



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Humor in Japan

What are the elements of Japanese Humor?

B.A. Essay
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Abstract

Japanese humor has often been perceived as peculiar, or one of a kind. There have been many scholars that state that Japan is rather reserved when it comes to humor and that it's high nonexistent. Yet, some state the opposite. How come there doesn't seem to be any clear acknowledgment thereof? What defines Japanese humor? How do cultural norms influence perceptions of what is defined as being humorous?

Japanese society is often perceived as strict, perhaps due to its image with business men, and the school system. Therefore it has been sometimes perceived as rather humorless. This has been mentioned by scholars in their articles and essays. There are some scholars that, however, state the opposite, and mention that Japan has its very own type of humor. There are various types of humor ranging from innocent and child-like to a very adult type of humor. This is of course the same in many other countries, but the way Japanese society presents this humor seems to be very distinctive.

This thesis is based on books, articles and journals related to Japanese humor, and humor overall, along with results of a survey on Japanese people's perception of their own humor.

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Image of Japan – An Introduction

What is Japanese humor? What do people think that Japanese humor is comprised of? What image do foreigners have of Japan and its humor.

Roger Pulvers's article "*Humor may be universal, but Japan's is largely its smut-free own*" mainly focuses on how many countries make fun of their neighboring countries, while he claimed that Japan does not make any jokes of those type, along with sexual jokes and many taboo focused jokes, but argued that Japanese people only make innocent, harmless jokes (2009). Hugh Cortazzi is largely in agreement since he's claimed that Japanese people "lack a sense of humor" (2007, l. 2) and that "they prefer to call themselves serious people" (2007, l. 19).

These two articles would indicate Japan is a rather humorless society, or at least don't possess a vulgar type of humor. However, based on these two aforementioned articles, Miranda Richards has argued that this is far from an established fact, that some Japanese television programs tend to start on light subject when talking, and how they sometimes gradually become a bit more overtly sexual. She also points out that in the west part of Japan, people are more comical, that is, the way they speak and behave. It seems that their personality is more exaggerated and comical than in Tokyo. Based on her experiences and research in Japan, she argues that many Japanese people have their own individual type of humor (2010).

While looking at the three aforementioned articles, it becomes evident that scholars are rather divided when it comes to the image of Japanese humor. So the question arises; what exactly defines Japanese humor? My perception, before arriving in Japan, was that most Japanese humor revolved around slapstick comedy and dirty humor, since I had been exposed to those examples through my family, largely through animation.

However, whilst I was in Japan, I stumbled on a video on a site called 9Gag. Which featured a segment in a television program; a segment that was called Hand-job karaoke [手コキカラオケ], and was mainly about men trying to sing a song whilst receiving stimulation by hands of women, and if they scored over 90 points, they would receive a hefty money prize. I found this to be a very peculiar show, therefore I showed it to a few Japanese friends, all at different times, yet no one had seen the show. One had, however, just heard about it. This fueled my interest in knowing more about what is featured in Japanese comedy and humor, and whether it is ubiquitous throughout the island, consequently the thesis question arose "what are the elements of Japanese humor". To try to figure this out I decided to look at the history of humor, along with trying to find out what Japanese people think about Japanese humor.

The image I had had of Japan for some time was that Japanese society is rather strict, especially taking in consideration their school system and school uniforms, along with the image of the average salary men and office ladies. Japan seemed rather uninteresting when it came to those subjects. However, after meeting Japanese people, and being in Japan myself for a year, I

can say that my image of the country has changed for the good. I still think it is strict yet not as bad as I had always thought, plus I can't say that I feel that Japan is uninteresting at all anymore. I went to a few high schools and junior high schools during my stay in Japan, and the students themselves seemed to be enjoying their school life rather much. Thus my opinion is that people should go to Japan themselves to really see how Japan is, and to be able to form an opinion on their own.

Methodology

In order to better ascertain the current status of humor in Japan I conducted a survey targeting only Japanese people. It was shared on Facebook on the 11th of November 2015, and consequently a few Japanese friends also shared it for me on Facebook and Twitter in order to get a greater variety of results. It was conducted in Japanese and can be read in its entirety in the appendix. , Overall 60 people answered the survey, their ages ranging from 15 to over 40 years old, and from various prefectures of Japan. The survey was formally closed on the 2nd of December.

The reason why I decided to conduct this survey was to understand better how Japanese people define humor, along with knowing more about what opinions they might have about, for example, dirty humor on television, and if they even use such humor in their everyday life.

Prior to the survey, there was an introductory text informing the participants of the reason behind the survey, that it was completely anonymous and that should they wish then they could quit at any time. Furthermore that the head of the Japanese department had approved the survey, and it included contact information so they could contact the maker of the survey if they had any inquiries. Due to a few Japanese native speakers mentioning one word discrepancy within the survey that could easily be simplified and made clearer it was decided to change that based on recommendations for people to grasp the concept of the survey more easily

The Perception of Humor in Japan

As was discussed in the introduction, according to some scholars Japan is a rather humorless society. There could be some explanations for that. Jessica Milner Davis mentioned that the older generations were taught ever since they were young “that it is shameful to be laughed at by others” (2006, p. 16). She also mentions that Japanese people smile, or laugh, even when not amused. It could be that they are that good at controlling their emotions so that they are able to greet guests with a smile even though they are sad (2006, p. 17). She also mentioned that some Japanese people might restrain themselves whilst laughing, and wait until they can laugh as much as they want in a better setting, e.g. alone, or with a person close to them (2006, p. 18). An element of this is where Japanese try to keep their face, or not show their real face, referred to as *honne*, along with *tatemae*, where people show more of their real feelings and perceptions.

