

*Spirited Away* from Japan to America: An Exploration of International Appeals

Sprawled across the cluttered backseat of an SUV, a 10-year old girl sulks while holding a bouquet of flowers. What begins as a simple story of moving houses, however, soon transforms into much more. Viewers of the 2001 film *Spirited Away* eventually find themselves following the protagonist into a land of spirits riddled with various challenges. Nearly two decades later, *Spirited Away* continues to captivate viewers from across the globe with their plot. Yet, what exactly makes this Japanese film so appealing, especially to the American audience?



Chihiro in the opening scene of *Spirited Away*

The Academy-Award winning success of *Spirited Away* in 2003 and beyond demonstrates, what I believe to be, an appeal to America's increasing recognition of moral corruption within a capitalist, global system. With themes that parallel the criticisms of the Industrial Revolution, *Spirited Away* establishes a modern argument that life in the 2000s depends not on an abolishment of capitalism but rather a coexistence under moral restraints. Such restraints, like resistance to excessive greed and altruism, would allow people to overcome the problems that capitalism imposes, like selfishness and lack of regard for others. Some may believe that capitalism rarely results in these problems, but I argue that this point must be ignored to realize the film's appeal. Instead, one must focus on the attractiveness of the film's portrayal of an ideal world in which moral restraints and capitalism coexist. For such reasons, it's clearly no mistake

that *Spirited Away* won the Academy Award. Beyond its beautiful animation and music, the film poses a solution to the problems of capitalism while also drawing attention to the need for meaningful discussion regarding the role of America as a dominant force in the globalization of capitalism and how capitalist expansion prioritizes wealth over morals.

To begin, Americans have long recognized the prioritization of wealth over morals, enabling them to appreciate the setting of *Spirited Away*. From a historical standpoint, Americans began condemning capitalist behaviors during the Romanticist era of the Industrial Revolution.

Romanticists pointed out how capitalism was leading companies to mistreat workers for the sake of financial gain and how man was becoming more distant from nature. When *Spirited Away* was released in 2002, such criticism still existed. Activists continued drawing attention to problems like the environmental impacts of harsh consumerism and the usage of foreign sweatshops to create low prices for American shoppers. Yet, given the American preconception that animated films are merely children's content, I acknowledge that many American viewers are probably not thinking of these criticisms while watching the film. Rather, the film appeals to Americans by placing the protagonist at the bottom of the spirit world's economy. Here, the prior context Americans have-- whether that's from historical or contemporary events—allows them to anticipate the struggles the protagonist will face in improving their socioeconomic status. This evokes a sense of cultural familiarity and allows American viewers to embrace the film with an open mind, eventually enabling them to instinctively understand the views held by the Japanese filmmakers toward capitalism.

As the film progresses, *Spirited Away* proves itself to be a reflection of Japanese values toward capitalism, and one that creates a message that is agreeable to the American audience. In the film, the protagonist is the embodiment of morality and the antagonist the embodiment of capitalism. For example, the protagonist, Chihiro, starts her journey by entering the spirit world, free from any existing expectations. In other words, she begins as someone who is untainted by capitalistic behaviors, much like Japan was before Westernization. As Chihiro ventures further, she finds that she must get a job from the bathhouse to save her parents who were turned into pigs. In this sense, she joins the working class and eventually has to brave corporate capitalism, represented by the bathhouse's greedy owner, Yubaba. Although Yubaba is known to manipulate and badly treat her workers-- much like the company owners of the Industrial Revolution-- Chihiro is able to both get a job from her and win Yubaba's approval out of pure determination and kindness. Chihiro still plays into the capitalistic system of the spirit world, but rather than manipulating or stepping on others, she maintains those altruistic restraints which ultimately allows her to succeed in various ways. This outcome demonstrates Japan's belief that morality does not need to be sacrificed for the sake of wealth and success; however, it also serves as a reaction to those who did lose their altruistic and moderate characteristics to the process. For the American audience, this explicit idea of moderating capitalism may not entirely translate when we keep that preconception of animation in mind. However, the film's emphasis on the protagonist being kind and determined reinforces a more observable idea that selfishness will not lead to success. Additionally, at this point in the film, Americans may not realize that the antagonist represents capitalism as a whole, but this may be part of the appeal. Before that can be further discussed, however, we must first continue examining the film's proposed solution for the problems of a capitalist economy.

