

**Romantic, Strange, Cool:
Three Images of Japan in Western Popular Culture**

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The relationship between Japan and the United States has long played itself out in the mass media reflections each country has of the other. Like images in a mirror—sometimes distorted, sometimes accurate—popular culture reveals the assumptions one country has of the other. In Western pop-cultural icons we learn not about Japan, but about the motivations and desires that become symbolized by the concept of Japan.

Western images of Japan in popular culture tend to fall into three categories, each representing a different set of needs and desires in the Western audience. There is a fair amount of overlap between the three categories, yet each has hallmarks that distinguish it from the others. Generally speaking, Japan tends to be portrayed either as Romantic Japan, Strange Japan, or Cool Japan. This paper details each of the three images, giving examples from Western popular culture artifacts about Japan.

Romantic Japan

Romantic Japan is the most traditional image of Japan. Indeed, it is Tradition reified and solidified. Romantic Japan is the image of Japan that schoolchildren in the United States are taught when they study culture around the world, marked by the iconic figures of the geisha, the samurai, and the traditional arts such as tea ceremony, calligraphy, and kabuki.

Romantic Japan is an image deeply rooted in the past, and most portrayals of it in American media are deeply elegaic, mourning a lost beauty and spirituality. The two most recent movies to show Romantic Japan are *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), each a look at the most iconic male and female figures of Romantic Japan. Each movie lauds the romantic ideal of traditional Japan—the samurai in *The Last Samurai* are glorious in their tragic deaths, facing down their own extinction with honor and bravery. *Memoirs of a Geisha* is slightly more honest about some of the harsh realities of life as a geisha, yet it too casts a yearning eye on the delicate, subtle beauties of Japan before Western influence destroyed it.

And destroy the romance the West does. In both movies, the catalyst for the end of the beautiful life of the samurai or geisha is the arrival of the West. British and American guns brutally put an end to the days of samurai fighting with swords and horses, culminating in the climactic battle where machine guns viciously mow down the samurai on their doomed final stand. In *Memoirs of a Geisha*, World War II and its aftermath bring harsh, cold reality crashing in on the

life of Sayuri, the main character. In the eyes of the occupying Americans, geisha are equated with whores and treated as such, shattering the delicate, romantic image of the geisha as mistress of the arts. Romantic Japan is forever lost, forever reconstructed with yearning in Western culture.

The books of Alex Kerr perfectly capture this elegaic tone. Kerr, an American who moved to Japan as an adult, has written two books that lament the passing of Romantic Japan. In *Lost Japan*, he takes the reader on a loving journey through *kabuki*, *ikebana*, Japanese calligraphy and Japanese art, bemoaning the fact that the Japanese themselves seem unable to appreciate their own Romantic past: Many of the experiences I describe in this book come from worlds which are dead or dying. Even people who have lived in Japan for years may find these worlds unrecognizable. It's as if I were describing a trip to the moon (259). The fact that Kerr's books are immensely popular in Japan, and *The Last Samurai* was a great success, reveals that Romantic Japan, lost in the mists of time, holds an equal fascination for Japanese people as for foreigners.

Turning from movies to other representations in popular culture, we can see certain themes appear in popular books about Japan as well. Books abound in how to take the images of Romantic Japan and incorporate them into modern Western life, infusing the banality of twenty-first century living with the meaningfulness and depth of Romantic Japan.

The image of the samurai lives on in books about how to use the samurai spirit in daily life or business. Recent books on the topic include *The Samurai Leader* (2005), *The Code of the Executive: Forty-Seven Ancient Principles Essential for Twenty-First Century Leadership Success* (2000), and *The Japanese Samurai Code: Classic Strategies for Success* (2004). All these books argue that classical Japanese philosophy can be used for personal success.

The yearning for Romantic Japan most meets its apogee in books about Zen Buddhism. Ever since Zen was transplanted to America in the early 1960s, Americans have been fascinated by the perceived simplicity and depth of the philosophy. It has seemed like a way to add spiritual depth to modern life without the baggage of traditional Christian religion. Books about Zen and how to live it in one's daily life abound in the West: a simple search for English books with Zen in the title at the online bookstore Amazon turns up almost four thousand results. Many are straightforward discussions of Zen philosophy, like *Everyday Zen* (1997), *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* (2002), or *The Zen Commandments: Ten Suggestions for a Life of Inner Freedom* (2001). Many others, however, apply Zen to concepts that would most likely seem incongruous or downright bizarre to a practicing Buddhist: *Zen Golf: Mastering the Mental Game* (2002), *Momma Zen: Walking the Crooked Path of Motherhood* (2006), *Zen Guitar* (1998). In the West, Zen has come to be used as a catch-all placebo, an empty vessel into which Westerners can pour all of their hopes and longings for a non-religious spirituality.

Images of Romantic Japan, in short, fulfill for Westerners an ideal of a timeless past full of

spiritual meaning and deep culture, a place where the corrupting influence of modern life holds back for a moment. Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai* is a deeply satisfying figure to the Western audience – an American disgusted and weary of the dehumanizing effects of modern warfare who goes native – and achieves, for a brief and fleeting moment, true honor and courage.

