

A NORDIC JOURNAL ON ASIA BY EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

# ASIA IN FOCUS

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## **The Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe:**

A literary analysis of Arundhati Roy's  
*The God of Small Things*

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INGVILD BADHWAR

## **Beyond Historical Humiliations**

New ways of understanding the significant role of  
historical conflicts in Chinese history education

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Genre and the fantastic mode in Japanese cinema

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WESTER WAGENAAR

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# Editorial Introduction

What is the role of a journal and indeed of academic production in the ever-changing world of scholarly publishing? At a time when the EU is putting a deadline of 2020 for all publicly-funded research to be published on open-access platforms, prominent journals have begun to offer the option of paying to make one's work freely available online, and researchers increasingly offer versions of their work on peer-sharing oriented websites such as academia.edu and researchgate.net. From Aaron Swartz's efforts to Alexandra Elbakyan's Sci-Hub, the call to free the hold that large publishing houses have over outputs resulting from largely publicly-funded research so that they can reach a wider audience has continued to grow louder.

As fledgling researchers, we at Asia in Focus are acutely aware of the complementary concerns of early-career and well-established scholars alike: to publish in respectable forums that can hopefully create positive real impact but also further one's career at a time when competition for research funding has reached unprecedented levels. In recent months, the prospect of a 'Brexit' with the 23rd June EU referendum has prompted a good deal of debate on potential implications for researchers' access to funds and mobility within Europe. These conversations are a sobering reminder of how living in a world increasingly defined by national borders and identity politics categorically limits a large number of people's access to cutting-edge research and thereby their opportunities to engage as informed global citizens and fellow academics in a structurally unfair and discriminatory world.

Now into its second year and third issue, Asia in Focus seeks to do its bit by providing emerging researchers in the Nordic countries a freely accessible online platform to showcase their work on a variety of Asia-related topics, while simultaneously providing a valuable window into research on Asia to interested audiences worldwide. This issue, for instance, ranges from analyses of humour in Finnish-Chinese negotiations and Indian literature in English, to scrutiny of Japanese cinematic genres and how Chinese schoolchildren are taught a particular version of history. In autumn, we shall publish our first Special Issue, on the theme of family and gender in a globalising India. This marks a modest attempt by Asia in Focus to not only seek to capture the breadth of concerns relevant to the study of Asia with its astonishing diversity, but also to plumb in-depth the endless complexity of the broached issues. The upcoming special issue is in addition to the regular winter issue, for which a call for articles and book reviews is now open.

Over the course of the past three issues, we have grown as a team, learning about the

ins and outs of running a smooth ship, plagiarism checks and online presence, and refining our review process. Happily, we have retained most of the founding editors, lending us continuity and a strong sense of collegiality. A few have moved on (geographically) with their careers, and others have been welcomed aboard. We are fortunate enough to have a steady stream of quality articles coming our way, which is a mark of the need for platforms like this. Notably, we have acquired an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), and a new logo and layout which we think are fabulous – we hope you like them too! We remain grateful to our reviewers, who have contributed efficiently and substantially to enable us to present some fine work on Asia by early-career Nordic researchers. Enjoy the read, and as always, we look forward to your comments and suggestions.

On behalf of the Editorial Team,  
Siddharth Sareen

# The Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe:

## A literary analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

INGVILD BADHWAR

In this essay, I read Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as a melodrama in order to explore the relationship between the subaltern and the world of everyday life. I draw upon Spivak's conception of the subaltern, her lack of voice and location within both everyday life and the narrative of history. I argue that the main character, Ammu—not speaking the language of everyday life, yet desperately desiring to express herself—is forced to resort to melodramatics, bolstering her incomprehensibility and leaving her even more isolated. I discuss the relationship between post-colonial studies, melodrama, everyday language, skepticism, innocence and knowledge, representations, and the subaltern's opportunity to regain her voice in order to tell her own story.

**Keywords:** melodrama, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, literary theory and analysis, narrative theory

Is it true that “there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak, 1988, p. 307)? The subaltern, Ammu—ostracized and rejected by her community—is no longer in a position to obtain knowledge about society, and can therefore neither understand it nor speak its common vernacular. In her desperate desire to communicate, she begins over-expressing herself. When she is still not understood, she is effectively forced into isolation. I suggest that it is the responsibility of the reader to question the public narrative, understood as “stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual” (Baker, 2006, p. 33), to highlight her absent voice.

In this essay, I read Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* as a melodrama. I discuss whether the oppression of the subaltern will inevitably result in a position of skepticism towards the world of everyday life or if the subaltern subject—while not being a part of the depicted fictive everyday world—can ever reacquire her voice to tell her story, and fill the Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe.

### **Lack of Locus Standi**

As a woman, Ammu’s only chance to free herself from her sinister father’s grip is to go from being in the possession of one man to being in that of another. This drives her into an unhappy marriage with an alcoholic Hindu, and the divorce leads her and her twins, Estha and Rahel, back to their callous family in Kerala, to a status that has depreciated for her to that of a female divorcee “from an intercommunity love marriage” (Roy, 1997, p. 46).

*The God of Small Things* explores the Small Things in the hybrid space between the Big Things. Ammu’s English niece Sophie’s visit to the family leads to the Big Thing, little Sophie’s drowning, and to the Small Things, the murder of the untouchable Velutha, the banishment of the subaltern Ammu, and the separation of the twins. After their separation, the twins lose their sense of self; Estha withdraws into silence, and Rahel is left desolate and devoid of status in her late mother’s home.

Rahel leaves Kerala for school and silently drifts from place to place and from marriage to divorce. Her American husband recognizes that “her eyes behaved as though they belonged to somebody else,” lamenting that he can never understand her, because “in the country she came from (...), worse things had happened.” (ibid, p. 19). His assumptions serve to reduce her to that of his opposite: something mystical, incomprehensible and completely different to himself.

Homi Bhabha has coined the term, ‘not white/ not quite’ to illustrate Indian men’s perpetual search for their own identities in the hybrid space of post-colonial India. This has often led them to adopting Western mannerisms in an attempt to find a locus within the context of cultural imperialism. However, to recite someone else’s identity is not the same as to experience and make it their own, which is why they remain ‘not white’ and ‘not quite’ (Prakash, 1992, p. 16).

Similarly, Ammu’s brother, Chacko, is in limbo between his former existence as a student at Oxford University, and his current existence as the owner of the local family business in Kerala. He is presented as a man who strives to maintain his po-

sition as a well-read member of the English elite. When he tells “Rahel and Estha that Ammu ha[s] no Locusts Stand I” (Roy, 1997, p. 57), he is paradoxically misquoting the Latin term ‘locus standi’, which in law is used to state “the right of a party to appear and be heard before court” (locus standi, n.d.). This misquotation serves to highlight the discrepancy between Chacko’s real self and his make-believe world.

We can also apply this syndrome to India as a post-colony: India is in a hybrid position, or, as Chacko puts it, “[w]e belong nowhere [...]. And when we try to listen, all we hear is a whispering [...]. A war [...] has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (ibid, p. 52-53). However, without a location, from where they to hear and see, it seems impossible for them to regain their voice to speak.

