

# On the Importance of Studying the Image of Japan in Culture and Literature from a Comparative Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present the importance and relevance of the representations of Japan in contemporary culture from aspects of comparative and imagological studies and East-West dialogue. It helps to comprehend the ways in which imagery as well as theoretical concepts are activated in the discourse on Japaneseness. The focus is on the image of Japan as a country which is unique in its immutable tradition, as well as on its radical revision in modern culture and literature considering the relevant theories about Japan based on the works by Roland Barthes (1983), Koichi Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Karatani Kojin (1989, 1993, 1999), etc. Here, the writers argue that the goal of modern comparative studies concerning Japan should be to advance the understanding of how both general and specific components of cultural and literary representations of Japan and Japaneseness are manifested in the East-West cultural dialogue and that the in-depth comparative analysis is needed to reveal the inter-related aspects in the image of Japan.

**Key Words:** image of Japan, comparative studies, culture of representation.

## Introduction

In recent decades in the world of humanities, issues concerning national perception have come to the fore. This is due to the peculiarities of the development of academic knowledge itself; without clarification of the laws that influence national perception, it is impossible to understand intercultural dialogue as a whole. In a rather simplified way, we may assume that the world *culture* is determined by a combination of opposite processes of divergence (national identification and unification) and convergence of cultures (globalization and Westernization). Japanese culture is no exception and can be considered in these terms as well. It is well-known that the modern Japanese context, which is marked by the phenomenon of cross-cultural interaction, provides numerous examples of reconstructing the image of Japan in cultural and literary texts. It can also be described by rethinking the poetics and semantics of postmodernist models of the West, in unity with the national tradition and authentic artistic and aesthetic canon.

The relevance of the study of the image of Japan is due to the ongoing debate in mod-

ern comparative studies, which comprises the phenomena of intercultural dialogue in the context of interethnic dialogue. This debate manifested in the studies of Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Tatsumi (2002, 2006), Washburn (2007), etc., considers the role of autonomy and authenticity as well as the hybridity of contemporary Japanese society and the role that cultural representations play in the formation of the ideas of nation and subjectivity. By identifying the significance of national ideas in various cultural interactions, it is possible to provide an objective assessment of the influence of national images, myths and stereotypes on the process of intercultural communication. In addition, world literature has extensive experience in understanding and modifying literary images – an experience that is just beginning to be studied.

The image of a country is most often, on the surface at least, unambiguous, because it hides in itself the plurality of distinct phenomena (which can sometimes be opposing in their content and ways of formation): symbols, stereotypes, clichés, biases, etc. The image of Japan in the works of contemporary Western and Japanese culture and literature is often an implicit, metaphysical concept, with a large number of meanings, which are always shifting and unstable due to the variety of historical, political, economic, cultural and literary factors. A bias in the perception of oriental cultures is evident in the works of many researchers as well as in the works of many writers, who have repeatedly emphasised the impossibility of understanding between East and West.

The portrayal of Japan in Western culture and literature has its own history. Especially controversial and complex are the Japanese phenomena in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The exotic image of a beautiful country of cherry blossoms, resilient samurais and picturesque geisha is replaced by the propaganda cartoons of the *yellow peril*, which in turn, give room to the technological and anti-utopian visions of Japan, the supposed country of the future. Another complexity in branching and systematising the images of Japan is related to the contrasting vision from inside and outside of the country (in regards to how the Japanese see themselves and how they are seen by the Western world). ‘Objectivity’ of the image from the outside is often accused of being of the Orientalist approach, which aesthetises the culture of Japan and pays special attention to the exotic functions of Japaneseness.

While conducting this research, we follow the main concepts of comparative studies and imagology studied in the works of Marius-François Guyard, Albert Lortholary Michel Cadot, Jean Marie Carré, Marius-François Guyard, Francois Jost, Hugo Dizerink, Joep Leerssen and others. These authors deal with the complicated issue of national identity and

its perception through the lens of foreign people (hetero-image) and self-perception (auto-image) as well as stereotypes and myths connected to different perspectives. Such concepts as orientalism and postcolonial studies are also considered relevant hence we consult with the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes. The body of research on the image of Japan can be called rather vast however it mostly deals with the representations of Japan in politics and media and is mainly conducted from the USA point of view (Japan (Dennis Wachburn, Ines Sandra Freesen, James Joseph Orr etc). The Japanese perspective on the image of Japan and contemporary cultural and literary processes in Japanese society is of most importance to us as well, and, thus, the works of Mitsuyoshi Numano, Tatsumi Takayuki, Kojin Karatani, Masao Miyoshi also serve as the theoretical basis for this paper.

