

Cultural Imperialism through Capitalism: The *Kagerou Project* as a Westernized, Eastern Text

Within the genre of Vocaloid music and its corresponding subculture, no multimedia project is more well-known than the *Kagerou Project*. The *Kagerou Project* tells the story of a ragtag group of teenagers, all with special eye powers, who learn to love a world that has repeatedly rejected and frowned upon them. Over the course of hundreds of timelines, they work to escape an endless summer and realize the happy ending they've been searching for. The complexity of a story based on a series of music videos was unmatched for its time; viewers had to watch videos multiple times to understand what was happening in the larger narrative, and fans of the *Kagerou Project* theorized what the relationships between established characters were while they eagerly awaited the release of a new song to confirm their theories ("How the Kagerou Project Changed Vocaloid"). Using Marc Steinberg's analysis of the *Kagerou Project* as a basis, I argue that the story of the *Kagerou Project* suffered the same fate as the video-sharing platform Niconico Video; as a product of the early 2010s, the *Kagerou Project* was heavily influenced by the Eastern values present on Niconico Video, borrowing elements from works of Fukushima fiction as well as Buddhism. However, both the *Kagerou Project* and Niconico Video lost their unique, Eastern identity due to Western cultural imperialism, highlighting the damage that globalization and global capitalism inflict on non-Western texts (Steinberg).

Commercially and culturally, the *Kagerou Project* was a success in Asia but lacked a similar following in Western countries, leading to a lack of scholarly, English discussion about the *Kagerou Project* which further unpopularized it. The *Kagerou Project* began as a series of songs, the first of which was released on February 17, 2011, and grew to represent itself in manga, light novels, anime, comic anthologies, and even a talk show. Throughout its lifetime, the

Kagerou Project has cemented itself as nothing less than historic; its second album, *Mekakucity Records*, was the first album created by a solo Vocaloid producer to top the Oricon charts in Japan, and all nineteen of its individual music videos have entered the coveted *Hall of Legends* on Niconico Video (Hisana). Yet, despite its popularity in the East, the *Kagerou Project* failed to garner the same traction in the West. As a result, secondary sources regarding the *Kagerou Project* are far and few between, causing even fewer people to consume the story and forcing the *Kagerou Project* into a vicious cycle of unpopularity. However, the book, *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet* by Marc Steinberg, serves as one of the few direct analyses of the *Kagerou Project* in English, and the book represents the *Kagerou Project* as an example of how Niconico Video, while presenting itself as a counter platform, adheres to the same capitalist values as Western platforms such as YouTube or Netflix.

In the chapter “Platforms after i-mode: Dwango’s Niconico Video”, Steinberg argues that the *Kagerou Project* is an example of how Niconico Video cultivated user-generated content for commercial profit, using the platform as a representation of the evolution of Japanese internet culture in the late 2000s/early 2010s. The chapter references how, under the i-mode model, early Japanese internet companies forced users to pay for most internet services, including music, ringtones, and mobile games among other things. This model normalized other paid models for service, leading to the success of Niconico Video where users would pay a fee for premium memberships on the site. Another factor of Niconico Video’s success was in its unique user interface; much like the infamous Japanese site 2ch, which was notorious for its breeding of far-right extremism and which inspired the Western 4chan, Niconico Video allowed for users to have what Steinberg describes as “pseudo-simultaneous” reactions to videos. Users could input comments, and later viewers would be able to see those comments at the exact timestamp when

while presenting itself as a counter platform, Niconico Video was effectively analogous to its Western counterparts in harnessing and publishing user-generated content for profit, damaging the integrity of said user-generated content in the process.

Though Steinberg's analysis of the *Kagerou Project* does not focus on its storytelling nor its larger symbolism, the description offers a lens through which to view the *Kagerou Project* through. Steinberg presents the *Kagerou Project* as a generalization of Niconico Video and its distinct subculture, and indeed, the *Kagerou Project* is a mirror of early 2010s Japanese internet and Vocaloid culture. Thus, the Western cultural imperialism that harmed Niconico Video's identity did the same to the *Kagerou Project* and its storytelling. To show how said cultural imperialism has hurt the *Kagerou Project*, we must first establish the story as an Eastern text. There are two main influences that have had the greatest impact on shaping the *Kagerou Project*: the Triple Disaster and the growth of Buddhism through Vocaloid. Both influences are fundamentally Japanese and Eastern, with the former spurring large-scale changes in the Japanese mainstream and politics and the latter reinvigorating the enthusiasm for Buddhism within Japanese youth, and both influences provide perspectives critical of capitalism.