### **The Public Narrative of History**

Spivak defines the subaltern as “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism – a space of difference” (Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, cited in de Kock, 1992, p. 45). Her essay reveals the dilemma of the subaltern woman; embodying the inferior sex of an inferior culture, she is oppressed not only as the man’s other, but also as the other of cultural imperialism. Her character, her needs, and her desires are defined from the perspective of the ‘white woman’, who in this story is present through the character Sophie Mol – Chacko’s daughter and Ammu’s niece.

In Spivak’s words, the subaltern woman is left at the absolute bottom of the hierarchy, not only as the ‘not white/not quite’, but also as the ‘not quite/not male’ (Spivak, 1985, p. 244). Ammu, because she has no access to first-hand experiences with society, has to adopt their mannerisms from a distance. Appropriately, by adopting these mannerisms in order to be heard, she reinforces her own inferiority, emphasizing herself as unworthy of possessing her own voice.

This resonates with Ranajit Guha’s assertion that history has been institutionalized within Western academia (1997, p. 3). In fact, post-colonial approaches frequently argue that India’s narrative has

been represented from a ‘universal’ perspective as the unknown, mysterious other (Prakash, 1992, p. 9). However, just as Ammu reinforces her own inferior position by subscribing to the public narrative, I contend that this argument effectively reinforces the subaltern position of India, and thus subscribes to a public narrative that presupposes the superiority of the Western perspective.

Spivak affirms that through representations, whatever is left of the subaltern will only be further removed from the narrative of history (1988, p. 70). In other words, Ammu’s silence can only be amplified by somebody else’s attempt to represent her from their own perspective. Instead of being represented by someone else, Guha stresses the subaltern’s need to be an active agent in her own story (1997, p. 11).

However, the demand of the subaltern to process agency in order to be heard collides with the very definition of the subaltern, namely that she “signifies the impossibility of autonomy” (Prakash, 1992, p. 9). With this in mind, the recovery of the subaltern voice seems highly improbable. Yet, Spivak suggests that we, rather than representing the subaltern, can illuminate her lack of location within society and history. This is what she describes as the ‘unlearning project’: Instead of maintaining the narrative we have learned; we should scrutinize it and rip it apart (1988, p. 92).

### **The Melodrama**

Stanley Cavell defines the melodrama as a “locus of ‘excessive’ expressions” –extravagant and theatrical emotional responses founded on the fear of being unable to communicate (1996, p. 40). Ironically, by desperately over-expressing herself, the subaltern Ammu remains unable to express anything at all. Cavell states that “[t]he familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar” (Cavell, 1986, p. 100). As I read him, everyday language is a way to negotiate and establish a common ground for communication, avoiding the unfamiliar and incomprehensible.



The problem is, though, that the subaltern, because she has not been exposed to the world of everyday life, cannot speak its language, and thus remains voiceless. Peter Brooks defines melodrama as a surface covering up fragments of truth, which we can detect and understand only if we activate our emotional apparatus and rely on our intuitive, human emotions (1995, p. 5 and p. 16). In a rather similar vein, Ammu cannot adopt Western mannerisms in order to be understood. However, the reader can acknowledge her existence because of her elaborate emotional expressions.

Based on a fundamental sense of good, empathy, and one's own life experiences, the reader should be able to find a way to connect with the subaltern. By not focusing solely on confirming the public narrative that one has been brought up to trust, one might even be able to hear Ammu's voice, just by virtue of being human. In other words, Ammu's inability to find common ground with her interlocutors can be remedied by her subscribing to the melodrama (Cavell, 1986, p. 112). Thus, even if Ammu remains unknown to her audience in the novel, I suggest that there is a way for the reader to acknowledge her through her melodramatic expression.

### **Reinforcing the Subaltern Status**

The family's position as the subalterns is amplified by the presence of the English Sophie Mol. "On the day that Sophie Mol came, Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol was performed" (Roy, 97, p. 164). In this performance, Sophie's character is reconstructed through the expectations shaped by the family's submitted adornment for the cultural empire. "Sophie Mol [...] walked out of the Play [...]. But the Play went with her. Walked when she walked, stopped when she stopped. Fond smiles followed her" (ibid, p. 186).

The melodramatic expression of the family, when around Sophie, serves to maintain their roles as subalterns, and the distance between them and Sophie is increased as a consequence of their in-

ability to communicate, understand and be understood. In other words, there is no common ground for communication between the family and Sophie.

The twin's mother tongue, Malayalam, is placed at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy, and must surrender in favor of the British vernacular. Upon Sophie's arrival, the twins are forced into an "Indo-British Behaviors Competition" (ibid, p. 145). They are not only denied the right to speak their own native language; they are also chastised upon their every attempt to exercise the English language, reinforcing their inability to give immediate responses. Under perpetual observation and constant correction, they feel discouraged and insecure, which leads them not only to doubt themselves and their social abilities but also to doubt the very function of language.

After Sophie's death, she is remembered not for who she was, but for who they wanted her to be; with "redbrown hair (N... Nalmost blond), the curve of two fat freckled cheeks (Nnnn... almost rosy), bluegrey-blue eyes" (ibid, p. 174). She is squeezed into the very embodiment of everything that, for the family, symbolizes the West. The treatment of Sophie's memory stands in stark contrast to the treatment of Ammu's. "[T]he church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts [...] Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice [...] The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt No. Q498673" (ibid, p. 162-163).

On the other hand, "the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there" (ibid, p. 16). Sophie's funeral is filled with ceremonial dignity, and her memory in her absence is so immersive that the original Sophie vanishes in its presence. While "the family stood huddled together", Ammu and her twins "were made to stand separately [...]. Nobody would look at them" (ibid, p. 5).

In life, Ammu has faded into isolation, and when she dies, she is removed from the earth in the same manner as "a platoon of ants carried dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstrating what should be done with corpses" (ibid, p. 162), dispassionately, mechanically, effectively. While Ammu is erased from both society and history, the construct-

ed memory of Sophie Mol is more alive than the original Sophie ever was.

### **Innocence & Knowledge**

“[Ammu] hoped that under [Velutha’s] careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (Roy, 1997, p. 175 - 6). I suggest that Ammu finds refuge in her relationship with Velutha at least in part because of their similar status and their shared enemy. In Cavell’s words, “to know another’s existence by knowing what the other knows is evidently a route for knowing whether your own existence is known, say acknowledgeable” (Cavell, 1996, p. 20).

In other words, Velutha is Ammu’s only chance to be recognized, to realize herself, and to gain new knowledge. When Velutha is murdered, and when everyone turns their back on her, Ammu no longer has anyone to recognize her existence. Thus, she no longer has a reciprocal relationship with the world, which makes her question its existence altogether. To quote Cavell, “what returns after scepticism is never (just) the same” (1986, p.100). Thus, once she stops trusting that there is an external existence, she cannot go back to the way things were, and she cannot obtain further knowledge (ibid, p. 94).

In the process of acquiring knowledge, Ammu is forced to challenge her position, because as a subaltern, she has no other opportunity to gain knowledge about the world. When she touches the untouchable, she breaks the laws of society and leaves her innocence behind. By breaking these laws, Ammu has effectively further increased the distance between herself and the world of everyday life, making herself an outlaw. Besides, she never gains the knowledge she fought for, and her innocence is “buried alive and unable to voice its claim to recognition” (Brooks, 1995, p. 20).

