

Wunderbar! Nico Nico Douga goes German – and some hesitant reflections on Japaneseness

Nico Nico Douga has now released a Spanish (<http://es.nicovideo.jp/>) and a German version (<http://de.nicovideo.jp/>). The German translation of the interface is still a bit shaky, but hey, who would complain? This makes life so much easier for non-Japanese-speakers such as me. The German interface gives you access to all Japanese videos, including the Japanese comments. Japanese tags are not included. Instead you will find the first German tags. You have on each language version the possibility to put up 10 tags per video. On the start page you find videos uploaded by German-speakers (e.g. German cosplayers), as well as Japanese videos, where German-speakers make their first and often slightly awkward steps into the world of commenting. It will come to no surprise that most of the first users seem to be German Japanophiles (of which there are quite many).

Of course I am very curious how this will take up, not the least because it will give us some information about one of the big questions: How Japanese / East Asian is Nico Nico Douga? Behind this lurks a second question: Will Nico Nico Douga be successful in the West? Both questions are always among the first that get asked by Japanese as well as by non-Japanese. And since quite a while I wanted to address them. But before I address them now, I have to make some remarks about why I was evading them for such a long time.

¹ In this series of short and preliminary (!!) texts we publish first results of the Metadata Project's ethnographic research on Nico Nico Douga. You can find more under "output" on <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-centre/project2.php> and on our research blog: <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/metagold/>.

As someone with some background in anthropology, I have the typical mix of obsession and hesitance, when it come to analyse Nico Nico Douga as something uniquely Japanese. I am obsessed by it, because I constantly meet concepts, which I can only understand, if I learn more about their specific Japanese background. At the same time I am hesitant, because an explanation by “Japaneseness” can be easily crude and often superficial (check out the seminal works of Shunya Yoshimi for a critique of thinking Japaneseness). But, of course, I cannot help it. I have the gaze of the gaijin. And many Nico Chuus seem to feel the same: They explain Nico Nico Douga’s characteristics by Japaneseness. But again: The fact that Nico Chuu explain Nico Nico Douga to me by Japaneseness is of course a result of my presence.

What to do in this situation? Well, I think, keep in mind that Japaneseness is only one side of Nico Nico Douga, and, more importantly, it should never be the only explanation. On the other hand it is something that I have to tackle. And indeed, on this blog I reached again and again a point where I had to reference to Japanesness. So enough of worried preambles, and forward, into the material! Oh, no, one more thing needs to be said: To not overcomplicate things, I make in this post no difference between Japaneseness and East-Asianness. Of course, I know that there is a huge difference. But taking it into account is unfortunately even more beyond my gaijin insight.

The most obvious candidate for Japaneseness is “kuuki” – the shared atmosphere of appreciation that one needs to catch, if one wants to comment appropriately, and to understand the joy of being a Nico Chuu. If you look at Kuuki against the background of Japaneseness, you arrive quickly at a list that includes conformity, a high value of group, a sensitivity for atmosphere, non-confrontative communication, friendliness for friendliness’ sake ... here you have about half of the stereotypes that the West has generated, when it

tried to pin down Japaneseness. I leave it to you, how much you want to actually apply. But to understand kuuki fully without them will be probably impossible.

It gets even more problematic, if you look at a second group of stereotypes. Whether you look at the videos or the comment: Nico Nico Douga obviously lives to a high extend of duplication. Nico Chuu comment the same as their predecessors. Videos are often deal with the same topics and similar icons. Duplication and mutation: Here we have two concepts that take us right back to the 60ties and 70ties of the last century, when the West started to get scared of the industrial power of Japan, and read it as a nation of copycats (which was, as we know now, hugely mistaken – but this does not prevent many Western as well as Japanese commentors to repeat the same mistake, when they read China now).

However, it is not only stereotypes. There is something to it. Of course, duplication and anonymity exists in the West as well. But in the West, such forms of mass behaviour are often the tabooed undercurrent of the behaviour of seemingly single subjects, which have the self-perception and self-staging of making up their mind all by themselves. In Japan, this seems to be less of a concern. Duplication and mutation seem to not threaten the self-perception of the Nico Chuu. Can you imagine a platform in the West with similar traits? If you cannot, a Western version of Nico Nico Douga is in trouble, as duplication and mutation are so essential to its workings – they are the key to its evolutionary character, which will soon be a topic in one of my next posts.

