

# Reflections Upon a Brick Wall, Dillweed, Mugwort Bread and Californian Car-Lore

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## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, while doing research in a remote part of Kyushu, I became intrigued by the way in which certain 'non-indigenous' cultural elements came to be adopted by my neighbours in the country valley in which we lived. My initial awareness of the problem started when I was obliged to build a stone wall to shore up a somewhat precipitous slope below our house. At the end of three days' hard work, I realized that I had built a European wall, consisting of square or rectangular stones which had been laid in overlapping layers as though they were bricks. This wall was very different from other walls which formed the stepped rice paddies in the valley, and which consisted of round or rhomboid-shaped stones dropped into one another in a manner totally different from my own brick-laying style.

This was not the only element of local 'culture' which will doubtless cause one or two puzzled archaeologists to scratch heads in a few hundred years time. In the same valley (and only, so far as I know, in this one valley), a number of farmers' wives grew dillweed. I discovered that dill had been brought there by men who had been imprisoned in Siberia and had learned about the herb's uses from the Russians. They thus referred to dillweed as *roshiagusa*, or 'Russian grass' (Moeran 1985: 158, 228).

Let me continue a little longer with the anecdotal style permitted by the undisciplined discipline of anthropology. One of the things that attracted my attention on a recent visit to Berkeley was the use of personalized number plates on cars and trucks. In order to while away hours made idle by the sheer size of the university campus, I

used to note in my pedestrian travels those number plates that struck me as especially intriguing or amusing. Some I found peculiarly 'Californian'—like LIF LOVR (Life lover), for example, or JOGNLIV (Jog and live), EVERHI (Ever high), and GODSINU (God's in you). Others made dexterous use of the fact that environmental licence plates (as the personalized plates are officially called by the Department of Motor Vehicles in Sacramento) are limited to a combination of seven letters and/or numbers: for example, WRSFS (We are San Franciscans), PCOFMND (Peace of mind), MCMLXV (1965, the year of the car's make), YR BNDR (Wire bender), XCLNT (Excellent), TPLZ BNY (Topless Bunny, for a Volkswagen Rabbit Hatchback), GN2LNCH (Gone to lunch) and ICUUCME (I see you; you see me). Yet others were little more than onomatopoeic sounds for the cars they licensed, as with VVVVVVV, MMMMM 6, RUUMMM, ZIMMMM, and ZZZOOM.<sup>1</sup>

I soon noticed that a number of Japanese words occurred among the environmental licence plates. Many of these were clearly the names of the car owners, as with MORIOKA, KAMATA, DAIGORO, IM YURI, SUMISAN and KAGAWAS; but many more included words and phrases which were used by and known to American, as opposed to simply Japanese-American, car owners. It is the latter that I wish to look at in further detail here before discussing them in the context of cultural and linguistic innovation.<sup>2</sup>

#### CLASSIFICATION OF DATA

In view of the fact that the Japanese are very fond of nature and refer to it in many different spheres of their culture, it was perhaps not surprising to find that a number of car license plates referred to various aspects of nature. Thus I came across SHIZEN (Nature), and MIDORI (Green[ery]), together with YAMA (Mountain), YUKI (Snow), and SORA (Sky). Astronomical bodies represented included TAIYO (Sun) (and variants TAIYO 1/8), TSUKI (Moon), TSUKI 1, and HOSHI/1 (Star). Flora and fauna were found in HANA (Flower), UME (Plum), FUJI (Wistaria), SAKURA (Cherry), KIKU (Chrysanthemum), and MOMO (Peach).<sup>3</sup> Variations on the last three included:

SAKURA 1	MOMO 3
SAKURA 4	MOMO 4
KIKU 1	MOMO 40
KIKU 11	MOMO 5
KIKU 2	MOMO 59
KIKU 7	MOMO 72
MOMO 1	MOMO 8

MOMO 12	MOMO 9
MOMO 21	MOMO 919

Birds and animals were not often found. Exceptions were TSURU (Crane), and TSUBAME (Swallow), symbols of long life and prosperity respectively. HEBI (Snake) was seen on an AC Cobra car, and BEARSAN on a car owned by a student who supported the 'Golden Bears' football team of the University of California at Berkeley.