In 2010 there was a scholar who did a research called Japan’s funniest story project. Its focus was to collect funny stories in Japan for a year and discover the most popular stories and gags. The reason behind this project was because a few years earlier there had been a research conducted aiming to find the funniest joke in the world. Even though the world focused research received over 40 thousand jokes from more than 70 countries, none of them were from Japan. The reason, they surmised, could have been because Japanese people tend to tell funny or interesting stories, rather than telling actual jokes (Oshima, 2013, p. 92). In the Japanese language there isn’t really a word for a joke, except adapted from English. There is, though, a word in Japanese that is usually used for when joking. Joking (*joudan*) [冗談] is written with Japanese kanji, or symbols, while joke (*jo-ku*) [ジョーク] is written in katakana, which is usually for words adapted from other languages.

During the course of the research in Japan, all of the stories were categorized into 4 groups. Overall 560 stories were published. They also categorized the top ten stories for every month, along with top three stories. The most popular group was always language related, but that was also categorized into 3 sub-groups; “mis-heard/mis-said”, “wordplay or pun”, and “foreign language relation”. The other categories shown in the research were “Reflection of society or culture”, “Universal”, and “Non-sense” (Oshima, 2013, p. 97-98).

Whilst looking at the Japan related results, it seems clear that most Japanese stories are made to seem more personal to the person telling the story, for example, by making it about people in question or someone close to them. By making it more personal, the audience can perhaps have an easier time imagining the situation, which could assist in making the situation more humorous as it’s easier to relate to (Oshima, 2013, p. 95-96). So by looking at the data, it can be said that one of the traits of Japanese humor is to use individual experiences to make the stories more personal.

Japanese humor outside of Japan

The general impression seems to be that when people see shows from Japan, they might think derogatorily “only in Japan”. Some countries outside of Japan have actually made use of Japanese styles of comedy and game shows as an influence for their own shows, and furthermore they’ve also been parodied in drama shows.

For example the American show *I Survived a Japanese Game Show*, produced by A. Smith & Co. Productions in 2008 and 2009, revolves around 10 strangers who think they are going to be on a reality show when they are suddenly flown to Japan, and are told that they are going to participate in a Japanese game show. In the end of the season following various trials the winner takes back home 250 thousand dollars. The games they participated in were usually over-the-top, as an example, being dressed up in fly costumes and having to jump on a wall and spray paint on targets in order to acquire points. All of the settings were rather colorful, and the audience and the host of the show were all noticeably loud during the whole show. However, all other aspects of the show were that of a rather typical of American type of shows, for example, they had a confession corner, which is a staple in American reality television programs, and serves to make situations, and the show, more dramatic. This show completely shows how the American perceives Japanese humor and shows.

In 2013, there was also a sort of a spin-off show called *Japanizi: Going, Going, Gong*, where kids competed in various type of games, similar to what had been seen in *I survived a Japanese game show*. There were elements of surprise over this type of image of Japan being still held aloft in television programs, since there hadn’t really been any shows with this type of over-the-top games in recent years. This show, however, was shown in various countries all over the world with the aim to show and teach foreign cultures about the Japanese culture and language (Michel, 2013).

Another television program which is known to play on inter and meta textuality (Koven, Thorgeirsdottir, 2011) is *Supernatural*, which is about brothers hunting demons and supernatural creatures. In episode 5 in season 8, the two brothers are sent to another world by a demon, a world based on popular television culture. There they have to play their parts in various types of drama shows and variety shows, and in one instance they ended up featuring in a Japanese game show. There they were asked questions, and if they answered incorrectly, or couldn’t answer at all, they were hit in the groin by a penis machine. This type of penis machine can be seen in some Japanese shows where comedians have to, for example, read a hard poem really fast, and if they fail, they are hit in the groin by the machine.

These two shows used games that could actually be seen in real Japanese television programs. However, the large majority of television shows are far closer to what would be deemed normal in any country, and not nearly as exaggerated as these few examples. The American shows seem to focus on the most ridiculous type of Japanese games for inspiration. It could be because they deem them to be more interesting, and further away from the American

norm, so they use these type of games to attract audience. However, it consequently further enhances the popular impression that all Japanese television programming is “weird”.

There have also been legal repercussions, as was the case where a popular television program called *Wipe-Out* was sued for allegedly copying several Japanese game shows. The show’s format is that contestants have to get through an obstacle course in order to ultimately win a prize. The obstacles that were used in the show were claimed to be unoriginal, and plagiarized from Japanese game shows. The lawsuit ended in a settlement (Belloni, 2011).

One of the shows *Wipe-Out* was alleged to have copied the layout and form from *Takeshi’s castle*. The Japanese program was broadcasted between 1986 and 1989 in Japan. Later on it was shown in various countries all over the world, becoming famous in many places because of the commentaries given by the announcers in their respective languages. Originally around 100 participants competed in various obstacle courses, and in the end only a few were left, and attempted to get in to Takeshi’s castle to win the game. This show was full of slapstick humor, showing many of the participants as they failed to get through the courses. Not many have managed to actually to claim the prize (TV Tropes, *Takeshi’s Castle*). *Takeshi’s Castle* has been very popular in many countries, and could be one of the main reasons people find Japanese game show type of humor to be peculiar.

