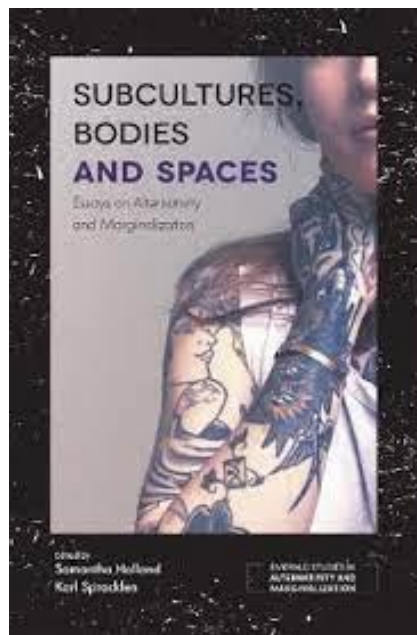


## Japanophilia in Kuwait

### How far does International Culture Penetrate?

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**Abstract:** I launched the online survey at a private English-speaking university in Kuwait to evaluate the status, value and importance of Japanese and Korean popular cultures in Kuwait. East-Asian culture is a subculture that is very widespread in the region because of internet use and the influence of English-speaking education. The survey shows that this subculture can be understood as an alternative culture because it tends to contain a dissimulated critique of traditional Kuwaiti culture. Many students approach Japanese and Korean cultural products because they are in search for a coherent lifestyle founded on a certain ethics. The Japanese-Kuwaiti cultural transfer implies a double resistance towards the local culture *and* towards American culture. The resulting marginalization is therefore twofold, too. Resistance towards Western culture is here not based, as is often assumed in Arab contexts, on cultural closure and conservatism but rather on the willingness to engage with an alien culture. This creates a paradoxical pattern of resistance to both the East and the West through the adherence to another Eastern culture. The phenomenon can be understood in terms of globalization but also of anti-globalization.

Japanese culture is present in Kuwait in various shapes. Universities have manga clubs, Japanese conventions like Q8con or PlamoQ8 draw thousands of people, cosplay competitions take place several times per year, and the Japanese and Korean embassies organize cultural events for young people. Universities invite specialists of Japan for well-attended talks. Of course, it would be wrong, naïve and – paradoxically – orientalist to find this surprising. All over the world young people are attracted by Japanese popular culture, so why should young Kuwaitis be different? Kuwait is a “normal” country in terms of internet access and communication, and the by far largest part of Japanese culture is not concerned by censorship. Haruki Murakami’s novels (though erotic in content) can be found in the main bookshop. A certain religious input in manga – as some characters can be derived from quasi-animist Shintoist deities – could raise concern, but even manga addicts seem rarely be aware of this connection. In this sense, “Japanophilia in Kuwait” is a non-topic except for

people who mistakenly assume that Kuwait is an isolated culture steeped in the Wahhabist tradition banning everything that does not directly reflect religious truths. The focus for this chapter came to my mind the day a female student, fully covered with niqab leaving only a tiny slit for the eyes, came to my office to tell me about her enthusiasm for manga. I found that her manga club drawings showed real artistic talent. Do you want to see my IMVU avatar, she asked? Out of her folder she took the drawing of a busty, scantily clad woman with tattoos and flowing blond hair striking a rather provocative pose. “This is me,” she said.

Roughly speaking, there are two kinds of Japanophilia in Kuwait. Many young Japanophiles consume Japanese culture in the same way in which they consume Hollywood, soap operas or commercial Pop-music: without any ambition to unearth a cultural background linked to this entertainment, without using the newly discovered culture as a basis from which to view their own culture, and without using the new culture to construct for themselves a more nuanced Kuwaiti identity. However, a minority of young Kuwaitis is doing exactly this. I decided to search for this alternative minority that seems to be constantly growing. It was not the “officially” modernized youth consuming mainstream Western culture and who has recently added Japanese and Korean mass culture to their menu of entertainment. Nor was it the – often affluent – youth that had in past decades acquired Western knowledge by spending time in the West and by attending Western universities. The youths I was interested in were not Westernized in a straightforward, “modern” way but in a more convoluted, “funky,” individualized, or postmodern way. A more personal, reflective, and selective use not only of Japanese, but also of Western cultural elements made those friends of Japan different from other consumers of popular culture.

As the example of the niqab girl with the sexy avatar shows almost literally, certain aspects of globalization in non-Western countries are not manifest but hidden. In terms of space, “Japanese culture in Kuwait” can be theorized as deterritorialization; in terms of time, it can be theorized as a reconfiguring of the relationships between tradition and modernity. While in the past, “Westernized” Kuwaitis went most typically to a Western country to study, today young people can get “globalized” on their own, through the internet. Globalization through the internet functions in a very personal way since new ideas can be received from foreign online friends. This kind of online communication is particularly frequent among people who are interested in Japanese or Korean culture. Because of the individual way in which the internet functions as a medium, many people will mix their own cocktail of globalization and develop a subculture that will be opposed to the mainstream consumer culture of their country.