As Chihiro continues her journey, she faces yet another capitalistic antagonist, but her reaction expands on the film's commonly-missed message that capitalism can be even better under moral restraints. Such an argument makes sense since the Japanese economy had just crashed in the 1990s, a decade prior to the release of *Spirited Away*. Japanese people had to reconsider their economic state, and according to Catherine Lapointe, an East Asian Studies researcher from the University of Toronto, "The collapse of the bubble economy did not lead people in Japan to reconsider capitalism, but rather to question why they had failed it" (Lapointe, 8). As a result, they emphasized certain characteristics like resisting excess. Likewise, in the film, Chihiro lets this new antagonist, No-Face, enter the bathhouse so that he can get out of the rain. For her kindness, No-Face offers Chihiro an abundance amount of gifts and gold, to which Chihiro refuses. Yet, the workers who buy into No-Face's offers become excessively greedy and are eventually consumed by No-Face himself. From this, it's clear how No-Face represents the dangers of capitalism and the individual being consumed (quite literally) by the problems of capitalism, in this case, excessive greed. But, the point that capitalism can be beneficial when moderated with conscious moral actions is often missed. In the movie, Chihiro's interactions with No-Face were beneficial. Her moderation kept No-Face as a normal spirit who provided what was needed, but only when the others started abusing No-Face's offers did he turn demonic. This mutually beneficial situation represents a continuation of Japan's belief that capitalism is at its best when individuals maintain moderation and altruism. To the American audience, this compatible relationship between protagonist and antagonist, morals and capitalism, is appealing; the film suggests a modification to the American way of living and not a total eradication of the capitalist system to which they're so used to. *Spirited Away's* portrayal of

an ideal world where the benefits of capitalism are amplified and its problems reduced sits comfortably with Americans and prevents the message from being outright rejected. Yet, this then begs the question, why do some Americans tend to miss this message?



No-face in its demonic form

The loss of *Spirited Away*'s message across borders may be due to a lack of awareness or simply a lack of exposure to Japanese media among foreign audiences. From an American standpoint, perhaps some Americans already believe that it's possible to live morally alongside capitalism. As John Rollert, a professor at the Booth School of Business, explains, some view greed as a beneficial characteristic that enables those with power to give to those without (Rollert, 2014). Those who didn't initially see capitalism from a pessimistic perspective probably wouldn't associate it with the antagonist. However, should they recognize it, the film's suggestion that there can be a mutual relationship between moral restraints and capitalism would still appeal since it reinforces their ideas. For those who disagreed, who thought that capitalism was purely harmful, the film still appeals by proposing a way to reduce that harm. From another perspective, perhaps some American viewers were too overwhelmed by the Japanese imagery that they lost focus on the overarching themes. Especially knowing how other films made by *Spirited Away*'s production company usually takes multiple watches to fully digest, this loss in translation would make sense. However, this then drives a responsibility on those who did understand the film's

message to share their understandings with others. In other words, *Spirited Away* leads to a need for discussion regarding the moderation of capitalism through moral means.

This translation of *Spirited Away*'s message to America becomes increasingly important when one considers the fact that America is a dominant force in the globalization of capitalism.

Americans need to take the appropriate actions to increase their awareness of how their culture transcends borders, something that's possible by watching foreign films like *Spirited Away* and engaging in discussion. It's important to recognize that actions made in one area have the potential for global implications, much like we see with the expansion of capitalism from the West to Japan. While some viewers may have never associated *Spirited Away* with capitalism at all, the people who did are now capable of starting those crucial discussions, asking others whether or not we'd like to live our lives as moral heroes or capitalist monsters.

Works Cited

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