Rahel and Estha, on the other hand, are shielded by their innocent curiosity and their trust in the everyday world. By trusting the narrative into which they have been socialized, by trusting that which

society has generated as parameters of right and wrong, by following its laws and orders and by never questioning its truthfulness, by not challenging their roles or the reality that has been arranged around them. Their characters remain safe, they remain included, or as included as they originally were. Ammu, however, can never again participate in this reality.

### **From Everyday Language to Skepticism**

Previously, I argued that speaking everyday language offers one an opportunity to better obtain knowledge, and to acknowledge one another’s existence. When Velutha is imprisoned and killed, Ammu’s knowledge project is aborted. This is when Ammu starts changing: “That whole morning Ammu talked incessantly. She asked Rahel questions, but never let her answer them [...]. Fear made her garrulous. She kept it at bay with her babble.” (Roy, 1997, p. 160).

Because Ammu’s words are not grounded in the mutual premise of everyday language, it is impossible for Rahel to relate to them. This runs parallel with the family’s theatrics in the presence of their English audience: rather than being able to connect with Sophie, their behavior bolsters their differences. Furthermore, by not revealing their true identities to her, and by resorting to melodramatics, the family’s theatrical performance amplifies their inability to make themselves known to her (Cavell, 1996, p. 40).

This works as an unceasing reminder of the structure of power between the post-colonial characters and the spectator of the cultural empire. The dramatic eruptions act to segregate and create distance between their audience and themselves as actors of a self-perpetuated play (ibid, p. 21 and p. 40). This self-assigned requirement reflects the family’s insecurities, their obligation to demonstrate English manners to their superior visitors thus proving themselves to be on a par with them. They attempt to adopt a Western identity, only to remain ‘not white/not quite’.

Curiously, the more they doubt their ability to reveal their true identities to their audience, and the more they attempt to take on an identity that does not belong to them, the more they seem to resort to melodramatics. Along the same lines, as long as Ammu cannot speak the language of everyday life, she cannot recover her voice. No matter how hard she tries to simulate it, from her isolated position, she can only fade out of existence and memory.

### **Mindreading versus Everyday Language**

After “childhood tiptoed out” (ibid, p. 320), the twins are left to the same fate as their fading mother: one where they digress from a state of innocence within the world of everyday life to a state of silence and skepticism. I argue that speaking everyday language entails an opportunity to come to terms with one’s separateness from others; that the people involved are forced to negotiate the meaning of what they are saying and therefore realize that they are not the same person (Cavell, 1996, p. 43).

In other words, when the twins discontinue their use of everyday language, they are not only expunging the difference between one another, but also their difference from others. “Rahel never wrote. There are things that you can’t do – like writing letters to a part of yourself. To your feet or hair. Or heart” (Roy, 1997, p. 164). In chorus with their transmutation, their use of language changes from playful curiosity in their interaction, to an expectation of absolute understanding for one another, which soon transforms into a language of silence, founded on a shared conviction of mind reading.

Their private language of mind reading implies a general rejection of bodily separation from one another, and possibly also the rejection of their physical presence in the world. This, to reference Cavell (1996, p. 42 and p. 43), can be understood as a denial of a “publicness of a language”, from which only inexpressiveness can follow because private experiences can only be grounded within the framework of society. “It is like searching for the power of a word when the language has been lost”.

When the twins refuse to accept their separateness and dependence upon language as means of understanding one another, they are consequently rejecting their physical bodies, seeing them merely as a limitation to what their minds want to express. In their desire to overcome bodily distinction, the twins effectively claim to be one, and when they are separated, they have no choice but to retreat to silence and fade out of existence because without each other they have no way of knowing that they exist in the world at all.

After Rahel learns that Estha has returned to their childhood home, she goes to Kerala to find her lost history and twin brother in the fragments of old notebooks and memories. As an extension of Rahel’s “(no Plans, No Locusts stand I)” attempt to collect the fragments of their family history (Roy, 1997, p. 231), she purportedly sees herself and her brother as fragments of one personality.

In her attempt to bring Estha back into existence, and to find her own identity, the sexual intercourse between them can be understood as one last, desperate desire to reunite. “Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons [...]. What they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief [...]. Once again they broke the Love Laws” (ibid, p. 328). Rahel’s return to Kerala concludes their history and Ammu’s bedroom becomes the very materialization of both the beginning and the end, one last attempt to obtain knowledge of themselves and each other.

### **The Public Narrative & the Storyteller**

“So, to say that it began when Sophie Mol came to Ayenemem is only one way to look at it [...]. Equally, it could be said that it began thousands of years ago. Before the British took Malabar [...]. That it really began the day the Love Laws were made, the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (Roy, 1997, p. 33). The story belongs to the storyteller – in this case, the author of the novel; she decides what and who to include, what to emphasize or omit. In other words, there is never

just one, public narrative, but several perspectives from which the story can be understood.

So, if the subaltern is inevitably led to silence and skepticism, and skepticism results in an unrecoverable voice, how can we ever be able to hear the subaltern's version of the story? To rephrase Spivak, we cannot intellectualize the subaltern position, nor represent her; if we do, we will inevitably end up coloring her story with our own experiences and intentions. Instead of speaking for her, Spivak (1988, p. 92) suggests that we illuminate the subaltern's lack of location, much like Arundhati Roy has done in her novel.

Ammu and her family, because of their subaltern positions and lack of knowledge about the world of everyday life, are inhibited from speaking its language. Along these lines, they are accustomed to a life unknown to their audience, desperately trying to befit the roles they have been assigned and eventually resort to melodramatic expressions.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed the subaltern position in *The God of Small Things* through everyday language, the public narrative of history, and the melodrama. I have argued that the subaltern's lack of location in the world of everyday life is manifested through her inability to obtain knowledge about the world in which she lives. Devoid of a common language, she grows desperate and eventually takes to melodramatics.

Everyday language serves to establish a common platform between its interlocutors; by virtue of its negotiating nature, we come to terms with our differences from others, realizing that we are not sharing the same conscience, but that we have to compromise in order to meet one another on common ground. The twins, when they stop using everyday language and start relying on mind reading and the confidence of a shared conscience, are effectively expunging the separation between them, others, and the physical world in general. This inevitably leads them into complete isolation and sepa-

ration from their community – a silence from which they cannot return.

When Ammu is not understood and thus left both unknowing and unknown, she becomes doubtful of the function of language and starts drifting towards skepticism, which leads her to silence and self-isolation. Having turned away from society, she is subsequently wiped out of the narrative of history, and as long as she does not speak the language of everyday life, she cannot recover her voice, she cannot be heard, and she cannot hear. As a subaltern, she possesses no agency, and can neither regain her voice to tell her story, nor affect the public narrative of history.

The presence of the English Sophie Mol amplifies Ammu and her family's position as subalterns, and their relationship can be seen as analogous to that between India as a post-colonial entity and the cultural empire as the producer of the public narrative. Ammu has limited to no access to knowledge of her community, and in the presence of Sophie, she is not only 'not white/not quite', but also 'not quite/not male'.

