Perception of Japanese folktales by readers from different cultural backgrounds

Mari Sawai

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A Thesis

entitled

Perception of Japanese Folktales by Readers from Different Cultural Backgrounds

by

Mari Sawai

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in English

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The University of Toledo

May 2013
An Abstract of

Perception of Japanese Folktales by Readers from Different Cultural Backgrounds

by

Mari Sawai

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in English

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This thesis investigates perceptions of Japanese folktales by readers from different cultural backgrounds. The study analyzes whether a reader’s cultural background affects how the Japanese folktales are perceived and understood, particularly focusing on where the comprehension difference appears between Native English Speaking (NES) American readers and Japanese readers as well as where the NES American readers with more than three years of Japanese courses fall within the spectrum. The participants in this study are separated into three different groups, namely Japanese, NES Americans with more than three years of Japanese courses and NES Americans with Japanese courses. The participants were asked to read three Japanese folktales, *Urashima Taro*, *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* and *Click-Clack Mountain*, and were asked to answer short-answer survey questions regarding three folktales as well as the general questions about the Japanese folktales. The survey responses were typed and tallied by themes of responses. The result showed that there are differences in comprehension of the Japanese folktales between NES American readers and Japanese readers. Also, the NES American readers with more than three years of Japanese courses’ comprehension was similar to Japanese readers than NES American readers without Japanese courses.
For my colleagues I worked with in the M.A. ESL program and Japanese department, who inspired me and helped me through the hardship. For my father, Hiroyuki, and mother, Kumiko, who have supported me from Japan, and always believed in me that I can accomplish anything I dreamed of. For my sister, Hiromi, who has always encouraged me and made me laugh when I was under stress. Most importantly, for my loving husband, Matthew, who has always been there for me and supported me through the M.A. program. Without your love and encouragement, I could not have accomplished my dream. Thank you very much.
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List of Abbreviations

NES ...................... Native English Speakers (Native English Speaking)
SC .......................... Source Culture
SL .......................... Source Language
TC .......................... Target Culture
TL .......................... Target Language
Chapter 1

An Overview of Perception of Japanese Folktales

Introduction

In each country/culture, there are stories and folktales being told and/or orally passed down throughout its history. Some cultures use folktales to record their true history under a dictatorship while some simply reflect the customs and/or religious beliefs of the time. For example, *The Tale of Genji*, written in eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu portrays both Japanese people’s belief in spirit possession and the events revolving around prince Genji. *The Tale of Genji* “contains a number of episodes of spirit possession, still a commonly held belief in Japan. The two most famous episodes of possession relate to the death of Gneji’s young lover Yugao and then eventually the death of his pregnant wife Aoi” (McCormick & White, 2011, p. 730).

Another example is the *Nihon shoki, Dainihonkoku Hokekyokenk* and *Uji shui monogatari*. According to McCormick and White (2011), “these tale collections were compiled for a number of reasons…for use by itinerant priests who traveled the countryside to spread Buddhist teachings and collect donations for the construction of temples and statues” (p. 730).
Yet, another example is a parallelism of the story Momotaro (Peach Boy), in which Momotaro travels to defeat the troublesome ogres, and a hero of the Japanese Civil Wars, Minamoto no Tametomo, observed by Antoni (1991) in a review of Bakin’s collection (p. 167). According to Antoni (1991), Minamoto no Tametomo was banished to the Izu Island after losing the battle of imperial succession in 1156. While he was on the island, he observed two herons flying over the horizon. Tametomo, knowing that heron cannot fly a long distance, assumed there would be another island not too far away. Tametomo rowed his boat to the direction in which the two herons disappeared and found an island where monster-like creatures lived. The unknown creatures spoke a different language and carried swords on their sides. While Tametomo was on the island, he used his arrows to hunt which scared those monster-like creatures and caused them to submit to him (Antoni, 1991, p. 167-168). While the reasons Momotaro and Tametomo went to the Island of Ogres are different, there are overlaps in both stories.

From these examples, it is clear that Japanese folktales reflect Japanese history and/or religious beliefs which are unique cultural characteristics of a source text. While some cultural aspects are something that readers can relate to of other cultures, many aspects can be confusing and/or unfamiliar to the readers which, I believe, will create different interpretation of a Japanese folktale by readers of different cultural background. In this study, three groups of participants (i.e., 1. Native English Speaking (NES) American with Japanese courses, 2. NES American without Japanese courses and 3. Japanese) will read and answer questions regarding three Japanese folktales, namely Urashima Taro, Click-Clack Mountain and Bamboo-cutter’s tale, in order to investigate how readers’ understanding of source culture and custom (i.e., Japan) affect their
comprehension of the implications of Japanese folktales as well as whether the readers’ cultural backgrounds affect how the Japanese folktales are perceived and understood.

**Characteristics and Comparison of Japanese Folktales to Western Children’s Stories**

Before introducing characteristics of Japanese folktales and the comparison of Japanese folktales to Western children’s stories, it is important to define what folktales are as this study will compare and contrast the similarities and differences between Japanese folktales and Western children’s stories. According to Kitayama (2005), folktales reflect people and culture of the source text. He defined the folktale as stories “shared by folk people from the past” and “these stories are similar to myths, except that they are related more to human matters than to supernatural beings” (p. 85). Another author, Colby (1966), defines a folktale as “a complex cultural production. It may function as a catharsis, provide a world view, describe sanctions and prohibited behavior, liberate one from the immediacy of his own situation, or describe various types of useful behaviors and strategies” (p. 381). From these definitions, it can be assumed that folktales reflect how people lived and what they believed in the past. Moreover, Kitayama (2005) states folktales “are useful cultural products for examining the issues with which people are concerned, the common problems they encounter, and the kind of coping methods that are prescribed for dealing with them” (p. 85). This statement also confirms that folktales reflect the source culture and people’s way of thinking. For example, Kobayashi (2010) compares Japanese animal-wife folktales and Scottish animal-wife folktales. Kobayashi (2010) states that the common trend of the animal-wife tale in Japan is: 1. Animal woman appears in front of man; 2. Animal woman proposes
and gets married; 3. Animal-wife’s secret is revealed through husband’s action; and 4. Animal-wife departs/leaves her husband (p. 237). The common trend could be the reflection of how Japanese society viewed females; they are weak, dependent, and hide their true-selves even to their husbands. This is apparent in *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* where Kaguya Hime does not reveal her true- self to the old couple who raised her until the end when the moon-maidens came to escort her back to the moon (McCarthy, 2000, p. 38). On the other hand, the Scottish folktale differs in that secret is revealed via the animal-wife’s action.

The first characteristic of Japanese folktales is the interesting way that the folktale was used in the past. McCormick and White (2011) state Japanese folktales were used as propaganda during the Pacific War by “making the connection between Momotaro and the Japanese, who were attempting to free enslaved Asians from the American and European imperialist powers, and between the ogres and devils and the imperialist West” (p. 736). Even though Momotaro was not written based on this war, it was used to raise awareness of nationality and unity among Japanese people which shows the closeness of a folktale and people as well as how the folktale reflects culture and customs.

The second characteristic is a reflection of social norm at the time when a folktale was written. Kobayashi (2010) analyzes the plot development of Japanese animal-wife folktales which she describes as, “a female figure vainly challenges a male figure, and the male eventually foils her challenge” (p. 245). This analysis reflects the society’s way of thinking that the male has the absolute right to make decisions (even though the male is at fault by breaking promises to his wife and discovering her secret). Also, this analysis goes back to the comparison above that in the Japanese folktale, the male character was
the one taking the action of revealing the secret while in the Scottish story, the female character did so. Moreover, Kobayashi (2010) explains how Japanese gender roles are reflected in Japanese folktales by using the first episode of the Sacred Marriage story. The story teaches unconventional behavior (i.e., female initiating an action) results in misery, but ends in success when the male initiates it (p. 247). Kobayashi (2010) describes that stories, such as this, are based on the principle that, “the male behaviour always takes precedence over the female behaviour” (p. 248). The author also states, “in tales of animal women, the female figure tends to function as one who defies androcentric social codes” (p. 248). Again, the society’s norm of male chauvinism is implied in Japanese folktales. Furthermore, Kitayama (2005) also notes that females in Japan were in an unfavorable position in society compared to men and the female was criticized for showing her emotion even to her husband (p. 90). For example in Crane Wife, after a crane disguised as a beautiful woman becomes the wife of a kind-hearted man who helped the crane when she was trapped, she locks herself in a cabinet and weaves a beautiful cloth using her feathers. Not knowing how the cloth was made, the husband asks her to make another one to please the lord of the province. Even though she was weakened by the loss of each feather she used to weave the cloth, she did not complain or even show how she was weakened to her husband (Faurot, 1995, p. 183).

