

# ‘Shall We *Dansu*?’: Dancing with the ‘West’ in contemporary Japan

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**Abstract:** In this article we offer a reading of the film ‘Shall We *Dansu*?’ as a cultural text which sheds light on the intriguing theme of the various ways in which things Western and the ‘West’ as a cultural concept are played with in contemporary Japan. Social dancing has been regarded, from the time of its introduction to Japan in the 1930s, as a Western social skill. While ballroom dancing often has the qualities of ‘alternative realities’, we argue that in Japan one of these alternative realities is an imagined ‘West’, which exists in Japan through various social practices. Following the colorful characters of the film we look at specific aspects of the ways in which the ‘West’ is imagined, exoticized, manipulated and played with in contemporary urban Japan.

**Keywords:** Ballroom dancing, alternative realities, Occidentalism, exoticism, cultural play, inter-cultural borrowing

The recent and extremely popular Japanese film, entitled ‘Shall We *Dansu*?’ (1995),<sup>1</sup> offers an interpretation of the social dancing scene in Japan. It opens with the camera focusing on the golden stage of a dance hall in Blackpool, England, spiritual home and host of the annual international competition of ballroom dancing. The ceiling above the stage is inscribed with a quote by Shakespeare: ‘Bid me Discourse, I will Enchant thine Ear’, hinting that this theatrical stage of social dancing holds a promise yet to be fulfilled. All around the world, social dancing is a pastime defined by its separateness in time and place from everyday life, by its strict rules, as well as by its theatrical and somewhat exotic attributes such as fantastic costumes, special shoes and wigs. It is played passionately by those who are captivated by its charm and by the unique temporary experience of existence it offers. Moreover, in some places aspects of its playful character derive from its marking as a foreign game.

Social dancing (*shakō dansu*) was brought to Japan by British dance teachers

who traveled there to teach the large foreign community in Kobe in the 1930s; it then became popular with the new Japanese middle class as part of the *shakō dansu* craze (Savigliano 1992: 240). Two main traditions of social dancing were brought to Japan, the English and the French. While there were clear differences between these two schools, 'the two enterprises shared the common goal of Westernizing Japan' (Savigliano 1992: 242). The story of tango in Japan as told by Savigliano (1992, 1995) is very instructive for understanding the attraction and meaning of social dancing in Japan. Argentinean tango is an illuminating example in this respect as it has certainly never been the authentic tango as danced in its places of origin, but a commodified version of this dance well packaged in France and Britain before being promoted and domesticated in Japan.

Upon being introduced to the Japanese market, social dancing was presented as a Western social skill, and thus as an element of modernization (Savigliano 1992: 239). In contemporary Japan, the social dancing scene no longer represents 'modernity', but it is still defined in comparison to the social dancing scene in the 'West': as one of the aficionados of social dancing in the film describes it, 'after all, it is an English sport'. This point is made clear by the title, 'Shall We *Dansu*?', which is an explicit example of a humorist play with the 'West'. The first two words are written in English while the last word is in Japanese English written in *katakana*, the distinctive form of writing used for Western loan words, thus declaring the spectators' entrance to the world of the Japanese variation of Western-style social dances.

In this article we offer a reading of the film as a cultural text, which sheds light on the intriguing theme of the various ways in which things Western and the West as a cultural concept are played with in contemporary Japan. Scholars have already referred to the indispensable process of 'translation' through which imported cultural products pass when entering a new cultural discourse (Bhabha 1994; Lotman 1976). Joseph Tobin uses the term 'domestication' to indicate that the process by which aspects of the 'West' – real or imagined – are adopted by the Japanese and made part of their culture is a process in which the receiving culture is thoroughly active (1992: 4). In this article we emphasize the active and playful attributes of this process. Part of the complex process of reproduction and negotiation over imported cultural images, ideas or material elements is the actual double-layered 'play' with them. It is, first, a play of imagination in which fantasies and images of the 'West' are produced and attributed with temporary meanings that can easily be altered or even replaced (Appadurai 1991: 198). Then, those images are given life through their transformation into Japanese social practices and material goods. By broadening the horizons of cultural possibilities, the 'West' as an inspirational source of imagined alternative existences represents opportunities that can be incorporated into real life.