History – development

In order to examine the Japanese reserve and reserved nature, in particular in the humor context, the history of humorous writing in Japanese needs perforce be explored. As argued by Peterson:

Few works of Japanese humor have even been translated into English, contributing to a sharply skewed perception among some foreign readers that all Japanese literature is gloomy and depressing, and that is ultimately ends with the suicide of the writer (or in the early twentieth century, in death from tuberculosis.). The truth, however, is that Japan is the birthplace of a wealth of humorous literature. (Peterson, 2009, p. 20)

Due to this, many might think that Japanese literature is rather depressing to read, however, if more work would be translated it might change people opinions on that matter. Humor is said to have started in literature in Japan, in poems and stories. The earliest works can be found in e.g. *Kojiki* [古事記] and *Manyoshu* [万葉集] which are some of the first written books in Japan, both compiled in the 8th century. The *Kojiki* is a book filled with collections of myths about heavenly deities along with heroes, and “contains what can be viewed as some of the first instances of humor (whether intentional or not) in Japanese literature” (Peterson, 2009, p. 26). The *Kojiki*, even though its main purpose is that of extrapolating historical and spiritual meanings in Japan, still contains humor.

Later the humor became more of an intellectual type during the Heian Period (794-1185), a culturally very prominent and important period in the history of Japan. The culture of the court aristocracy flourished along with the literature and the literature “combined subtlety and complexity” (Peterson, 2009, p. 27). During the Kamakura Period (1185-1333) the humor developed into something sharper, perhaps due to the militaristic focus within society, and continued developing during the Edo Period (1603-1867).

In the late medieval period humorous or funny stories (*warai banashi*) [笑い話] became more popular with the samurai, then later in the 17th century, thanks to printing technology, popularity gained popularity amongst commoners, along with parodies. Parodies could often be used by commoners to express themselves better, e.g. when unhappy with certain things, like the ruling class. Many books and stories came to be popular during that era (Peterson, 2009, p. 30-31). Another popular form of humor during the medieval periods were the comic plays or theatre (*kyougen*) [狂言].

During the Edo Period comic poetry started to become more developed. Previously poetry styles such as the *haiku* [俳句] and *waka* [和歌] were the main forms, and a style developed from these which could be called a comic style of *haiku*, called *senryu* [川柳]. *Senryu* has more free style, so it can have various topics without any special form of restrictions. Then there also was *kyoka* [狂歌], which is similar to *waka*, that is also comic but despite this, the comic poetry style is similar to *senryu*, yet it didn't, become as popular. Another style of literary expression that came through, and formed in the Edo period was the comic novel *kokkeibon* [滑稽本]. The comic

novel went through various changes during that era, but has managed to keep its ground. (Peterson, 2009, p. 32-35). The *kokkeibon* usually had contents about the daily life of people, and had conversation in it, yet made them humorous.

In Japan today there are three very popular styles of comedy, some of them being related to the history of Japanese comedy. Those styles are called *rakugo* [落語], *konto* [コント], and *manzai* [漫才]. (Peterson, 2009, p. 44)

Rakugo means comic story telling. The format is usually one man telling a humorous story to an audience. He is usually dressed in rather traditional clothes, along with holding a folding fan and he is usually sitting on his knees while he performs.

The roots of *rakugo* can be traced back to the end of the seventeenth century. It developed from brief stories told among common people, and some *rakugo* stories originated in the preaching and teaching of Buddhist priests. (Davis, 2006, p. 99)

Rakugo performers usually come from families of *rakugo* performers. There was often a master who had an apprentice and in order to secure the lineage and the continuation of the art the master often adopts his apprentice, and the family then has a *rakugo* successor.

The stories performed today are various old stories, and some performers have even constructed their own stories, in of course *rakugo* style. Even though the stories are well known, and the same punchline been heard over and over again, they still garner laughter. The secret being in the performance, that every performer tries to make it like it is their own story by putting on “original touches” (Davis, 2006, p. 103). This is a comedy style that is still rather popular today.

This brings us to the next style. *Konto* is usually groups performing comical stories or encounters in a sketch. *Konto* usually has a set-up, as well as props.

Though a connection can be made in some cases to the comic styles employed in *kyogen*, no collection of “traditional” *konto* narratives exists, and the overall feel is closer to that of American or British stage comedy than to premodern Japanese theater.”...“*Konto* is considered to be a subset of *manzai*,” (Peterson, 2009, p. 47)

Even though *konto* is rather popular today, it is not really what can be called traditional Japanese comedy, due to it being more like what is called a Western stage comedy, than a Japanese stage comedy.

Manzai is what can be called the most popular comedy style in Japan. *Manzai* usually consists of two comedians who are paired up, and make jokes together, often in the style of a dialogue. They usually have two different roles, one being *boke* and the other *tsukkomi*. *Boke* is usually the person that says stupid, or “out-of-context remarks” (Tsutsumi, 2000, p. 147). *Tsukkomi* is usually the brighter person of the two, the one who points out the stupidity of what the *boke* has said. He often hits the *boke* on the head in response as well.