Although Ammu can neither speak for herself nor tell her own story, we cannot speak for her. However, we can fragment the public narrative: as readers, we might not be able to understand exactly what the melodramatic voice of Ammu is trying to express, but by questioning the public narrative into which we have been socialized, we can illuminate the lost voice of the muted subaltern. This is what Spivak refers to as the 'the unlearning project' (1988, p.92): Even if we cannot clearly hear her voice, we can address the elephant in the room and illuminate the Elephant-shaped Hole in the Universe.

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# **Beyond Historical Humiliations**

## New ways of understanding the significant role of historical conflicts in Chinese history education

TROELS KJEMS PETERSEN

ASIA IN FOCUS

In recent years, various studies have taken on the task of examining history education in Mainland China. However, within this field of study there has been a tendency not to include classroom observations as empirical data on the grounds that history classes in China are so heavily dictated by curriculum stipulations that it is sufficient to analyze the textbook material in order to understand Chinese history education. In this article, I present research results which refute this statement and show that there are differences to be found between the content of the textbook and the reality of classroom sessions in China. Based on four months of classroom observations in China, I present how historical conflicts play a much larger and more profound role in the narration of the Chinese past in the classroom than in the textbook. Furthermore, I demonstrate how my observations show that conflicts other than the struggle with Western imperialism are emphasized in class – most notably the Cultural Revolution – which indicates that the narration of the past in Chinese history classes is about more than promoting anti-Western sentiment and presenting a grand narrative of ‘national humiliation’ to the students.

**Keywords:** China, history education, collective memory, historical narratives, historical conflicts, classroom observation



In recent years, history education in Mainland China has become a subject of major interest to many researchers. Some have examined Chinese history education since the 1990s as a political instrument for political legitimation of the CCP leadership and promotion of anti-Western nationalist sentiments (Callahan, 2004; Gries, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2012). Other researchers have been preoccupied with viewing Chinese history education as part of the post-1945 political issue in East Asia of mutual misrepresentation of a common past in the region (Mash, 1991; Vickers, 2005; Müller, 2011; Sneider, 2011; Morris, 2013). Despite their difference in focus and scope, all these previous studies on Chinese history education have had a similar tendency to only view Chinese history education as a matter of political socialization. Thus, previous researchers have tended to focus exclusively on political stipulations, curricula outlines and textbook materials when examining Chinese history education, and actual observations of history classes have never been incorporated as a method before.

The long-standing argument of many scholars is that in East Asia in general and in Mainland China in particular, classroom sessions are heavily dictated by the textbook content, and thus analyzing the content of textbooks should be sufficient to give a proper understanding of how history is taught in the classrooms throughout China (Mash, 1991; Vickers, 2005). Furthermore, since the task of observing classroom education in China is a very difficult and time-consuming anthropological exercise, it is logical that previous studies have not engaged in classroom observations when analyzing Chinese history

education. However, it is my belief that the exclusive focus on textbook material and political stipulations by previous researchers suggests a serious gap in our understanding of Chinese history education, since they only offer insight into the politics behind history education in China, rather than give a deeper understanding of what is actually taught within the reality of the classroom. Hence, in this article I present the research results of my master dissertation from the University of Copenhagen (Petersen, 2014) and, as the first researcher to do so, I offer new insights to our understanding of what is taught in Chinese history high school classes by using classroom observations as empirical data.

The results I present in this article are based on four months of classroom observations at a high school in Zhejiang Province. In the fall of 2013, I observed the history classes of four different *gaoyi* (first year) classes. The high school gave me permission to use all the PowerPoint slides from the classes that I observed, and allowed me to interview one of the teachers for my research project, as long as the school, teachers and students involved were anonymous in my research. Thus, in order to keep the school's anonymity intact, the high school is referred to as "the school" in this article.

I did all the observations at the school on my own without the use of a translator or interpreter, as my education in China Studies has given me a high proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. I am aware that my presence as a foreign observer in the classes at the school may have affected the teachers' way of narrating and communicating the content of the classes to the students, however, there was no ob-

vious sign of this. To the contrary, all of the teachers at the school used the same pre-produced PowerPoint slides for all their lessons on Chinese history. Even the few teachers using the blackboard tended to write up the same content on the blackboard as that of the PowerPoint slides. The PowerPoint slides thus represent very well the exact content of each lesson I observed, and the history teachers of the school's collective interpretation of the textbook material.

In the following, I present how it was possible to observe central differences between textbook and classroom sessions during my time at the school, despite the textbook dictating the chronological order, historical themes and topics in class. I use examples of PowerPoint slides used in class, as well as excerpts from my interview, to underscore these differences between textbook and classroom narration. It is also important to emphasize that the results presented in this article do not offer a way to generalize about how history is taught in Chinese high schools. Rather, I present a methodical example of new insights that can be achieved by incorporating classroom observations.

### **The difference between textbook and classroom narration**

In Chinese history education today, Chinese national history is divided into three broad periods: ancient times (*gudai*) (2000 B.C. - 1840), modern times (*jindai*) (1840 - 1949) and contemporary times (*xiandai*) (1949 - 2000). Previous studies have been preoccupied with examining the teaching of the modern period as a central period in Chinese history education, mainly because many researchers argue that China's 'humiliating' conflicts with foreign imperialism between 1840 - 1949 are the most central trauma and narrative in Chinese collective memory today (Callahan, 2004; Gries, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2012; Sneider, 2011; Morris, 2013).

Given that previous studies have only analyzed Chinese history education on the basis of political stipulations and textbook material, it is logical that

many researchers see the conflicts with Western and Japanese imperialism to be the main focus of Chinese history classes. If we look at the narrative structure of the textbooks used at the school (Zhu, 2013), which followed the official curriculum outlines in Mainland China (MOE, 2006), the conflict with foreign imperialism was very much the clear pivotal center in the narration of China's national past (see Table 1). In the textbook, the ancient period was narrated as a stable, progressive and peaceful period with no real conflicts, which served as a sharp narrative contrast to the struggles and wars in the modern period (Zhu, 2013, p. 2-21). Likewise, the contemporary period only served as a narrative epilogue to the modern period, with the purpose of showing how well the CCP leadership developed Chinese society after China was 'liberated' in 1949.

However, in the classes that I observed at the school, the narrative structure was very different to that of the textbook. Where the textbook only focused on China's conflicts with feudalism and Western imperialism in modern times, the teachers focused on narrating historical conflicts as central to the historical development of each historical period of the Chinese past – both ancient, modern and contemporary (see Table 2).

HISTORICAL PERIOD	NARRATIVE FOCUS
ANCIENT PERIOD (2000 B.C. - 1840)	No historical conflict or drama.
MODERN PERIOD (1840 - 1949)	Dramatic period. China is in conflict with feudalism and foreign imperialism
CONTEMPORARY PERIOD (1949-2000)	No historical conflict or drama.