From the point of view of the individual cultural players themselves, part of the significance of the cultural play with the Other is the sheer play itself. Similar to other forms of play, the playing with the Other is imbued with emancipatory

characteristics (Weissman 1990: 60), and presents alternative ways of self-expression and self-demarcation (Liebermann 1977). When one plays a game with full care and attention, one is rewarded with great joy and satisfaction (Huizinga 1955: 3). This great joy may be the result of a unique feeling of freedom. Whereas in 'real life' a person is usually socially controlled by obligations, norms and responsibilities, when playing he is entering voluntarily into the realm of an alternative reality. Although this reality is also defined by rules and the game's limits, a feeling of control and of freedom of choice prevails (Rapp 1980: 25).

### **The dancing stage**

Masayuki Suō's film 'Shall We *Dansu?*' tells the story of a forbidden love: the love of Sugiyama for a young professional teacher of social dancing. Sugiyama plays the placard role of the ultimate and successful *sararīman* (salary man), the white-collar Japanese male worker who has become a 'folk model' in Japan and the epitome of Japanese economic success (Miller 1995). Having achieved all the social expectations – wife, child and a home – he finds himself tired and unsatisfied.

Absentmindedly gazing out of the train window on his daily trips home from the office, he gradually falls in love with a stranger gazing out of the dance school window, the beautiful dancer Mai. With tremendous effort, Sugiyama overcomes his shyness and secretly decides to start taking dancing lessons, ignoring the great risks involved to his social, familial and personal status.

The story of Sugiyama and Mai is a story of unrequited love, which in the film is paralleled with another latent story of unfulfilled love. This is the love for Western-style dance in Japan as portrayed through the variety of placard characters who perform on this same dancing stage. This love is ultimately unfulfilled since the 'West' always remains faraway and abstract. The characters that Mr Sugiyama meets on the stage are very different from those he might have met in his 'real' life. They are dreamers fantasizing about other worlds, alternative realities. Once a week these heroes meet on the dance-school stage, and are transformed (at least from their own perspective) from pitiful and pathetic individuals, hardly able to survive in the harsh and grinding routine of their own realities, to colorful, free butterflies. Once a week, all of them, women and men alike, temporarily become Cinderella. Putting on their costly, carefully chosen and shining dancing shoes, they dance as if a spell has been cast upon them.

### **Alternative realities: Mai as Cinderella**

Sugiyama first sees Mai, the dancing instructor, as she stares out of the window. As he tells her later, it is her gazing that attracted him. Mai, who spends a great deal of her time gazing through this and other windows, is not looking at the

Japanese scene outside; she in fact imagines and yearns for faraway scenes. Throughout the film Mai, the delicate young dancing teacher, who coaches her students strictly in the ways of this 'English sport', is preoccupied with her as-yet-unfulfilled dream, which is to find the proper dancing partner. Her fantasy is to locate the perfect impersonation of the ideal Western-style gentleman who would protect his female partner's body no matter what obstacles they may encounter.

Mai and the other leading female characters in the film, including Tomoko, the elder instructor, and Toyoko, the meticulous and extravagant veteran dancer, are portrayed as taking the role of guiding others into the realm of fantasy. In contemporary Japan, more than other social groups, Japanese women, especially young women, are intensively preoccupied with the West. Modern Japanese women are said to have *akogare*, or an idealizing, unrealistic longing for the 'West' (Kelsky 1996: 33).

The 'West' has become an accepted form of 'alternative reality' for Japanese women (Kelsky 1999: 238). In the 'bubble years' of the 1980s and early 1990s, young women became the main spenders on foreign travel as well as on other West-related dreams: traveling abroad, taking English conversation classes and buying Western brand-name products (Creighton 1992; Moeran 1989). Indeed, foreign travel and a fixation with foreign culture has become an escape hatch for these women (Kinsella 1995: 252) who may also try to fulfill their dreams by gaining 'residence status' in 'Cinderella cities' at large department stores, which issue Cinderella cards (Creighton 1992: 48–9) – for consumption itself is a social practice through which a person can reach self-fulfillment.

For young, urban, middle-class Japanese women – like Mai – the modern West has become 'the universal model against which the backward particularities of Japanese tradition must be judged, rejected and reformed' (Kelsky 1999: 230). Women, as the unprivileged gender in Japan, have not only gained the ability to 'challenge hierarchies of the native over the foreign' (Kelsky 1999: 238), but have developed a kind of natural 'flexibility' that frees them from the oppressive laws of nation and race. Japanese women, who are relatively more liberated from the constraining burden of the world of work, play a significant role as the carriers of new and innovative trends as well as creative pursuits (Iwao 1993). In the vocabulary of play used here, Japanese women have a 'license to play'.