### **The Meme Café**

My research on Japan and Korea based subculture in Kuwait started in the Meme Café. The Meme Café (or Meme Curry) is a Japanese restaurant serving Japanese food (mainly Japanese curry) and is located on the top floor of a videogame shopping mall in a rundown urban area of Kuwait City called Rihab (Hawalli Governorate). Here one can meet many of the above-described young people. The

customers are all male and, according to the waiter, practically all of them are Kuwaitis. This does not mean that this subculture is a mainly male affair but males in Kuwait can move around more easily than females in certain spaces and at certain times. On blogs women complain that the Meme Café's location is not suitable for women. The young men's look is casual as they are wearing flip flops and shorts. They often have long hair, which is still frowned upon in traditional Kuwaiti circles. The public here is not the rich crowd of Kuwaitis arriving with Ferraris and wearing Rolex. The former will rather be spotted at traditional shisha places in the city center or in Salmiya; nor are those the poorer Bedouin types who can be encountered in fast foods. In the Meme Café we find a middle-class youth that has had some access to education and educated themselves over the internet. The mall's shabby appearance (the lower floors are devoted to furniture adapted to the gaudy taste of poorer expats) draws a strict line between this subculture and the fancy world of Kuwait's oil driven luxury lifestyle.

In the entire videogame part of the mall Japan is important. Most businesses located close to the restaurant incorporate Japanese themes or are exclusively catering to Japanophile tastes. Shops with names like "Anime Planet" sell games and action figures. The restaurant is extremely popular. While the five Arab and Indian restaurants in the mall are almost empty, the Meme Café is always full, and the premises have recently been extended. People eat Japanese curry, tempura, and udon. The waiters are wearing head bands like Japanese waiters and the menu contains a manga telling the story of the Meme Café. Manga drawings by customers are hanging on the walls. But there are no chopsticks and the "meme special" versions of some dishes might be considered rather unfortunate interpretations of Japanese food: a grid of mayonnaise stripes usually found on California rolls is put on the udon and on the curry. The restaurant's website is entirely in Arabic though the printed menu also has English translations. Bloggers criticize the recent substantial price increase as well as the marginalized location of the restaurant. The high prices seem to point towards a gentrification of this subculture; on the other hand, the fact the Meme Café remains where it is and even expands shows that the subcultural identity will not be abandoned.

This is the crowd that I consider as representative of a new subculture in Kuwait and which I wanted to interview. How could I reach them? A survey addressing Japanophilia in Kuwait was a good starting point, though the more interesting (in terms of individuality, creativity, and critical consciousness) Japanophiles needed to be separated from the passive consumers. Therefore I decided, as I began interviewing people about their cultural interest, to introduce certain questions about Western subculture into the survey. The more individualist people are not only interested in Japan but also tend to search Western popular culture for particular themes. A Kuwaiti Japanophile who knows Jimi Hendrix and *Clockwork Orange* is most probably not the manga consumer who is only interested in fighting scenes. I introduced a general knowledge question inquiring if they know some non-mainstream Western cultural items like Pink Floyd or 9gag.

The internet is the first reason for the emergence of this alternative, "funky" type of globalized youngster. In the Gulf, Western cultural elements tend to be absorbed very quickly, which accelerates both the deterritorializing and the reconfiguring processes. Kuwait has the highest rate of Twitter users per capita, and Saudi Arabia has the highest rate of YouTube users per capita in the world (see

Mocanu et al. 2013). Young people in Kuwait (who represent the largest sector of Kuwaiti society) constitute the highest concentration of Internet users, which runs around 63% of all internet users in Kuwait (Wheeler, npn). Mazeedi and Ismail state that in Kuwait, 73.4% of students who use the Internet feel that it was being used in socially abusive and ethically unreliable ways (Conference presentation, see Wheeler). However, the influence is not merely negative. The internet has brought about dramatic changes in society, for example “the transgression of gender lines, which are otherwise relatively strictly enforced in Kuwaiti society. This capability is especially important for Kuwaitis who have attended government schools that are segregated, a majority of the population” (Wheeler, npn). Wheeler found that the Kuwaiti internet generation “redefines norms and values for future generations” because here a “new thinking, perhaps contrary to one’s upbringing, can grow unchecked by traditional authority figures.” Somehow the internet always goes “against.”