**Table 1: Narrative structure of the textbook content**

When teaching the students about the ancient period, the teachers followed the official guidelines, and taught about the constant, progressive development of the political system throughout the ancient period. However, unlike the textbook, the teachers explained to the students why it was important to

HISTORICAL PERIOD	NARRATIVE FOCUS
ANCIENT PERIOD (2000 B.C – 1840)	Dramatic period. China is in a conflict with regionalism and bureaucratic corruption
MODERN PERIOD (1840 – 1949)	Dramatic period. China is in a conflict with feudalism and foreign imperialism
CONTEMPORARY PERIOD (1949-2000)	Dramatic period. China is in a conflict with the Cultural Revolution

Table 2: Narrative structure of the classroom content

Notes: Table 1 & 2 gives an overview of the difference in narrative focus between the official textbook content and the content of my classroom observations.

develop the political system in ancient times. In the lessons on ancient Chinese history, the teachers heavily emphasized that developing the political system of autocracy was a way of solving ‘two pairs of fundamental conflicts’ (liang dui jiben maodun) that existed in ancient China. These two pairs of fundamental conflicts were on the one hand Centralism vs. Regionalism, and on the other hand the Emperor’s power vs. the Prime Minister’s power (see Figure 1 & Figure 2).

Even though the textbook characterized the development of the political institutions as a means to strengthen centralism and the administrative power of the central authorities in ancient China (Zhu, 2013, p. 14-16), the textbook did not mention the attempt to solve regionalism or bureaucratic corruption as the main reason for political institutions being constantly developed throughout the period. Yet, by placing an explicit focus in the classroom on the conflicts with regionalism and the corruption of ministers, and by giving them the name of fundamental conflicts, the teachers added a deeper level to the narration of an ancient, unified China. They did so by underlining that all the different rulers fought the same two conflicts throughout the whole ancient period.

If we look at the contemporary period, the difference between textbook and classroom narra-



### 温故而知新

秦朝

提问1: “大一统”的君主专制制度形成于何时?

提问2: 在演进与强化的过程中包括着几对基本矛盾?

皇权与相权、中央集权与地方分权

提问3: 在明以前的封建历史进程中, 统治者是怎样逐步解决这两对矛盾的?

皇权与相权: 三公九卿制→中外朝制→三省六部制→参知政事

中央与地方: 郡县制→州郡县→道(路)州县→省路(道)府州县

Figure 1: PowerPoint slide from the class on ancient Chinese history

Notes: The slide illustrates how the teachers, in contrast to the textbook, explained to the students that all political development was a result of the Chinese rulers attempt “to solve the two fundamental conflicts” (jie jue zhe liang jiben maodun) with “regionalism” (difang fenquan) and “the power of the ministers” (xiangquan). (Petersen, 2014, Appendix I)

### 回顾一下

#### 发展线索

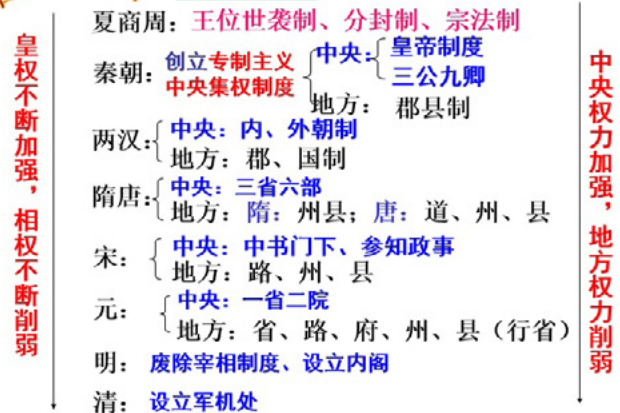


Figure 2: PowerPoint slide from the class on ancient Chinese history

Notes: The slide illustrates how the teachers emphasized to the students that the development of political institutions in each dynasty had the same purpose of both “strengthening the political power of the Emperor and weakening the political power of the Prime Ministers” (Huangquan

*buduan jiaqiang, xiangguang buduan xueruo*), but also “Strengthening the central authorities and weakening the regional authorities” (*Zhongyang quanli jiaqiang, difang quanli xueruo*). (Petersen, 2014, Appendix I)

tion was even more apparent. Where the textbook narrated the period as stable, and only very briefly mentioned the Cultural Revolution, the teachers instead dedicated a whole lesson to teaching about the Cultural Revolution (CR), and clearly emphasized to the students that it was a pivotal event of the contemporary period.

Only one other specific historical event was given an equal amount of classroom time, the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45. Similar to when teaching about this war, the teachers did not hesitate to emphasize that the CR was a terrible period with many victims. This was reinforced by all the teachers telling the same story of former president of The People’s Republic of China Liu Shaoqi, who died during the CR as a direct result of physical abuse by the red guards. Besides telling the martyr story of Liu Shaoqi’s sufferings under the CR, the teachers also used a lot of photos and pictures to illustrate the problems encountered during the CR. In many ways, the lesson on the CR was very similar to the lesson on the war with Japan, in the way that the teachers relied on vivid pictures and illustrations when narrating the event, rather than tables, diagrams or maps. Even if the pictures illustrating the errors and abuses of the CR were not as terrifying as the pictures showing the war crimes of Japan, they still served the same purpose of showing the reality of the event to the students; a reality of suffering, which was at no point mentioned or illustrated in the textbook (Zhu, 2013, p. 71-72). The teachers also went further than the textbook by listing four manifestations (*biaoxian*) that were examples of how the CR destroyed the democratic legal system in China: 1) The reckless abuse of the Constitution and the fundamental human rights of the citizens. 2) The insane personal cult of the Red Guards assaulted the democratic institutions. 3) The establishment of

various revolutionary committees was a step backwards in the building of political organization. 4) The National People’s Congress and the institutions of consultation encountered violations and destructions. (Petersen, 2014, Appendix I)

It is clear from these four manifestations that the CR was narrated in the classroom as being ‘unconstitutional’ in its violation (*pohuai*) of the Chinese society. This narrative focus is also the explanation as to why the teachers could teach the students about the violence and errors of the CR so explicitly. By criticizing the CR for violating the constitutional rights, and at the same time narrating the 1982 constitution and “Reform and Opening” policy as a return to “the rule of law” (*yifa zhiguo*), the teachers then narrated the CR as a violation of the political foundation and political development of the PRC. Moreover, all critique of the CR would at the same time promote the current CCP government, since all of the post-1978 policies of the CCP leadership were explained in class to represent a “development to perfection” (*fazhan wanshan*).

### **Conflicts as the ‘driving forces’ for historical development**

What is interesting about my observations is not that the teachers’ focus on historical conflicts in the ancient and contemporary period should be seen as discrepant from the textbook material, but rather that it should instead be seen as an indication of some level of autonomy given to the teachers in interpreting the textbook material. Neither the textbook material, curriculum outline, nor the teaching guidelines mention “conflicts” directly or that the teachers should focus on “conflicts” when teaching national history. Nonetheless, the teachers at the school still focused heavily on historical conflicts in their classes. The teacher that I interviewed elaborated this point further:

Well, this guideline does not tell us “hey, you have to know about these conflicts”. Instead, it says like this (points in the guidelines). For

example here, when describing “lesson three” [in the chapter on Ancient Chinese political history] the guideline mentions the “3 secretaries, 6 ministries” of the Tang Dynasty and the “partition of the ministerial power” of the Song as an illustration of the development of the characteristics of the political system in ancient China. When we have to teach these characteristics to the students, we take measures to explain that this was actually about the continuous reinforcement of the emperor’s power and a continuous weakening of the prime minister’s power.

