“Culture is Not a Zero-Sum Game”
A Conversation with Monkey Business

Angela Qian

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*Monkey Business* is a Japanese literary magazine founded in 2008 by translator and critic Motoyuki Shibata. *Monkey Business: New Writing from Japan* is the annual translated offspring of the Japanese literary magazine, featuring essays, fiction, and graphic narratives for an English-speaking audience. While on tour for the newest issue of the journal, editor-in-chief Motoyuki Shibata, contributing editor Roland Kelts, along with illustrator Satoshi Kitamura, and writer Aoko Matsuda, both of whom contributed to this issue, sat down to talk about contemporary Japanese literature, translation, and cultural differences and similarities between Japanese and American literature.

Motoyuki Shibata is a major Japanese critic and translator who has taught American literature and literary translation at the University of Tokyo, and has translated Paul Auster, Rebecca Brown, Stuart Dybek, Kelly Link, Charles Simić, and many other writers into Japanese.13

Roland Kelts is the author of *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop...*

"Culture is not a zero-sum game"

Culture Has Invaded the U.S., who has appeared on various T.V. and radio talk shows, and has written on Japanese culture for many publications including The New Yorker, Vogue, Salon, and Zoetrope.

Aoko Matsuda is the author of two short story collections, Stackable, nominated for the Yukio Mishima Prize, and Eiko’s Forest. She has translated Karen Russell’s St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves into Japanese.

Satoshi Kitamura is a picture-book artist and illustrator, both in Japanese and English. His many awards include the National Art Library Award, The Mother Goose Award for Most Exciting Newcomer to British Illustration, and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year for his When Sheep Cannot Sleep.14

AQ: What is the project of Monkey Business, and how is it related to the Japanese counterpart? How did you originally conceive of the journal?

MS: The easiest answer is a little bit long. Do you know the book The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories? It’s a standard anthology of Japanese short stories. The editor is Ted Goossen, who teaches at York University in Toronto. This is a minor bestseller. It is used in so many courses on Japanese literature. The publisher has been pressuring him to create a contemporary version of this anthology, and Ted thought about it, but he thought that an anthology of new stories would become dated very quickly. Classics don’t get dated so quickly, stories by Natsume Soseki or Mori Ōgai – you know, they last. But you know, those anthologies made of stories from the 2010s would become very dated after a while. So he came up with the idea of doing the annual anthology every year. He looked up my magazine, the Japanese Monkey Business, and thought, why not get the best stories out of those stories in Moto’s magazine and create an annual anthology? And he talked me into doing it. He is the co-editor of Monkey Business. The official mission would be something like, “To let readers in English-speaking countries know more about contemporary Japanese fiction.” But we don’t think in terms of the mission, of why we’re doing it. We just pick up what we like and translate it and put it on paper.

14. All names in this transcription have been standardized for an English-speaking audience, with first names first and family names last.
AQ: [Roland Kelts] You wrote a book called *Japanamerica*, on how Japanese culture has infiltrated the West. From my experience, the most famous cultural products that come over are anime and video games. In some places, there is a certain stigma attached to people who like those things. Japanese literature is frequently underplayed in American culture. Do you think this perception of Japanese culture in the West prevents a more serious appreciation of Japanese literature?

RK: You mean the popularity of anime and manga prevents people from discovering Japanese literature? I don’t think so. In fact, I think it’s the opposite. I think a lot of young Americans who are interested in anime—maybe they discover *Dragonball Z*, or *Pokémon*—or something newer, like *Death Note*, they become interested in Japanese culture beyond that. You know, why are people eating *onigiri*, what are *tatami*? They see these things in the anime and manga, and that tends to lead them to more questions about the culture. And I think that awakens in them an interest in Japanese food, Japanese politics, samurai traditions, whatever one may exhibit of *bushido* and so on, and then, of course, literature is the next doorway, because it’s the work of the imagination, but it also enriches your experience of culture. I think there is a positive relationship. Of course, not every manga or anime fan will discover prose or poetry. But some of them do. And I think in particular, in contemporary Japan, the work of Haruki Murakami has been a huge selling point for Japanese literature. Obviously, with *Monkey Business* we want people to go beyond Murakami’s work, even though he