Strange Japan

If Romantic Japan is the past, Strange Japan is the present. Strange Japan is the Japan of the salaryman, the crowded subway, and the capsule hotel. It is all the aspects of Japanese culture that cause a feeling of disorientation and culture shock in the Westerner.

The normal disorientation of travelling is exacerbated in the large cities of Japan, which look in so many ways like any other large city in the world. The concrete jungles of Tokyo or Osaka are nearly always disappointing to the first-time visitor to Japan, who at some level is expecting a country like the Romantic Japan he or she learned about in school.

The true disorientation sets in when the Westerner begins to see the many small but jarring ways Japan is different from his or her home country. The very sameness of Japan to other industrialized nations renders these differences deeply confusing. Web pages detailing all the oddities of life in Japan abound on the Internet – taxis with lace doilies and doors that open by themselves, squid in convenience stores, fried shrimp sandwiches at McDonald's, corn on pizza. The familiar and unfamiliar mix, and the effect is sometimes rattling.

One recent movie to capture well the feeling of Strange Japan is Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003). In it, two Americans, Bob and Charlotte, meet in Tokyo. Jetlagged, lonely, and deeply insecure in their lives, they strike up a tentative romance. Tokyo remains for them a blur of neon and concrete. In an interesting touch, Coppola does not subtitle any of the Japanese spoken in the film, so the average viewer is as lost as Bob and Charlotte. Entire conversations go on around them while they simply stare. The feeling of dislocation is exacerbated in Japan for a foreigner by the fact that kanji are completely devoid of meaning. In France, an English-speaker might not be able to understand a written word, but he or she could still attach a sound to *chien*. *犬*, on the other hand, expresses neither meaning nor even sound to a naïve English-speaking tourist. Dave Barry, an American comedian travelling in Japan, noted with amazement that the Japanese/Chinese characters don't look anything like what they're supposed to represent. They all look approximately like this: [a graphic of an impossible mass of squiggles] *And every one of those marks is important.* If you put one teensy little line in there wrong, you could change the entire meaning of the character, from something like 'man holding broom' to 'sex with ostriches' (23). For an English speaker, the complete inability to understand even simple written language can be quite frightening.

Another film to reflect Strange Japan is a Belgian movie called *Stupeur et Tremblement* (*Fear and Trembling*) (2003). Amelie is a Belgian woman who has come to Japan to work at a major company as a translator, but despite her fluent Japanese she is constantly mystified and stymied by the culture around her. Instructed not to speak English, given random and repetitive busywork, and undermined by her co-workers and superiors, Amelie struggles to stay sane in a world that seems impossible to understand to her.

A large part of the effect of Strange Japan is the disjunction between the idealized Romantic Japan and the modern reality of urban Japan. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte takes a day trip to Kyoto. While mournful music plays, she wanders wordlessly through the set of Romantic Japan: rock gardens, lily-filled ponds, a bride and groom in formal kimono. Charlotte's eyes are bewildered and sad, shut out of something that she can't seem to access.

Amelie in *Fear and Trembling* suffers much the same problem. Over the opening credits we see the actress with her face painted white as a geisha, her eyes closed, her lips a bright red square. Then the actress opens jarringly blue eyes and smiles broadly. The effect is startling, an impossible confusion of East and West. In the movie itself, Amelie fondly remembers visits to Ryoanji as a child. We see her as a little girl sitting at the garden, staring fixedly at her ideal image of beauty. The rest of the movie is her vain struggle to reconcile that image of beauty and tranquility with the apparently senseless monotony of everyday Japanese life.

Similarly, in her book about living in Japan called *36 View of Mount Fuji*, Cathy Davidson starts with the disjunction she experienced between her Romantic image of Japan and the drab, Strange reality:

I dreamt Japan long before I went there. Moss gardens, straw-mat rooms, wooden bridges arching in the moonlight, paper lanterns with the fire glowing inside. Whenever I paged through photography books of traditional Japan, I found myself gasping with appreciation. Three rocks, a gnarled pine tree, rakes white sand: awe. . . .

But what struck me as we drove away from Osaka International Airport was the unattractiveness of the scene. Forget rocks and raked sand! Neon everywhere, billboards as far as the eye could see, concrete apartments dingy with pollution. Even the details radiated a sense of urbanization run amok. Whereas other affluent nations bury power lines and strive for at least some sense of visual harmony, Japan seemed to be clotted with the cables and wires of modern life. Looking out the car window at gray buildings and rusting metal roofs, the power lines crisscrossing bizarrely overhead, I was reminded of some grim old photograph of a nineteenth-century immigrant ghetto, zapped by late-twentieth-century electronic overload. . . .

I knew that Japan wouldn't look like the picture books but I was surprised by how different it really was. I joked that I had thought the streets of Japan would be paved with gold. (5-6)

In movies and books that use the image of Strange Japan, the country itself is largely the

backdrop for the nearly-existential crisis the main character is undergoing. Familiar-looking landmarks give way to the dizzyingly unexpected (the semi-apocryphal vending machines selling girl's underwear are quintessential), the world around becomes a blur of incomprehensible language and lights, and the main characters of the narrative stand utterly alone and alienated from everything around them, lost in translation, full of fear and trembling.