### **The Logic of Subculture in the Gulf**

Japanese/Korean popular culture in Kuwait can be called “subculture” for several reasons. First, it tends to be critical of traditional Kuwaiti culture. Subculture has been defined as a possibly subversive cultural manifestation existing within the margins of a mainstream culture opposing the latter’s “passively accepted commercially provided styles and meanings” (Riesman 1950, 361). Subculture youths generally distrust the authority and leadership embedded in mainstream culture. They are yearning for a different quality of life and question the values of contemporary culture and tradition. The arguably most radical subculture in Kuwait is the underground Hip-Hop culture, which is hidden but dynamic. The “Red Bull BC One Cypher” Hip-Hop competition (in its 13<sup>th</sup> year) gathers every year hundreds of spectators and a Graffiti park has been constructed in 2014. The independent curatorial initiative “Visual Therapy” has a blog, a curated space, a studio, and an online shop.

In Kuwait or in the Gulf in general, Western subculture has a peculiar status. Regional popular Arab culture is very much limited to pop music and traditional music or a mix of both. However, who would be the Arab Jimi Hendrix? There is little Arab Indie music. This partly explains why Japan is particularly fascinating for some Kuwaitis. Though being a non-Western country with social rules and traditions relatively far removed from those of the West, Japan has its own rock, punk, and hip-hop scene. The scene is so important that many young Japanese have no need to revert to Western culture at all but decide to stay in the realm of their own subculture. The Gulf countries have nothing similar, as a student pointed out in the survey when stating that for him/her the main difference between Japan and Kuwait is that “we don’t have a thing called ‘Kuwaiti Pop’ or anything like the manga or anime they have.”

Even the rest of the Arab world is arguably less well equipped than the West in terms of subculture. The status of Arab pop music can be compared with that of Japanese pop music. But when it comes to subculture or to a pop culture representing a whole package of alternative lifestyles including music, literature, films, and fashion, as it is the case for Japanese pop culture, there is no real equivalent in Arab culture. While in the realm of mass culture an equally strong pull from the

Arab and the Western side does exist, in the realm of subculture, the Arab pull is relatively weak. More often than Arab mass culture, Arab subculture is dependent on Western sources. Therefore, Western subculture elements tend to be absorbed very quickly by people who are looking for alternative cultural identities outside the realm of mass culture. But the existence of subculture in Kuwait is remarkable for still another reason. Whatever those subculture elements are, the present generation has most probably not been informed about them by their parents. Very few older Arabs whom I asked, know Jimi Hendrix while 20% of the young respondents knew him. This means that young Kuwaitis who responded to our survey constructed their subcultural identity, or perhaps even the concept of subculture itself, from scratch and on their own.

Traditional Kuwaiti popular culture might have a relatively weak pull in subcultural terms, but on the other hand, it is very exclusive. Imperatives about what should be done, how one should behave, and what should be consumed, are very strong. This also applies to the music one should listen to and to the pop stars one should adore. The person who listens to rap can easily be marginalized and be labeled “American.” Again, this is different from what happens in Western countries and also in Japan. The constellation of a “weak Arab subculture pull” plus Kuwaiti exclusiveness fosters the emergence of a subculture in which people look different, use different words and expressions, and can at times even be recognized by their body language.

The fact of speaking English quite well (sometimes better than Arabic) reinforces the above pattern. One reason why foreign-inspired subcultures develop relatively well in Kuwait is the strong presence of international schools. The spread of English education is unique in Kuwait, first because the population is affluent enough to pay for international schools, second because Arab public schools have a bad reputation. The colonial history might also play a (though minor) role here. This does not mean that all subculture youths have a good command of English. However, though English education is not necessary for acquiring any subculture identity in Kuwait, its pervasiveness remains important. A study by Hasanen *et al.* found “that individuals who studied at universities that use English as a medium of instruction show significant differences in the extent to which they embrace a global identity” (Hasanen *et al.* 2014, 544). This has repercussions on subculture consumption. Since the pull of Arab subculture is weak anyway, people who have a partially “English” identity are more likely to be drawn to Western subculture.

## **The Survey**

I launched the online survey at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), a Kuwaiti owned private English-speaking university. GUST currently has 3564 students, 85% of which are Kuwaiti nationals. Most of the others are born in Kuwait and have nationalities from a variety of Arab countries. 60% are female and 40% are male. 24% of come from English or American private schools, 11% from other private schools, and 65% from government schools. The tuition fees (about US\$20,000 per year) are covered by government scholarships on the condition that students have a moderately high GPA (grade point average). A Western-style curriculum (almost all textbooks used

are of Western, mostly American, origin) and a large proportion of Western teachers guarantee a relatively liberal environment. The GUST campus is certainly one of the most open-minded places in the country.