Under the guidelines of Fukushima fiction defined in Rachel DiNitto's book, *Fukushima Fiction: The Literary Landscape of Japan's Triple Disaster*, the *Kagerou Project* exudes the traits of a work of Fukushima fiction. The Triple Disaster referred to in the title of DiNitto's book occurred on March 11, 2011 in the Fukushima Prefecture in the northeast region of Japan. The word "triple" refers to the two natural and one man made disasters that took place: an earthquake off of Japan's coast triggered a tsunami, which in turn reached a nuclear reactor that caused a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The aftermath was catastrophic. Sixteen thousand people lost their lives while hundreds of thousands were displaced

from their homes. As a result of the events of March 11, referred to by DiNitto as 3/11, authors, filmmakers, and other content creators responded in earnest by creating media to both cope with the loss of life and to document what had happened for future generations. In reference to the concentric circles that the Japanese government used to evacuate citizens, DiNitto uses a model of concentric circles to define the types of stories and fiction that emerged as a result of 3/11: the innermost circle, where characters and their environments are directly affected by the Triple Disaster, the middle circle, where characters do not experience first-hand the tragedy of Fukushima but have trauma due to their connections to the area, and the outermost circle, where characters experience collective trauma due to the Triple Disaster without direct reference to the event itself. In the outermost circle, common themes include “metaphors for the containment of the disaster and any trauma it has created”, “link to the 3/11 disaster through indirect references”, and protagonists who relate to 3/11 victims as being on the “growing list of social outcasts in Japan” (DiNitto).

The common themes of the outermost stories of Fukushima fiction are also present in the *Kagerou Project*, thus establishing the *Kagerou Project* as an example of Fukushima fiction. In the *Kagerou Project*, the equivalent of March 11 is August 15. Every character in the story dies on August 15 and is later reborn with a special ability that, when activated, turns the user’s eyes red. These red eyes can be thought of as markers of tragedy for the characters, ones that cause them much grief and suffering. The characters that best exemplify the effects of August 15 are the Mekakushi Trio: Tsubomi Kido, Kousuke Seto, and Shuuya Kano. These three characters all lost their families and lives on August 15, and after their return to the real world, they were put into an orphanage for adoption. The trio spent their time being lamented by the other orphans; in the fifth light novel, *-the deceiving-*, Kano bemoans how others discriminate against the trio: “I

was sick of going to Room 107 and seeing a Post-it with MONSTER HOUSE written on it stuck to the door. We had to do something to improve our image, the sooner the better” (Kagerou Daze, Vol. 5: -The Deceiving-). In many ways, these character arcs are reminiscent of the victims of the Triple Disaster described in Fukushima fiction; the trio all suffer a horrible tragedy, and despite surviving, they must live with the guilt that their families are gone as well as the shame associated with being a survivor^[1]. The main way that these characters come to accept their abilities and tragic backstories is through imagination and play. The Mekakushi Trio are adopted by the Tateyama family, and their older sister, Ayano Tateyama, tells them to be proud of who they are rather than ashamed. In “Ayano’s Theory of Happiness”, she encourages the Trio to embrace themselves: “With fear in their eyes, they cry ‘I’m just a monster,’ so I tell them, ‘That’s not true at all. Red is the color of a hero, so there’s no need to be afraid...’” (“Ayano no Kouhuku Riron”). Ayano’s tenderness towards the Trio’s special condition is not unique to the *Kagerou Project*; child-like imagination is heavily used in Fukushima fiction, and Japanese nuclear fiction in general, to cope with the loss of life associated with such tragedies. Consider the story of Godzilla, a prehistoric reptile who came to life as a result of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Much like Ayano, Godzilla’s character was formed after national tragedy, and Godzilla’s fantastical nature and Ayano’s use of play both reframe tragedy from something to be ashamed of to something to acknowledge and move on from (Yam). These plot points and characteristics are present not only in the Mekakushi Trio but in many of the characters as well: Mary, the granddaughter of a Medusa, believes herself to be a monster until Seto shows compassion towards her; Momo uses her eye power for good by becoming a pop idol; Takane loses her body and resolves to save the last of her friends by keeping him company in an attempt to salvage what is left of her world. The similarities between characters in the *Kagerou Project*

