# Chapter 2
# Engaging the Politically Inactive:
## A Case for Music in Japanese Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

*Japan has seen few political protests over the past 40 years despite worsening social problems including wage stagnation, job insecurity, and a rapidly aging society. Those protests that have occurred, including demonstrations against nuclear energy following the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, have neither been representative of the population as a whole nor have they resulted in meaningful political change. In combination with research on the lack of engagement in politics by younger people and salarymen and the resiliency of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, this chapter first analyzes the films Linda Linda Linda (2005) and Shall We Dance? (1996) for how their musical themes of rebellion and individuality are juxtaposed with the pressure to conform at two points in Japanese people's lives: graduating high school and purchasing a home, respectively. It then proposes that music in film represents a new landscape for social and political engagement in Japan.*

## INTRODUCTION

The phrase often used to describe Japan's group-oriented society is "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down," a warning not to be too conspicuous unless you want to be sanctioned or criticized. This is reflected in research that shows a high degree of social conformity (Fukushima, Sharp, & Kobayashi, 2009; Miller & Kanazawa,

2019). If used without any context, however, it can risk reducing an entire nation of people to a single entity if those wielding it ignore the unique cultural expressions that attempt to subvert that social order. Examples include women-led subcultures that counter the government's "Cool Japan" campaign of male-centered *anime* and *otaku* culture (Miller, 2011), musical subcultures that challenge traditional gender roles (Overell, 2019), and the various youth fashions and delinquent groups that developed as reactions to Japan's emphasis on group harmony (Kawamura, 2013; Sato, 1991). Despite high expectations of social order and a documented lack of political engagement across large portions of the Japanese population (Oguma, 2016), the existence of diverse subcultures teases out a picture of Japan that has the desire for social and political criticisms.

The popularity of Japanese cinema at home and abroad signals that it, too, has an important role to play in society. The *anime* film Demon *Slayer the Movie: Mugen Train* (2020) is the highest grossing film in Japanese history, and its relatable themes of family and overcoming adversity helped it connect with global audiences during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic to become the first non-Hollywood-American production to top a yearly global box office (2020) in film history (Adkins, 2021). In fact, nine of the top 10 highest grossing Japanese films are *anime*, but they nevertheless touch on important issues including environmental exploitation (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997), the loss of traditional culture (*Spirited Away*, 2001), and youth alienation (*Your Name*, 2016).

Academic studies have analyzed how films address problems such as the crisis of changing family roles (Iles, 2008a), problematic constructions of "otherness" and "Japaneseness" within Japanese society (Ko, 2010), and the lack of authentic female voices and stories (Iles, 2008b). Scahill (2010) specifically examined Kurosawa Kiyoshi's films *Cure* (1997), *Pulse* (2001), and *Tokyo Sonata* (2008), which indict the "loss of selfhood and agency" within global neoliberal capitalism's routinized and increasingly digitized culture that reduces people to automatons (p. 70). Japanese cinema is therefore well-equipped as a cultural institution to identify crises within society from dramatic cultural shifts to existential threats, which calls for exploration of their political dimensions to better understand their role as critical political texts.

Adding to the above literature, this chapter examines music in Japanese cinema as a politically conscious element. Using the films *Shall We Dance?* (1996) and *Linda Linda Linda* (2005), both with music-centered stories, it first locates their narratives at the intersection of two significant phenomena: the collapse of Japan's Bubble Economy in 1991, which led to a period of economic uncertainty called the "Lost Decades," and the near continuous political control by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's ruling conservative party. Together, these have fostered a climate that disincentivizes political engagement by recasting it as a social stigma. This chapter then analyzes the films' musical elements as responses to expectations

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