### **Imagining the 'West': Tomoko and her dreamland**

The tune 'Shall We Dance?' is a theme song in the film and is also expressed in the film's name. This romantic dancing tune is taken from the successful American film, 'The King and I' (1956). The link between the two films is clearly made when Tomoko, the older dancing instructor who has become one of the Sugiyama's main introducers to the social dancing world, tells him the romantic tale of her falling in love with Western-style dancing as a result of that film and that particular dancing tune. In 'The King and I', Hollywood movie star Yul

Brynner plays the role of an Oriental king who finds comfort in Western-style dancing. The way his kingdom, Siam, is portrayed in the film as an Oriental dreamland for the Western audience seems to parallel the abstract image that Tomoko – like other dancer-dreamers in the film – has of the ‘West’ as a dreamland.

This abstract way of viewing the Other seems to be a result of a complex relationship of Orientalism–Occidentalism between Japan and the West. The Other, which in modern Japan has been the West (Miller 1977, 1982), is perceived in large collective terms, which paradoxically mirror the same abstract Orientalistic manner in which the West has often perceived Japan (Moeran 1990: 9). In a very similar way to Orientalists who conceived of humanity as consisting of artificial entities rather than of individuals (Said 1978: 154–5), in the popular Japanese discourse the West is imagined as an abstraction, which is categorically and systematically different from the imaginary ‘Japan’. The way in which the ‘West’ is perceived in monolithic terms is clearly observed in writings about the West in Japan, especially in those writings that are part of the literature usually referred to as *nihonjinron* (discourse on being Japanese). According to the context and the preference of the author, the West may refer to America or to any other European society (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 132). This general ‘West’ is frequently regarded in everyday life as that which is found over there (*mukō*) (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997: 142). In this imaginary place ‘over there’, time seems to stop.

Processes of Orientalism and Occidentalism tend to intensify the sense of self by dramatizing the difference and opposition to the Other (Said 1978: 55; Carrier 1995: 3). In the Japanese case, such processes of self-Other definitions have reached the point of self-Orientalism (Miller 1982: 209–11), self-exoticism (Martinez 1990; Ivy 1988, 1995; Goldstein-Gidoni 1999), as well as counter-exoticism. Exoticism is a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated. The process of exoticism and counter-exoticism includes ‘the act of indiscriminately combining fragments, crumbs of knowledge and fantasy’ (Savigliano 1995: 169).

This process of constructing fantasies and imageries of the Other is very playful. Costumes, which are indispensable in any play, are a fertile ground for such an imaginary production. Take, for example, the old-fashioned morning suits (*mōningu*) worn on ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals. While almost forgotten in their countries of origin, these symbols of the West, which were proclaimed by the government as formal wear for men in the Meiji era (Yanagida 1967: 11), are still worn by Japanese men, who in many ways have become ‘models for the West’ (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999). Other wedding costumes – as well as individual articles of clothing, such as the bustles in the brides’ crinolines – which ape the gowns of the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie as they are portrayed in period films and on television, constitute another example of this imaginative process of conceptualizing an abstract West in frozen images.

Imagining the West as the Other in contemporary Japan also carries with it

fantasies and images of a dream world. While in Japan marriage is not necessarily related to romantic love (Iwao 1993), the wedding industry often profits from these romantic fantasies. Recently popular overseas weddings offer an illuminating example of the attractiveness of this kind of fantasy. Since the late 1980s, bridal as well as travel magazines have been packed with such phantasms. ‘Become the heroine of a story in a Walt Disney Wedding’, one such magazine advertisement promises. Another magazine offers a ‘pumpkin horse-carriage tour’ from a Disney hotel (Rosenberger 1993). The appeal of these overseas weddings, which take place in Hawaii, Disneyworld or Guam, lies not in their specific geographic location but in their imagined ‘wonderland’ quality.

This cultural process of imagining the Other is an active process that combines Anderson’s idea of the imagined community in the sense of constructing a cultural identity (1983) and Appadurai’s idea of ‘the imagination as a social practice’ (1990: 5), in the sense that it is not mere fantasy, nor simple escape, nor mere contemplation. The construction of the ‘West’ in contemporary Japan should be viewed as part of the process by which contemporary Japanese imagine and produce their world and their culture *vis-à-vis* the ‘West’ as an imagined other.