and in Fukushima stories implies that the *Kagerou Project* itself is a form of Fukushima fiction which solidifies it as an Eastern text.



Figure 2. Screenshot from vgperson's translation of "Ayano's Theory of Happiness". Shows (left to right) Seto, Kido, and Kano overjoyed from being called "secret agents". Accessed on Youtube, May 8, 2023.

Another aspect of the *Kagerou Project* that cements it as an Eastern text is its numerous references to Buddhism, an influence that reprimands the existence of the *Kagerou Project* as a profit-driven story. Part of the *Kagerou Project*'s use of Buddhism is directly tied to its existence as a piece of Fukushima fiction; after the disaster, many turned to the religion as a means of escapism with Buddhism providing a promise of temporariness to the dire situation. Buddhism also provided post-Fukushima Japan with a philosophy to stave off the militant capitalism that had caused the tragedy in the first place. However, before going into what makes the *Kagerou Project* a Buddhist text, I would like to point out the revival of Buddhism in the late 2000s/early 2010s that was perpetuated through Niconico Video and Vocaloid culture. With enough scrutiny, every text could be connected back to Buddhism (or any religion for that matter), so the

reemergence of Buddhism shortly before the *Kagerou Project* is important for classifying it as a truly Buddhist text.

The widespread use of the internet to propagate anime culture in the early twenty-first century allowed Buddhism to regain its historical presence amongst the youth through the skillful means of Japanese Buddhist monks. One of the most important texts in the East Asian Buddhist canon is the Lotus Sutra, and the Lotus Sutra instructs monks that they must adapt their style of teaching to the way students learn. The main way to do so is through skillful means, which are defined as methods “to help us see and embrace what we might not otherwise see or appreciate—the potential and power in each of us...to become the buddha” (Reeves). Therefore, monks who embrace skillful means are constantly mindful of the ways that they spread the message of Buddhism to the masses. In Japan, this idea has manifested itself in the anime-ification of Buddhist deities and scriptures. In Elisabetta Porcu’s article, “Pop Religion in Japan: Buddhist Temples, Icons, and Branding”, Porcus articulates how temples have begun hiring artists to create anime personas of their deities to attract younger patrons. Her main example is the temple of Ryohoji, a temple that has grown in popularity as a result of its rebranding. The temple hired an artist, Toromi, to redraw their main deity, Benzaiten, into a *moe* anime girl, flush with a mini skirt, thigh highs, and a cutesy shrine maiden outfit^[2]. The reimagination of Benzaiten was renamed Toro Benten and sparked renewed conversation about the temple, leading to an increase in Ryohoji’s popularity (Porcu).



Figure 3. High resolution image of a banner depicting Toro Benten outside of Ryohoji temple. Accessed on <https://tricycle.org/magazine/welcome-ryohoji/>, May 8, 2023.

In addition to the anime-ification of Buddhist deities, Buddhist monks have also used Vocaloid to spark Buddhism amongst the youth, resulting in the spread of Buddhism throughout the Vocaloid genre. Vocaloid generally refers to software used to mimic human singers in music production^[3]. The software was made popular by Hatsune Miku and other vocal banks created by Crypton Future Media, and the genre of Vocaloid is best known for its independent producers. Because Vocaloid has a relatively low barrier of entry, anyone can create songs using the software, leading to songs with unique lyrics and subject matters. The fact that anyone can use Vocaloid has led to the use of the software by Buddhist monks, with the most famous explicitly Buddhist work being “Heart Sutra Pop”^[4] by Onyu-P. The video features Hatsune Miku singing the Heart Sutra, one of the most important sutras in Japanese Buddhism, and this video ignited a revival of Buddhism amongst young internet denizens. As John Shultz writes, “many viewers [of