The survey was sent by email to all students and 301 students responded. 8 students left the survey blank or wrote only meaningless characters, which reduces the sample to 293. Two thirds (197 students) were between 18 and 22 years old, 41 were between 23 and 25, and the rest was over 25 years old. Only 29 participants were non-Kuwaitis. Respondents were enrolled for all sorts of majors though the majority (62%) studied accounting. 203 participants were female and 90 male, which contrasts with the all-male crowd I encountered in the Meme Café. Students received an extra credit for participation, which motivated also moderately interested individuals to respond.

The students who took the time to answer this questionnaire were overwhelmingly students interested in Japanese/Korean culture. However, 50 students indicated that they have no affinities with Japanese or Korean culture (except perhaps the food) but still answered all questions. In 11 cases of those 50, the respondents' dislike of or indifference towards these cultures was not formulated in a straightforward fashion. For example, a respondent would say that s/he "does not like anything Japanese or Korean," but still indicate his/her favorite manga character or even report that s/he went to a manga convention. Those contradictions are probably due to the fact that the respondent's interest decreased over a certain period of time. In the past, they were interested in Pokémon, but at present, this pop-culture is not very important for them. I analyzed the sample of those 50 individuals separately. This means that in this survey there is a ratio of 243 'pro' participants (83%) against 50 'contra' participants (17%) who tend towards an "I don't like it" attitude.

## **Interests**

Anime/mange remains the main driving force of far-Eastern cultural consumption. Respondents could choose from eight options but could check more than one. On average, they checked two options:

Anime (169)

Manga (100)

Martial arts (70)

Korean films (67)

Video games with Japanese content (63)

K-pop (56)

Japanese horror movies (45)

Visual kei (11).

As "other" options, students mentioned "fashion," specifying the harajuku and gyaru street fashion style, J-rock, and Korean TV dramas. When being asked "How important is Japanese/Korean culture in your life?" 14% responded that it is very important, 32% that it is quite important and 53%

that it is not important at all. On the other hand, 42% stated that Pokémon was “very important” for them. 30 indicated their favorite manga character. 19 were members of an anime/manga club and 57 went at least once to an anime convention like Q8Con, Plamo, ONGCon, GXCon, Rumble Expo, FikraKW, but also to conventions abroad like Extravagant Gaming, ComicCon Dubai, and MEFCC (Middle East Film and ComicCon). Only 9 participate in Cosplay but 46 have or had an avatar and many describe it:

A Chibi version of my own self with a funny expression.

A demon with a skeletal skull (I don't want it to look similar to me. I have low self-esteem, so I made it look intimidating).

Pastel pink haired with blue eyes and styling both pastel colors fashion and Korean street fashion.

She wears old style red dara'a, [has] tanned skin, brown eyes, long black twisted hair with some pearls on her head.

A sad girl with hair that reflects the universe.

Brown hair with blonde stripes or shades just from the down and hazel eyes.

The majority (77%) finds the Japanese/Korean material on the internet. 11% get it from friends and very few get it through mail order or bookshops. Of 157 individuals, 50 said that they knew this culture already between ages 2 and 7, another 48 said that they started between ages 8 and 13, and only very few said they discovered it after age 17. 70 said they were introduced to it by friends or siblings (almost always by brothers) but 40 state that they discovered it themselves on the internet on gaming sites, YouTube, forums, blogs, social media, and through spams. The website KissAnime seems to be important. Some refer to television, especially to the Arab TV channel Spacetoon but also to MBC4 and to KTV, which was showing Takeshi's Castle in the 1990s. Korean dramas were often discovered by randomly browsing TV channels and getting stuck with the Korean Arirang channel, whose dramas have English subtitles. 18 indicate having discovered Japanese/Korean pop culture on American television. Some state that they watched anime dubbed in Arabic from early childhood on without knowing that it was Japanese. A girl reports that when she was using makeup she loved big eyes, and suddenly discovered a parallel with manga characters, which incited her interest.

The students do not seem to encounter much resistance from their families though 40 out of 293 (13%) say that many people in their family are against it. 23 individuals report that at least one of their parents was interested in Japanese culture when they were young.

## **Background**

Most students describe their families as relatively traditional. 33% check “rather traditional” and 50% check “a little traditional.” There was practically no difference here between the “interested” and the “non-interested” sample. However, when it comes to the question “Are you religious?” one can

observe important gaps between the students interviewed in this survey and students whom I had surveyed on another occasion in the past. In the present survey, only 19% answer “yes” and 56% answer “moderately.” 24% check “not very much.” This contrasts very much with a survey that I conducted in 2014 at the same university with a sample of 1660 students.<sup>1</sup> At that time, 53% stated that for them religion is “very important” and 36% that it is “important.” Only 11% checked “not very important.” In that earlier survey (concerning the wearing of the hijab), 92% confirmed to pray daily, and 64% indicated to have a “good” knowledge of Islam. When in the present survey only 19% state that they are religious (against 56% who are “moderately religious” and 24% who are “not very religious”), it can be concluded that far-Eastern popular culture attracts less religious students.