### **Becoming the exotic Other: Aoki as Donny Burns**

Another major character in the film is the colorful and intriguing Aoki. In ‘real’ life, Aoki is an unsuccessful *sararīman* rejected by his colleagues as the unattractive, weird, black sheep of his firm. But on the dancing stage, he is a very experienced dancer. Aoki is depicted as the ultimate example of a person who wishes to become ‘the real thing’ through the zealous implementation of all available options. Aoki can dance only when he is temporarily transformed into the Other. As he confesses to Sugiyama, when he takes off his glasses and puts on his dancing costume – including a wig, a tight black T-shirt and pants – he actually becomes Donny Burns, a British Latin dance champion. His body movements and facial expressions are infused with exaggerated ‘Latin’ lust and passion; he is an instant Don Juan (Ehrlich 1998: 24). He changes so dramatically that Sugiyama does not recognize him when he first sees him dancing. Only when his wig is brutally tossed off during an attempt to mock his exaggerated impersonation of his foreign hero is Aoki’s real identity revealed, much to his embarrassment. Without his wig, it is as if he has been stripped of his manhood, stripped of the image of the exotic Other.

Aoki’s behavior is so consistently exaggerated that, although a good dancer, he is unable to find a female partner. One of the girls with whom he tries to practice tells him hysterically before ending their short partnership that ‘he gives her the creeps’ (*kimochi warui n’desu*) when he dances. It seems that Aoki’s overly deep involvement with the exotic Other provokes – as with other exotic products – ‘the strongly ambivalent feelings of repulsion and attraction’ (Savigliano 1992: 238).

Latin dance has become one of the popular dancing styles in Japan. However, the most widely practiced version of Latin dance in Japan is the English version, which has helped it escape its scandalous roots (Savigliano 1992: 241). As explained by an instructor of tango, 'Perhaps the way the tango is danced by foreigners, it is very passionate, but the way we teach it here, tango does not require a physical expression of passion through movements . . . we [Japanese] don't hug, kiss, and emote like you guys' (Savigliano 1992: 241).

This distinction lies at the core of the film – which begins with an explanatory note about Japanese people from an unseen narrator:

In Japan, ballroom dancing is enveloped with prejudice. The thought of a man and a woman hugging in public and dancing is very uncomfortable. It is embarrassing for married couples to attend parties together; dancing together is even more embarrassing. Husbands and wives do not tell each other 'I love you'. According to the Japanese way of thinking, they should understand each other without words. Going dancing with a woman who is not your wife, or a man who is not your husband may be seen as cheating on your partner, and is even more embarrassing. And yet, [such] Japanese still wonder about the tremendous pleasure that music and dancing may bring.<sup>2</sup>

This voice appears to be that of social dance lovers in Japan who seem to share with the tango performers and aficionados interviewed by Savigliano the feeling that there is something strange about Japanese performing Western-style social dancing together (1992: 251). This feeling of inappropriateness does not prevent Japanese people, especially urban and young Japanese, from practicing various 'exotic' pursuits, such as celebrating their own versions of foreign holidays (Moeran and Skov 1995) and Christian-style weddings (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001a), visiting theme parks reproducing replicas and reconstructions of faraway lands (Hendry 2000) and using their own Western-style language (Horiuchi 1990; Stanlaw 1992; Ishino *et al.* 1988).

The people engaging in such kinds of pursuits fully understand the limits and the options of the cultural play with which they are involved. In the film, Aoki acts as a player who has lost the conscious position towards the cultural play in which he is caught up. For him, social dancing is an extremely serious game to which he abandons himself body and soul. His consciousness of its being 'merely' a game is thrust into the background, and the joy which he thereby derives, and which is inextricably bound up with playing (Rapp 1980: 19; Yasuda 1971), is transformed, inexorably, from elation into real tension. His behavior is the outcome of his complete identification with the alternative context of reality within which he performs. He is so immersed in his dream that he believes that the disguising accessories have actually become part of his own self. However, he becomes the 'best player' only at the end of the film when his disguise is again brutally exposed during the grand amateurs competition and he decides to discard his invented Donny Burns identity for that of Aoki.

In this way, he plays the alternative other instead of hopelessly endeavoring to become the Other.

### **Playing the game: Sugiyama crosses the lines**

Sugiyama's mid-life identity crisis draws him to the world of social dancing. Attracted by the sad and beautiful figure of Mai, once he dares to enter the social dancing studio, he realizes that he is expected to play the game whole-heartedly. His colleagues have immediate doubts about his sincere intentions towards dancing. But, as far as they are concerned, although he is 'cheating', he is at least playing along, taking care not to destroy their illusionary world. But cheats are soon exposed, as he finds out when Mai rejects his invitation to have dinner together, declaring that she is a professional dancer, and that, if his interest in her as a woman made him participate in the dancing classes, he had better leave. Though discouraged, that sour incident opens Sugiyama's eyes to the real beauty of this fantastic, bubble-like temporary reality that can afford rich compensation for his routine life. Reconsidering his new situation, he leaves his feelings towards Mai behind, and joins the 'play community' of social dancers, accepting its members' mutual obligations towards each other as well as towards the maintenance of the ongoing game.