Cool Japan

Like Strange Japan, the image of Japan that makes up Cool Japan is a mix of East and West, familiar and strange. The difference in a movie or book with is all in how the main characters, and by extension the audience, react to that mix. Portrayals of Cool Japan relish the clash of images, taking a postmodern pleasure in the pastiche of old and new, East and West. Cool Japan is a very common mindset in the West right now, as more young men and women grow up watching anime and reading manga.

Movies that use the image of Cool Japan tend to have either a very futuristic feel or a heavy reliance on martial-arts. In *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), the American main character races cars in Tokyo against the yakuza. Tokyo is a tangle of brilliant neon and beautiful technology, full of dangerous men and beautiful women. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003) features a blond, blue-eyed American (Uma Thurman), who makes her way to Japan to kill the yakuza-trained assassin who destroyed her life. Speaking fluent Japanese, she convinces a legendary katana-maker to craft her the perfect weapon, then faces down her nemesis in a perfect Japanese garden. The assassin is dressed in a pristine white kimono, the main character in a grungy yellow jogging suit. East and West clash with cinematic intensity; the result is a spectacle for Westerners to enjoy.

Japanese culture is cool in the West in many ways right now. Manga are increasingly popular in America, for example both manga made in Japan, which is published and read from right to left, Japanese-style, and American-made manga. Time magazine recently reported that manga sales in America have tripled in the last three years (Masters). Translated manga take up large amounts of shelf space in American book stores and are especially popular with young women, a demographic traditionally neglected by American comic books.

The surge in popularity of anime and manga is connected to another aspect of Cool Japan a love of kanji. In images of Strange Japan, kanji reflect the isolation and incomprehension of the main characters, struggling to understand the world around them. However, kanji fascinate many Americans who enjoy the Cool Japan image. Simultaneously words and pictures, meaningful and meaningless to the Westerner, kanji are common on t-shirts, signs, and tattoos. A recent book published in America called *Designing with Kanji: Japanese Character Motifs for Surface, Skin &*

Spirit (Oketani and Lowitz) offers a guide to using kanji in home decorating or tattoos. The book's description reads in part, Pick from Warrior, Heart, Nature, and Spirit categories to find the characters that express your sentiments best. Each entry includes historical or etymological background, often with unusual 'kanji facts.' Then trace, photocopy, or even stencil the clear letterforms—displayed in several different *kanji* 'fonts'—to get just the effect you want.

Despite books like the above-mentioned, many Westerners use kanji to disastrous effect. Just as Japanese sometimes use English in unintentionally humorous ways, so too do Westerners sometimes misuse kanji. The web page *Hanzi Smatter* (www.hanzismatter.com) documents the many disastrous cases of kanji written backwards, mirror-reflected, or simply mutilated beyond recognition. Some of the most famous include a person who had a tattoo of 足 (leg) on their arm. Another very common error are people who want a tattoo of change, and learn that 変わる means change in Japanese, so they ask for 変 as a tattoo, unaware that using the kanji alone changes the meaning to strange. The allure of pictures that have meanings but don't feel like words is very strong. A recent *Sports Illustrated* article about the kanji tattoos of famous basketball players quotes a player as saying he got a tattoo with the kanji for loyalty because I didn't want words (Hughes), revealing how little like words kanji feel to a foreigner. Kanji have a kind of magical feeling they're symbols and runes but not simple words. As such, they are quintessentially cool.

Conclusion

Japan has always fascinated the Western mind, and as such images of Japan appear very often in American and other Western popular culture. These images are sometimes accurate, sometimes so wildly inaccurate as to be amusing (or insulting), but they generally reveal much more about the minds of their makers than the actual country they are supposed to be portraying.

The three images of Japan detailed in this paper Romantic, Strange, and Cool mix and intermingle in the Western imagination. Some are more in ascendency at some times than at others. For example, during the 1980s, when relations between Japan and America were tense for economic reasons, images of Strange Japan were more common in movies. *Gung Ho* (1986), for example, portrayed the Japanese worker as well-intentioned but bizarre, a corporate drone locked into the Japanese machinery who needed to be freed by American free-spiritedness. *Black Rain* (1989) shows Michael Douglas wandering a terrifying neon landscape of corrupt police and inscrutable but menacing businessmen. At the time, Romantic and Cool images of Japan were quite rare; in the early 21st century, however, all three images are fairly common, perhaps reflecting the more complicated global interactions between the two countries.

Whether focused on the elusive and idealized past of Romantic Japan, the bewildering and

alienating present of Strange Japan, or the exciting and exotic future of Cool Japan, Westerners continue to project their own fears and desires onto other countries. One assumes that, given their shared complicated and tumultuous past, Japanese popular culture does very similar things with images of America and other Western countries. Which themes and images would appear in a careful study of popular culture artifacts is beyond the scope of this study, but would be an interesting direction for future research.

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