cultural politics of global imaginings in the current J-craze in the United States.

Note

1. Such fans also tend to prefer that the anime and manga they consume are as unchanged from the original Japanese as possible: subbed (subtitled) rather than dubbed, for example, with no adulteration being rendered on the text, characters, or plotline at all. Distributors and marketers of J-cool vary on the localization strategies adopted for the U.S. marketplace. In the case of *Pokémon*, the movies were considerably changed to suit what the U.S. producers considered to be American tastes (the need for the story lines to have a clear good versus evil plotline, for the background music to be American, etc.), the cartoons were rotoscoped to erase explicitly foreign items, and many pocket monsters were given more American-sounding names. By contrast, on the cable television network *Cartoon Network*, the broadcasts of *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *Paranoia Agent*, for example, are almost entirely intact without modification to names, plotline, or characterizations (yet the anime are dubbed rather than subbed).

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