The reason why the jokes that the *boke* makes are usually found funny could be because the jokes he makes are not what is to be expected. They play on incongruity of the exchange. In

Hideo Tsutsumi's research, there are many examples of these jokes. One rather interesting one is called Example 2. The *boke-tsukkomi* exchange goes this way;

1. R: What is your trickiest punch?
2. A: Left hook.
3. R: What's so tricky about that?
4. A: I use my right hand. (2000, p. 157)

The exchange between the two seems rather normal, until the final line is delivered, and the audience can see what the joke was all about. In *manzai*, the punch line is usually the last line put in the conversation. Sometimes the *tsukkomi* adds something to the end, but that is usually to highlight the *boke's* joke. The reason this form of comedy is so popular could be because of the simplicity, and the many ways the *boke-tsukkomi* can draw laughter from the audience.

Some scholars have been researched the origin of *manzai*, some having traced it to Middle age rites "performed at New Year's by pairs of traveling entertainers who combined auspicious rituals with laughable acts" (Davis, 2006, p. 52). It is different to what it is usually like today. However, it seems to have a connection with the history of comedy and humor.

Image of Japan – A Strict Society?

Japan has the image of being rather strict, what is the impetus behind this image? A defining factor could be the culture and how they are raised. In order to gain a better view of this so-called strict culture, it is first important to look at different aspects of Japanese culture.

First is the school system. Many people know that most schools in Japan use school uniforms. There are also many rules behind the uniforms and the students' appearances. In some schools make-up is prohibited, or even plucking their eyebrows, in others it's not allowed to dye the hair, and sometimes there are rules regarding the length of their hair, and there are cases where skirt are not allowed to be less or more than the prescribed length and so on (Tackett, 2013).

There are also many schools which have been rather strict when it comes to rules and attendance. Some students have gotten injured while trying to get inside the school gates while already being late to school. There was a case in 1990, where a teenager was late to school, but fell while trying to get past the school gate, and a teacher closed the gate on her head, and she eventually passed away because of that incident (Wray, 1999, p. 102).

After going through high school, and having had to abide by their various rules, students finally enter university, usually at the age of 18 to 19, not everyone though. However, there they have to start preparing for another tough challenge ahead; Job-hunting. In Japan, there are certain periods where students have to go search for a job to secure for when they graduate university. During that time, a lot of young people can be seen around wearing black suits and with black, undyed hair. There are many books which can be found in Japan in relation to job-hunting, many of them giving tips on how to do it correctly, or finding the right job (Xil, 2015). While job-hunting, everybody has to make sure that they look clean, and not too flashy. Jewelry is not appreciated, and the suit, shirt, and shoes have to be simple and clean. So again, the students have to abide by rules, though unwritten, when it comes to appearances (Fuku, 2014).

When the students have graduated and started working, some of them find themselves in an even tougher situation. In Japan, there are often strict dress code at work, and there have been many cases of people overworking themselves. Some until they have a break-down, or even attempt suicide. Others even have had health-related issues due to overworking (Underhill, 2015). So it should be to no one's surprise that many have the image of Japan being rather strict. However, the humor in Japan might disprove this image.

Regional Differences in Humor in Japan

In Japan there are many types of humor, and it is very often different between regions. For example many scholars, and television programs, tend to compare the *Kanto* and *Kansai* regions, which is comparing Tokyo in the Kanto region, and Osaka in the Kansai region usually to see the differences between the areas.

Inoue Hiroshi, a chairman at Japan Society for Laughter and Humor Studies said;

When we think about Japanese laughter, it seems evident that there are two different cultures of laughter in Japan. One is the culture of laughter accepted by the samurai (warrior) folk of Tokyo, and the other is the daily culture of laughter cultivated by the merchant of Osaka. (Davis, 2006, p.27)

On YouTube there are a few videos which show the differences between Osaka and Tokyo. Some show how people in Osaka tend to make jokes about weird situations, and react in a completely different manner to people in Tokyo. For example, there was a television program that interviewed people in Osaka, and handed them a toilet brush instead of a microphone, and showed their reactions, or asked them to take a photo of them using solidified jelly. All of them acted normally at first, and then acted like they just realized after they talked or took a photo by suddenly saying “Hey what is this??” or “This is not a camera!!”.

In the same video they talked to people in both Osaka and Tokyo. They asked them to answer a phone call, and handed them an eggplant. In Osaka people grabbed it, and talked a bit, saying for example “Hello”, and then suddenly they acted like they were surprised, saying “It is an eggplant!” and something along those lines. Handing it to people in Tokyo, however, was completely different. Some people laughed and walked away embarrassedly, whilst others just stared blankly at the camera crew.