### **English Language Skills**

It was necessary to establish the importance of the English language in the process of acculturation. 36% indicate that their parents speak English “quite well” and 26% say “sort of.” 38% of the students’ parents speak no English. Again, there was practically no difference here between the “interested” and the “non-interested” sample. 135 of those who read manga read them in English and 24 read them in Arabic. Only 53 say that it does improve their English, 119 say that it does a little, and another 199 say that it has no effect on the mastery of their English. 33% went to English schools, which is higher than the overall at GUST (24%). In the small sample of those who are not interested in Japanese/Korean culture, the numbers are a little lower (30%). 8% say that they speak only English with their friends and 58% that they use a mixture of English and Arabic. Among the “not interested” ones, this number goes down to 48%, and 5% speak only in English with their friends.

### **National Identity**

Hasanen *et al.* have shown that “the language policy in international schools weakens national identity and enhances the global identity of students” (549) because “generally, Kuwaiti media reinforce nationalism, provide a Kuwaiti perspective on issues and interests and emphasize the importance of local culture, heritage and Islam, which all reflect the nation’s prejudices” (550). It has also been stated that in Kuwait, “frequent viewers of American television were more likely to endorse equal gender roles and a liberal outlook on life in Kuwaiti society” (Abdulrahim *et al.* 2009: 63). However, to perceive the exposure to foreign cultures only as a factor weakening national identity can be problematic. While studies like Hasanen’s describe relatively simple West-East influences, the reception of Japanese/Korean culture by Kuwaitis is uniquely complex. It is more complex than the Western way of seeing Japanese culture. When being asked “What do you like about Japanese (or Korean) pop culture?” 33 simply answer that they like it because it is different, unique, or a “whole world by itself.” However, this does not always mean that they were looking *only* for differences. Students also look for similarities. Several students write that Japanese culture is “different and also somewhat like our own,” which means that they contrast both Japanese/Korean and Kuwaiti with

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<sup>1</sup> See Botz-Bornstein and Abdulla-Khan Noreen 2014.



“Western.” They recognize Japanese/Korean as exotic from their own point of view and even more from the Western point of view. At the same time, they notice “people who sit on the floor, who take off their shoes when entering a house, and who like to eat rice.” One concludes that this is “exactly like in Kuwait.” The social norms are similar. As the most striking feature, students point out the formulaic behaviors of Japanese and Korean people. These behaviors contrast very much with American casual social norms. In the Anglo-American world, professors are wearing shorts, everybody is called by the first name, and authority seems to have been abolished in the 1960s. In America, non-formulaic behavior can lead to success, which works neither in Japan nor in Kuwait. This means that students discover not only the exotic other whom they can reject or emulate, but they are also stunned by the fact that societies similar to their own can be globally successful.

### **General Culture**

Are there differences between the “interested” and the “non-interested” ones in terms of general culture? Naruto was naturally known to 71% of the “interested” ones and much less to the others. What about some other Western cultural icons? I asked about Pink Floyd, 9gag, Louis Armstrong, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, Frank Sinatra, and *Clockwork Orange*. Bob Marley was known by more than the half of all students. The others rated between 24% and 35%, with *Clockwork Orange* reaching a minimum of 13%. With regard to all items, the “non-interested” ones scored an average of 10% less than the “interested” ones, except for Bob Marley and Frank Sinatra.

### **What Makes it so Attractive?**

Japanese/Korean cultures are not simply consumed as an entertainment. ‘Cool’ and ‘cute’ appear only twice in the survey though one could have expected those aesthetic categories to be more central. Only one student says that s/he likes fighting scenes. Clothes and fashion are mentioned only 3 times each, and the words fun, joyful, friendly, exciting, and entertaining appear only once each. Only one student is impressed by the technology. Catchy tunes and the choreography are mentioned, but the messages contained in the stories are put forward much more often. Aesthetic qualities like style (7) and creativity (5) are noticed, but more students seem to have a strong interest in the culture and the traditions of Japan and Korea. “I like how everything, from their arts to their food, is deeply rooted in their culture,” is a typical statement. The words behaviors, habits, manners, and customs appear repeatedly. This means that most students look at Japanese and Korean cultures not from an aesthetic but from an ethical angle. They are impressed by the Japanese politeness and their capacity to organize life, which lead to harmonious societies or what three students characterize as “simple life.” Discipline and a good working attitude are pointed out over again.

Their politeness and their peaceful attitude.

Smart, hard workers.

## *Japan in Kuwait*

Efforts and hard work will always show in the things they make and I appreciate that.

Active and growing.

Advance quickly.

Organized and respectable. Also have good technology.

How much thoughts and efforts they put into what they make.