Playing sets one free. It suspends the menacing flow of time. It is like stepping out of reality (Rapp 1980: 25). This overwhelming feeling of joy is most evident in the film. The camera purposely follows a female devotee of social dancing leaving the school building and dancing in the streets, carried away by the euphoria that overwhelms her after the class. Sugiyama himself, who first enters the dance school as a worn-out *sararīman*, later confesses that, as social dancing has become more important in his life, he himself has 'turned out to be [everyday] more and more alive' (*mainichi ikiteiru yōni nattekimashita*). At one point, he finds himself dancing in the pouring rain reviving Gene Kelly's famous scene in the classic *Singing in the Rain*: it is not just any other alternative reality Sugiyama is discovering, but one marked as Western, in which mythological heroes are often Hollywood stars.

However, this seemingly ultimate freedom itself is actually more imagined than real, as the rules of this cultural play are very constraining, like the rules of any other game (Huizinga 1955: 10–11). Freeing the player from reality, the cultural play with the 'West' sets a fantastic reality styled by its own rules, and defined both in space and in time. While the cultural limits of a game such as social dancing are evident, they may not seem so during other occasions of cultural play with the 'West'. Nonetheless, they are there. For example, social actors in contemporary Japanese society are usually extremely aware of the marked cultural distinctions between what is defined as 'Japanese' (*wa*) and that which is culturally marked as Western (*yō*). This tendency can be observed in various spheres of material culture including food, dress and consumer products (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001b; Tobin 1992).



The feeling of freedom involved in play derives from the choice among options and the inner play of variations (Rapp 1980: 26). These allow for a certain playfulness within the game's own boundaries (Caillois 1958: 8). Thus, playfulness with the 'West' is the ability of the player to perform variations based on basic rules. The player gains the ability to reproduce his own self-image by using fixed cultural patterns and semiotic abilities such as a sense of humor, self-reference and an exaggerated zeal in implementing all the existing options to become the 'best player'.

The film provides us with an interesting perspective on some aspects of playing with the 'West' in contemporary Japan. As a cultural text, the film should be understood in a more general cultural context. The cultural permissiveness towards things Western in Japan is shaped by a cultural stance that sees imported ideas or elements as stylistic points of reference, allowing uninhibited domestic creativity. Affluent Japan can afford to celebrate differences between cultures as style choices (Ivy 1988: 27). The manifold ways in which the 'West' is imagined and produced in contemporary Japan imply that there are endless variations of the production and invention of culture, some of which bear the characteristics of sheer play.

Cultural attitudes towards the 'foreign' exist only through social practices. In contemporary Japanese society, the electronic media are major social agents that both reflect and affect the cultural attitudes towards what is culturally marked as 'non-Japanese'. For example, it is characterized by an abundant use of *katakana* words, in both spoken and written language.<sup>3</sup> A popular television program during the early 1990s was 'Wow! The World' (*Naruhodo za wārudo*), the first word in Japanese, the second in phonetically adjusted English, already suggesting a playful attitude towards its object of discovery. Traveling around the world, sometimes to faraway and exotic places, this program challenged directly the cultural confrontation with the foreign. Its hosts – famous and fashionable culture stars – explored new frontiers and tasted new and sometimes bizarre foreign foods. Nevertheless, they usually traveled as a self-contained group almost never mingling with the native populations, always stressing their own or their colleagues' lack of ability to communicate linguistically beyond their own cultural and social world.

Non-Japanese hosts or guests are very popular on Japanese TV shows. Usually their foreignness, coupled with their ability to speak fluent Japanese and perform accordingly, is the essence of their charm. Starring in one such popular television show was a potential media star nicknamed 'Native Stranger' (written in English). The peculiar and catchy name was hinting at what was obvious from his looks: he was only half-Japanese. His presence, comments and fluent Japanese focused all attention on him, and the cultural tension that he represented aroused great cheers. 'Native Stranger' represents an innovative cultural category consisting of a fundamental contradiction. His hybrid nature is played dramatically and manipulatively, pointing at his own mixed etymology in a self-referential way.