Japanese place names were also infrequent, being found only in KYUSHU, 8 BUNGO, SAPPORO,<sup>4</sup> and a number of variations on Japan's major city (TOKAI):

TOKYO	TOKYO DA
TOKYO MO	TOKYO-TO
TOKYO Z	TOKYO 1
TOKYO 10	TOKYO 2
TOKYO 3	TOKYO 7

Neither *Osaka* nor *Japan* existed, but variations on the latter were found in:

NIHON	NIPPON
NIHON 1	YAMATO
NIHON 2	

while general connotations of 'Japaneseness' (a point to which we shall later return) were found in such license plates as TAMASHI (Spirit), KOKORO (Heart), MUSHIN ('No Mind'), and WA (Harmony).

Historical periods have been commemorated in TAISHO (1914–1926) and SHOWA (1926 to the present day), but not *Meiji*. Japan's part in the Pacific War was noted with HAISEN (Defeat), while another conflict further back in time was recalled with GENJI (the Minamoto) and HEIKE (the Taira).

Artistic activities were represented by such number plates as KABUKI (theatre), HAIKU (poetry), CHANOYU (tea ceremony), IKEBANA (flower arrangement), and GEISHA, while many of the aesthetic concepts associated with the practice of such arts were also found. For example:

BI (Beauty)	AWARE (Pathos)
IKI (Chic)	SHIBUI (Subdued quiet)
YUGEN (Quiet beauty)	MUJO (Impermanence)

The last word is perhaps more strictly 'religious' than aesthetic, and in this context I came across MATSURI (Festival), DAIMOKU (Prayer chanting) and ZAZEN (Zen Buddhist meditation). Indeed, it is with

ZEN that the personalized number plates in California come to life, as the following list illustrates:

ZEN 1/12/21	ZENMAN
ZENBIKR	ZENMIND
ZENBOY	ZENMOBL
ZENBUG	ZENTRUK
ZENCAT	ZENWIND
ZENFLOW	ZENZERO
ZENGAME	

To these can be added the linguistic puns, ZENEMY (The enemy) and ZENXIOUS (Zen anxious).

As a philosophy, Zen Buddhist thought has been associated with a number of martial arts. These were represented on number plates with AIKIDO, JUJITSU (together with its variant JUJUTSU), KARATE, and KENDO. JUDO was used in a number of variations, including:

JUDOKA/S	JUDOMAM
JUDOMAN	JUDOMOM
JUDOFUN	JUDO 1/12/2/5DN/84

The SAMURAI code of BUSHIDO was also found, together with BUSHI (Warrior), and NINJA (Acrobatic spy). A more recent exponent of the warrior code was to be found in:

KAMIKAZ	KAMIKAS
KAMIKZ	KAMIKZE
KAMIKZI	KAMIKZY

In the meantime, SUMO, the art of Japanese wrestling, occurred in:

SUMO 1/2/3/4	I SUMO
SUMONO 1	SUMOCAR
SUMOIT	

In view of the emphasis on such activities which emphasize instruction, it was perhaps not surprising to find both SENSEI (Teacher) and DESHI (Pupil) on number plates. Other social roles included the traditional OYABUN (Patron) and KOBUN (Client), together with those types of person generally associated with feudal-like relationships: YAKUZA (Gangster), DAIMYO (Feudal lord), and SHOGUN.<sup>5</sup>

Family relations were also frequent: ONNA (Woman) and OTOKO (Man), together with KODOMO (Child), OTOSAN/OTOSAMA (Father), OKASAN (Mother), ONISAN/NISAN (Elder brother), OJISAN/OJICHAN (Uncle),

OBASAN/OBACHAN (Aunt), and OJISAN (Grandfather). Marital relations occurred in: SHUJIN (Husband), TSUMA, OKUSAN and YOME (Wife), while the whole concept of continuing generations of the Japanese household was to be seen in DAIDAI.

Personal pronouns relating to the household were seen in UCHI (Our) and TAKU (Your), while individual forms of pronominal address occurred in:

BOKU/NO ( <i>I, My</i> )	ANATA/MO ( <i>You/too</i> )
WATASHI ( <i>I</i> )	KIMI ( <i>You</i> )
KARE/NO ( <i>He, His</i> )	KANOJO ( <i>She</i> )
KARERA ( <i>They</i> )	

Other social statuses represented were NISEI (Japanese American), KOKUJIN (Black American), GAIJIN (Foreigner), and the punning GAKUCLA (UCLA student, *gakusei*). Occupations occasionally remarked upon included DAIKU (Carpenter), GINKOKA (Banker), FUDOSAN (Realty estate) and HAISHA/1/2 (Dentist); while SHOBAI (Business) in general could be found in such words as OKANE (Money), DAIKIN (Great sum) and DAI-TOKU (Great profit).