“Heart Sutra Pop”] understand that they have a certain religious duty to memorize the Heart Sutra, though they find it to be a daunting task. Numerous users express that the video is a clever device for helping them to remember the text, presumably for times in their lives when they might need it”. Because of the publication of “Heart Sutra Pop”, Shultz argues that there has been a “Heart Sutra Boom” that is on par with other spiritual awakenings in Japanese history, citing a “a very distinctive spike in Google searches for ‘Hannyashingyō’ in kanji” as evidence (Shultz). Thus, the spread of Buddhism in online Vocaloid, manga, and anime communities serves as concrete context to the *Kagerou Project* and its themes as a whole.

The *Kagerou Project*’s existence as a Buddhist text manifests itself in the form of timelines and thinly veiled references to Buddhist parables, and no character better embodies the ideals of Buddhism than Shintaro Kisaragi, an eighteen-year-old recluse who undergoes enlightenment over the course of hundreds of lifetimes. To best understand Shintaro’s character, look no further than the music video for “Loss Time Memory”^[5], the second song in the series that describes Shintaro’s character in detail. The song and accompanying music video focus on two storylines: one where Shintaro is able to move past the death of his best friend, Ayano, and leave his room (labeled as Route 1), and one where Shintaro remains stuck in the past, ultimately leading to him murdering his cyber companion, Ene, and killing himself (labeled as Route XX). Route 1 spans the first verse and chorus, and in the music video, Shintaro’s ability to move on is shown as a positive; the colors in this section are generally brighter, more varied, and give off a happy vibe. Additionally, Shintaro is shown smiling and meeting new people, emphasizing his growth and happiness.



Figure 4. Screenshot from “Loss Time Memory” showing Shintaro meeting the Mekakushi Trio in Route 1.

Accessed on YouTube, May 10, 2023.

In stark contrast, Route XX uses a blue color filter and more muted colors, illustrating Shintaro’s despair and listlessness when stuck mourning over Ayano’s death. The most vibrant colors appear when Shintaro thinks of memories with Ayano; blinding oranges, reds, and browns fill the scene, and though these colors instill a sense of comfort, they appear “too perfect” and artificial, symbolizing the impossibility of returning to the past and the fabrication of the delusions Shintaro clings to instead of moving forward. The only times Shintaro smiles or shows any signs of happiness is when he is inside of his memories, further reinforcing how Shintaro’s inability to move on is detrimental to his mental and physical health due to his reliance on delusions instead of embracing reality.



Figure 5. Screenshot from “Loss Time Memory” showing the bleakness of Route XX. Accessed on YouTube, May 10, 2023.



Figure 6. Screenshot from “Loss Time Memory” showing the artificiality of the flashback sequences in Route XX. Accessed on YouTube, May 10, 2023.

The non-linear storytelling of “Loss Time Memory” highlights Shintaro’s steady enlightenment throughout different timelines and rebirths, representing the *Kagerou Project*’s Buddhist nature as a text. In many ways, Shintaro’s actions in Route 1 and Route XX exhibit a Buddhist worldview. At its core, Buddhism teaches its followers to break the cyclical nature of life and death, urging Buddhists to look past the material desires associated with being human and attain a level of enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths emphasize this, stating that “life is suffering”, “desire is the cause of suffering”, “suffering can be ended”, and “by following the Buddhist way, one can easily end suffering.” We can use Ayano as a symbol of Shintaro’s earthly desires and suffering because her death is the main reason why he isolates himself and goes into depression (the misogyny here will be touched on later). In this light, “Loss Time Memory” changes from a story of moving on to a story of enlightenment; once Shintaro is able to let go of his desire to return to reunite with Ayano, his suffering ends and he gains a newfound sense of “enlightenment”. However, when Shintaro is unable to free himself from his desires, he traps himself in a self-imposed prison where the only possible exit is suicide. Importantly, in “Loss Time Memory”, Shintaro makes the conscious decision to move on; he requires no outside forces, and he leaves his room on his own accord, showing a will to improve himself that is deeply ingrained in the teachings of Buddhism. Thus, Shintaro’s actions and traits throughout “Loss Time Memory” accentuate the Buddhism inherent to his character and the *Kagerou Project* as a whole.