And it gets more complicated. Sometimes, the Japaneseness of Nico Nico Douga can take inversed forms: Some of the traits of Nico Nico Douga might have to be explained as specifically Japanese forms of Anti-Japanesness. The most obvious example for this is anonymity.

Anonymity is anti-Japanese, because it provides freedom for the user, which they might lack in their sometimes pretty restricted social life offline : The freedom to express, the freedom to be controversial (especially on 2channel), the freedom to act irresponsible. Anonymity enabled the success of 2channel and partly of Nico Nico Douga as well. Many Nico Chuu told me that it has a special significance in Japan. In the West, we might simply need it less.

It does not stop here. There is more potential Japaneseess in Nico Nico Douga's version of anonymity. Videos, comments and tags on Nico Nico Douga are not only non-trackable to a real offline person. Their anonymity goes further. Comments, tags and also most videos are also not trackable to any kind of online identity. It is difficult to find out, which other comments a user has made (however, you can block all comments by a person). Is such an absence of a unified subject Japanese? The speaking subject seems to be less a central concept. An opinion is not an expression of a single judging subject, not even a virtual one. At least I have some gut feeling that Western users would miss this consistency of a subject.

Let's stay for one more paragraph with the anonymity. From what I have heard from the Nico Chuu, it is good manners for uploaders and producers of videos to not name themselves. However it is a high honour if you get named. Other Nico Chuu recognise a style and give its producer a nickname. So you do not name yourselves, but you can get named. Is that Japanese? Hm..., at least it is another one of this rather foreign, yet fascinating concepts for me as a gaijin.

To summarise the three elements of anonymity: Firstly there might be more need for anonymity in Japan than in the West. Secondly the depth of the anonymity in Japan might be irritating for Western users. Thirdly, the game of getting named by others might be something that relates to Japanese traditions. All three factors strengthen anonymity

in a way they might not do in the West. And this might be result in a further stumbling point for Nico Nico Douga in the West. Nico Nico Douga probably needs anonymity. The inconsistency of a single speaking subject is one of the key elements of its success. It enables the comments to melt with each other, as well as to melt with the video. But not all is lost. The recent success of 4chan in the US might indicate that there is just as much need for anonymity in the West as in Japan. This could be a very good sign for Nico Nico Douga, and a good starting point for a community of early adapters.

The potential Japaneseness of tags doomed to me in a drunk conversation with Nico Nico Bu members in Tokyo. As mentioned several times before, tags do not only describe videos. Tags take a lead role in user-lead generation of new genres. On Nico Nico Douga, tags compress complex terms into a combination of only a few signs. There are three Japanese alphabets, and one of them, Kanji, resembles the Chinese alphabet. It not only enables the expression of much more content in much less space. It also connects words into one combination of signs. In a visual sense, sentences are internally more connected, almost as if they would be one word.

Some of my Japanese conversation partners have told me, that the condensation of the tags is not only a result of writing in the three Japanese alphabets. It has an equivalent in a passion in Japanese culture for condensation as such. If you believe this, you can see this passion for condensation everywhere: In architecture, as in painting, in Haikus ... Once again, stereotypes all over the place.

However, one thing is for sure: Tags on Nico Nico Douga are so effective, because they are often highly complex, and Nico Nico Douga would not be what it is, without its effective tags. When you look at the German translation of the interface of Nico Nico Douga, you can see already, where one of the difficulties of the adaption of Nico Nico

Douga will lie: Obviously it is a challenge to translate the condensed Japanese terms into similarly short and condensed German words. And this is not only a question of translation. It is simply hard to imagine generic German tags that enable equivalent degrees of complexity.

A next candidate for Japaneseness is the combination of writing and image. I am not an art historian, but you do not have to be one, to know that there is an old tradition of combining text and image in Japanese paintings and prints. Indeed, you just have to watch an hour of Japanese mainstream TV. If you flip through the channels of broadcast TV, you will hardly ever find a TV image that does not show some kind of writing on it. This is by no means a reaction to Nico Nico Douga, I am told. The abundance of written text on TV became popular in the 80ties.