The third characteristic is the reflection of custom and culture of Japan, namely prohibition against looking and the concept of amaee which is defined as “a desire or need to be loved…often interpreted as ‘dependency’, but it is rather a psychology of implicit request, expecting a favor or support from others” (Kitayama, 2005, p. 94). Kitayama (2005) explains common psychology that appears in Japanese folktales by looking into
six Japanese myths and folktales which involve prohibition against looking, which is a part of Japanese culture where it is considered rude to open a gift in front of the person who gave the gift. This relates to one of the folktales used in this research, *Urashima Taro*, in which Otohime (the undersea princess) gives a present to Urashima when he returns to his home, but prohibits him from opening the box, thus prohibiting him from looking at what is inside. Upon his return to his hometown, he finds out that several hundred years have passed and he opens the box he received to escape from unbearable pain. Kitayama (2005) points out that the weakness of a male, such as not being able to keep the promise of not opening the box, often leads to a tragic ending of the Japanese folktales (p. 95). Kitayama (2005) states, “we can think of the male protagonist’s *amae* as one of the causes of the tragic development of the stories” (p. 95). The concept of *amae* is also apparent in another folktale used in this research, *Click-Clack Mountain*. When grandmother is murdered, the husband (grandfather) mourns over her death, but her death was avenged by the rabbit who was treated as their child in the story. Also, in the third folktale used in this research, *Bamboo-cutter’s tale*, when Kaguya Hime leaves grandfather and grandmother to go back to the moon, the only thing the grandfather does is to beg her to take him with her and to not go back. According to Kitayama (2005), the former story (i.e., *Click-Clack Mountain*) also entails a cultural characteristic in which “the male protagonists are also passive and powerless in the face of their wives’ wounds, bleeding, or death” (p. 95).

The abovementioned characteristics show that Japanese folktales (perhaps, any folktales) reflect religious beliefs, history, social norms, customs and/or gender roles within the source culture. Due to these facts, there could be a possibility that a nonnative
Japanese reader will not be able to relate to or understand the implications made within a folktale.

**Spectrum of Translation**

While this thesis’ main concern is not translation, it is important to briefly introduce different degrees of translation. This will allow us to see where and how translation loss is inevitable, and also could provide plausible explanations of the differences in responses among the three groups of participants in this study. According to Mailahac (1996), there are two extreme procedures of translation: cultural transposition (also known as transliteration) and exoticism. Mailahac (1996) make a reference to Harvey and Higgins’ (1992) definition which states, cultural transposition is “a systematic attempt to convert the source culture setting into a target culture one” and exoticism “will plunge the target reader into the source culture” (p. 134). Moreover, the exoticism can be further divided into two categories: “exoticism with minimum presence of the translator” and “exoticism with maximum presence of the translator” (Mailhac, 1996, p. 135). The minimum presence of the translator is when the readers of the target culture (TC) receive no supplemental explanation as they do with the maximum presence of the translator in the text (Mailhac, 1996, p. 135). An example of the exoticism with maximum presence of the translator can be found in *The Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* when the translator explains the meaning of Kaguya Hime’s name. The proceeding section will explore how translation was done historically as well as the recent trend, and problems that persist with various methods used in translation.

**History and Recent Trend of Translation**
Historically, translation from western languages to Japanese was done exotically; following the syntax of the source language as well as directly translating culturally unique idioms into Japanese (Furuno, 2005, p. 147). This practice was due to underlying reason for reading foreign texts was to “learn from the West” (Furuno, 2005, p. 148). In order to exotically translate foreign texts, “translators at that time coined many neologisms by using combinations of Chinese characters to express the new concepts from the West” (Furuno, 2005, p. 148). This, however, created some problems such as the “cassette effect” which is explained by Furuno as “suggesting that the newly coined neologisms gave the impression that they were of absolute validity, and Japanese readers had a blind acceptance imposed on them without fully understanding their meaning” (Furuno, 2005, p. 149). Moreover, Furuno (2005) states that “translators during the Meiji period not only coined neologisms but also often deliberately replicated the grammar and style of the source texts” (p. 149). By translating texts exotically and literally, influence as well as presence of a translator was kept to a minimum; therefore, the translator’s interpretation, stereotype and/or prejudice toward a source text/culture were kept to a minimum.

Furuno (2005) proceeds to a discussion of current trends in translation which is moving toward a transliteration style. The author references the round-table discussions amongst translators and professionals on translation problems from the translation journal, *Honyaku no Sekai [The world of translation]*, in which they conclude, “rather than just pursuing linguistic faithfulness to the original text, translation should also be discussed from the aspect of target-language expressions” (Furuno, 2005, p. 151). Moreover, the author also cites a translation textbook, *Honyaku no Hoho [The way of*
translation], by a group of university lecturers who state, instead of translating word-for-word, students should express the meaning of texts in natural Japanese (Furuno, 2005, p. 151). These statements indicate that transliteration allows readers of the TC (i.e., Japanese) to read the translated text in the same manner as Japanese literature, without having to decipher, say, neologisms or foreign idioms, as was briefly explained in the previous section.

While transliteration makes it easier for a target reader to interpret a foreign text, it poses a problem at the same time. The problem is that the target audience may not perceive the message in the same manner as the source language audience due to alterations made by the translator. This was the most important factor I kept in mind while choosing the folktales to use in this study due to the fact that too much alteration will skew my data. For example, while reviewing one of the folktales used in this research, *Urashima Taro*, I found one version with explicit explanation of the moral lesson at the end of the story. It states, “little children, never be disobedient to those who are wise[er] than you for disobedience was the beginning of all the miseries and sorrows of life” (Ozaki, 2009, the story of urashima taro, para. 101).

Furthermore, Chan (1997) provides five important principles of twentieth-century translation between Chinese and English advocated by three renowned Chinese translators, namely Yan Fu, Fu Lei, and Quian Zhongshu in an effort to seek a “good” translation. The first renowned translator, Fu, believes that there are three principles which must be fulfilled in translation: fidelity, elegance, and fluency. While Fu believes fidelity is the most important principle above the other two, in practice, he states that he emphasizes fluency. Fu states that while it is important to have fidelity, in reality,
Translators have the liberty of playing around with words for fluency (Chan, 1997, p. 58–60). In addition to and with consideration of Fu’s three principles, Lei introduces the principle of “likeness-in-spirit.” Lei believes that the translation is similar to copying a painting using different sets of paint. He argues that the aim of translation is not “affinity in shape’ but likeness in spirit” (Chan, 1997, p. 61–63). Lastly, Zhongshu adds the fifth principle, “realm of transformation” which differentiates “good” and “bad” translation. According to Zhongshu, a “good” translation is when translated text does not have awkwardness of introducing new concepts to a TC, and shows no trace of having to accommodate linguistic differences. Moreover, a “good” translation should motivate readers to seek the original text. As is stated in his principle, Zhongshu strongly believes that the translation is a method of transforming one culture to another, and translators are mediators of two cultures (Chan, 1997, p. 63–65). In order to achieve this mediation, he argues that the translators can have “great laxity as well as latitude” (p. 64) in the process of carrying out their tasks.

