

Andrzej Wajda's Life and Work as an Example of Building Friendship Between Poland and Japan Through Art

by Alicja Chojnacka

1. Introduction

Throughout Polish history, some individuals have had the imagination and sensitivity to capture the spirit of Poland so faithfully that their work crossed national borders and introduced Polish culture to people of many nations. One of them was Andrzej Wajda, the renowned Polish film director known for films such as "Ashes and Diamonds", "Kanal" and "Man of Iron". Born in 1926 and living until 2016, he witnessed some of the most turbulent times in Polish history: the Second World War, the communist era and the entry into the new millennium. To mark the centenary of his birth, 2026 was designated the "Year of Andrzej Wajda" in Poland. Many institutions contributed to the commemoration, including the Polish Institute in Tokyo and the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków.

That so many institutions connected with Japan took part is no coincidence. Wajda was deeply connected to Japan. Throughout his filmmaking career he formed numerous professional, personal and artistic bonds with Japanese people and ideas. These led to him being called "a Friend of Japan" and eventually to his being awarded the Kyoto Prize, regarded by many as "Japan's Nobel Prize". His life and work show how an individual, through curiosity and creativity, can become a bridge between two cultures. Wajda's contribution to Polish-Japanese relations can serve as a model of cultural diplomacy conducted by an individual and his circle. Through his work he introduced Polish culture in Japan and Japanese culture in Poland, which maximised the positive impact on relations between the two countries.

2. Introducing a Culture Through Art

In the context of Polish-Japanese relations, the introduction of a country's values, history and culture through audiovisual media is mostly discussed with regard to Japan's soft power and its influence. It is well known that many young people have started studying Japanese because of anime and manga, and historians name Akira Kurosawa as the reason for their interest in Japanese history. Film, as an audiovisual medium, offers many opportunities to introduce one's culture of origin. A film's setting can encapsulate particular aesthetics and historical background, its story can introduce important events, characters and values, and its dialogue can showcase the beauty of a language unfamiliar to the viewer. How, then, did Wajda capture the Polish spirit in his films, and did it resonate with Japanese audiences?

2.1. Wajda's Films Bringing Poland to Japan

The first Wajda film screened in Japan was “Kanal” (Japanese: “Chikasuidō”), which premiered there in 1958. It is a work deeply rooted in Polish history that gained recognition after winning the Special Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival. However, real interest in Wajda's work emerged in Japan only with the Japanese premiere of “Ashes and Diamonds” (“Hai to Daiyamondo”) in 1959. Set in Poland just after the end of the Second World War, the film still prompts discussion of moral dilemmas, history and the meaning of revolution, which has secured its place as one of the most important Polish films. In Poland, Wajda's films in the following years attracted even larger audiences, but in Japan none surpassed the popularity of “Hai to daiyamondo”. It is said to have resonated with the feelings of the Japanese after losing the war. The film was influential enough to spark an interest in Poland among young people who later helped to develop mutual understanding between the two countries. Examples include Nagao Hyodo, who saw the film as a student and later became Japan's ambassador to Poland; Prof. Koichi Kuyama, a translator of Polish literature into Japanese and of Wajda's works; and Nobuo Murata, the initiator of the Polish Film Festival in Tokyo.

Film festivals and special screenings offer a way to reach today's young Japanese viewers. During Wajda's active years, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, audiences could get to know his films because they were screened in cinemas shortly after their premieres. The main venue was Iwanami Hall, a legendary Tokyo arthouse cinema that screened most of Wajda's films. Among the institutions working to share Wajda's universal values with today's audiences are the Polish Institute in Tokyo and the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology. Thanks to them, Wajda's works continue to introduce Polish culture and history in Japan.

2.2. Wajda's Activities Bringing Japan to Poland

While the introduction of Polish culture to Japan seems an obvious outcome of screening Wajda's films there, his influence on relations between the two countries was not one-sided. In fact, Wajda brought as much of Japan to Poland as he brought of Poland to Japan.

Wajda travelled to Japan seven times, for professional and personal reasons. During these visits he was exposed to the many wonders of Japan's cultural and natural landscapes. Mesmerized by them, he did not stop at simply taking them in: he wanted to show this beauty to people in Poland and to pay tribute to it in his work. His fascination with Japan is reflected in a collection of his drawings kept by the Manggha Museum, in which he sketched shrines, temples, koi fish, kimonos and much more.