Why is it that there is such a difference between these two areas? It could be due to the Japanese perception of what is *honne* and *tatemae*. *Honne* refers to someone who shows the real them, someone who is more honest with their feelings, while *tatemae* is someone who has a front, or a mask. There are many various types of *honne* and *tatemae* so it is hard to put them just in a one group. Using this, it can be said that people from Osaka tend towards showing their *honne* side, while people from Tokyo are more likely to maintain their *tatemae* side. Using what Inoue Hiroshi said about samurai and the merchants, it could be said that the merchants are more out there or louder people, while the samurai are quieter people. (Peterson, 2009, p. 49-50)

Osaka humor tends to be boisterous, with a significant emphasis on slapstick comedy. Tokyo humor, on the other hand tends to be more subtle, and, some would say, less crude. While purveyors of Osaka humor will often direct harsh verbal and physical abuse toward others, knowing that their targets and observers will recognize that it's

all in good fun, and will return in kind, Tokyo comics are more likely to make a conscious effort to avoid offending, at least directly. While the underlying meaning may be as pointed as that found in Osaka humor, it is frequently softened by a gentle manner and a quiet voice. (Peterson, 2009, p. 50)

There are a lot of comedians whose hometowns are in the Kansai region, most of them from Osaka. Osaka also has many “traditional performing arts” (Davis, 2006, p. 30), e.g. aforementioned *manzai* and *rakugo*. A considerable amount of comedians also speak in the Kansai dialect, even though some of them might not even be from the Kansai region, clearly displaying how popular the humor of Osaka really might be.

Dirty Humor and Slapstick Variety

It was mentioned earlier in the introduction to this thesis that there was a corner in a Japanese television show called Hand-job Karaoke, where men compete to score 90 points in karaoke to win prize money, while receiving a hand-job from beautiful women the show has found just for this corner. This show is called in English Tokui Chuck [徳井義実ののチャックおろさせて～や], and the show features other various segments in the show. For example, they interviewed the top adult video actresses and asked them to do various tasks, e.g. show how they give blowjobs while using a finger, the best way to pleasure a woman, and so on.

This program usually invites adult video actresses and actors on the set with them and during the show they talk about various things, often while being rather serious, despite talking sometimes about rather weird subjects, and sometimes they show clips from videos the actresses appeared in, and do quizzes in relations to the videos. That one segment alone though became very much talked about on the internet after being uploaded as a video, GIF, and a photo on 9Gag.

When watching the video on YouTube, suggested videos are displayed on the side. Many clips and videos taken from Japanese shows can be found there, and sometimes even compilation videos of many shows can be found. There, along with an easy search on YouTube, by using search words such as “Weird Japanese Shows”, a lot of “weird” or sexual shows and clips can be found. That does not necessarily mean though that they are what can be normally seen on Japanese television, or are what can be said to be a normal television program. To use an example of what is a normal and a popular comedy show, it is best to look at shows like *Gaki no Tsukai ya Arahende*. [ガキの使いやあらへんで]

Gaki no Tsukai is a television program that started in 1989, and features a few comedians, most famous of them being the comedy duo Downtown. In this show they have done various activities, for example made one of the comedians into a pop singer by making a song, a costume, a choreography, and a music video for him, and in one episode they had a dance competition, which was mainly one of the comedians making a dance move, and the next person having to copy that dance move, along with adding his own move and so on.

In the episode where one is made into a pop star, Hamada was chosen to be the pop singer. However, he had no idea about the project, so when he came into work and was told about it he was surprised. The other 4 members each took their own roles. One made the costume, one made the song, one made the lyrics and the last one made the dance choreography. When that was finished, and the song was recorded, the music video was made. The character was actually based on an existing pop singer called Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. The song was mostly about *tsukkomi*, since Hamada is the *tsukkomi* of the Downtown duo, and how he loves to hit people. One of the main phrases that is repeated throughout the song is in fact the word *tsukkomi*.

The *Gaki no Tsukai* series added a new year's program in 2003 called *Gaki no Tsukai waratte wa ikenai* [ガキの使いわらってはいけない], which is shown every year still today. This program stars 5 comedians; aforementioned Downtown, another comedy duo called Cocorico; Shozo Endo and Naoki Tanaka being the members, and solo comedian Hosei Tsukitei. Every year the show has a different theme, for example an airport or becoming teachers. In these shows they are not allowed to laugh, or they will face punishment. The punishment is usually that they are hit on the butt with something like a bat by a punishment squad. During each episode, the producers have traps set for them to try to make them laugh, e.g. pictures, or comedy skits, or famous people appearing at places they never would have thought about. People do various things to try to make them laugh, and sometimes even family members join in to try to make them laugh. This usually goes on for 24 hours straight, and then it is edited down to be shown to them and a live audience, on New Year's Evening. They go through many trials, and often complain about their butts hurting during the 24 hours.

One of the segments that are usually on the show are them riding a bus to the destination where they will film most of the show, and then at the destination they have a room where they will spend a lot of time. There they all have their designated desk. Usually there is something that will make them laugh in the desks, and in the room also. They take turns in opening the drawers in their desks, and there various things that can be found in the drawers, e.g. buttons, DVDs and photos. This segment is usually filled with tension and laughter.

There are also segments in the show where these 5 comedians have to watch other comedians compete in various ways, e.g. trying to eat boiling hot food just with their mouth, that is, without any kitchen supplies, or light a firecracker by their assholes. So one could say that they get a bit extreme with the tasks they do in the competitions. Which could be said to be one of the elements of humor in Japan. In another segment, many comedians come together in a room, and again, the 5 comedians have to watch them. However, in this segment, the comedians are telling stories about other comedians, for example, the 5 who are in the show, along with other in the room, and the stories are usually them trying to badmouth each other, or telling them storied no one knew of. The stories are usually true. So many of the comedians become rather embarrassed during this corner of the show.