From Fu’s three principles, it can be perceived that translation can be inaccurate, if elegance or fluency is the main focus, or by different translators since they have the choice of weighing more on fidelity, elegance or fluency. I believe that the main principle followed by the translator can also vary based on the type of text being translated. For instance, when translating a scholarly article, the focus must be on fidelity instead of the other four principles; however, for the translation of a folktale, translators can have the liberty of choosing any of the five principles as their focus. This variation was another important factor I kept in mind while choosing the folktales used in this study; I made sure that the folktales’ focus is on fidelity instead of on other four
principles to eliminate a possibility that the difference in perception of NES American and Japanese readers was not caused by infidelity to a text.

In historical and recent trends of translation, there are problems concerning both methods. While a reader is left to understand and make a judgment of a source culture/text with historic (i.e., exotic) method, it poses a problem in that the reader may not understand certain expressions, resulting in a loss of true meaning/implication. On the other hand, even though the current trend (i.e., transliteration) creates a natural flow of reading, the presence of a translator is more apparent in this method. The source text may be affected by the translator’s stereotype and/or prejudice and may include his/her interpretation of the source text which was argued by Wolf (2002) when he states the metaphor, ‘translation of culture’ is not true since it “suggests that in principle it is actually possible to translate cultures. This claim is problematic not only because it presupposes the existence of stable cultural units which can be transferred between an ‘original’ and a ‘target’ culture, but also because in the final analysis such a translation turns out to be an ethnocentric operation” (p. 182). This statement indicates that it is impossible to translate one culture into another culture without a translator’s own cultural perspective of the source text and/or allowing his/her own culture to influence the translation. This poses a different problem in that a target reader may not perceive the message in the same manner as a source language reader due to alteration/justification made by the translator. Since the folktales have been translated by multiple translators and in different decades, the selected folktales were carefully read to ensured that the translation was not too exotic and literal (i.e., historical method) or greatly altered (i.e., recent method). This process was very important to avoid differences in perception
caused by the translation issues stated above, because it is already difficult to translate one language/culture to the other as will be elaborated on in the next section.

**Lost in Translation**

With the advancement of technology and globalization, communication among different languages became easier and necessary. While communication among countries has enriched our knowledge of different cultures, people behind the communication (i.e., translators) still face many challenges regarding linguistic and cultural differences. The following paragraphs will explore few difficulties, both linguistic and cultural, in translation and methods used to alleviate these problems. This section will allow us to better understand where and why misinterpretation occurs and/or true implications are lost, thus allowing us to closely investigate the result of my study.

**Linguistic.** The first linguistic issue is the use of pronouns. In the Japanese language, pronouns can be omitted, thus much Japanese literature contains sentences without pronouns, creating “an absence of autonomous selfhood” (Aoyama & Kobayashi, 2010, p. 102). Furuno’s (2005) explanation supports Aoyama and Kobayashi’s statement; “Pronouns are not usually used in authentic Japanese sentences unless for indicating concrete objects or directions” (p. 155). From these passages, it is clear that some writers intentionally do not include the subject in a sentence to allow readers to interpret a passage on their own. However, when literature is translated to English, pronouns are added to conform to English grammar. The problem arises here since many pronouns in Japanese, if used, are chosen by age, gender, and/or class, as well as the relationship of the speaker and listener. These distinctions are lost in English translation due to its lack of variation (Aoyama & Kobayashi, 2010, p. 102). Furthermore, it is
common in Japanese to refer to someone by their occupation or descriptive phrases (e.g., teacher) rather than by their name. When that literature is translated, translators must decide whether to keep the consistency with the original text and refer to a character by his/her title and add a footnote for explanation or by his/her name (Aoyama & Kobayashi, 2010, p. 104). However, with both methods, different problems arise since the former method will result in the translators’ presence in the text and the latter will result in the loss of authenticity.

The second issue is the use of alphabets and honorifics. In Japanese, writers use four different alphabets to set tones and characteristics of characters in a story. For example, Hiragana is the common alphabet used throughout Japanese writing, but Katakana is used mostly for foreign borrowed words, words spoken by foreigners, or onomatopoeias. However, the significance of Japanese alphabets is lost in English translation due to the lack of variety in English alphabets. Moreover, Japanese writers employ various degrees of honorifics which are used to achieve readers’ understanding of characters’ relationships; however, again, this effect is lost in English translation (Aoyama & Kobayashi, 2010, p. 103 – 104). In two of the folktales used in this study, the characters refer to grandfather and grandmother using a honorific in Japanese version to show great respect to them; however, this respect is not reflected in the English version. Moreover, in Urashima Taro, the honorific suffix (i.e., -sama) is used to distinguish the undersea princess’s relationship to the others. While the undersea princess is referred as “おとひめさま [Otohime sama]” in Japanese, when translated to English, her name becomes “Princess Oto” in which the distinction is lost.
The third issue is cultural reference and knowledge within words. Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) state that simply translating source language (SL) words to target language (TL) words does not transfer the true implication of the text since there is a possibility that cultural features of the SL vocabulary cannot be literally translated into the TL vocabulary due to the lack of equivalent expression (p. 69). An example is presented above (i.e., the concept of *amae*) since there is no English equivalent expression to express the word *amae*. In addition, the translators often supplement, linguistically and/or contextually, to conform to the TL norm. The degree of adjustment made to the translated text depends on the decision of translators; either to stay as close to the source text or to prioritize readability and acceptability of the target culture (TC) (Schäffner & Adab, 1997, p.335).

Another linguistic issue, similar to the previous one, is found within the cultural gap between the SL and the TL. Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) state, “problems are generated by a range of less concrete phenomena…social customs and institutions; cultural traditions and conventions; names of people, places and organizations…” (p. 69). This problem is apparent in *The Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* since the name ‘Kaguya Hime’ literally means ‘shining princess.’ The translator needed to supplement within the text to transfer the significance of her name to NES American readers. Also, in the same story, the old couple make the statement that the child (Kaguya Hime) was sent from “the gods” (p. 13). By considering Japanese culture and tradition, it is fair to assume that “the gods” that the old couple refers to is Buddha and is not referring to anyone else nor to multiple gods; however, it was translated into ‘the gods’ causing ambiguity of the word and losing exoticness.
Cultural. In addition to linguistic difficulties of translation, there are challenges of translating cultures/customs from a source culture to a TC as Hervey, Higgins, Cragie and Gambarotta (2000) state, “translat[ion] involves not just two languages, but a transfer from one whole culture to another” (p. 24). It is also noted by Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) that the translation is not merely the mean of transferring the message, but is the “mediation between cultures.” They continue, “texts and utterances are produced in particular places at particular times, are shaped by particular conventions, precedents and ideological constraints, and are aimed at particular receivers” (p. 68).

While there are various definitions of ‘culture,’ Min’s (2007) definition of anthropological culture is well suited to the purpose of this thesis. Min (2007) defines ‘anthropological culture’ as the consideration of “any aspect of the ideas, communications, or behaviours of a group which gives to them distinctive identity which is used to organise their internal sense of cohesion and membership” (p. 217). From this definition, it is obvious that cultural difference occurs in various aspects, namely linguistics and ideology; therefore, it can be assumed that cultural difference has great influence on how people perceive the world. In another words, the anthropological definition of culture explains different perspectives of people from different cultures.

The first cultural issue arises especially with old Japanese literature. According to Aoyama and Wakabayashi (2010), factors include: multiple sexual relationships of male characters, but never of female characters; spirit possession in Buddhism and Shintoism which were thought of as females’ weapon; family and political relationships and their implications; and addressing someone in a teaching position as “teacher” even though a character is not his/her student (p. 102 - 104). While most factors listed here do not
appear in folktales, one factor, spirit possession, seems to explain why the avenging of grandmother’s death was done by the rabbit in *Click-Clack Mountain*. Even though the reason stated above (i.e., grandmother treating the rabbit as her child) sounds reasonable, it may seem awkward to readers of the target culture (TC) due to unfamiliarity with the concept of spirit possession. As I stated in the introduction, it was believed that females hold a power to grudge someone to death (McCormick & White, 2011, p. 730). Therefore when a person passes away suddenly, it is written as though the grudge of a wife (or a mistress) brought the death to the person. While it is not explicitly stated in *Click-Clack Mountain*, it is plausible to assume that this factor allows Japanese readers to read through the story without creating the awkwardness that the readers of the TC may feel.