A random example of writing on Japanese TV – here in the lower right corner (blurred by me)

The next points are so obvious that it might be important to write them down, merely to not forget them: Without Manga and Anime, which seem to be especially suited for re-editing (see the post Hikawa-san for his further-leading ideas on that); without the cult of 2D characters, who often take a larger than life importance; without the obsession with artificial life, that goes beyond Otaku culture, even though it is especially prevalent there; without Otaku culture itself, which provided the blueprint for a hyper-consumerist yet subversive

fandom; without the comic market, where fans offer and buy self-made variations of existing commercial products, without the blueprint for toleration of copyright infringement, that comes with that ... without all that, much of Nico Nico Douga would not look like it does today. Some of this has long arrived in the West, but still, let's not forget: Japan is where it comes from, where it has the longest, and often also the strongest traditions.

It is probably no coincidence that all this emerged in Japan. Manga and Anime culture, for example, have roots in older levels of Japaneseness. This seemed apparent to me, when I visited six weeks ago a Kabuki theatre in Tokyo: The codified expressions of the actors did indeed look to me like the codified set of expressions in anime.

Kabuki is a good starting point for more speculation on Japaneseness. Originated in the 17th century, it already contains many of the elements that make Nico Nico Douga so unique: The high level of transtextual clues can be tracked to Kabuki; just as the active audience, which often shouts, when actors come on stage; or the obsession with gender swap (in Kabuki, either female actors play both male and female roles, or, more often, male actors play female as well as female roles).

You think things become quite un-analytic at this point? You think that this is stereotyping too much? Then how about this one: One afternoon I walked through a crowded road full of pedestrians in Ikebukuro, and I saw a woman, riding on a bike single-handedly, while she was texting on her mobile. So, here I was, thinking immediately: This is an ability to multitask that goes far beyond what we have in the West – at least far beyond my abilities. So what do you think? Do we have to look at the interface of Nico Nico Douga against the background of a visual culture that seems to be overloaded and crowded from a Western point of view?

Ok, now I have definitely taken it far enough. The question of Japaneseness cannot be answered, nor can it be evaded. It turned out that I had good reasons to evade them. This post became rather long and arbitrary lists of potential candidates for Japaneseness. I am not really happy with this. Not only because Japaneseness is a highly problematic term, loaded and at the same time imprecise. It is simply beyond my (and maybe anyone's) capability, to give satisfying answers. So why not bin the whole thing? Well, I still think that it is braver to address these questions head on, instead of evading them. Plus it enabled me to develop some scenarios for a potential success or non-success of Nico Nico Douga in the West: If you agree at least partly with me and most of the Nico Chuu, and share the perception that there is to some degree something specifically Japanese about Nico Nico Douga, will Nico Nico Douga be successful in the West?

An answer about future is best made in scenarios, and I think you can at least make four of them. First scenario: Nico Nico Douga will fail in the West, because it does not make sense. Second: Nico Nico Douga will become a playground for Western Japanophiles, who will use Nico nio Douga to play to be Japanese in their spare time. It remains a niche offer. The third scenario goes further: Nico Nico Douga might transform itself and become something different in West. How this will look like, remains to be seen.

The fourth scenario is the most far reaching: Not so much Nico Nico Douga will transform itself, but it will become part of a transformation of the West. Nico Nico Douga might become one driver of a long-term process of Easternasation. I have put this hypothesis forward at another place in a short article written together with Scott Lash. Easternasation is a speculative hypothesis, and I am not really sure whether I really believe in it. But if there is something to it, Nico Nico Douga could be a key driver of Easternasation: It might promote, for

example, new ideas of playfulness, collective creativity and creative evolution, a different relationship between content holders and users, and maybe even the introduction of kuuki itself.

As I said: Time will tell. The new German and Spanish version will teach us, whether one of the first three scenarios will realise itself – the fourth one operates on a longer time frame. In the last days, we in London (Foo-san, Takashiro-san, Zimmer-san, Lash-san and me) started to dream up an offspring project of the metadata project, which might look for answers by a quantitative analysis of Nico Nico Douga's data. Not sure whether we will really be able to do this – but it seems to me a project worthwhile pursuing.

And as much as I get excited about the data on the German and the Spanish version of Nico Nico Douga, it is the Taiwanese version, which might turn out to be the most interesting. It might give us some ideas, how much of Nico Nico Douga is Japanese, and how much is East Asian. This question is just as relevant as the ones that are based on the dichotomy Western versus Japanese, indeed maybe even more so. You will of course not get straight answers – other factors such as the national business environment or the IPR policy are probably just as important as cultural factors. But it will give hints, and much material for even further questions without answers.