At the end of the program, they usually have a segment where they are allowed to laugh. However, the main mission of the producers is to scare them. They often have to do tasks while walking through scary hallways where there are many traps set up to scare them. One of the members, Naoki, usually gets scared very easily, and is often seen falling to the ground with his hand in the air when they are being scared. So there is a lot of slapstick comedy going on throughout the whole show.

The *Gaki no tsukai* series are rather popular actually throughout the world, and they have wiki pages dedicated to them. There are also many fan sites dedicated to the series. Just by using *Gaki no Tsukai* as the search word on Google.com, various results appear. Some of them being

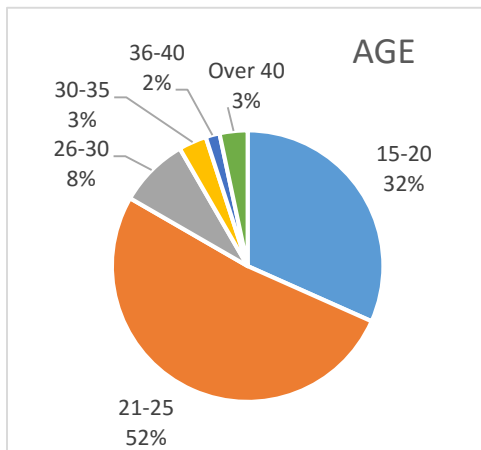
websites mostly about the show itself. They are so popular that some fan sites are mainly for making and sharing subtitles for the show for the foreign fans. One of the sites that has *Gaki no Tsukai* in its title does seem a bit Downtown biased though, since while looking through it many shows that either one or both of the members have appeared in are shown there. The most popular segment would probably be though the New Year's program, since many sites seem to try their best to upload the videos, first without subtitles, and then add the subtitles later on. There can also be found every year live stream of the program so people can watch it live as well.

With this, it can be seen that there are many shows in Japan that have a bit what can be called extreme humor to outside viewers. But there seems to be various type of this "extreme" humor. Which can make one wonder, what is it though that is Japanese humor? Is it all extreme? Or do Japanese people themselves have different opinions on what is extreme humor, and normal humor?

Perception of Humor in Japan

In order to better ascertain the current status of humor in Japan I conducted a survey targeting only Japanese people. I used Survey Monkey to make the survey, and it was shared on Facebook on the 11th of November 2015, and consequently a few Japanese friends also shared it for me on Facebook and Twitter in order to get a greater variety of results. It was conducted in Japanese, and I had a few Japanese friends reading over my questions to make sure that the Japanese was correct and easy to understand. Overall 60 people answered the survey, their ages ranging from 15 to over 40 years old, and from various prefectures of Japan. The survey was formally closed on the 2nd of December.

The first question, sex and hometown, was answered by 59 of the 60 participants. The female-male ratio was 36 to 22, but one participant only wrote that he or she was from Japan with no other information. The participants were also from various parts of Japan; Kanagawa, Tokyo, Saitama, Gunma, Tochiki and Chiba in Kanto region; Morioka, Takada and Kunohe-mura in Iwate prefecture, along with Aomori, Fukushima and Miyagi prefecture in Tohoku region, which is in the north-east part of Japan; Fukuoka, which is in the southern part of Japan; Wakayama, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo in Kansai region, in the south-west part of Japan; and Shizuoka in Chubu region, located between Kanto and Kansai region. There were a few who just answered with a prefecture, or Japan only.



The second question pertaining to age can be seen in the accompanying pie chart. 19 were ranged from 15 to 20, 31 from 21 to 25, 5 from 26 to 30, 2 from 31 to 35, 1 from 36-40, and only 2 were over 40 years old.

Humor in Japan

So what is Japanese humor to Japanese people? There were many answers that came forth. Some of them included “making people laugh” [人を笑わせること], “being mean” [卑屈なところ], “going along with a joke” [のり、つつこみ、], “comic dialog” [大喜利], “saying wrong things, try to say something the conversation partner would not expect” [正しくないことを言うこと。相手の予想とは違うことを言うてみる], “self-deprecating joke” [自虐ネタ], “word play” [ことば遊び], and so on. Some answered that they weren’t sure what Japanese humor was exactly, or even that it was in relation to culture. The most common answers were *manzai*, *boke* and *tsukkomi*, *rakugo* and comedy.

When asked what they thought was the most popular humor in Japan 6 of the respondents skipped the question. The most common answers were usually *manzai*, *boke* and *konto*, however, in-between them there were answers like “Unfortunately, but making fun of

strangers, is popular I believe” [残念ですが、「他人をいじるタイプの笑い」が人気があると思います。], and “sarcasm” [皮肉]. One even put a word joke in his or hers answer to explain a *rakugo* story. The joke was “A man was paying at a store when he was counting the money “1, 2, 3...” and ask the cashier “What time is it now?” The cashier answered “4 o’clock“ “4? Thank you! 5, 6...” [蕎麦のお金を支払う際にお金「123…ところでオヤジ、今何時だい？」「4時だよ」「4時だね？ありがとう！56…」]

By looking at questions three and four, it can be safe to say that the most popular humor, or comedy style, in Japan is *manzai*. It does not come as a surprise though, since in many articles and books that have mentioned Japanese humor, have usually mentioned something about *manzai*.