Games must be played seriously in order to thrive (Huizinga 1955: 18–19). The serious play with the West in Japan is even more accentuated as attention to proper form and etiquette characterizes Japanese social behavior in general (Buruma 1984: 22; Creighton 1992: 44). Sugiyama's attitude towards Western-style social dances is the best example. Acknowledged by everyone (in real life and on stage) as Mr *Majime* (serious and earnest), Sugiyama buys very expensive dancing shoes before setting foot on the dance floor for the first time. Later on, he also buys a special T-bar training device, designed to practice the correct erect posture while dancing. But his total devotion and earnestness is most dramatically expressed when he agrees to commit himself to rehearsals three times a week for the grand 'Eastern Japan Amateurs Social Dancing Competition', ignoring the great risks of exposing his secret at home and at work. By then, Sugiyama has implemented all the cultural options of the game to turn into the 'best player'.

This kind of extra seriousness is common in 'play communities' like the one Sugiyama has joined (Huizinga 1955: 11–12). With Japan becoming a consumer society, grouping around the reproduction of non-Japanese images has become a popular social activity, particularly among young Japanese (Skov and Moeran 1995: 16–22). From the 1970s onward, members of 'play communities', such as 'Japanese Punks', have been buying second-hand jeans for hundreds of dollars, thereby reproducing the authentic look, but leaving behind the social protest of the punk movement. During the late 1990s 'Black Japanese' dressed up and styled their hair according to the latest black American fashion in Harlem, as depicted, for example, in Spike Lee's films.

Comparing these sub-cultures and their English or American points of reference may seem at first to be a misunderstanding of the functionality and meaning of different imported elements and codes of behavior. Nevertheless, it is a play of selection and combination in which cultural limits of form and content are re-examined and redefined for domestic consumption.

The adventurous game is over for Sugiyama as soon as his secret is exposed during the grand amateurs dance competition, and the cultural boundaries that kept the fantasy where it belongs crumble to allow reality to crawl in. As Aoki is being stripped of his wig by a vicious competitor, Sugiyama's partner for the competition loses her dress while on stage during an unfortunate accident. And, worst of all, Sugiyama himself discovers that his wife and daughter are sitting in the audience watching him dance. The magic that fueled the dream vanishes immediately. Sugiyama turns his back on the world in which he was a transient prince. As much as his playmates try to tempt him into going back, as much as his wife pleads with him to do so and as miserable as Sugiyama may be, he knows that the social dance studio is no place for a well respected *sarariman*. In a final twist of the film, he returns for a very last time, responding to a large signpost that he spots through the train window addressing him in English: 'Shall we dance, Mr Sugiyama?'

## Conclusion

The dynamics of cultural production are colorfully portrayed in the very last scene of the film. Sugiyama and Mai unite in their first and last ballroom dance to the tune 'Shall We Dance?', and all the other amateur dancers join them, glowing in harmonious joy. The rules of the game were not broken, the prince and Cinderella join together. As the tune fades away, the lights on the Japanese stage fade with it. When the lights go on again, the Shakespearean stage is now the background for the running credits. Most spectators are ready to leave the cinema when the screen comes back to life. Fair-haired ladies and English gentlemen dance a quickstep to the rhythm of a Japanese popular song. Then, eventually, the Japanese tune changes, almost imperceptibly, into the tune that combines East and West, 'Shall We Dance?'

The contemporary illusion of a borderless world draws many Japanese to contemplate a wider set of 'possible' lives than ever before. This is where fantasy and imagination become social practices, as mediators between reality and alternative realities (Appadurai 1991: 197). The negotiation between these culturally constructed 'realities' is fertile ground for an 'internal cultural debate' on identity (Parkin 1978; Moeran 1984).

The playful attitude towards the 'West', as portrayed in the film and in other examples given in this article, manifests the significance of the concept of play for the understanding of the production of culture and cultural identity. A play offers its participants a sheltered space protecting them from any fatal consequences, hence inducing creativity (Caillois 1958: 66; Weissman 1990: 58–63). Playing with the 'West' in contemporary Japan, like any other play, provides its participants with a sense of freedom. It is not freedom in a sense of escape however; the play affects and even generates new realities, new identities.

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## Notes

1. 'Shall We *Dansu?*' had one of the largest openings ever for a foreign-language film in the United States (Ehrlich 1998: 25). The English version has been shortened by 18 minutes.
2. All citations from the film are translated directly from the Japanese.
3. Either as loanwords written in *katakana* or as quotes written in the original language.

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