Over the past decade or so, Westerners have shown increasing interest in Japanese fashion and clothing, so it was hardly surprising to come across GETA, HAPPI/HAPPY, KIMONO and OBI. Food and drink also received some attention with GOHAN (Rice) (together with variants GOHAN DA and GOHAN 2), and SEKIHAN (Congratulatory red bean rice), as well as TEMPURA (Deep fry), PAN (Bread) and the somewhat unexpected NINJIN (Carrot). Other foods included the ever popular SASHIMI (Raw fish), together with the following varieties of SUSHI:

SUSHIED	
SUSHI DR	
SUSHI 1/111	
SUSHI 2	(Sushi too)
SUSHIKO	(Sushi child)
SUSHISF	(Sushi San Francisco)
SUSHI 42	(Sushi for two)
SUSHI 4K	(Sushi for Kay)

And to quench one's thirst, personalized number plates offered us the choice of ASAHI, KIRIN or SAPPORO beer, or the more traditional SAKE, with its toast of KAMPAI or KANPAI:

SAKE2U	(Sake to you)
SAKE2ME	(Sake to me)

SAKE4ME (Sake for me)  
SAKE 1/19

#### CAR-LORE AND KEYWORDS

In other articles (Moeran 1983 and 1984), I have discussed the way in which certain keywords, emphasizing 'Japaneseness,' tend to crop up in a number of different spheres of Japanese society. I have already mentioned a few words from environmental licence plates which reflect the kinds of ideals generally attributed to a typical Japanese 'spirit.' *KOKORO* (Heart) was one example; *MUSHIN* (No mind), *WA* (Harmony), and *TAMASHI* were others. Here we might add some more words which are characteristic of the kind of ideals by which Japanese society is organized: *GIRI* (Social obligation), *NINJO* (Human spontaneity), *SHINNEN* (Conviction), *SHINBO* (Perseverance), *KONKI* (Endurance), *ANTEI* (Established), *KONJO* (Disposition), *KONKI* (Endurance), *SHOJIKI* (Honesty), *MAKOTO* (Sincerity), and *JISHIN* (Self-confidence).

At the same time, there is a second group of words which directly contrasts with this sense of 'Japaneseness,' revealing instead an idiosyncrasy, or *KOSEI*, more characteristic of what might be seen as the 'fun-loving,' 'Californian' way of life. These include *OKASHII* (Funny), *URESHII* (Happy), *KIREI* (Attractive), *HEIKI* (Self-possessed), *NONKI* (Easygoing), *KAKKOII/KAKKO E* (Groovy), and *SUTEKI* (Marvellous). More down to earth are *ZURUI* (Crafty), *SUKEBE* (Lecherous),<sup>6</sup> *ETCHY* (Dirty minded), and *BAKA* (Fool). These last words come in for a number of variants, as does *KOI* (Love, or Carp).<sup>7</sup> Thus we have,

BAKABOY	ETCH I
BAKADA	ETCHYS
BAKASAN	ETCHY 1/2/3
KOIBITO	KOIFAN
KOIJYO	KOI I
KOIMAN	KOINUT
KOIFISH	

It would seem that these two groups of words represent two different aspects of Japanese culture. The first group is probably close in 'spirit' to the *formal* aspects of Japanese culture spread abroad. It consists of words that are compatible with the ideals of the martial arts, for example, and Japanese art in general, and which, along with cuisine and fashion, reflect the acceptable face of Japanese 'tradition' as it is propagated both at home and overseas.

The second group of words is not part of the 'official' mainstream cultural tradition of Japan. Although such words are frequently used

in Japan, they tend to be frowned upon by those in authority since they express a certain 'individuality,' and thereby suggest that Japanese society is moving away from its traditional values towards a modern and 'Western' system of morals (Moeran 1984). In this respect, the second group of words provides an *informal* counter-balance to the somewhat 'religious' character of the words listed in the first group.

#### LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL INNOVATIONS

Clearly, the way in which Japanese words and phrases are gradually being assimilated into English, especially American English, is of interest to those concerned with folklore studies. This is particularly so, perhaps, in light of the recent media focus on the Pacific as a major political arena of the future. It is likely that linguistic assimilation of the kind seen on Californian environmental licence plates will proceed apace, and that, in the coming decades, Japanese influence on the West coast of the United States will become even stronger.

Such speculation may be acceptable in after-dinner conversation, perhaps, but needs further discussion when printed on the pages of an academic journal. It should be stressed, however, that the reflections which follow are meant to inspire further research, rather than conclude the somewhat hasty jottings of an Englishman abroad.

I began this paper by referring to two examples of cultural contact in a remote valley in central Kyushu. In the first, the story about a brick-like wall, a Western way of doing things was practiced by a Westerner living in a Japanese community. In the second, the story about the origin of *roshiagusa*, local Japanese brought back from a Western society a herb which had not hitherto been grown or used in their own community. At the moment, there is no evidence to show that Japanese living in the valley concerned have as yet adopted my method of constructing stone walls. Still, there is the chance that at some stage in the future they might see fit to do so, for some wives now successfully grow beetroot from the seeds that we have given them, while others have wholeheartedly adopted my wife's method of making *yomogi*, or 'mugwort,' bread which they sell in the local supermarket.

Brick walls and dillweed are just two examples of the way in which objects and artifacts have been converted into 'cultural' items in a remote Japanese valley. In the context of this paper, I wish to suggest that words frequently cross linguistic boundaries in a somewhat similar manner. Thus, some environmental licence plates with Japanese words on them have probably been registered by members of Japanese immigrant families (the '*brick wall*' route); others by those living in California who have had some sort of contact with Japanese culture<sup>8</sup> (the

'*dillweed*' route). Many more words are probably adopted as a result of mutual contact—in much the same way as my Japanese wife learned how to make bread from some American neighbours in Kobe many years ago, proceeded to experiment with the ingredients, and then taught local Japanese farmers' wives how to make *yomogi pan* (the '*mugwort bread*' route).

Although considerable attention has been paid by both Japanese and Western scholars to the way in which Japanese has borrowed from European languages, particularly from English, not many scholars have addressed themselves to the way in which Japanese words have been adopted into (American) English. Nagara (1972) has considered the use of Japanese pidgin English in Hawaii, and Miller (1967: 256–259) has enumerated a number of words which have come into more or less general usage in the United States in particular. These include tycoon (*taikun*), *mikado*, and *hara-kiri*, together with a number of words connected with art (e.g. *shibui*), nature (e.g. *ginkgo*), food (e.g. *soy sauce*) and fashion (e.g. *kimono*).

Clearly, there is a tendency for vocabulary items connected with Japanese arts (in the broadest sense of the word), foods, and fashion to be adopted into American English (and other Western languages). These are, after all, three of the more exportable aspects of culture in general (as our own Gallicized vocabulary reveals). This point is supported by the number of such words found on Californian environmental licence plates—*ikebana*, *chanoyu*, *aware*, *shibui*, *zen*, *judo*, *sumo*, *karate*, *sushi*, *sashimi*, *sake*, *obi*, *geta*, *kimono*, and possibly *happi*.<sup>9</sup> There are doubtless more which my brief period of research has not discovered.

Other words, however, are less easy to classify. SUKOSH and SUKOSHI could well be a hang-over from post-war *pangurishi*, or 'street-walker English,' picked up by those employed in the American military during Japan's occupation after the Pacific War (Miller 1967: 263). The fact that the spelling of this word is usually abbreviated, as in a fashion ad '*a skosh more tight at the hips*,' shows just how much this Japanese loanword has been assimilated into the American-English phonetic system. There are other words on Californian licence plates which would also seem to stem from 'bamboo' or 'street-walker' English. For example,

ARIGATO	DOZO
DAIJOBU	DAISUKI
DAIICHI	TAKUSAN

to which we might be permitted to add GAIJIN, KOKUJIN, and possibly SUKEBE.



Loanwords like these have almost certainly been brought into California (and the United States) by the 'dillweed' route. There are occasions, however, when the 'brick wall' route has been prominent, as Japanese themselves introduce their own language into the society to which they have migrated over the past century or so. I would suggest that this is so of many of the terms connected with domestic life: for example, kinship, cooking and food.