The next question tackled the perception of Japanese humor outside of the country. In this question, 7 participants skipped, so only 53 answered. Some answered that they did not know, or that it would not be considered interesting perhaps. Some answered “unique, or weird?” [ユニーク？とか変？], “silent” [静か], and even answers like “no sense” [センスないな] and “a bit eccentric” [少し変わってる] came forth. By looking at the answers, most of the participants seemed to have had no idea, or thought a bit negatively about what foreigners might think about Japanese humor. So even though most of the participants agreed on what was the most popular comedy style in Japan, most of them also thought that outside viewers had a bad image of it.

Sexual or dirty humor

From question 6 the subject changed a bit, where the questions tackled more of the dirty, or sexual side of Japanese humor. The reason I wanted to ask this question was because from my experience not many Japanese people watched shows that had anything dirty or sexual in it. Question 6 was “Do you see dirty, or sexual humor on television”. Respondents were 58, meaning only 2 skipped this question. The most common answer was “occasionally” [たまに], along with “don’t see” [見ない], with a few “yes” [はい] or “I see a lot” [よく見る]. From those answers it can be seen that it is really different between the participants and that there is no definite answer to whether it can be easily seen on television or not.

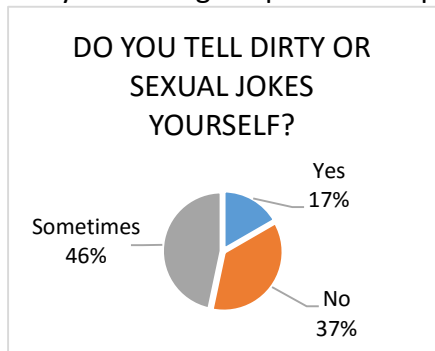
When asked “If so, what type of dirty or sexual jokes?”, there were many participants that choose to not answer the question. The total number of respondents that skipped the question was 19, meaning that only 41 participated. There were many types of answers that came forth with this question, so it can be said that everybody defines the question in their own way. Such as “Feces etc.” [うんこ等], “love scenes in foreign movies. Japanese programs don’t have many, I think.” [洋画のラブシーンとか。日本番組では少ないと思う。], “there’s no limit” [限界がない洋画のラブシーンとか。日本番組では少ないと思う。], “Things related to women’s body are many” [女の人の体に関するものが多い], “things related to sex” [SEXに関係すること] and even long answers like “Unlikely foreign TV programs, Japanese humor of sex on media is not connected to sex. It's more about superficial, like women's boobs.” This answer was given completely in English in the survey, even though the survey was in Japanese.

There I decided to try to get a bit further in this by asking where and when they would be encounter this type of humor, only 42 participants answered the question, with 18 skipping it. Many answered “in late night broadcasting” [深夜放送] or “late night” [深夜]. Not many answered that they “didn’t know” [分かりません]. So it can be said that most of the participants agreed on when you could see it, with 28 of answering at night. Those 28 participants were the only ones who seemed to specify any time in their answers completely.

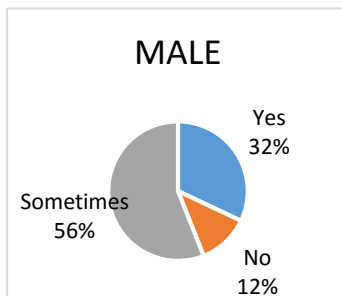
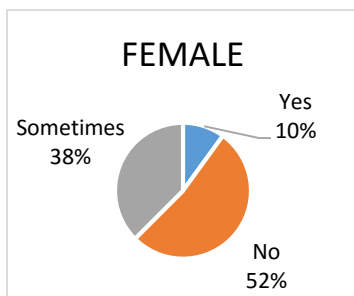
Question 9 continued this pace with “What do you think about dirty or sexual jokes being shown on television” where 57 of the participants answered. They were rather split on their answers, where some answered on the lines of “unpleasant” [不愉快] and “not good I think” [あまり良いとは思わない。], while some simply said “not that bad” [悪くないと思う] and “isn’t it alright?” [いいんじゃない?], and others simply said “Niiiiice” and “it’s good I think, it’s important for people” [いいと思う 人間にそれらは必要だね!]. This shows that people’s opinion on this subject are very varied. Most of the ones answered positively were males.

Now do Japanese people actually tell sexualized jokes? To gain some insight in to the subject, the last question was posed on the survey was “Do you tell dirty or sexual jokes yourself?” and only one participant skipped this question. The answer possibilities were three; “Yes” [はい], “No” [いいえ], and “Sometimes” [時々].

Looking at the graph below, it can be seen that most people answered “sometimes”, or 45.76% of them. 37.29% of them said “no”, and 16.95% said “yes”. It is interesting to see how many said straight-up no to the question, mainly because some people might actually sometimes



tell dirty or sexual jokes without actually realizing it. However, no one can be really sure about that. Looking at the gender-based graphs, it can be seen that more males answered “yes” than females, or 8 males and 4 females. However, it was completely reversed in “no”, or 21 female and 3 males. There was one other participant who answered “no”, but had never specified if he was a male or female. It was rather close for “sometimes” though, or 14 males and 15 females.



Overall impression

It seems that many had a hard time answering a few questions, most of them being related to dirty or sexual humor. When it came to telling dirty jokes themselves, males seemed to find it

easier to tell them, or at least sometimes, while very few said no. For females it was different since most of them, or over 50% said no.