How they give their best and make so much effort with dancing and singing. And taking care of their looks.

Polite to each other. Japan is strong independent country, even though they face a lot of natural disasters they stand up again doing her best again.

A student writes that they “organize their life starting from the clothes they wear.” This means that many students look for a coherent lifestyle founded on a certain ethics. This becomes even more obvious in the answers to the next question.

### **Would you say that Japanese (or Korean) culture contrasts very much with Kuwaiti culture?**

As expected, most students find Kuwait more conservative. No drinking in Kuwait, no public festivals, no karaoke bars. 81 find that everything is different, but 10 say that nothing is different; 12 say that they don’t know. One student writes that it’s like comparing batman to superman. Two students say that Japanese and Koreans are more creative than Kuwaitis. A student notices that the “idea of masculinity and attractiveness is very different.” Religion – contrary to what could be expected – is mentioned only twice. Differences of dress, greetings, food, and the way of speaking are mentioned 14 times. A student explains that the Japanese way of bowing could be considered offensive in Kuwait “because we can only bow to God.” But students also find similarities. Some believe that kindness, hospitality, and honesty are essential in both cultures. There is also an emphasis on fashion with which Kuwaitis can empathize.

However, the big topic is once again ethics. 15 are impressed by the work ethics, organization, and the application of rules, norms, and values, dedication to education.

In a way yes, because in Japanese and Korean culture, teamwork is highly emphasized and being loyal to the organization in which they work, those things do not apply in Kuwait. Also, though both Kuwait and Japan/Korea are considered high context cultures, Japanese culture is even more formal, also, you usually refer to someone with their last name and sometimes accompanied by a title.

From what we can see, they are definitely more organized than we are, and rules are rules in contrast to our culture where things are always unorganized.

I believe we should learn a lot from the way Japanese people manage their schools and education. They cover the basic fundamentals of Islam more than Kuwaiti people even though they are not Muslim.

One wonders how some parents can still think that this culture can have a bad influence on their children. Second, the word respect appears again and again (36 times in all comments). It is used in two contexts: (1) Japanese and Koreans show respect to each other; (2) they also show respect to outsiders. Ten students say that the main difference between the cultures is that Korea/Japan shows more respect to others.

Very non-judgmental respectful society, acknowledges different types of capabilities and talents.

They respect parents a lot. The difference between them [and us is that] they care about environment.

The difference is that they embrace the uniqueness of a person.

Respect towards their culture. Respect all people.

The respect peoples' differences.

I knew that they respect Muslims who fast in Ramadan.

The fact that students use these observations as an answer to the question about differences between Japan/Korea and Kuwait signifies that in their view, respect is not as much valued in Kuwaiti society. However, when it comes to the respect of parents, Kuwaitis see strong similarities with their own culture.

They have many traits that us Kuwaitis do, like respect our parents and must stay clean and tidy and to greet everyone.

The respect they have of their parents and how they treat them and how close families are in Japan.

It is slightly similar in some ways as the importance of their national culture and respect for the older.

I'd rather start with the similarities; we both show much respect for the elderly and for our parents

They both hold respect and honor in high standings. We both have similar culture when it comes to family. respectful to person who is older (they are more respectful than us).

In spite of the flagrant modernity of these pop cultures, the majority of the students emphasize the traditional character of Japan and Korea, which they find impressive and to which they can relate.

They have traditional behavior everywhere.

Some of their family ties are different and how they deal with cousins but similar in the customs of marriage & parenting.

The family issues are very similar.

The same because of the conservative society.

## *Japan in Kuwait*

Not much different if we look at the importance of tradition in both cultures.

Both feel proud with their tradition.

Similarities, such as the emphasis on family ties.

Moreover, it's that they still know their traditional life even the new generations.

Different from all things that we are used to. Everyone is more of a fan of American culture but Japan & Korea still have respect to their traditions which makes them different but very interesting.

Two students even believe that Korea and Japan are more traditional than Kuwait. Other are particularly fascinated by the fact that Japan is

So modern, but still grabs hold of their traditions in a beautiful way.

Or by

The existence of a mix of cultures and the adaptation of multiple parts of other cultures into it makes it a strange concoction.

### **How much personal research do students undertake to learn about the history and culture of those countries?**

It must be said beforehand that, in general, students at GUST are known to be not very much attracted by world history. This study must be put in the context of a society driven by consumerism and entertainment where knowledge is not very much valued. It is therefore surprising that almost half of the students indicates having made some efforts to approach the history and culture of those countries. The other 50% did not. The difference between Japan and Korea is “not clear” or “not really clear” to 54%. Only 23% know what bushido is. 42% are aware that Japanese manga have sometimes input from the Shintoism. On the other hand, the knowledge can be punctually quite concrete: some students know the Meiji era, the Sengoku period, and Chuseok. Sometimes the knowledge comes from watching anime about Japanese history. Some try to understand the lyrics of Japanese songs and search for historical references.