The second cultural issue is the concept of the self. Nishizono (2005) states, “comparing the East and the West, with relation to the self, Roland (1988) has maintained that the ‘familial’ self is the norm of behavior in Japan and India, in contrast to the ‘individualized’ self emphasized in America and Western Europe” (p. 48). This concept can be observed in many Japanese folktales. For instance, in *Click-Clack Mountain*, the rabbit avenges the death of grandmother who treated the rabbit as her child. Also, in *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale*, when Kaguya Hime’s parents discovered that she has to go back to the moon, the grandfather “hired an army of samurai to stand guard around his house” (Kawamura ed., 2000, p. 32). From these examples, it can be observed that Japanese people value the sense of familial self. Moreover, Richter and Song (2005) also discuss the concept of self and summarize it as “distinct from the generic ‘man’. Its related construct is the ‘self’, a conscious, thinking, reflexive and autonomous entity –
individual, distinct from others, but sharing common characteristics with them” which is apparent in American literature (p. 92). By comparing Japanese folktales and American fairytales, it is apparent that the former does not establish characters’ personalities whereas the latter extensively do so. This can cause differences in perception that while Japanese readers do not feel the need of knowing personality/identity of a character, TC readers may perceive the tale as lacking in character development. Furthermore, Richter and Song (2005) also point out that development of ‘identity’ is often the main theme of American literature. They state, “in such works, the author or the main character embarks on a quest to identify him or herself in terms of an individual nature that is both the sum total of external experiences and definitions, and the experience of an inner ‘self’ distinct from other individuals” (p. 94-95). This definitely is different from how most Japanese folktales are structured. Characters in Japanese folktales rarely, if at all, seek or develop their own identity through the story, which could be a reflection of how the concept of ‘identity’ is (or was) foreign to Japanese literature.

The third issue is the difference of cultural background knowledge which is closely related to my research questions about whether a reader’s cultural background affects how the Japanese folktale is perceived and understood. Haywood, Thompson and Hervey (2009) state “TL readers can never have the same cultural knowledge and experiences as SL readers, which means that some degree of translation loss in this respect is inevitable” (p. 72). This is also indicated by Nishizono (2005) when he discusses how psychopathology and psychotherapy are somewhat affected by one’s cultural background. According to Nishizono (2005), “it was found that both psychoanalysis and Morita therapy were restricted by social conditions and cultural
backgrounds,” and also he states “the nature and pattern of various psychopathologies are influenced by social background and cultural factors” (p. 40). These statements provide an insight that people of different cultures must think differently while people from the same culture may share similar, if not the same, way of thinking (psychology).

Moreover, Cortez (2001) explains that “cultural input is important to the understanding of foreign language texts…yet the relationship between the two is insufficiently understood” (p. 186). Through this research, it is my aim to discover whether there is a correlation between cultural knowledge and comprehension of a foreign text. My assumption, with consideration of the aforementioned and following issues, is that the perception of the big picture (i.e., moral lessons) of the folktales should be the same with both NES American and Japanese readers, but perceptions of parts of the folktales could be different due to culturally specific references.

On a similar note, Colby (1966) raises two problems of translation: “(1) the differential loss of information for denotative as opposed to emotive meaning; and (2) the importance of preserving the sense…and avoiding the distortions of overly strict literal translations” (p. 375). According to Colby (1966), emotive meaning is closely related to one’s past experience which “tend to be culturally bound more than similar experiences of a more cognitive nature” (p. 375). Again, this supports the idea that there could be a difference in the perception of the Japanese folktales by American and Japanese readers.


Moreover, Colby (1966) cites Quine (1960) where he states, “no translation can ever
capture the original meaning…the purpose of a translation is to communicate as much information as possible, not obscure it” (p. 376). This indicates, in my study, that translation loss is inevitable which may create an insufficient explanation in the English version of Japanese folktales for NES American readers to truly understand the meaning of the folktales. Furthermore, Colby (1966) states, “even a single motif in a folk tale may be complex. It may mean different things to different individuals or many things to a single individual” (p. 381). This statement strongly supports my idea that there is a difference in perception of Japanese folktales by NES American and Japanese readers.

Lastly, Colby (1966) explains how folktales reflect the culture of the origin by citing works by Roberts and Sutton-Smith (1962). Roberts et. al. state, “folk tales…are part of an array of cultural models which include art, sculpture, drama, literature, toys, maps, plans, and games” and “models such as folk tales may contain a variety of elements, each with special meaning for different people in different roles and different stages of maturation” (p. 385). Again, these passages describe how folktales are culturally specific. Also, the second passage indicates that the folktales may not only be perceived differently by readers of different cultures, but also by the same reader at different stages of their lives. Assuming that people gain knowledge through maturation and relating the maturation to their knowledge level of Japanese culture, the perception of the Japanese folktale may be similar or the same by NES American readers with extensive Japanese study due to their exposure to the culture. If that is not the case, NES American readers with Japanese courses, who have taken at least three years of Japanese language/culture courses at the University of Toledo, should at least have a perspective of
the Japanese folktales closer to that of the Japanese than NES American readers without any Japanese courses.

As a result of poor cultural background knowledge, implication loss is inevitable. According to Min (2007), “the readers with different cultural backgrounds are not equally equipped for the task of inferring” (p. 222). As Min (2007) states, it is almost impossible to make inferences (or read between lines to get implications) when readers are not equipped with the necessary cultural background knowledge which Schank and Abelson (1977) were the first to identify, and label as ‘Schemata.’ They state that “the reader brings a large repertoire of knowledge structures to the understanding task” and also reference Rumelhart (1976) where he states, “‘the process of understanding a passage consists in finding a schema which will account for it’” (p. 10). Therefore, it is natural to assume that most, if not all, implications of Japanese folktales are not truly understood by NES American readers due to their lack of schema in Japanese culture. Min (2007) provides an example of how true implication of Chinese idioms are not being transferred (or lost) in English translated text by comparing translation of a phrase by two translators. Even though my research does not concern Japanese idioms, this presents a great example of how insufficient understanding of the source culture limits readers of the TC to truly understand the implication of the story. Min (2007) cites an exotic and transliteration from Chinese to English by two different authors. Haroke’s exotic translation states “take a ramrod for a needle” while transliteration by Yang states “always getting hold of the wrong end of the stick” (p. 219). As it is apparent in these two translations, Haroke’s translation of the idiom does not transfer the significance of the idiom if a reader is not familiar with Chinese culture as Min (2007) states, “the
meaning of linguistic signs would be vague if we could not understand the cultural background” (p. 216). Again, true implication of the text will not be fully understood unless a reader of TC has the knowledge of the source culture.

Moreover, Wolf (2002) states in order for true translation to occur, the translated text must include implied meaning of the source text, and “‘translating between cultures’ consequently means that ‘other’ meanings are transferred to cultural practices which are themselves embedded in and shaped by institutions and traditions, i.e. by history” (p. 183). In other words, in order to truly translate an original text to a target text, a translator must include ‘other’ meanings which are based on custom and culture (in addition to history as Wolf stated). This reflects that there is a possibility of true implications or meanings of Japanese folktales which are not being translated (therefore not being understood by NES American readers). Wolf also argues that there is a possibility that original meaning of a source text may not be well translated. She states, “meanings are no longer perceived as being roughly the same across different cultures, but as something to be represented in codes and symbols linked to the translator’s and the ethnographer’s subjectivity and background” (p. 185). This indicates that the original meaning of a source text could be different due to a translator’s understanding of symbols and/or alteration made for a target audience. On the other hand, if alteration is not made for the target audience and kept the same, readers of the TC will most likely not be able to understand the significance of codes and/or symbols represented in the story.