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15. Rice balls wrapped in seaweed with different fillings.
16. A type of mat used in traditional Japanese rooms as flooring.
is a contributor to *Monkey Business*. But we hope to draw people in further. But I think anime and manga serve that function as well. I've taught at the University of Tokyo and at Temple University, which is an American university in Japan, and Sophia University. And in all of those places, some of those students were drawn to move to Japan through manga and anime, and actually pursue their whole education based on their entry through Japanese pop culture. And I think this is the same for other countries.

SK: Yeah. And I think maybe fifteen years ago, things started to change. I noticed because I lived in England for about thirty years, until 2009. Twenty or twenty-five years ago, people asked me, “Do you speak Chinese in Japan?” I'd say, “You know, we have a language called Japanese.” So that's how they saw us. But then when anime became popular, or Haruki Murakami or Banana Yoshimoto, things started to change very quickly. So those people who study the Japanese language from thirty years ago say they are interested in Buddhism or Mishima or stuff like that. But nowadays they are all about anime. I've been to Latin America many times in the last ten years. They are the same. And I went to this book fair festival in Bogota, in Colombia. There was a huge section dedicated to comics, Japanese-style comics, lots of them, made by them, and in Colombia. I find it, as Roland said, a very positive thing. It is a good thing.

Also, I was in Yakushima last year. I met a couple, from France, I think. They were there because the location was used in Miyazaki's films. They wanted to see this forest. It is a remote island in the south of Japan. It is not easy to get there. They just wanted to see the scene in this animation.

AM: Maybe *Princess Mononoke*?

RK: Yes, that one. I just want to add that I don't think it's exclusive to Japan. I've met people in other countries who loved, say, American Westerns, or Hollywood action films, and through that they become interested in America and want to go to the desert or go to New York or Los Angeles and maybe then they pick up a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, by a classic American, or *Catcher in the Rye*. So the way in can be fairly superficial in a way, but then you go deeper.
SK: But that’s how it is. People who are interested in England because of the Beatles, it’s always like that.

RK: It’s like a love affair.

MS: Culture is not a zero-sum game. So if something sells, it doesn’t mean something else doesn’t sell. The size of the cake is not fixed.

**AQ:** Haruki Murakami’s stories are famous for how he portrays adolescent and adult isolation, and alienation. From what I’ve read, I’ve noticed similar themes of transience and feeling alone in writers like Banana Yoshimoto, Yoko Ogawa, and Matsuda Aoko’s story “Photographs are Images.” Do you think there is a thematic trend of feelings of isolation among Japanese literature, or is it a global trend? And is there a tie to the Japanese of societal phenomena of parasite singles and hikikomori?17

AM: I don’t think it’s particular to Japan. I feel that isolation is a huge theme in American literature too. Rather than being particular to Japan, I think the feeling of isolation is shared all over the world. But hikikomori and those types... but America also has hikikomori doesn’t it?

**AQ:** I guess it’s not as famous of a phenomenon.

SK: Don’t you think that in a way—I kind of feel that the world is becoming Japonized in these things. An idea like *otaku*18, which became English, the word, came because people behaved in a certain way. The Japanese started doing this ten years before the rest of the world. That’s how I see it—in England, twenty years ago, there was a TV program showing stupid Japanese TV shows. At the beginning they thought, “How weird those are.” Five years later, they start the same TV shows themselves, just like Japanese TV. So in a way, the Japanese, probably because of our society, somehow started—in a negative sense—and are sort of ahead of the rest of the world. In things like isolation, or some style of isolation, like *otaku* things.