But most of the participants, being male or female, agreed on that *manzai* is the most popular amongst Japanese humor, and could be said that it is one of the defining elements of Japanese humor. The ones who had seen anything that could be called dirty or sexual humor also agreed on that it can be seen on late night broadcasting television stations. So from the responses on the survey, it seems many Japanese people agree on various elements of Japanese humor.

Conclusion

There are many scholars who have different opinions on Japanese humor, that is whether Japanese people have humor or not, and if Japanese humor exists as such, then scholars have different opinions on what type of humor they have. Some even think that there is no such thing as a dirty humor in Japan. Nevertheless it is very easy to say that that statement is wrong. Especially with all the variety of shows Japan has to offer. By using sites such as Google.com, 9Gag and YouTube a variety of humor and comedy in Japan can easily be found. It is also rather good to experience Japan itself to get to know it further, because it could change many people's opinions, probably most for the good.

By looking at *Japan's funniest story project*, many things come to light. Japanese people don't really have or tell jokes. They rather say funny or interesting stories. To make them more humorous, they tell them like they are telling about their own experience, or some ones who is close to them, for example a family member, which is perhaps why many stand-up comedians tend to do that. By doing that the audience find a sense of familiarity with the story teller. It can also be seen that Japanese people like stories related to Japanese language, for example, mis-heard or mis-said and word-play related stories.

There have been many shows outside of Japan, for example in America, which used Japanese game shows as an influence, and have parodied those type of shows. There have also been a show that has been sued for allegedly copying various Japanese game shows. That lawsuit ended though in a settlement. The reason they use Japanese game shows as an influence might be because of the foreign feel of it; it could help draw the audience in. Japan of course has many types of television programs. However, by using only these type of shows as an influence in foreign countries could perhaps only push under the image that Japan mainly has those styles of television programs.

The comedy programs in Japan are various. Even though there are of course some that tackle the sexual and dirty subject does not make it exactly the normal type of shows you would see on Japanese television. Some of the most popular ones are rather the ones that have slap-stick comedy, for example *Gaki no Tsukai*. These series have been rather popular since they started, and they have featured many comedians. They also have a popular New Year's program that features various type of slap-stick comedy, and various type of punishment for the sake of making the audience laugh.

The history of humor in Japan has its roots going back to the beginning of Japanese literature. Starting with the first known books in Japan, the evolution of humor has gone far. However, because not any works that include humor in it have been translated into English, it is easy to think that Japan has mostly depressing literature. However, there are numerous stories and books filled with humor in Japan, some perhaps unintentional. Humor in Japan developed throughout the Heian, Kamakura and Edo periods. Humorous stories became popular in the

medieval period, and even more during the 17th century thanks to printing technology, along with parodies. Comic theatre also became very popular. Comic poetry became more developed in Edo period and a style called *senryu* really came through, perhaps due to its freely used style.

In today's Japan there are three popular styles in comedy; *rakugo*, *konto* and *manzai*. *Rakugo* is a popular form of storytelling, where a story teller usually is dressed in traditional clothes and tells a story whilst sitting on his knees. This style was originated in the 17th century. *Konto* is a sketch-style comedy, where they usually use a set-up and props. However this style is not exactly a traditional Japanese comedy style. *Manzai* however is a comedy style that can be called the most popular one in Japan. *Manzai* is usually performed by a comedy duo, and that duo usually take on the roles of *boke* and *tsukkomi*, also known as the idiot and the smart one. *Boke* usually makes non-sense comments whilst the *tsukkomi* corrects or points out the stupidity of the comment, along with often hitting the boke on the head.

People in Japan can react differently to jokes and gags depending on where they are from. If people in Osaka are put on the spot by using a toilet brush as a mike, or an eggplant as a telephone, they usually act along with it by acting normal at first and then suddenly making a reaction to the gag. Whilst in Tokyo people get rather embarrassed when put on the spot, or make no special reaction to the gags. This seems to be a known fact in Japan since a television program put it to the test, and got exactly the reaction they were thinking of.

Using an online survey, I tried to get to know more about the average Japanese person, and its humor. While asking normal questions about Japanese humor, most people managed to answer, even though some said that they had no idea. Most agreed that *manzai* was the most popular form of humor in Japan. When it came to questions about more sexual and dirty humor in Japan, more people had a hard time answering the questions. Many of the participants had also very different opinions on that type of humor, and on it being shown on television. Which makes me come to the conclusion that most people can have the same and different opinions, even when they are raised in the same culture. So that can slightly disprove that all Japanese people are humorless, since most people are different, even when from the same country.

Appendix

1. あなたの性別と出身は何ですか？

2. 何歳ですか？

15-20

21-25

26-30

31-35

36-40

40 以上

3. 自分にとって、日本のユーモアは何ですか？

4. 日本で、一番人気があるユーモアは何だと思いますか？

5. 海外で日本のユーモアはどのようにみられていると思いますか？

6. テレビでエッチな（下ネタが出る）番組やエッチなユーモアをよく見かけますか？

7. それは、どんなエッチな（下ネタ）ことですか？

8. それは、いつどこで、ですか？

9. エッチな番組やエッチなユーモア（下ネタ）がテレビに出るのはどう思いますか？

10. 自分でエッチな冗談（下ネタ）を言いますか？

はい

いいえ

時々

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