Furthermore, Shäffner (1996) also argues that translators need to understand the culture, politics, history and social domain of target and source community as well as thorough understanding of the content to be able to translate from one language to
another (p. 153). As Wolf (2002) also stated, it is because there are many culturally specific words and practices which may not hold the same meaning in other cultures (p. 153). An example is provided by Min (2007) in respect to different perspectives of a symbol which he labels as cultural allusions defined as writing and speech that “are usually with references to characters or events from history, legends, literature, religion, etc.” (p. 221). For instance in Chinese culture, the phoenix signifies “the creature of good omen and the symbol of queen and empress” whereas in the West, it signifies rebirth (p. 221). This example shows that if a symbol or a concept is not explained in the text, readers may hold different (possibly wrong) perspectives on the symbol/concept which will alter the story or simply will not hold significance in the story. This unexplained symbolism appears in the Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale when Kaguya Hime goes back to the moon on fifteenth night of the eighth month. While it is not crucial information to understand the story, the significance of fifteenth night of the eighth month is not highlighted in the English version as it is in the Japanese version (losing exoticism).

Additionally, Nishizono (2005) discusses the difference between Japanese and Western traditions which relates to one of my survey questions which asks as to why there are more male main characters than female main characters. The first difference is awareness of an arranged marriage for “the succession in the family of the eldest son and the submission of women to men” (p. 42) which, not frequently practiced compared to the past, still persists in Japan. Also, “women were asked to remain in the house and support the work of the men outside” (Nishizono, 2005, p. 45). The difference in cultural perspectives could appear in regards to the role of male and female characters since I
believe most, if not all, Japanese participants are familiar with the abovementioned mentality. One of my survey questions which asks the reason of having many male main characters (as opposed to female or nonhuman main characters) in folktale could show the difference between cultural perspectives of NES American and Japanese participants. Many NES American participants could feel strange/uncomfortable or they could have strong stereotypes of Japan being a male-centered society, thus their answer could be similar to those of Japanese participants. Moreover, through urbanization and westernization, Japanese people’s way of thinking could have been altered as Nishizono (2005) states, “with the systems outside the house becoming modernized (and Westernized) while the system inside the house remained traditional, youth increasingly faced cultural contradictions” (p. 45). As a result, the perspective of young Japanese participants could be very similar to those of English participants.

**The Gap**

Taking cultural and linguistic differences and difficulty of translation into consideration, I believe it would be difficult to translate every aspect of one culture into the other without losing the true meaning held by a source text. Here, I realized there may be a difference among perceptions of Japanese folktale by readers of different cultural backgrounds. As Richter and Song (2005) state, “difference in cultural attitudes … will obviously result in different interpretations of a given text, as will differences in manipulating the TL and in appreciating and interpreting the source culture” (p. 101). In order to discover whether there is a cultural difference in perspectives on Japanese folktale, I collected the responses from NES American and Japanese readers on three
Japanese folktales, namely *Click-Clack Mountain, Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* and *Urashima Taro*. 
Chapter 2

Methodology

Assumptions for Research

My curiosity toward this topic was raised while I was reading bilingual Japanese folktales. While reading the folktales, I found that English translation had footnotes, additional sentences for explanation and/or alteration of names for easiness of reading. Then, I wondered if a reader who is not familiar with Japanese culture will be able to understand and view a folktale the same way as the Japanese readers do. Therefore, I began to research published sources, and conducted the survey to discover whether there is a difference in perception among people from different cultural backgrounds. Through the literature review, I believe there will be a difference between perceptions of Japanese folktales by NES American and Japanese readers, and there will be translation loss both linguistically and culturally. My assumption is that general messages (moral lessons) will be the same or similar among all readers; however, the difference will occur in how culturally oriented parts of stories are interpreted. In this chapter, I will outline the research questions, research context, and methodology of this study.

Research Questions
1. Does a reader’s cultural background affect how the Japanese folktale is perceived and understood?
   a. In which area/part does the difference between NES American readers and Japanese readers become evident in (comprehension of) the Japanese folktales?
   b. Where do NES American readers who have taken more than three years of Japanese at the University of Toledo fall within the spectrum?

Data Gathering Context

The data was collected at the University of Toledo and the Aichi University in Japan. The data from the University of Toledo was collected from NES students of Composition I, and NES students in third and fourth year Japanese language courses. The data from the Aichi University was collected from the Japanese students of orientation class. The data was collected during the class, and all students were informed that their grades will not be affected if they chose not to participate.

Methodology

Background and Role. I have a particular interest in this topic because of my background. I was born and raised in Japan until I was thirteen, and moved to the U.S. Living in the U.S. for the past twelve years, I have encountered many cultural differences in various occasions such as school system and family relations. In order to prepare questions for the study, I read multiple versions of each folktale used in this study to find the folktales which were the closest to the Japanese version. Then I formulated detailed questions about each folktale and also for moral lessons.
**Participants.** The participants were students from the University of Toledo and the Aichi University. The participants from the University of Toledo were students of either third or fourth year Japanese language courses with approximately Intermediate level of ACTFL Proficiency guideline, and others were students who were enrolled in NES Composition I in Spring semester of 2012. The participants from the Aichi University were students of orientation class for the International Communication majors. All participants were recruited through the Composition I instructor and the Japanese language professor at the University of Toledo as well as a professor from Aichi University in Japan. Sixty-five participants were divided into three groups for the purpose of contrastive analysis. The first group of participants consisted of 10 NES American readers who have never taken Japanese language/culture courses. The second group consisted of 22 NES American readers who have taken at least three years of Japanese language/culture courses. The last group consisted of 33 Japanese readers from the Aichi University. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 29 years old.

**Data Gathering Procedures.** For the data collection at the University of Toledo, I went to each class to explain and proctor the survey. As for the data collection at the Aichi University, the professor of the orientation class volunteered to proctor the survey. The data was secured until I personally went to the Aichi University. Each participant was given a consent form which explained that the participation is voluntary, and refusal to participate will not affect their grade for any of their classes. After all consent forms were collected, three folktales and a survey (Appendix A) were distributed to each participant. The first folktale used in this study is *Urashima Taro* which portrays a story about a man named Urashima Taro who goes to the undersea palace after helping a
bullied turtle. Urashima Taro enjoys his stay at the palace with the welcome of the undersea princess, but after three years, he decides to go back to the land. The princess gave a box (tamatebako) upon his return to the land and asks him to never open it; however, once he returns to the land, he discovers that it has been three hundred years. Against the princess’s warning, Urashima Taro opens the box, and smoke comes out which makes him three hundred years old, giving his real age back. The second folktale, Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale, is about a girl who was found in a glowing bamboo by a bamboo-cutter. The bamboo-cutter and his wife decide to raise her as their child, and she became a cheerful and beautiful maiden who every man desired to have as his wife. However, she refused all proposals since she has to go back to the moon on the fifteenth night of the eighth month. In spite of the effort of the bamboo-cutter, she was taken away by the moon-maidens, leaving him in his sorrow. The third story used in this study is Click-Clack Mountain which is about a mischievous animal that is called Tanuki who gets punished by a rabbit who was raised by an old couple. After years of pranks, Tanuki finally gets caught and an old man decides to cook him. While preparing Tanuki soup, his wife takes pity on Tanuki and decides to let it free; however, as soon as Tanuki becomes free, it kills the wife and flees. With sorrow of the old woman’s death, the rabbit decides to seek revenge by pulling three pranks and at the end, the rabbit let Tanuki drown to his death.

The participants were given approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Other than answering each question with a short answer, no specific instruction was given to complete the survey. Some participants read all three folktales before answering
the survey questions while some read one folktale and answered the questions for the folktale before reading the second and the third folktales.

**Data Gathering Instruments.** The data was collected through 30 short answer questionnaires for NES American readers, and 29 short answer questionnaires for Japanese readers. The difference in length is due to the last question on the NES American readers’ survey which did not apply to Japanese readers (i.e., What kind of differences are there between Japanese folktales and children’s stories you grew up with?). The survey consisted of a questionnaire about demographic information of participants and questions were separated into four categories; three folktales and overall general category. The questions regarding folktales asked for the participants’ perspectives on details of each folktale (e.g., “Why was Kaguya Hime born from bamboo? Significance?”) as well as moral lessons of the folktales. The last category, overall general questionnaires, was created to discover differences and similarities among three groups on Japanese culture, and also to discover whether the length of exposure to Japanese culture (through language/culture courses) affect NES American readers’ perspectives. Three folktales used in this study were: *Click-Clack Mountain*, *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* and *Urashima Taro*. Each folktale distributed to NES American readers was a translated version of the three folktales.