We must note, that despite the impressive academic discourse on Japaneseness, the topic of this study has not been well researched in historical, literary or comparative aspect of the analysis. This research presents an attempt to explain the complexity of the subject, as well as to underline the importance of such a study from comparative and imagological points of view.

## Research question

The main Research Question (RQ) of this study is formulated as follows:

RQ: What is the importance and relevance of studying the image of Japan from comparative perspective in contemporary Japanese and Western culture and literature?

The aim of this study is to determine the importance of the comparative and typological relationships and connections in the development of the image of Japan in Japanese and Western culture and literature at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century in the parameters of literary imagology. The aim of this study implies performing the following task: to consider the achievements of the leading oriental theorists and relevant methodological concepts of modern cultural and literary comparative studies, which help to develop approaches to studying the interactions in Westerns and Eastern literature in terms of literary imagology.

## Methodology

Since this paper aims to present just the general issues in regards to representing Ja-

pan in modern culture and literature in the East and West, there is no analysis of the work of culture and literature except the review of the theoretical works that we mention later in this section. Taking into account the provident theories by Western and Japanese scholars, we try to consider the importance and relevance of such a study in the contemporary academic field.

Due to its purpose and task, this study requires a combination of methods of historical and literary, comparative and imagological analysis, the foundations of which are laid in the works of Marius-François Guyard, Albert Lortholary Michel Cadot, Jean Marie Carré, Marius-François Guyard, François Jost, Hugo Dizerink, Joep Leerssen and others. In addition to theoretical works on the problem of national identity, the methodological basis of this research is works on the study of the image of Japan (Dennis Wachburn, Ines Sandra Freesen, James Joseph Orr etc). The culturological basis of this study consists of the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Mikhail Epstein, John Lee, Koichi Iwabuchi and others. The study of the Japanese literary tradition is based on the works of Masahito Ueda, Mitsuyoshi Numano, Tatsumi Takayuki, Kojin Karatani, Masao Miyoshi, William George Aston, Donald Keene, Jay Rubin, Susan Napier, etc.

In this study, methods adequate to the purpose and artistic nature of cultural and literary works are applied; the leading method is the comparative and typological method of studying common and distinctive features in creating the image of Japan in Japanese and Western culture and literature from the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century. The other method is the contact-genetic method, which is used to study the direct influences of the work of various writers on the formation of the images of Japan in modern culture. The analysis of the dyad Self vs Other, in the parameters of which this study considers the images of Japan and Japaneseness in the East and West, involves recourse to the imagological method, and the disclosure of mechanisms of polystylistic semantisation in the process of representing Japan is based on intertextual, intermedial, and hermeneutic analyses of associative and semantic subtext of works.

## Results and Discussion

### *Images of Japan: stereotyping*

Similar to those of the other Asian countries, the images of Japan are constructed on the basis of two main approaches: it is either an underlined vision of Japan's femininity in

its elegance, or the notions of its aggressive and violent character. However, Japanese culture occupies a special place in the context of contemporary Western culture due to the unique combination of Eastern sensitivity and the achievements of technical progress. In a small chapter of the collective monograph *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* describing Japan, Ian Littlewood (2007) traces the birth of the Western image of Japan, which was largely related to the geographical and cultural remoteness of the country. Japan, located on the other side of the world, is according to Littlewood only an antithesis to the West (Littlewood, 2007). However, it was clear that within the Orientalist opposition to the 'civilized West and the Wild East', it was impossible to judge Japan, a country of ancient and refined culture. 'The Empire of the Sun'<sup>1</sup> was a paradox and, as Littlewood points out, the language of paradoxes still permeates the discourse about the Japanese, who are represented as follows: 'They are affectionate but treacherous, polite but violent, responsive to beauty but brutally cruel' (Littlewood 2007, p. 201). Ruth Benedict also wrote about this property of the Japanese in his famous study *Chrysanthemum and Sword* (1946).

### ***Futuristic images of Japan and techno-orientalisation***

Littlewood draws attention to the fact that the image of Japan changed in the 1970's during the technological boom: 'There is a new battle-field with a new breed of samurai, this time in business suits' (Littlewood 2007, p. 201). The technological genius of the Japanese began to be perceived as a new form of the same Eastern intricate cunning, although sometimes these fears were expressed in terms of Western culture: 'the Japanese as a potential race of 'economic terminators' (Napier 1996, p. 3).