Petersen, 2014, Appendix II

This supports my observation of the difference between the classroom and textbook narration of the ancient period, and the teacher further explained that the history teachers at least had the liberty to interpret the textbooks themselves:

Well, it is like this that these characteristics might be based on our interpretation of the teaching material. It might be just like, you know, in regards to viewing an event how different people have different points of view.

Petersen, 2014, Appendix II

When asked why then they all tended to emphasize historical conflicts in each period, the teacher explained:

The conflicts are not important in themselves, but rather the intention is to explain to the students with this method [of focusing on the conflicts] the social context of the things that happened. Many things are connected to these conflicts.

Petersen 2014, Appendix II

Based on this interview and my classroom observations, I would argue that the historical conflicts were much more central to the classroom narration than the textbook because the teachers wanted to emphasize that these specific historical conflicts were the underlying ‘driving forces’ for the historical development of each period in Chinese history. Thus, the teachers illustrated the dynamics of historical development in each period in a more detailed way than the textbook. This was even apparent in the lessons on the modern period, where the conflicts with Western imperialism were narrated as more than tragic humiliation in the classroom, since they were narrated as being connected to the historical development of the period. Even though the teachers spend a great deal of time showing the students vivid depictions of the war crimes of Japanese and Western soldiers, the teachers, unlike the textbook, also explained the different reasons behind the many wars and conflicts with the foreign powers, and also addressed how these conflicts shaped Chinese society:

Now, this Western influence ... From our nation ... from a sovereign state [‘s point of view], we received a violation on our sovereign rights, so we call the Western influence an aggression. However, from the aspect of civilization development, we transformed progressively from a form of self-sufficient Chinese economy towards a modern industrial civilization.

Petersen 2014, appendix II

What the teacher was hinting at here is an interpretation of the historical conflict with imperialism as not just an antagonizing force that threatened and humiliated China, but also as a necessary conflict that was the key to propelling China into modernity. This narration of the conflict with imperialism as something difficult and hard, but something which China had to endure and solve in order to develop itself, is similar to the description of the conflicts

in the contemporary period. In Figure 3, the teachers used a graph to illustrate to the students the political development in the contemporary period, and at the bottom, it is stated that the building of democratic politics was characterized by: “The path is complicated, but the future is bright” (*daolu shi quzhe, qiantu shi guangming de*).

I would argue that this idea of the necessity to ‘walk a complicated path’ in order to reach a brighter future was central to the classroom narration of each period, and that it is through this that the historical conflicts should be understood as having a narrative role as ‘driving forces’ for the historical development of each period.

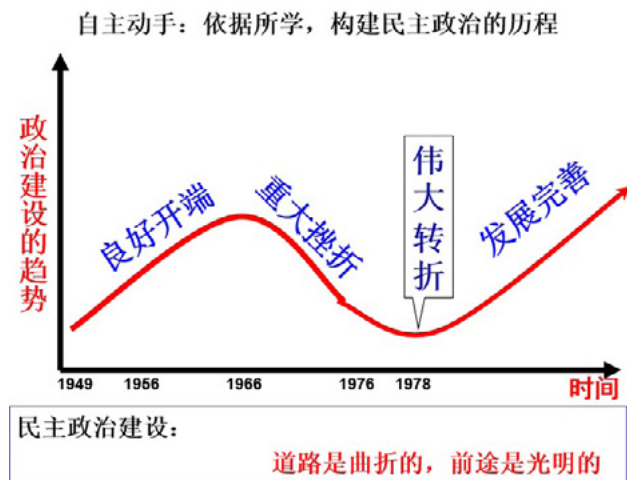


Figure 3: PowerPoint slide from the class on contemporary Chinese history

Notes: The slide is an overview and conclusion to the political development in the contemporary period given to students by the teachers. This overview both illustrates how the teachers described everything after 1978 as being symbolized by “development to perfection” (*fazhan wanshan*), but also how the “establishment of democratic politics” (*minzhu zhenzhi jianshe*) were viewed as being characterized by “the path is complicated, but the future is bright” (*daolu shi quzhe de, qiantu shi guangming de*). (Petersen, 2014, Appendix I)

## The national myth of the decline and rebirth of *Zhonghua minzu*

Inspired by the theories of Anthony D. Smith (1993) and Bruce Lincoln (1992), I argue that the role of historical conflicts as ‘driving forces’ in each period represented a dialectical narrative-structure in class, which seemed to be formed around a national myth of decline and rebirth. At the center of this national myth was a discursive vision of *Zhonghua minzu*, which translates as ‘Chinese nation/people’ and represented the imagined idea of an eternal, timeless Chinese essence that was symbolized by the good values of unity, progress and good governance. From the ancient Chinese rulers’ struggle with regionalism and corruption to the Chinese people’s modern conflict with foreign imperialism and contemporary conflict with the Cultural Revolution, it was always the unity, progress and good governance of *Zhonghua minzu* that was at stake in the classroom narration of each period.

DIALECTIC PROCESSES	SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION (VALUES)	SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES
THESIS (Period’s Stable Beginning)	Unity, Development and Good Governance triumphs	Hegemonic status of <i>Zhonghua minzu</i>
ANTITHESIS (Historical Conflict of the Period)	Disunity, Stagnation and Corruption triumphs	<i>Zhonghua minzu</i> is threatened by conflict and temporarily loses its hegemonic status
SYNTHESIS (Resolution of Conflict in the period)	Unity, Development and Good Governance is invincible	Hegemony of <i>Zhonghua minzu</i> firmly re-established

Table 3: Overview of the dialectic process of the decline and rebirth of *Zhonghua minzu* in the narration of each period

Notes: With inspirations from Bruce Lincoln’s theory of dialectic development in narratives, Table 3 presents how both the ancient, modern and contemporary period had the same dialectic process within their narrative structure. It is important to note that Lincoln’s theory differs from classical Hegelian dialectics by not seeing the synthesis-stage as a novel stage different from the thesis. Instead, it merely reestablish the thesis-stage. (Lincoln, 1992, p. 158-159)

In the narration of each period, *Zhonghua minzu* would go through the same socio-political process of first having a stable hegemonic status, then being threatened by the period's conflict, and finally having its hegemony re-established after the resolution of the period's conflict, that is, the thesis, the anti-thesis and the synthesis as exemplified in Table 3. My observations, which have shown a heavy focus on historical conflicts by each history teacher at the school when they narrated each period of the Chinese past, indicate that the overall story or the 'grand narrative' when teaching Chinese history at this school was a narrative of the continuous process of decline and rebirth of the *Zhonghua minzu*.

I argue that this grand narrative had a narration structure that resembles aspects of traditional Chinese historiography: the cyclical repetition of a decline and rebirth of *Zhonghua minzu* in each period resembled the dynastic cycles of decline and rebirth of the Mandate of Heaven in traditional Chinese historiography.

In addition, the teachers' focus on the struggles between conflicting impersonal forces as the 'driving force' of historical development resembled aspects of historical materialism, which according to historian Alisa Jones (2002) defined Chinese history education in the period from 1949 to 1976. In historical materialism, class struggle and peasant uprisings were seen as the 'driving force' of historical development. In the classes at the school, the teacher still narrated the struggles between conflicting impersonal forces as the 'driving force' of historical development, but unlike the history education of the Maoist era, these conflicting forces were no longer the heroic peasant-class struggling against the villainous landlord-class, or the socialist people struggling against capitalism. Instead, the conflicting forces were the heroic united people of the *Zhonghua minzu* struggling against the internal and external antagonizing forces of disunity, stagnation and corruption.