**Data Analysis.** After the data collection, I typed all responses. First, I read through responses from all groups to find reoccurring responses. Then, all of the responses were tallied according to the prominent answers found. If there were more than two participants with unique response which was not the prominent answers, I wrote those answers and tallied them also since the sub-research questions seek for where the
differences appear among all groups. For example, the first question for *Urashima Taro*, I asked “Why was the turtle bullied and not any other animals? Significance of turtle?” The prominent answers were: 1) weak/small/slow/helpless; 2) longevity; and 3) you can ride the turtle. In addition to these answers, I found unique responses from a few participants such as: turtle shouldn’t be there (since it is a sea creature); the turtle takes Urashima Taro to the princess; and mysterious creature with mysterious power. After all data was coded, the data of Japanese readers were compared to NES American readers with and without Japanese language courses to find difference and/or similarity in their data. In order to ensure the reliability of data coding, cross check was conducted. The result was 81.4% reliable.

In the next chapter, I will report my findings in regard to my research questions as well as analyze participants’ responses.
Chapter 3

Results, Discussion & Limitation

Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the findings of the survey and discuss its implications. The data was collected from a short answer survey in which each participant answered after or while reading the three folktales. This chapter will discuss if there is a difference and/or similarity in perspective/understanding of the three folktales (i.e., *Urashima Taro*, *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale*, and *Click-Clack Mountain*) by readers of different cultural backgrounds (i.e., NES American and Japanese). In addition, if there is a difference and/or similarity, I will locate where the difference and/or similarity appears. The findings are organized by the responses to the research questions.

Findings

Research Question 1: Does a reader’s cultural background affect how the Japanese folktale is perceived and understood? A reader’s cultural background seems to affect how the details of the Japanese folktales are perceived and understood. On the other hand, as I assumed in chapter two, the general perception of the general messages (moral lessons) was the same or similar among all readers. The responses to all three folktales as well as to the overall question about the recurring theme of the folktales were
similar in all three groups. For example, the majority of all three groups responded the moral lesson of *Click-Clack Mountain* was Karma as Tanuki gets punished for his mischievous acts at the end of the story. Also in *Urashima Taro*, while there were four themes present in the responses, the distribution of participants was similar in all three groups. The four themes were: do not expect reward, dream something realistic, obey what others say, and family should be the priority in life. The perspective differences are presented in the next two sections along with the findings of the other two research questions.

**Research Question 1 (a): In which area/part does the difference between NES American readers and Japanese readers become evident in (comprehension of) the Japanese folktales?** The difference between NES American readers and Japanese readers became evident in interpreting small details of the folktales. The differences can be categorized by three major influences: linguistic knowledge, point of view, and influence of childhood stories (i.e., folktales and fairy tales). The linguistic difference appeared in the first survey question of *Click-Clack Mountain*. It asked for the meaning of ‘click-clack.’ All of the NES participants and the majority of Japanese participants responded that ‘click-clack’ was the sound of flint stone or the sound of fire. However, 15.4% of Japanese participants responded that it foreshadowed how the folktale will end (i.e., the rabbit accomplishes or wins revenge for the grandmother) since ‘click-clack’ in Japanese is *kachi kachi* which can be literally translated to ‘win win.’

The next difference was in regard to understanding the folktales from different angles which appeared in the sixth survey question of *Urashima Taro*: why did the box (tamatebako) make Urashima Taro age. The difference between the NES American and
Japanese participants was obvious in this question to which only the Japanese participants responded that the reason for the smoke making Urashima Taro old was to pay for the extravagant time he had at the undersea palace while the majority of the NES American participants responded that it was punishment for disobeying or breaking the promise to the underwater princess.

Most of the differences seemed to be influenced by the prior knowledge of the Japanese folktales, the Western childhood stories (i.e., fairy tales) and Greek mythology (i.e., Pandora’s Box). In *Urashima Taro*, the first difference appeared in response to the significance of the underwater palace where Urashima Taro visited after helping the turtle (question 2). The most prominent response by Japanese participants was unknown or unrealistic world while NES American participants responded fantasy, paradise, Utopia, and Atlantis. As many of the Western childhood stories often include the concept of paradise and/or fantasy, many NES American participants responded that the palace was similar to Utopia or Atlantis; however, even though many mystical events occur in the Japanese folktales, the majority of the storylines are based on the real-life living of common people. Therefore, Japanese participants’ responses were vague and not as descriptive as the NES American participants. The next difference was found in the fourth survey question where it asked the significance of the box (tamatebako) that Urashima Taro received from the underwater princess when he left the palace (question 4). The most common response by Japanese participants was back to reality from dream, and all NES American participants without Japanese courses and 85.7% of NES American participants with Japanese courses answered that the box signified his youth. Again, the Japanese participants’ responses reflect the realistic nature of the children’s
stories that one cannot stay in one’s dream. On the other hand, the NES American participants viewed the box differently, in a somewhat positive manner, that the box contained his youth, not his true age or a reality.

In the second folktale, *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale*, the difference appeared in the significance of Kaguya Hime being born from a bamboo (question 1). Only Japanese participants were able to make a connection to how Kaguya Hime was born from a bamboo and the moon (i.e., where she went at the end of the story). This is because the folktale has been told as a children’s story as well as studied in many, if not all, middle schools as one of the old Japanese texts. On the other hand, the majority of NES American participants related the bamboo and the story (e.g., the bamboo was a means for Kaguya Hime to be united with the bamboo cutter). Since the Japanese participants were able to use their prior knowledge of the story, they were able to relate bamboo and the moon; however, due to the lack of a bamboo-moon connection among the NES American participants, they had to find some significant connection of bamboo within the folktale. A great difference appeared in the response to question eight which asked if there was an irony to her name and how the story ended. The Japanese participants responded that there was an irony and gave examples such as the fact that she was crying while looking up at the moon and expressions used throughout the story to describe her nature (i.e., bright and shiny). Only one participant from the NES American with Japanese course group shared the latter response with Japanese participants. This again reflects how familiarity with the story allows readers to interpret the folktale differently. On the contrary, the responses of the majority of NES participants in both groups were
general description of how the story progressed and/or ended, or related to her name, Kaguya Hime (i.e., shiny princess) which was explicitly explained in the story.

Next, in *Click-Clack Mountain*, a difference appeared in the sixth survey question. This asked if the story was too harsh for a children’s book as there are many incident of death, killing and revenge. While there was at least one participant from each group who responded the story was too harsh, maybe harsh or not harsh, the difference appeared in the distribution of the responses. The majority of Japanese of participants responded the story was too harsh because: it contained a great deal of killing/death; it could give the wrong idea to children that revenge is allowed; and it contained too many cruel expressions and ideas. On the other hand, the majority of NES American participants thought the story was not too harsh since it teaches children about punishment after mischievous acts and also teaches what is good and bad. The responses by the NES American participants could be the reflection of the nature of many Western fairytales and Grimm’s stories where evil characters are always punished at the end of a story; therefore, even though there were cruel acts involved in the process of punishing Tanuki, the NES American participants believed it was not cruel.

The last survey question (question 7) in the overall section of the survey asked NES American participants to compare children’s stories they grew up with and the Japanese folktales. The aim of this question was to find differences between Western children’s stories and the Japanese folktales. The majority of responses were stated in symmetric form. The Western stories have obvious (moral) lessons, maintain the innocent image of the heroes (or good characters), and usually end with happily-ever-after. Japanese folktales, however, teach (moral) lessons indirectly sometimes using
symbolism, the heroes (or good characters) could have a dark side, and usually end unhappily.