Although it cannot be classed strictly speaking as a loanword, one of the more interesting words filtering into English through the 'mugwort bread' route is RINGO. A number of licence plates carried variations of what is probably an American name, rather than a Japanese apple. For example,

RINGO 1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8  
 RINGO VW  
 RINGOS  
 RINGGO

The most famous 'Ringo' in 20th century history has probably been Ringo Starr, former member of the Beatles pop group. Another member of this group, John Lennon, married a Japanese woman, Ono Yoko, who must surely have been responsible for the pun underlying the naming of the Beatles's recording company, Apple.

In itself, perhaps, this is not so remarkable. It seems possible, for example, that the Japanese predilection for combining and abbreviating English loanwords (*cf.* *hansuto* for 'hunger strike') encouraged English and American newspapers to adopt the Japlish term *stagflation* (combining 'stagnant' and 'inflation'). However, in the case of *ringo*, Ono Yoko's linguistic wordplay did more than create the name of a record company. It established an initially arbitrary alliance between nature (the fruit) and culture (the record company)—an arbitrariness which has with times become less surprising as we find ourselves faced with a new generation of Apple and Apricot computers, Peach software, and a host of other trade names and slogans linking modern technology with the fruits of nature. Thus, not only has the *ringo/apple/record* equation initially supported, then contradicted, the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign (Jakobson 1978: 109–116), but a Japanese/English loan translation appears to have helped create an alternative semiotic system, affecting the way in which English and Americans 'see' their high technology.<sup>10</sup>

#### CONCLUDING COMMENT

Atricles in academic journals tend to be tightly argued with begin-

nings, middles, and ends. The reader starts at point A, before proceeding in orderly fashion to point B, by way of a well marked avenue lined with factual signposts—the highway code of scholarly research. This paper has left its reader at an intersection, none of whose roads seems to lead anywhere in particular. For this, and for the charge of ‘non-scholarly approach’ which is implied by my having failed to arrive at a predetermined destination, I can only apologize.

It is the ‘mugwort bread’ route to cultural and linguistic innovation which I find most intriguing in any study of the relationship between Japanese and English. Yet it is precisely this approach which refuses to be signposted in the customary way. Needless to say, the incomplete nature of my own ‘research’ on Californian environmental licence plates has probably prevented me from coming to an admirable theoretical conclusion in this paper. For the record, therefore, I would like to suggest that a number of keywords involving formal aspects of Japanese culture, particularly those connected with the arts, have probably been borrowed into (American) English by the ‘mugwort bread,’ rather than ‘brick wall’ or ‘dillweed,’ routes of cultural assimilation.

This is no more than a hunch—the kind of hunch someone has at an intersection when faced with a signpost pointing out that all roads lead to Rome, or wherever. The ‘mugwort bread’ route has the advantage of not being as hard as that proverbial brick wall, against which I should be banging my head in search of solutions. It also provides food for the thought of this *bakaboy* and, hopefully, for others less confused.

#### NOTES

1. The environmental license plates referred to in this article were either seen by the author, or taken from the Californian Department of Motor Vehicles’ three volume computer print-out, *Environmental License Plate Numbers*.

2. Since the January 30, 1984, print-out lists 1,210,374 personalized number plates, I do not pretend to have made here a complete analysis of Japanese words and phrases used, and my study of the print-out has been limited to two days in the Department of Motor Vehicles, El Cerrito.

3. In view of the fact that license plates included KIKUYO, KIKUKO, MOMOE, and MOMOCAR, we should recognize the probability that many of the plates categorized under the heading of ‘Nature’ could also be names of car owners.

4. It is possible that SAPPORO in fact referred to one of the brands of beer drunk by Japanese, and marketed in California, since both ASAHI and KIRIN also were found (see under Food and Drink).

5. The success of the television film *Shogun* was probably also responsible for ANJIN 2 (Pilot two/too).

6. Miller (1967: 259) suggests that *sukebei* instigated the English word *skibby*,

used apparently in California for any Japanese person.

7. *Koi*'s connotations of both 'love' and 'carp' are neatly combined in a bumper sticker, seen recently in London: *Carp Society members do it for love*.

8. This was the case with one of my students who had lived in Japan and rode around in a convertible with KAKKO E on it.

9. I say 'possible' because HAPPI may very well be a mis-spelling of 'happy' (cf. the license plate HAPPI 2B [Happy to be]).

10. For further examples of the way in which culture 'cooks' nature, see Williamson 1978: 103-121.

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