The history classes taught at this particular Chinese high school anno 2013 were clearly in-

spired by both traditional Chinese historiography and Marxist materialism. Given that both the traditional cyclical view of the past and the linear view from historical materialism is an integrated part of Chinese historiographic tradition, it seems only natural that the teachers at the school would take inspirations from both views when teaching Chinese history. However, in the classroom, the heroes of the past were no longer members of a given class, or of a Confucian entity but members of the ethnic and national entity of *Zhonghua minzu*. Similarly, the purpose of history was no longer to save socialism, or Confucian values, but to save *Zhonghua minzu*. This is further supported by the teaching guidelines and curriculum outlines where *Zhonghua minzu* is clearly visible as central to the narration of the national past: 'Through the study of the clan-system, [the students should] realize affections of love for *Zhonghua minzu*.' (Lü, 2013, p. 4); '[The students should] realize the heroic and unyielding fighting-spirit of *Zhonghua minzu*.' (Lü, 2013, p. 6); '[The students should] understand the great significances that the achievement of the motherland's complete unification had for the revival of *Zhonghua minzu*.' (MOE, 2006, p. 4).

### **Necessary conflicts or Western humiliations?**

The research results presented in this article offer important new insights for the understanding of how the national past is narrated in Chinese history classes and, in particular, the role of historical conflicts in narration of the national past. I believe that the national myth of the decline and rebirth of *Zhonghua minzu*, which I found to be central in the focus of each teacher on historical conflicts, adds a new aspect to the works of scholars like Alisa Jones (2002, 2005). Jones has argued that in the history of collective memory in China the conception of the past has always been connected to a totalized discursive vision of China as one eternal and inviolable nation (see Jones 2005, 2002). I would argue that this totalized vision canonized itself in

the lessons that I observed with the teachers' use of the concept of *Zhonghua minzu*. In the lessons at the school, the *Zhonghua minzu* represented the historical essence of China that went through a cycle of decline and rebirth as each historical conflict threatened its hegemony. I would argue that Jones' concept of 'One China' and that of *Zhonghua minzu* represent a shared imagined idea of a Chinese essence in today's Chinese collective identity in much the same way as the concept of the Mandate of Heaven represented a shared imagined idea of a Chinese Confucian essence in traditional dynastic historiography.

The research results can furthermore serve as a critique of some scholars' interpretation of Chinese history education as being primarily anti-Western in its nature (see for example Callahan, 2004; Gries, 2005; Hughes, 2006; Wang, 2008, 2012). These scholars have argued that Chinese history education is shaped by a grand narrative of 'national humiliation', and that historical conflicts are narrated as traumatic humiliations in the history classes in order to promote anti-Western sentiments. Zheng Wang even sums up Chinese collective memory today with the phrase: "never forget national humiliation" (*wuwang guochi*) (see Wang, 2012 p. 3), and furthermore characterizes history education in China since the 1990s, as simply being "education on national humiliation" (Wang, 2008, p. 792).

However, my research suggests a different interpretation of the role of historical conflicts. In the classes that I observed, historical conflicts were narrated as significant to the development of the Chinese nation, not just as tragic humiliations. Furthermore, my research has shown that conflicts other than the modern struggle with Western imperialism were emphasized in class as being a threat to *Zhonghua minzu*, most notably the Cultural Revolution. In the classes that I observed, the students were taught that the Cultural Revolution was "unconstitutional", and that the Cultural Revolution violated the central government and the hegemony of the CCP, and as such violated the hegemony of *Zhonghua*

*minzu*. Thus, my research indicates that the narration of the past in Chinese history classes does not rely solely on anti-Western narratives in order to promote national sentiments to the students.

## Conclusion

The research presented in this article suggests that it is relevant and necessary in the research on Chinese history education to incorporate classroom observations in order to achieve a more profound understanding of how the national past is narrated in different ways in Chinese history classes. By incorporating the method of classroom observation, I have shown that the content of the history classes at the school in Zhejiang Province differed from the content of the national textbook in terms of the role of historical conflicts: the latter played a much more significant role in the classroom narration than in the textbook. The teachers clearly had some liberty in interpreting the textbook material, and thus could place emphasis on things not mentioned in the textbook. Consequently, I argue strongly for the inclusion of classroom observations as empirical data when attempting to define or understand what is being taught in Chinese history classes.

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# The Simple and the Complex Nature of Humor and Laughter in Finnish-Chinese Negotiations

SANTA STOPNIECE

This article explores humor and laughter as sites of the search for common ground and power positioning in the context of Finnish-Chinese co-operation. It is mainly based on data obtained by interviewing individuals who work in Finland either for local government or one of the state agencies responsible for attracting foreign investment. The study uses positioning theory by Harré (1991) and politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) when analyzing expressions of humor between the Finns and the Chinese. Humor and laughter are seen as integral to co-operation and at times can assist in finding common ground and improving the atmosphere at meetings. At the same time, perceived differences in the sense of humor and the complexities of Chinese 'face' may render the use of humor during negotiations difficult. According to the interviews, both nationalities make adjustments in their humorous expressions for the sake of co-operation. However, in some situations, power positioning and autonomy are also asserted.

ASIA IN FOCUS

**Keywords:** Humor, China, Finland, co-operation, common ground, power

**T**he importance of co-operation with China has been increasing in Finland and other European countries in light of the growing importance of China and the interest in attracting Chinese investments. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Finland released the China Action Plan in 2010, which recognizes the role of China on the international scene and lists the priority areas for co-operation. Finland has established government agencies to facilitate Chinese investment in Finland and has also ensured the co-operation of regional and local governments in framework activities such as town twinning. Finns more frequently take the position of a seller by offering investment targets to Chinese or trying to gain a foothold in the huge Chinese market. An important part of investment facilitation and wider co-operation comprises reciprocal delegation visits by both nations.

Humor and laughter are integral parts of these visits, as is evident in the observations and interviews of this study. Humor can assist in building common ground, but at the same time it is complex to enact as a result of cultural differences in humor and possible sensitivities. In some ways, humor may also be a comparatively new field of exploration in international affairs for both the Finns and the Chinese. China was behind a “bamboo curtain” before it opened up to foreign investment in 1978. While the current President of China Xi Jinping smiles on official occasions, his predecessors hardly ever did. Finland, in turn, has been somewhat marginal in Europe, with more dynamic internationalization processes only happening in the last few decades. A common

stereotype is that Finns are not good at small talk, and humor is normally a part of small talk or talking in less formal circumstances. All these aspects make humor and laughter in Finnish-Chinese co-operation an interesting area to understand.