Thus, representations of modernised Japan are augmented with high technologies, creating an image of a country focused on the pursuit of financial and economic success. It is needless to say that such views may well be quite divorced from reality. Such stereotypes fall under the definition of techno-orientalism, which is well-known in literature because of the genre of cyberpunk and presents an alternative to the range of exotic stereotypes about Japan. This genre is marked with the distinct perspective on Japan as a soulless superpower, which is to be hated and afraid of. As Lozano-Mendez explains, 'it refers to a discourse that, from the sixties onward, has promoted an array of stereotypes and deformations about Japan, so that the country has come to epitomise a hyper-technified, de-

<sup>1</sup> The term was coined by the British writer James Ballard, who wrote an autobiographical novel of the same name (*Empire of the Sun* by James Graham Ballard, 2003).

humanised and materialist society' (Lozano-Méndez 2010, p. 183). The best examples can be found in the works of famous representatives of the genre such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Philip K. Dick, and David Mitchell (to some extent), shaping their own perceptions of the techno-images of Japan. Posadas understands techno-orientalism as a phenomenon directly linked to cultural representations of Japan. The researcher sees it as 'the production of 'Japan' as aestheticised spectacle, as image ... [and] ... as image commodity' (Posadas 2011, p. 84). Concern is with the assessment of the state of the Japanese culture, the tendencies of development and the destruction of spirituality. Thus, the attention of the Western writers is focused on the futuristic arrangement of these Japanese themes. It is no coincidence that the formation of the images of Japan in both Japanese and Western literature is almost always influenced by one of the opposite stereotypes – Japan's traditional aesthetics and culture; and Japan, which loses its past, becomes modernised and robotic.

### ***Aesthetisation of representation***

In the context of such an ideologised discourse of orientalism in general (based on the concepts of Said) and techno-orientalism in particular, the relevance of studying the images of Japanese uniqueness becomes acute. At a time when the West builds its own image of rationality and superiority through its relations with Japan, Japan itself also defines its position, emphasising its geographical and cultural uniqueness. Important components of these representations are the victim mentality (Orr, 2001) and the idea of incomprehensibility of the Japanese soul. Those aspects are at the centre of artistic comprehension and interpretation of contemporary writers, who try to look into Japan from inside (Yasunari Kawabata, Junichiro Tanizaki, Kenzaburo Oe, Masahiko Shimada, Ryu Murakami, Haruki Murakami etc.) and outside (William Gibson, Roger Zelazny, James G. Ballard, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Mitchell). However, those stereotypes are not permanent as well; they also change over time, according to historical circumstances. When relations between Western countries and Japan are good, as in the early twentieth century or in the 1960s, the aesthetic visions of Japan in the West tend to predominate. First it was Pierre Loti with his *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), and then Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* (1904) that were considered the key texts in moulding Western attitudes toward Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. In the post-war period, it was Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), which depicted Japan in a highly aesthetic way. Yasunari Kawabata, the Noble prize laureate in literature in 1968, can also be considered as a writer who, to some extent, meets the specific Western expectations in regards to representing Japan with a unique sense of

beauty and expression. It is even possible to say that the writer was given the Noble prize because his aesthetic views of Japan were admired by the West.

An interesting tendency in representing Japan should be noted. When relations worsened, either during the war or after the tensions in the trade relations of the 1980s, the 'warrior of Japan' became dominant in the representation of the country. The most distinctive literary examples of that can be found in Michael Crichton's controversial novel *The Rising Sun* (1992) and in the sci-fi genre of cyberpunk mentioned above. Although the power of stereotypes remains unquestionable, these fluctuations leave space for alternative images, which may be independent of clichés and mainstream biases. In more recent works, however, writers such as Haruki Murakami and David Mitchell look into the image of Japan as the essence of Japanese national identity, the peculiarity of their world perception and way of thinking.

### ***An updated image of Japan***

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century, the formation of an updated image of Japan has started in the works of Western and Japanese authors. To study the image of Japan, which is now part of cultural, political, historical and literary discourses, requires an interdisciplinary approach, involving studies of Japanese history, culture, philosophy, and aesthetics. In modern conditions, to write accurately about something as complicated as Japan, often means avoiding generalizations, ideological or aesthetic considerations. According to the numerous researchers (among them are the prominent works of Roland Barthes (1983), Jacques Derrida (1985, 1997), Koichi Iwabuchi (1994, 2002), Kojin Karatani (1989, 1993, 1999), John Lie (2004), Ian Littlewood (2007), Masao Miyoshi (1991), Takayuki Tatsumi (2002, 2006), Karen Thornber (2009), etc.), Japan remains a country of unshakable stereotypes, and even the Japanese themselves contribute to such a state of things often adding up to the existing stereotypes about Japan. During the twentieth century, Japan expanded its influence in all areas of cultural and economic activities. Because of globalisation and transcultural interactions, the system of signs called 'Japan' was formed, according to Roland Barthes (1983). Because of all the variety of possible meanings, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify or correlate the image of Japan with a specific phenomenon. The image of this country in different types of art, including literature, is surrounded by orientalist stereotypes, which, as indicated by Edward Said, are mostly based on cultural biases, especially within Europe and North America (Said, 1979). It becomes extremely important that the bluntness of such generalisations is checked by the

analysis of a specific cultural and literary material. The purpose of modern research should be to determine the basis in representing the image of Japan in the Japanese and Western cultural works from a comparative point of view. It should aim to discover the similarities and differences in the representation of Japan on thematic, problematic and intertextual levels. Bringing forth new imagological problems of contemporary comparative studies and broad historical, sociological, cultural and literary contexts allows unveiling the paradigm of representing Japan as an auto-image based on a theory of Japaneseness (*nihonjinron*).