As this section explains, there are differences between the NES American and Japanese participants in their perspectives of the Japanese folktales. The next section will further explore the perspective differences to investigate whether learned cultural knowledge will help NES American participants to perceive the folktales similarly to the Japanese participants.

**Research Question 1 (b): Where do NES American readers who have taken more than three years of Japanese at the University of Toledo fall within the spectrum?** The similarity in responses between the NES American participants with more than three years of Japanese courses and Japanese participants were found in their responses to all three folktales as well as in overall section. The responses can be categorized into three groups, namely custom, background knowledge and culture of Japan. There were more similarities between the two groups than differences.

The first similarity between the NES American participants with Japanese courses and Japanese participants was found in the seventh question of *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* which asked the significance and intention of Kaguya Hime giving longevity to the old couple when she returned to the moon. Only Japanese participants and NES American participants with Japanese courses responded that it was her way of showing gratitude and/or she gave what human wants. The response reflects a Japanese custom since gift giving is very common in Japan when one is taken care of or will be taken care of by others. The common responses shared by all three groups were related to Kaguya Hime’s wish for the old couple to live long and happy life.
The next similarities were related to background knowledge of Japan. In the third folktale, *Click-Clack Mountain*, the difference appeared in the third survey question. The question asked for what the grandma was making with the heavy wooden mallet after grandpa caught Tanuki and asked her to prepare dinner, Tanuki soup. The majority of both Japanese participants and NES American participants with Japanese courses responded that she was making mochi (rice cake), while all NES American participants without Japanese courses wrote, ‘she was making something with rice.’ As the former two groups of participants stated, wooden mallets are only used to make rice cake, which response requires background knowledge of Japan to be able to answer this question in detail.

Another similarity in regard to background knowledge of Japan was found in the second and the third survey questions of the overall section. As it is presented below, these questions cannot be answered without knowledge of Japan. In response to the second survey question which asked if there was any connection between Japanese historical/political events and Japanese folktales, the majority of Japanese participants and NES American participants with Japanese responded there was a connection and provided some detailed explanation. Some examples are: “The main figure of the click-clack story, Tanuki, could represent the trouble caused by the Imperial Japanese. The fisherman represents the dreams of the older Japanese society before Emperor Meiji, who could be represented as the box, modernized Japan taking them away from the old ways,” and “I believe Urashima’s tale is an analogy of Tokugawa seclusion. Kaguya-Hime could be a parable inspired by the women of the lords being held in Edo as a means to control the Daimyo.” On the other hand, the majority of NES American participants
without Japanese courses responded they are not sure or there is no connection between the political/historical events and the folktales.

The second similarity was found in the third question which asked if there was any connection between religion and Japanese folktales. The majority of all three groups responded that there is a connection between them; however, only Japanese participants and NES American participants with Japanese courses were able to provide detailed explanations. Those explanations include: “Shinto has an emphasis on nature being from god, as is shown in Kaguya-Hime. Also, there is a great emphasis on filial obligation as well as doing the right thing, which are aspects of Shinto and Buddhism,” and “in ‘Click-Clack Mountain’ the idea of karma is an component of Buddhism thought, so possibly in that way it’s used in that story.”

Many similarities between the NES American participants with Japanese courses and Japanese participants appeared in cultural knowledge of Japan which can be separated into two subcategories, knowledge and common belief. In Urashima Taro, the similarity in regard to cultural knowledge appeared in responses to question one which asked for the significance of the turtle and why it was bullied. The majority of all three groups’ responses were related to the nature of a turtle (i.e., weak and slow). However, the second prominent response by both NES American participants with Japanese courses and Japanese participants was longevity, which none of the participants in NES American without Japanese courses responded. This response reflects the Japanese proverb which states cranes live a thousand years and turtles live ten thousand years.

Another similarity in cultural knowledge appeared in the fifth question about Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale which asked for the significance of the fifteenth night of the eighth
month. The majority of Japanese participants and four NES American participants with Japanese courses responded that it signifies the full moon while all NES American participants without Japanese courses responded it was the night Kaguya Hime returns to the moon. As the NES American participants with Japanese and Japanese participants responded, the fifteenth night of the eighth month commonly represents the full moon, which traditionally was observed by eating rice cake and drinking Sake.

Moreover, the third similarity in regard to cultural knowledge was found in the responses to the fourth survey question in the overall section; why do you think many Japanese folktales end unhappily? The responses from all three groups were fairly evenly distributed among three themes stating that the folktales are used 1) to teach a lesson and not to entertain; 2) to show/reflect the reality; and 3) to show life does not always end happily. Even though the distribution of the responses was similar, some Japanese participants and NES American participants with Japanese courses provided detailed explanation, relating their responses to the Japanese culture. For instance, one participant responded, “(the unhappy ending is) largely cultural. To function as a cohesive society, a strong sense of harmony and community was ideal. Hence, these “rebels” met terrible fates.”

Next, the similarity concerning cultural belief was found in responses to two questions. The first question was about Urashima Taro which asked for the significance of the box (tamatebako) Urashima Taro received from the underwater princess upon his return to the land. Only NES American with Japanese courses and Japanese participants answered the box was testing his obedience to the princess which reflects Japanese belief that listening to elders (or wiser people) will result in a good fate. On the other hand, all
of the NES American participants without Japanese courses responded that the box contained time and Urashima Taro’s youth. Another similarity was in Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale where it asked, why was Kaguya Hime so small when she was born. The majority of participants in all three groups responded it was to allow Kaguya Hime to fit in a bamboo or to describe her inhumaness. However, the second major response shared only by NES American participants with Japanese courses and Japanese participants was to represent Kaguya Hime’s vulnerability and/or cuteness (later beauty). This also reflects Japanese common belief that small creatures/things are vulnerable or cute.

In the next section, the findings will be analyzed and compared to published studies.

Discussion

As presented in the previous sections, the difference between the NES American participants and the Japanese participants appeared in the details of each folktale. Also, the difference between NES American participants without Japanese courses and other two groups appeared in the details. The differences seem to be influenced by participants’ knowledge (or the lack) of Japanese culture. Also, as I stated above, the general perception of the general messages (moral lessons) was the same or similar among all readers. In the following section, I will analyze findings in detail by research questions.

Implication of Research. For most responses, I observed NES American participants without Japanese classes answered questions using literal meaning (directly from the folktales). I believe it is because they are not familiar with Japanese culture; therefore, they were unable to make reference to Japanese culture in their responses. On
the other hand, some Japanese participants and NES American participants responded with reference to Japanese culture and/or custom. This, I believe, indicates that cultural factors do influence how stories are perceived and understood. In addition, I observed some NES American participants making connections between the folktales and the Western mythology (e.g., Utopia, Atlantis and Pandora’s Box) in order to respond to some questions. For example, in response to the sixth survey question about *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale* (i.e., what is the significance of the moon?), the NES American participants responded, “it is bright, beautiful, mysterious, and represents feminine energy whereas the sun is masculine. At least in Western mythology, the moon is feminine.” Moreover, in response to the sixth survey question about *Click-Clack Mountain* which asked if the story was too harsh for children’s story, one of the NES American participants answered, “no, even Western folktales are scary, and they all teach good lessons. For example, Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel are about children in terrifying situations. Children can distinguish the moral from the violence.” I believe making connections (or using analogy) to understand the story shows that one’s culture greatly influences how he/she perceives the story.

The differences between NES American participants and Japanese participants were mostly found in minor details of the story. As I stated above, the differences, I believe, were influenced by three major reasons namely, linguistic knowledge, perception, and influence of childhood stories (i.e., fairy tales). Due to these facts, nonnative Japanese readers were unable to relate to or understand the implications made within the folktales. Linguistic knowledge greatly influenced the response to the first survey question in *Click-Clack Mountain*. As it was stated above, a few Japanese
participants responded the sound, ‘click-clack (kachi-kachi in Japanese)’ foreshadowed the victory of the rabbit as ‘kachi’ literally means ‘victory.’ Since there was no explicit explanation of what the author meant by ‘kachi-kachi (click-clack),’ it can be either the sound made by striking flint stones or the sound to foreshadow how the story ends. If it is the latter, the actual implication of ‘kachi-kachi (click-clack)’ is lost due to the lack of equivalent expression in English as discussed in Chapter one; causing loss of the true implication of onomatopoeia ‘kachikachi (win win)’ in English. I believe translating a story from one language to the other without losing cultural and/or linguistic implications is almost impossible; therefore, causing differences in responses among three groups of participants in this study.