To add onto the idea of Buddhism in the *Kagerou Project*, I would like to present a smoking gun that confirms the *Kagerou Project* as a Buddhist text: a plot point that draws a direct metaphor from the Lotus Sutra to the *Kagerou Project*. Chapter eight of the Lotus Sutra presents the parable of the jewel in the robe. The parable tells the story of a poor man who, after

sleeping over at his rich friend's house, has a jewel sewn into his robe as a gift from his friend. The poor man does not realize that the jewel is inside of his robe and remains impoverished; once he visits his friend again, his friend tells him that he had a hidden treasure that would have allowed him not to struggle as much. This story symbolizes how we have a hidden treasure within us: the power to become enlightened and escape the cycle of life and death. The only way to realize this treasure is through the help of our rich friend, representative of the Buddha, who has already given us the ability to become enlightened (Reeves). Many of the main plot points of this story are symbolically present in Shintaro's character arc, as well. In the second route of the manga, Shintaro is imbued with the power to remember every timeline that the Mekakushi Dan goes through, a metaphor for a treasure hidden inside him. This hidden treasure is finally revealed to him in the Anime Route. In Episode 11^[6] of *Mekakucity Actors*, Shintaro speaks with his power which takes the form of a talking snake. The snake describes itself as, "the power that was within [Shintaro] before this current [Shintaro] was born". The realization of the power does not come with immediate enlightenment; the snake informs Shintaro that, "no one knows what the future holds in store" and asks him, "now that you know the tale thus far, what do you plan to do about the future that lies ahead?" (オツキミリサイタル). This dialogue implies that simply realizing that one has the power to become enlightened is not enough; they must take conscious, mindful action to truly attain a new level of enlightenment like Shintaro does in "Loss Time Memory". As a whole, this scene reinforces the *Kagerou Project* as a Buddhist text with its references to mindful actions and boundless potential.

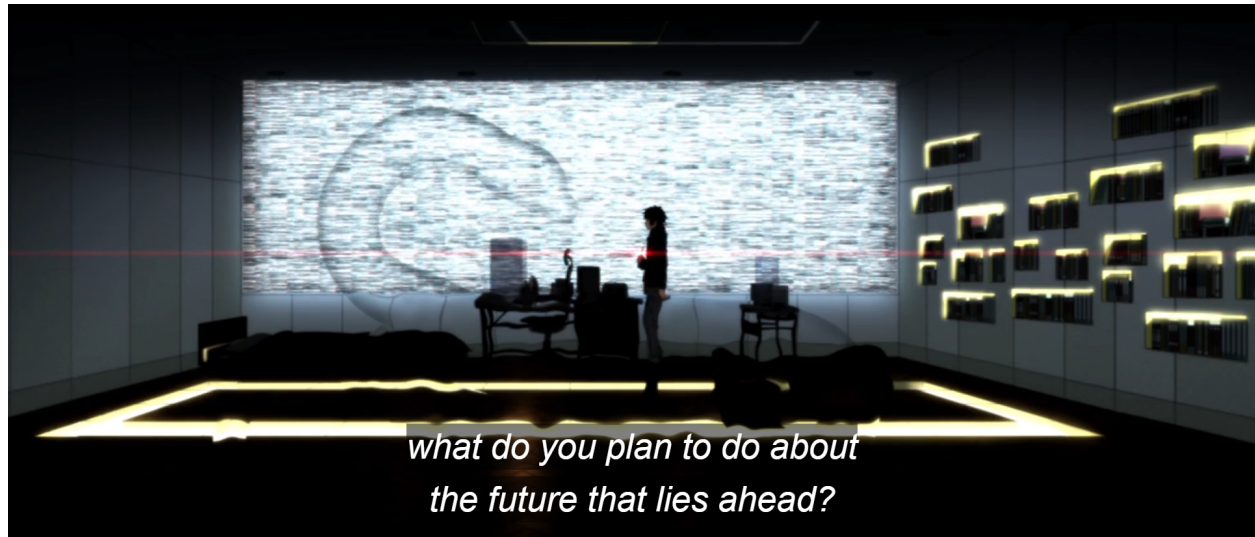


Figure 7. The Snake of Retaining Eyes asks Shintaro what he will do with his newfound realization, a scene reminiscent of the rich friend revealing the jewel in the robe. Accessed on 9anime, June 4, 2023.