This research, which potentially actualises the essential semantic connections of the artistic image of Japan with the problems revealed in society, seems promising for the expansion of the modern humanitarian knowledge. Thus it is important to study, from a comparative point of view, the relationship between the East and West from the aspects of the imagological dyad of the Self vs Other, the similarities and differences in representation of constant, stereotypical and historically changing features of the image of Japan in modern Japanese and Western cultures and literatures.

The theoretical significance of this analysis, therefore, is due to the fact that both the subject and the issues of research expand the theoretical range of topics and aspects of modern comparative studies and literary imagology, emphasising the commonality of intercultural communication. The dialectic of connections between the image and representation, between the Self vs Other in the works of writers of different national cultures is specified. Analysis of the work of contemporary Japanese and English-language writers who develop artistic forms of representation of 'Japaneseness' opens up a wide range of theoretical problems for linguists, literary critics and translators.

## Conclusion

The image of Japan, created in the works of writers in the East and West in recent years, differs markedly in semantics and in the means of artistic embodiment from the distant and alluring exotic image of Japan in the literature of the early twentieth century. It seems possible to establish that modern Japanese and Western imagological discourse on Japan and its national and cultural identity depends greatly on the historical and interethnic situation.

Scholars agree that Western literature acquires the features of pseudo-Japaneseness, and 'Japaneseness' becomes a path to represent the image of the Other. In the resonant work 'The Japonoid Manifesto: Toward a New Poetics of Invisible Culture', Takayuki Tat-



sumi expresses the belief that Japanese culture and literature of the last decades of the twentieth century have become a product of imports and borrowings from other cultures (Tatsumi, 2002). An analysis of modern culture and literature suggests that Japanese writers and researchers have responded to new processes in culture, creating an artistic and ideological context of internal opposition to the loss of national and cultural identity.

Within the theory of Orientalism, images of Japan are constructed on the basis of two approaches: an emphasised vision of 'femininity' of Japan and its elegance, or an insistence on its aggressive and violent nature. In the result of the analysis in this study of the cultural category of Japaneseness, it is possible to conclude that the concept of Japaneseness should not be understood as a utilitarian idea, but as the whole set of ideas, stereotypes and specific features characteristic of Japan, the Japanese or Japanese cultural phenomena.

In culturological, philosophical, neohistorical discourses, multivariate images of Japan and Japaneseness created: 'aesthetic Japan' by Basil Hall Chamberlain and Lafcadio Hearn, 'yellow peril' by Robert Thompson, the country of 'military patriotism' by John W. Dower, 'odourless culture', 'invisible colonization' and 'Japan for the West' by Koichi Iwabuchi. In the context of the polarity of these theories, it becomes essential to develop an adequate methodological approach to the study of the image of Japan in the works of modern Western and Japanese culture and literature, which is formed not only due to but also contrary to stereotypical constructs, supplementing and correcting ideological prejudices.

This paper is an attempt to present the topic and outline its importance as well as map out some problems connected to the representation of Japan in a modern East-West discourse. Further research including a comparative in-depth analysis is much needed to reveal the inter-related aspects involved in the image of Japan. Traditional stereotyping of Japan as exotic, mysterious, strange, irrational, sensual and potentially dangerous is juxtaposed to literary images of the country in the contemporary cultural and literary works that reveal the variety of complex paradigmatic components of the image of Japan (exotic, violent, odourless, techno-orientalist, etc.). Such a study would evoke the enduring themes in national identity debates that are substantially reworked in contemporary theories of Japaneseness in the works by Ruth Benedict (1967), Peter Dale (1986), Naoki Sakai (1998), Harumi Befu (1987), Yoshio Sugimoto (1986), etc., thereby determining the reasons for the longevity of stereotypes and understanding the complex phenomenon of shifting formulations of 'Japan' as an aestheticised object. Such an analysis would expand the knowledge of Japan as a set of meanings, tracing not only the common features, but delving also on their

historical evolution, multidimensional nature, specific artistic deconstruction and recontextualisation. The ultimate goal should be to advance the understanding of how both general and specific components of cultural and literary representations of Japan and Japaneseness are manifested in the East-West cultural dialogue. That is why a comparative study of the image of Japan is so important in the contemporary context.

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