I always try to learn more about it rather than just sticking to watching anime. I'm into learning the Japanese proverbs and the mythology that was written back in the Edo era. And I'm still on the progress of learning more and more.

Me and my family were interested in the story behind the ring.

I was interested in some of the religious references that they make sometimes, and some of the characters have very complex philosophical ideas behind them that were even [present] in the Greek mythology.

Only 12 students put forward religion and myths as their main interests. Many looked for information about geisha, kawaii culture, samurais, traditional clothes or the lifestyle in Japan... Three were interested in Japanese philosophy. However, the by far most popular topic is war.

I researched some history of warlords like Oda Nabnuga [Nobunaga] or Date Masumumne [Masamune] and a little about Korean empires. I have also researched about their folklore and legends, a little about some artists and classic novelist.

How they lost the war.

I found out that Japanese history is built on betrayal that many shogun in Japan history betrayed each other know a lot about the civil wars in feudal japan. It is one of my favorite cultures to study and understand The general history of the Japanese Edo period and its conflicts.

The shogun and feudal Japan but I kind of dropped the history lesson after a while.

Some things about the warring states.

I search about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Researched a bit about the civil wars in there between the samurais to learn more about ruruni kenshin.

World war.

I searched about how they recovered after WWII and a lot about their education and general information about their lifestyle.

I took huge interest in Japanese history especially when it comes to war, clans or big known warriors who changed the land.

### **Did your interest in Japanese/Korean culture change your way of seeing the world?**

To this question, 116 answer 'yes' and 174 answer 'no'. Some comment that they find the morals of manga childish and that they can only be consumed for fun. One student says that Japan is all about "Sushi'n losing wars." Six state that it changed "everything" for them. Many are more precise and explain how it affected them. For a smaller group, it concerns the aesthetic perception, as emerges from these comments:

It has shown me how beautiful the world is.

I see now that the world has beauty.

Japanese culture makes me positive and optimistic!

## *Japan in Kuwait*

For me, the world (or at least the society I live in) has become dull and boring. It made me want to live in the Japanese culture and experience it firsthand.

I feel like it makes me see the world in more color.

Japan made me realize how the world is not all flower and sometimes you they will be darkness in your life.

The world is not all bad with anime in it, it lights it up in a way.

I started to notice a lot of things that I didn't before.

It unleashed my creativity and broke down many boundaries.

A by far bigger group puts forward ethical themes. 26 state having been influenced by Japanese values and discipline and claim that it changed their character.

I like how Japanese people treasure WORK and it made me do that too. Although I am a lazy person.

They're so organized and the way they raise their kids inspires me so much.

I've tried to adapt some aspects of Japanese culture into my life as well as work. I've introduced the concept of Keizen at my workplace and that interested my superiors.

Even more popular is the "open minded" theme. 29 students answer that the contact with those cultures made them more tolerant of other cultures, that it made them think differently, and that they look now at the world from a different angle:

A culture shock to be honest. I became more open minded instead of the rigid way of thinking.

To be tolerant of all diverse existences, human or otherwise.

Made me more open minded, creative and taught me professionalism. And to value knowledge.

The biggest subgroup gives this "open minded" theme a more ethical slant by elaborating once again about the importance of respect. Two suggest that the confrontation with this pop culture made them less racist.

I have more respect to others now. It made me realize that each individual has their own concerns and is trying hard to live by day-to-day. I have grown appreciative of some of my teachers, even the ones I disliked.

I have really close family members who think Asian men look like females, which to me is not true. They do have clear skins with no hair but that's what makes them special and we should respect out differences.

Respect peoples' privacy.

Respect, respect, and respect. All the way.

Respecting people.

The way they treat people.

It let me see that some countries don't care about organizing society or respecting others.

### **Does it make you different from other people in society?**

This was the final question that was supposed to grasp the marginalization of this kind of culture. 30 answered 'yes', 41 answered 'no', 9 said 'a little' or 'may be'. Three explained why they think that it does *not* make them different:

Globalization and the internet is blurring the lines. Much more people are getting into Japanese culture, a lot are already into it. However, because they fear what people think of them, they keep it hidden."

To be honest, not really. We are living in a world where cultures are intertwined. Especially with the internet where we are exposed to many cultures around the world.

Not so much, because Asian culture is very popular even here in Kuwait.

Yes, but not a lot because there are people like me in my country.

I think that Asian culture is very widespread in this generation, you can find a lot of anime lovers, so I think a lot of people will think the same way.