RK: I completely agree, and I think part of it is the advances in

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17. A parasite single is used to describe a single person who lives with his parents late into his or her twenties or thirties, continuing to be supported by their parents. Hikikomori is a term for a socially withdrawn person, often who resorts to extreme isolation (such as never attending school).

18. A term used to describe someone with obsessive interests, such as in anime or manga.
technology that have become global. I remember roughly ten years ago, when the Japanese cell phone was the most advanced on the planet, the keitai denwa. They were these flip phones. When I took mine out in New York, at a party, everyone was like ooohh and aaahh and said, “You can take a picture and send it immediately on email?” And you could take a video, and go online. And my friends in New York were shocked. Because they had old Nokia phones that you could only call people or send short messages on. But then these [smartphones] came out. And so in Japan at that time, people on the trains were always like this [mimes staring at phone] on their phones. But if I went to New York, everyone was talking on the phone: “Hey Steve, how’s it going?” But when these [smartphones] came out, suddenly the Americans looked very like the Japanese. Everyone on the train is on their phone texting, typing, checking online. So it’s almost like Japan kind of anticipated a lot of what Western culture is experiencing. And I think the question of isolation, I agree, is very common in urban—especially urban culture around the world. But I think in Japan, the advent of single-occupancy apartments is relatively new, compared to the United States. New York and London and San Francisco have had solo residents, twenty-five year olds, thirty-year olds, for decades. It’s very common. But in Japan, in Tokyo, and in Osaka, for all of these millions of young people, to live alone—

MS: I had the completely opposite impression. I am a specialist in American literature so I tend to compare American literature with Japanese literature. And in American literature, it is so much about families.

AQ: That’s what I was thinking. There is more of a family focus.

RK: That’s true. I guess, what I’m saying is that the urban
experience of living alone without any connection to a community...

MS: But you said that it’s been going on here for a long time and that it’s relatively new in Japan? I didn’t realize that.

RK: Because if you look back at Breakfast at Tiffany’s, part of the humor of the book and the jokes is this apartment life in New York, where a single woman lives alone in her apartment and she is available and the guys come into her apartment. A lot of that humor and comedy is based on a postwar American experience. You know, The Apartment is a classic, right? All these movies and shows about individuals living in their own apartments. But in urban Japan, that experience by young people who don’t live in a company dorm anymore, all those danchi which came exploding in the ’80s—and danchi culture—I remember then, if you got an apartment, you were supposed to bring a gift for your neighbor to introduce yourself.

SK: Like a towel.

RK: I asked my students at Todai, do you bring anything? And they said, “No, nobody brings anything anymore.” And my students said they don’t know their neighbors.

SK: The style of single, isolated living has changed because of the environment; technology has changed. Therefore, even though Westerners, like Americans or Europeans, lived on their own, especially young people, for many decades, the literature that makes us realize this is a very modern style of living, that Japanese influenced a lot. Not influenced, but, like the idea of otaku, which is very Japanese, and has been common for the last twenty-five years in Japan. So then Americans—some Americans also call themselves otaku—which is very interesting. And that is not only because of them living on their own for decades, but also videos, computers, those changed things. And nowadays those things changed in Japan too. Even families don’t eat together. They get lunchboxes from the convenience store. And they have their TV set and computers in their room. Families don’t meet or talk.

RK: And I think that highlights something else, which I think is
important, which is that this is where the cultural differences sort of are revealing. So for example, a single person in New York, an American, is more likely to feel like they should meet their neighbors, or should go out to the bar and meet a stranger or should go to a party. So my neighborhood in New York, Soho, I get all kinds of requests to come to neighborhood parties. And I never go because I don’t need to meet anyone else. But they come in like Soho neighborhood gatherings, at a park. You know, free wine, sunset. And they try to bring people together. Whereas by comparison, in urban Japan, a lot of people who live alone don’t feel like they should communicate with strangers. And still you keep to yourself more so in Japan. So in some ways the isolation is more pronounced—because of the way Japanese society operates. Even Kōbō Abe, in The Box Man—that’s a very Japanese novel, even though it could be a character in an American city. But the isolationism, the sense of being unable to connect to a stranger, I think, is very cultural.