Though, at its inception, Jin established the *Kagerou Project* as a Buddhist text, the capitalization of the story westernized many elements of the series, contradicting the main themes of the story and leading to the *Kagerou Project*'s current state of unpopularity. As a medium, the music videos best represented the Buddhist nature of the *Kagerou Project*: like the Buddhist canon, each video was a small story that provided insight into a few characters, and it was only through careful analysis of all of the videos that one could understand the larger story. Consider "Loss Time Memory": the video appears to be a simple story about depression and regret, but with careful analysis, the story behind the song belies a plethora of Buddhist themes. Additionally, unlike Western fiction, there was no one true, consistent protagonist, and the videos did not resort to capitalist practices such as advertisement or paid promotion to boost their popularity. However, once the *Kagerou Project* was so large that companies began looking to monetize it, the Eastern nuance that made the *Kagerou Project* unique was hampered. This westernization affected Shintaro's character the greatest, especially when the *Kagerou Project* shifted from a collective narrative to a monomyth with Shintaro at the forefront. At the beginning

of the *Kagerou Project*'s manga, anime, and light novels (all of which were made possible through the profit-driven model of Niconico Video), Shintaro is described humorously as a loser shut-in virgin who only goes outside because he spills soda on his keyboard. As a first impression, these descriptions paint him as a typical, Western hero: a person who believes himself to have no power receives a remarkable call to adventure and finds the power within himself to overcome a final obstacle. It also removes Shintaro's Buddhist self-determination to change his fate and enlighten himself, supplanting it with a desire to buy a new keyboard and thus erasing much of the Buddhism that once defined his character. Furthermore, Shintaro's reduction to a stereotypical hero bludgeoned the depth of his and others' characters. Ayano is a prime example of this; instead of being her own, independent character defined by her desire to save her family and pension for sacrifice, the monomyth turns her into a damsel in distress to be saved by Shintaro. Also, under the monomyth story structure, Shintaro's sole motivation appears to be solely centered around his love for Ayano, an assumption that undermines his previously established desire for self-improvement as well as the Fukushima-like trauma his character experiences. Shintaro's transformation into the stereotypical Western hero is understandable when considering the *Kagerou Project* as a strictly for-profit series, as it allows the Eastern themes of the story to be more palatable to a wider audience, but said transformation damages what made the *Kagerou Project* so unique as an independent Vocaloid project in the first place.

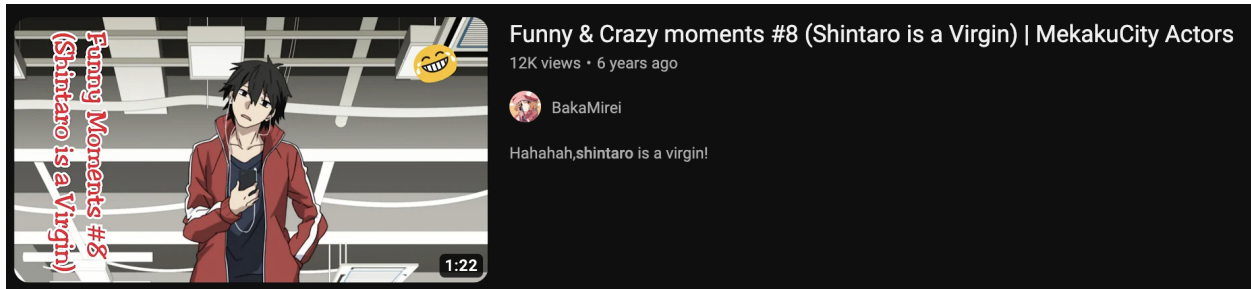


Figure 8. Screenshot of YouTube search results for “shintaro mekakucity actors” showing viewers’ interpretations of Shintaro in *Mekakucity Actors*. Accessed on YouTube, May 24, 2023.