Next, the difference in perception of NES American and Japanese participants became apparent in response to the sixth survey question of Urashima Taro. In Urashima Taro, the Japanese participants responded that the reason of Urashima Taro becoming old by opening the box given by the undersea princess after returning to the land was to pay back for the extravagant time he had at the palace. On the other hand, majority of NES American participants responded that it was due to his disobedience to the promise he made with the princess (i.e., not opening the box). While both cultures teach the consequences of disobeying a promise and a reward after hard work, I assume the difference in this question shows that the Western and Japanese culture may hold different priories in teaching these two (i.e., Japanese value hard work more while the Western culture values promise keeping).

The responses to the last survey question of NES American participants which asked about the difference between the children’s stories they grew up with, and the
Japanese folktales clearly indicate that most of the NES American participants grew up reading fairy tales with happy endings. The influence of the fairy tale and familiarity with the folktales used in this research created a great number of differences between the NES American and Japanese participants. For example, in response to the second survey question about *Urashima Taro*, the majority of participants in both NES American groups answered the significance of the undersea palace was ‘imagination, dream, paradise, Atlantis, Utopia.’ On the other hand, the majority of Japanese participants responded it was ‘an unknown/unrealistic world.’ Here, the influence of fairy tales is evident as the majority of NES American participants viewed the undersea palace as paradise even though it brought unhappiness to Urashima Taro at the end. I believe the response by the Japanese participants reflects the familiarity with the story, and reading the story while taking the unhappy ending into consideration; and therefore, not viewing the undersea palace as paradise or Atlantis.

While there is no precise way to measure where the NES American participants with Japanese courses fall between Japanese participants and NES American participants without Japanese courses, it is obvious that the NES American participants with Japanese courses perceive the Japanese folktales more similarly to Japanese participants than the other NES American group does. In addition, NES American readers with Japanese courses were able to provide thorough responses by incorporating their knowledge of the Japanese culture. Two prominent examples which show the great influence of Japanese cultural knowledge are the significance of the turtle in *Urashima Taro*, and the significance of the moon in *Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale*. While the majority of the NES American participants without Japanese courses responded that the significance of the
turtle was ‘weak, small, slow or helplessness,’ the other two group responded ‘longevity.’
The latter coincides with the Japanese cultural belief that a turtle signifies longevity.
Furthermore, in Bamboo-Cutter’s Tale, all NES American participants without Japanese
courses responded that the fifteenth night of the eighth month was the day Kaguya Hime
returned to the moon. On the other hand, Japanese participants and NES American
participants with Japanese courses responded that it was the night of the full moon.
Again, the latter corresponds to the old Japanese custom of observing and celebrating the
full moon on the fifteenth night of the eighth month. In these two examples, the
influence of cultural knowledge is apparent, which places the NES American participants
with Japanese courses somewhere in between the other two groups.

**Limitations of Research.** As the participants were recruited through professors’
on a voluntary basis, the distribution of participants was unbalanced. This could have
skewed the findings as the percentage distribution was greater for NES American
participants without Japanese courses than that of Japanese participants due to the
number of participants in each group. The second limitation is in regard to the survey
questions. I should have asked whether all participants are familiar with the three
folktales used in this study. It is because, without knowing how familiar the participants
were with the folktales, I can only assume that the participants who gave detailed
explanations were either familiar with the folktales already (therefore were able to
analyze it in detail) or cultural aspects learned through the class allowed them to make
those assumptions. Thirdly, due to the lack of previous studies on this or a similar topic,
I was unable to compare and confirm my findings with the previous studies.
Suggestions for Future Research. I believe conducting a study with more participants may result in greater differences between NES American and Japanese participants. Also, the number of participants per group should be kept approximately the same to avoid unbalanced percentage per participants in each group. Moreover, using a different genre of reading or using a different form of media (e.g., film) may create different results. Lastly, conducting a survey with different age groups in all three groups (i.e., NES American with or without Japanese courses and Japanese participants) could create a deeper perspective into how much maturity and cultural knowledge of participants affect how the folktales are understood.

Conclusion

Through the related previous studies and the findings of this research, it is evident that one’s cultural knowledge does affect how he/she perceives a folktale. While the overall meanings of the folktales were perceived in a same manner, the details of each folktale were perceived differently. Although it does not create a great discrepancy in understanding the story, it may not evoke the cultural imagery as it does for the Japanese readers. Moreover, as the cultural knowledge affects the perception and understanding of the folktales to some degree, I believe a similar, if not greater, incongruity could be found in more advanced readings. I believe this matter should be further investigated to discover whether the understanding of the source culture has an effect on complete understanding of the source language and whether insufficient cultural understanding also has an effect on understanding the language.
References


Appendix A

Perception of Japanese folktales by readers from different cultural backgrounds

Demographic Information: Please circle the one that applies to you.

1. Age:
   a. 18 years old
   b. 19 years old
   c. 20 years old
   d. 21 years old
   e. 22 years old
   f. Other: (____ years old)

2. Gender:
   a. Female
   b. Male
3. Year in school:
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior
   e. Other: (_______________)

4. Primary language:
   a. English
   b. Japanese
   c. Other: (_______________)

5. Are you taking any Japanese class(es)?
   a. Yes (Go to number 6)
   b. No

6. If you answered ‘Yes’ on number 5, which class(es) are you taking?
   a. Japanese 1120
   b. Japanese 2150
   c. Japanese 3020
   d. Japanese 4020
   e. Other: (_______________)
**Instruction**: For the following three folktales, please read each folktale first before answering questions. Please answer each question in short answer (1 – 3 sentences).

**Folktale 1**: Urashima Taro.

1. Why was the turtle bullied and not any other animals? Significance of turtle?
2. Is there significance in the underwater palace (which is impossible to exist)?
3. What is *tamatebako* (the box from the underwater princess)?
4. What is the significance of the box (*tamatebako*) Urashima received from the underwater princess?
5. What is the significance of three days being equal to 300 years?
6. Why did smoke come out of the box (*tamatebako*) which made him old (even though Urashima helped the turtle)?
7. What is the moral lesson of the story?

**Folktale 2**: Kaguya Hime.

1. Why was Kaguya Hime born from bamboo? Significance?
2. Why was she so small when she was born?
3. What was the purpose of Kaguya Hime giving wealthy men impossible tasks? What was her purpose?
4. Is there significance to her name Kaguya Hime to her characteristic?
5. What is the significance of fifth night of the eighth month?
6. What is the significance of the moon?
7. What is the significance of Kaguya Hime giving longevity? What was her intention?

8. Was there any irony with her name and how the story ended?

9. What is the moral lesson of the story?

**Folktale 3: Click-Clack Mountain.**

1. What does “click-clack” mean?

2. Do you think it was too far for the old man to tie up and kill Tanuki for his mischief? Explain.

3. What do you think grandma was making with heavy wooden mallet (p. 31)?

4. Why do you think Tanuki was nice and carried firewood for rabbit even though he was mean to everyone else (p. 32)?

5. Why do you think the rabbit decide to revenge Tanuki in three ways (using fire, hot/spicy soup, and hitting him on the head with the paddle)?

6. In your opinion, do you think this story is too harsh for a children’s book?

7. What is the moral lesson of the story?

**Folktales Overall:**

1. In Japanese folktales, why are there more folktales with male main characters than with female main characters?

2. Is there any connection between Japanese historical/political events and Japanese folktales? Explain.

4. Why do you think many Japanese folktales end not happily ever after?

5. Why are most, if not all, characters in the Japanese folktales poor?

6. What are the reoccurring theme/moral lessons in the Japanese folktales?

7. What kind of differences are there between Japanese folktales and children’s stories you grew up with?