SK: I do feel, because I lived abroad and now I live in Japan, I find it sort of more isolated. Superficially, it does seem super friendly—or, courteous.

RK: Yes, courteous is the word.

SK: But, but it is difficult to talk to strangers in Japan.

RK: It is difficult to make new connections.
ANGELA QIAN

AM: But when you read American literature, especially recently, there does seem to be an increasing lonesome feeling. Don’t you feel that way when you read contemporary American fiction?

AQ: Yes, but it’s different because in a Japanese novel like *Kitchen* or *Hotel Iris*, there are not a lot of characters. There’s like two or three characters. And if you read something like Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, there’s a lot of characters—

MS: And they are all connected to family.

AQ: And there’re a lot of people’s narratives in one novel and somehow they intertwine at one point or another, even if they end up alone.

AM: Do you know Amelia Gray? She is a new writer. She has only published like, three books. She was born in 1980s. She is a young writer. And what she writes is something that seems very Japanese. What she writes is very familiar to me. Sakuchi Kishimoto, or Kimada Yamada, and a lot of Japanese critics and translators who read her works are surprised by how familiar her works feel to them, and sympathize with them. There are not that many characters in her fiction. So it is exactly like Japanese fiction. Two men are locked up in a box, and don’t know where they are. And it’s about the relationship between the two of them. So I never had the impression this was particular to Japan.

MS: If you go back to slightly older writers like Kelly Link...

AM: Or *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby—it’s about isolation.

MS: Well, in *The Great Gatsby*’s case, it’s more about self-creation. So living alone is positive. You are creating your identity. You are your own God, your own father. Whereas people in Japanese fiction, it is not like that. Gatsby positively gets rid of his parents, even changes his name.

AM: But we have that kind of novel too. Like, *Shiroi Kyotō*.

MS: Oh, I haven’t read that. It’s a very popular novel that I should
“CULTURE IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME”

have read.

AM: *The White Tower*. It’s a really famous novel about a hospital. It’s about a doctor who comes to the city from the country and creates himself, going up in the ranks of the doctors.

MS: But they are more subject to the system, those salarypeople. Gatsby creates his old system.

AM: Richard Yates.

MS: *Thirteen Kinds of Loneliness*.

RK: *Eleven*.

MS: Sorry—eleven. But I do think in the ‘50s and ‘60s loneliness used to be a big theme in American literature. Like you said, Truman Capote, John Cheever, Richard Yates...

RK: But I think you hit on something with Gatsby because a lot of characters in American fiction, they’re lonely but they’re very proactive. They try to reinvent, they try to fall in love, they try to have a fight, they try to strike out into the West, go West....A lot of Japanese characters are, by comparison, more passive.

MS: Yeah, they just want to be left alone.

SK: It’s very different with Japan and America. You could probably compare Japan to European countries more easily.

RK: A parallel, I agree.

MS: Kazuo Ishiguro, you know, you could imagine that kind of writer even if he weren’t born in Japan. Britain could have created that kind of writer. But not America.

RK: He would not be an American writer, yeah.

MS: That kind of resignation, restricted by the system.

RK: I often point out to people that most of Haruki’s characters—
they hardly do anything. They get sucked into an adventure by circumstances. You know, they’re just cooking and drinking beer and they lost their job and the cat’s missing, the wife’s missing, and they go out into the alleyway, like, “Oh, what’s going on?” They’re not trying to change the world.

SK: Something slightly unique about Haruki Murakami is that there are no parents. They are just individuals. There are no mothers. It’s a bit strange, but somehow, that is how we are in a way—not just in Japan, but elsewhere. That’s why he has so many readers. It may be twenty years ago when that sounded unrealistic, that someone has no connection to his mother or father.