Beyond these many small sketches, Wajda found inspiration in Japan for his theatre and film work. He familiarized Polish audiences with the distant world and aesthetics of kabuki theatre through “Nastasja”, an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's “The Idiot” in which both the leading female and male roles are played by the famous kabuki actor Tamasaburō Bandō. Although it remains relatively little known among Wajda's works, it is evidence that he not only admired Japanese culture but also sought ways to combine it with his own cultural background. Another example is the play “Mishima”, directed by Wajda for the Narodowy Stary Teatr in Kraków. The production consisted of four one-act plays by Yukio Mishima and was performed in Polish by Polish actors yet remained faithful to Japanese aesthetics. Wajda in his plays incorporated characteristic elements of Japanese theatre, such as its pacing and the kuroko, figures who assist the actors, borrowed from bunraku theatre. This particular play was staged as part of the celebrations marking the opening of the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków in 1994, and the museum itself may be the

greatest and most tangible example of Wajda's determination to serve as a bridge between the two countries.

3. Relations Between Countries as Relations Between People

In 1987, Andrzej Wajda was awarded the Kyoto Prize in the category of Arts and Philosophy. He decided to use the entire prize money to create a Japanese center in Kraków, suitable for exhibiting the collection of Feliks "Manggha" Jasieński, a Polish collector of Japanese art. This place would eventually become the museum known today as the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology. But even with the prize money, Wajda could not build this almost literal bridge between Poland and Japan by himself. He needed support, and he found it in people who believed in the role of art in international understanding as much as he did.

Speaking about the whole project, Wajda said: "What is the most important thing in our Japanese adventure [...] since the moment I was awarded the Kyoto Prize, which gave rise to the idea of building the Manggha Centre in Kraków? It is that we met people - wonderful, extraordinary people, who think just as we do, even though they live according to entirely different patterns." (Author's translation from the Polish original.)

The Museum is now home to exhibitions on Japanese art, history and design, and it popularizes Japanese culture and language. Its completion would not have been possible without Wajda's many friends, and the people who became his friends during the project. They include Chieko Akiyama, a radio icon who spread information about the project throughout Japan; Akira Matsuzaki, President of the East Japan Railway Workers' Union, who contributed greatly to the museum's fundraising campaign; and Arata Isozaki, the renowned architect responsible for the museum building's very distinctive shape and many other people.

The creation of the Manggha Museum is often given as an example of Wajda's activity that brought Poland and Japan closer. It is also deeply symbolic, because it highlights not only his impact as an individual but also the importance of cooperation between people from both countries. The same is true of Wajda's films. They could not have been screened in Japan without people in the Japanese film world who were genuinely curious about Polish cinema, such as Etsuko Takano, a film lover and for many years the head of Iwanami Hall, or the aforementioned Koichi Kuyama, who translated many of Wajda's works into Japanese.

4. Conclusion: Before Cultural Diplomacy, There Are People

Wajda's case shows that cultural diplomacy on this scale depends on three things working together: the commitment of an individual, art of real quality, and the support of people and institutions in both countries.

The art born from Wajda's sensitivity and curiosity came first. But even great films do not travel on their own. His work reached Japan because distributors such as Etsuko Takano gave it a home at Iwanami Hall, and because translators such as Koichi Kuyama made it accessible to Japanese viewers. The Manggha Museum tells the same story. It was built on Wajda's Kyoto Prize, but it also needed Chieko Akiyama's radio appeals, the support of Akira Matsuzaki and the railway workers' union, Arata Isozaki's design and the donations of Japanese supporters.

None of this had to be called "cultural diplomacy" or "soft power" to work. Before any such strategy can exist, people must be curious about one another, sensitive to other ways of seeing the world and kind towards someone from a distant country. Wajda's example shows how much one person's

sensitivity can do for the friendship between two nations. It also shows that such a bridge is never built by one person alone, and that it stays standing only if others keep using and maintaining it.

Governments cannot create this kind of connection on demand, but they can make it easier for it to grow and last. That means supporting the translators, distributors, festival organizers and cultural institutions, such as the Polish Institute in Tokyo and the Manggha Museum, who carry the work of individual artists to new audiences. It also means treating the people behind these bridges as long-term partners. Relations between countries are, in the end, relations between people, and Wajda's life is a reminder of this.

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