Arguably, turning the *Kagerou Project* into a for-profit series allowed Jin to create more content and explore the characters more in depth than he could have without the backing of publishing companies, but one of the most damaging effects of the westernization of the *Kagerou Project* (aside from the changes to the story) is the fact that Jin struggles with copyright issues and the inability to release new content today. At the height of the *Kagerou Project*’s popularity, Jin forfeited its copyright to a publishing company in order to enter new mediums. Though he was successful in moving into said new mediums, Jin is now no longer able to release new content, as he no longer owns the intellectual property of the *Kagerou Project*. It’s almost poetic how the very system that expanded the *Kagerou Project* preyed on its young owner to ensure that no new content would be released years into the future. So, not only did global capitalism create contradictions and hurt the *Kagerou Project* as a story, it also prevented its growth nearly a decade in advance, causing the story to fall into obscurity today.

The *Kagerou Project* is but one of hundreds of examples of cultural imperialism through globalism affecting non-normative stories and silencing perspectives diametrically opposed to capitalism. The removal of Eastern and Buddhist elements from the *Kagerou Project* is no accident; as the *Kagerou Project* attempted to go global, Jin had to shake the invisible hand of the free market, a force determined to remove views contrary to it. The *Kagerou Project*’s

presentation as a collective narrative butted heads with the Western individualism synonymous with capitalism, leading to the replacement of a main cast with a single protagonist. Similarly, Buddhism's criticism of materialism could not exist in a story driven by profit, so the Buddhist themes of the story were toned down. Therein lies a profound, iron law of capitalism: the only way to spread anti-capitalist ideas is through the very system that censors said ideas. The plight of the *Kagerou Project* is not uncommon; Vocaloid as a genre has also suffered from the effects of globalization and capitalism, as seen by the recent prevalence and popularity of songs highlighting Western morals and imagery^[7]. Though globalization allows for the sharing of unique perspectives, the ways in which these perspectives are twisted to conform to the dominant, global culture must be kept in mind.

Footnotes

1. After the Fukushima incident, many survivors were placed into a social class of “undesirables” who were thought to be tainted by the nuclear waste. That is why survivors of the Triple Disaster feel a sense of shame; much of Japanese society did not accept them.
2. Inherently, the remodeling of deities into an anime style sexualizes them due to their clothing becoming more promiscuous. This sexualization goes hand in hand with the idea of global capitalism, and said sexualization goes against the tenets of Buddhism, further showing how the internet, as an extension of capitalism, perverted many ancient, Eastern ideals.
3. Technically, VOCALOID refers to the voice banks that were created by Crypton Future Media, but there are many other synthesized voice banks out there, including CeVIO AI and UTAUoids. As a genre, though, Vocaloid refers to any song with synthesized voice banks.
4. This song title has been translated in many different ways, including “Pop Heart Sutra” and “Heart Sutra Pop”. I go with “Heart Sutra Pop” because that is the translation Shultz uses in his article.

5. This song title has been translated in many different ways, including “Loss Time Memory”, “Losstime Memory”, and “Lost Time Memory”. I opt for “Loss Time Memory”; the official English title of the song on Spotify is “Losstime Memory”, but “losstime” is not a word, so “Loss Time Memory” seems more appropriate to me.
6. The anime refers to each episode as an “act”, but for clarity, I chose the word “episode” for those unfamiliar with the anime.
7. Examples of these new Western Vocaloid songs include “God-ish”, a song which references Nietzsche and uses Christian imagery, “lower”, a song that recounts the story of Jesus and Judas, and “Samsa”, a song inspired by the themes of “The Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka. “God-ish” and “lower” are two of the most viewed Vocaloid songs on YouTube, and the view count of “Samsa” is growing rapidly, showing a bias towards these Western Vocaloid songs released in the last two years.

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