MS: He would have been very unrealistic in the fifties, but in the seventies and eighties, as Roland pointed out, so many people started living on their own in cities. And these novels really caught up very quickly. So it wasn’t just Haruki, but so many writers started to write about people who live on their own in cities. And that’s a sort of basic format of contemporary Japanese fiction. Whereas in the United States, even though they might be living on their own, they go back to their family on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and there are some connections, positive or negative, with their own families.

AQ: [Aoko Matsuda], you said you translated Karen Russell’s *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. She is a surreal writer. And in an interview for *Ignition Magazine*, Motoyuki Shibata said that “ambiguous boundaries between self and other, human and animal, may be considered very Japanese,” and you cited Hiromi Kawakami. In Murakami’s novels, too, there is a blurring between human and animal or a weird surrealism element there, too. How did this surrealism in Japanese fiction develop, and why do you think it is “very Japanese”?

AM: We have a great tradition of ghost stories and old folk tales, tales about monsters and ghosts. And everyone growing up listens to or reads these stories, and when you’re a child, you don’t think it’s fiction, you think it’s the real thing. Like, “a demon will get you if you do something bad”, and that kind of thing. It’s naturally a part of you, and it remains even when you grow up. Of course, you fall in
love with other cultures as you grow up, but the old things you fell in love with as a kid still remain. And the new anime and movies are dealing with that kind of old tradition. Rumiko Takahashi used to be huge in the ‘80s and ‘90s, a manga artist. And she brings in all sorts of myths and folktales. And she was hugely popular because of that. Her most famous one is *Inuyasha*, about a wolf boy. It’s an essential part of Japanese culture. I find it very easy to find empathy with works by Karen Russell or Kelly Link.

SK: But I have the impression of children’s literature, in Europe and the West, that it has lots of animals. They speak, and behave like humans. But especially in England, there is a divide between children and adults. They start to feel that picture books should stop when you are twelve or thirteen. They draw a line here. So these are children’s books. Now, you are grown up, you must read books with no illustrations, and no speaking animals. That’s the kind of thing. Although it’s not as strict as it used to be.

MS: Especially in the United States.

SK: Still, there is a sort of line drawn. So children, like European or American children, read books with animals speaking and so on.

MS: American readers are especially hung up on realistic fiction. It’s the mainstream. But things are starting to change, with writers like Kelly Link, Karen Russell, Amy Bender.

**AQ:** But they are still in the minority.

MS: That’s right, that’s right. Especially male writers. I think female writers are more flexible.

**AQ:** So a lot of literary magazines, like *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Agni*, and so on, do not include comics or graphic narratives in their content. But *Monkey Business* does. And in this issue, there were two. So why did you choose to include those?

MS: We always do. I mean, it’s part of literature. It doesn’t make sense that if you have images along with the text, it’s not literature. That idea doesn’t hold. It has no real basis. And it is fine to have
images if they are good. A good popular song is better than a second-rate classical music piece. And a good manga is better than a third-rate literary short story.

SK: So you don’t have the sort of literary magazine that Art Spiegelman would contribute to?

MS: There are some—like McSweeney’s?

RK: The New Yorker also has illustrations.

AQ: But a comic panel isn’t the same as having a chapter of a graphic novel.

SK: I wouldn’t be surprised if Spiegelman could have ten pages in a literary magazine.

AQ: Though we do have a yearly anthology of the best comics.

MS: That’s right, you do. But it’s interesting, because I think American comic artists feel more isolated. The isolation is a huge theme in American comics because the artists themselves are so much more isolated from the mainstream culture.

AQ: Since you [Satoshi Kitamura] spent time in England, and your “Variations and Theme” did have a poem by Charles Simic, who is an American poet—did you feel that your time abroad influenced your art style and content as a Japanese illustrator?