Two say that "It does influence my character, in a good way, so I believe so, yes" and that "It just make me funnier." However, another 25 explain, often quite lengthily, how their interest in Japan and Korea marginalized them by establishing an aesthetic or ethical distance between them and the rest of Kuwaiti society. They stick out. Already at home, their rooms being decorated with Japanese picture makes them different within their own family. "Being different" is not so much a matter of looks in Kuwait because especially girls (who were the main respondents in this survey) will often not be allowed to stylize their outer appearances, for example, by coloring their hair. Most of them cannot even show their hair. The difference must be hidden.

By the way I look and behave? Not at all. By the way I think? Absolutely.

I am smart enough to not show it otherwise they will look at me weirdly.

Not really. I am interested in many things. I am an Otaku. A hidden one I guess. But that does not mean that I let go of everything else. I am a very diverse person. People always say that I can click with everyone be it games, books, history, manga, fashion or makeup, I can make a long interactive conversation about whichever subject which the other individual is interested.

## *Japan in Kuwait*

No, the only thing that makes me different is that i don't talk about it.

Generally no, because my interest in Asian culture is just an interest, not an obsession. So I only converse with people who I know like the genre instead of people who don't. Also, there are a lot of people who enjoy Asian culture, but they don't show it out of fear of scrutiny.

Others experience a separation from the rest of society.

In a way yes, because not everyone in Kuwait has a keen interest on Asian culture and most of my friends do not watch anime.

Of course, because nobody really understands why I like Asian culture unless they're into it themselves.

I believe so! Since there aren't that many people who share the same interest as i do.

In a sense, yes because I tend to be more open minded than others because if what I've been exposed to.

Pretty much, yes. Rather childish, as they say.

Some people make fun of me because I watch "cartoons". They're judgmental and closed minded.

It makes me feel different because not all people like it.

It isolates you because you meet [only] people who have somehow similar interests like you.

The subculture effect can be grasped when considering that for many, the adherence to this culture signifies a sort of protest. They have chosen it in order to be separated and they do not regret the separation. They have a feeling of superiority that is typical in subcultures:

People who know more are different from others.

It separates me from them, it's my own will.

Maybe... I wish I could live there myself since people here are not going to change.

I think so. I'm one of the few people that's not really interested in Arabian culture, but I'm definitely interested in Asian cultures.

Because I like what I like and love what I love instead of liking the same things as my friends. You to have your own stuff and that's one part of what it makes me unique.

I'm not interested in Arabic culture, and my family is very cultural. I choose to draw 'weird and creepy' art (similar to monsters in anime and manga) because that's what I like to draw. But people around me tend to think it's too scary and think I'm too much of a weirdo.



In personal interviews, a student whose parents threw away her entire manga collection, explains why she insists on her being different.

I know I'm different, why should I be like them. I have my own way of wearing clothes [she is actually wearing a traditional abaya], I have my own way of speaking.

A student who has blue hair under her hijab (she once tried to take it off, which cause a major turmoil in her family) explains that she likes Japanese culture because it makes her superior.

What are those others doing? They believe in rumors, conspiracy theories, follow all sorts of advices on the internet about dieting and so on. Do plastic surgery. Everybody imitates the other. They don't respect individualities. Here people enjoy humiliating people because they have no self-confidence. That's why I am into Japanese culture.

## **Conclusion**

Globalization tends to be linked to Americanization and is most often seen as a power that flattens and erases local culture. In an Arab context, this produces political connotations. Arab culture has been credited with the ability of resisting globalization and cultural imperialism because of its conservatism and traditionalism. This has been made clearest by Raphael Patai in his *The Arab Mind* (Patai 1976). Also less biased authors like Al-Kandari and Gaither confirm that “many Arabs refuse any acculturation of Western values that might alter or negatively affect the social structures, status quo and the morality of youth” (2011, 270). The problem is that this logic considers only the transfer from the West to the East while in the “Japan-Kuwait” case we have to do with an East-East exchange. The Japanese-Kuwaiti cultural transfer implies a double resistance towards the local culture and towards American culture. Therefore, alternativity is created in a more complex way as it is the result of globalization as much as anti-globalization attitudes. The double-bind structure implied by those negotiation with both traditional and Americanized Kuwaiti culture can lead to increased marginalization. More precisely, it can lead to a twofold marginalization. Manga fans are against Kuwaiti traditions but also leave the American cultural fold that used to be the accepted symbol of coolness. East-Asian culture represents the alternative to two (and not only one) culture. Second, resistance is not based on cultural closure and conservatism but rather on the willingness to engage with another (Eastern) culture. The paradoxical pattern of resistance to the East through the adherence to another Eastern culture exposes the complexities that international subcultures can undergo in a postcolonial world. Kuwaiti/American is seen as a compound that one tries to undermine by using elements of another non-Western culture. The result is a subculture wearing many traits that subcultures manifest in the West.

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