SK: Yes, I think so. I started working in England and I had to, first of all, write in English and communicate in English. That influenced me a lot. But also, an as artist working in a different cultural background, there are certain things that I took for granted that didn’t work. If I drew something in a certain style in Japan and showed it to the editor, they understood. But sometimes they were puzzled, and asked me for more of an explanation. And then I thought if fiction that needs an explanation is not successful, I started to draw quite logically, and on point. And not just draw logically but think logically as I was drawing, and try to make everything self-explanatory. That was a good education in a way, because, basically, drawing is
“CULTURE IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME”

communication, especially if I’m doing it for children. So whatever I want to put in it has to be able to be seen by a four-year-old. They don’t have to understand everything, but they at least have to sort of like it or take it. So that’s how I worked. So I always worked for children for most of my career—but also I got some work with poets in England. And I find illustrating poetry very interesting, because it is totally different from stories. You can put lots of things in it. Anyway, I think it’s related to this graphic novel-type stuff. I was interested in comics. I was very influenced by comics in Japan as a child.

But actually Moto suggested I should do “Variations and Theme” and gave me the chance to do it in a magazine—Monkey in Japan and Monkey Business, here—at least to me. And I’m very interested. I want to do more.

AQ: Nagai Kafū, the writer, once said “Purely Japanese literature died out around the year 1897...[after that] it is Western literature written in the Japanese language for the sake of form only.” And in her book The Fall of Language in the Age of English by Minae Mizumura, she also argues that contemporary Japanese literature is “juvenile” and with the dominance of the English literature, both the quality of Japanese literature has dropped and the writing style has changed, too, to become more easily translatable for an international audience. How do you feel Japanese literature


has evolved in the last 100 years, and do you agree with Minae Mizumura?

SK: That kind of statement is a sign of age.

RK: She is aging.

MS: She thinks that Meiji literature is really great.

SK: Most of us can’t read Meiji literature.

AQ: She really thinks the Golden Age was, say, Natsume Soseki or Yasunari Kawabata. She said they are not being taught as much. And the fact that you are translating Japanese literature into English is a sign of the dominance of the English language.

MS: She has a point, but it is too extreme. She says writers who write in the English language get to be read all over the world, which is not true. It’s only 1%, or even less, of the people who read serious literature. And she also says if you read books in a minor language like Japanese that are not translated into English, no one reads it, which is not true. There are so many readers in the Japanese language. She makes everything all or nothing, which is a huge distortion.

But having said that, I do feel that the Meiji period was a golden period for literature, and also for translation. Because things were so much in flux in those days. There were so many directions they could go in. Nobody knew what is going to happen next. And that created a huge intercultural excitement. Whereas now we have this sense that things have been done, so many things have been done, and there is so little room for creativity.

But having said that, again, I do feel that contemporary American fiction and Japanese fiction are in such good shape. That writers are creating new, exciting things and incorporating—especially from other genres. Like, serious fiction writers are using elements from science fiction and fantasy, or folktales, or ghost tales, or movies, and music. There are fewer boundaries between each genre. A hybrid. You don’t have to use the word “hybrid” because everything is a hybrid now if it’s good. But everything is in good shape. As Satoshi
“CULTURE IS NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME”

said, she is just too old and she doesn’t even mention one good or bad
Japanese artist today. She just says “everything is junk” and that’s it.

SK: I write in British English, and I used to be published in
America or Europe more, but my main readers are in Latin America.
I am more popular over in Latin countries—that is my market. So
writing in English is not that helpful, Spanish is the language.

AQ: If you could recommend contemporary writers from the
Japanese literary scene, who would you recommend?

RK: Aoko.

MS: Read writers from *Monkey Business*.

RK: Mieko Kawakami, Hiromi Kawakami...

MS: And you know Yōko Ogawa.

AM: Akiko Akazome.

AQ: Are they translated?

MS: Not yet.

AM: But she got the Akutagawa Prize.

MS: That’s right.

RK: So she should be.

AM: She should be. She’s *amazing*.

RK: Hideo Furukawa, of course.

AM: Yoriko Shono. One of her books has been translated. It is very
interesting.

MS: She led the trend or tendency of female writers to not be
afraid to go beyond boundaries. She is a very political, provocative
writer.