There are only a few studies focusing on national styles of humor in face-to-face interactions. Jokes can be seen on a continuum from almost universal to very culture-specific (Grindsted, 1997). Joking strategies appear to play a significant role in business negotiations, and such strategies relate to the structure and sequencing of talk in various ways in different languages and cultures (Harris & Barge-la-Chiappini, 1997). Pivoting on this research gap, the purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze humor and laughter as sites of a search for common ground and power positioning in Finnish-Chinese co-operation. This study approaches the topic mostly from the perspective of the Finnish side as they were more easily accessible to the author and most of the data was obtained in Finland. The author holds dual citizenship of Latvia and Finland. While my citizenship may involve a bias when approaching the subject, I have in-depth knowledge of China through having lived there for three years, being married to a Chinese national, and through having studied China related subjects since 2006.

### **Theoretical framework and method**

The theoretical framework of the study is based on positioning theory by Harré (1991), which addresses power, positioning and accommodation in intercultural communication. An individual has nu-

merous choices about how to position themselves in response to an unfolding narrative and to change and adjust their position (Davies & Harré, 1990). In telling a joke, whether explicitly or implicitly, a speaker assigns parts and characters in the episodes described, both to themselves and to other people, including those taking part in the conversation. A person thus can be said to ‘have been positioned’ by another speaker (Davies & Harre, 1990). Humor is part of a power play, and positioning theory is a suitable resource for addressing humor in the dynamic context of co-operation with China, where power relations are being actively negotiated. Power is one of the functions of humor, the others being solidarity-based and psychological functions (Hay, 2000). Humor can be seen as a product of power relations and the contesting of these, thus humor analysis can be a tool that helps to discover organizational power relations (Dyer, 1991).

Politeness theory, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), will also be used when considering the aspect of ‘face’ in humor. According to this theory, humor involves accommodating two different ‘face’ needs – the need for autonomy and the need for affiliation, one of which may be stronger in a particular culture. The concept of common ground in the context of this paper is understood as one aspect of collaborative management when the co-operating sides are making an attempt to work closely with one another (Garber, 2006). Thus, two different ‘face’ needs impact the search for common ground; the ‘face’ of affiliation being in favour of it, and the ‘face’ of autonomy possibly working against it.

The main methodological tools used in the study were interviewing and participant observation. Observations were taken over six days during a Chinese delegation’s visit from Tianjin, a major port city in northeastern China, to Turku, a city on the southwest coast of Finland, in October 2013, and also during a Finnish delegation’s visit from Oulu, the most populous city in Northern Finland, to Suzhou, a city close to Shanghai, in May 2014.

I interviewed representatives of Finland who facilitated Chinese investment, co-operation and trade opportunities at the local and the state level. The representatives included five Finns, three Chinese and one Japanese person. The Chinese and Japanese participants had lived and worked in Finland for between 5 and 20 years. Four of the interviewees were representatives of local or regional government; three were team members of a state investment attraction agency, and two were Chinese interpreters working in Finland. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions, broadly addressing the experiences of working with the Chinese.

The purpose of the interviews was to discover themes regarding communication in the setting of Chinese investment, co-operation and trade facilitation and to encourage interviewees to offer their own definitions of particular activities (Silverman, 2006; Briggs, 1986). Five interviews were held at the interviewees’ workplaces, two in cafeterias and the remaining two over Skype. The interviews were conducted in English and recorded and transcribed. The interview quotations used in this paper are direct citations, and some have been modified for the sake of comprehension. The interviews were coded IV 1-9 according to the sequence in which they were conducted. Information about the interviewees is provided in Table 1. Some participant observation was also conducted in meetings to get access to naturally occurring intercultural communication, and to provide a fuller sense of the context. The nine interviews were conducted in the Finnish cities of Helsinki, Turku and Lahti in the autumn of 2013.

Silverman (2006, p. 39) notes that interview responses are not always consistently related with peoples’ behavior in naturally occurring situations. However, their stories do provide insights about their momentary concerns and circumstances. Reflective use of interview materials has clear benefits in providing insight into topics and their characteristics in specific cultural contexts (Nikander, 2012). In a qualitative framework, research based on interviews seeks to manifest meanings; therefore, a small

INTERVIEWEE CODE	GENDER	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	WORKING TITLE
IV1	female	Japan	Business Development Officer
IV2	male	China	Interpreter
IV3	male	Finland	Development Manager
IV4	female	China	Interpreter
IV5	male	Finland	Senior Advisor
IV6	male	Finland	Head of International Affairs
IV7	male	China	Business Development Manager
IV8	female	Finland	Customer Operations Director
IV9	male	Finland	General Manager

**Table 1. Interviewee codes and basic data**

number of cases facilitate the researcher's close association with the respondents and inquiry in naturalistic settings (Crouch, 2006).

During the analysis stage, the interview and observation data were systematized according to sub-themes and then combined for a thick description of the intercultural communication dynamics in the given context (Spradley, 1980; Geertz, 1973). One of the themes that emerged from the data was the role of humor and laughter in co-operation.

### **Humor and laughter as common ground**

Humor is believed to have a connection to playing. It can be interpreted as training for the unexpected, placing oneself at risk of losing balance or dominance while learning to recover, and as catching one another off guard in ways that simulate risk and stimulate recovery (Boyd, 2004). Humor may be connected to seeking relief, ridding ourselves of accumulated nervous energy and a release of suppressed emotion (Porteus, 1988). The shift to a playful mode may imply a need for strengthening the interpersonal relationship between the speakers. Humor and laughter are universal; however, while laughter is clearly visible and audible, humor is more difficult to analyze. Laughter is not an exclusive reaction to humor, however it is an important and a convenient one to include in a definition of joking, which is in itself an important aspect of humor. In a conversational approach to joking, the utterance

counts as a joke if it is 1) spontaneous, 2) intentional, and 3) accompanied by laughter (Grindsted, 1997, p. 164). Humor in the workplace can reduce stress and enhance group cohesiveness and communication (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

During the interviews, Finnish representatives spoke of having humorous interactions and laughing with the Chinese, which was helpful in improving the atmosphere and in finding common ground. Mutual understanding can be achieved through humor:

We often laugh quite much in the meetings with delegations. In certain situations, somebody makes a joke and laughs, and it's not a problem. I think it's not so that we do not understand their humor; we laugh at similar things, at least in situations that I have been. (IV6)

During the observations, it was also possible to see that laughter or seeing some situation in a humorous light is an integral part of visits and communication, especially in less formal situations, for instance when having meals and demonstrations. When a Chinese group was introduced to the virtual reality glasses during their visit to Turku, a junior Chinese group member agreed to try out an exciting virtual ride on the rollercoaster. The person assisting them recommended that he sit down because some people had previously had strong reactions and the person trying them out might lose their balance if they remain standing. When the junior delegate expressed his excitement about the ride, other members of the delegation laughed. Later during lunch in Turku, the Chinese asked whether the Finnish hosts liked the food when they visited Tianjin. The Finns replied that they liked it very much, but some dishes were a bit spicy. To that, the Chinese also laughed (perhaps because Tianjin food is notoriously spicy).

One interviewee indicated that humor may be related to the necessity to find relief and relax during negotiations:

When there are negotiations, of course, we laugh together with the Chinese, but it is not so clear why. It is more like a habit or politeness to laugh about some, I would say, not so funny joke, but at least that is something to share with them. That is also a way to relax people – to tell a joke (IV3).

Another interviewee implied that he does not see humor as central for finding common ground, but it can improve the atmosphere:

It is not joke business, it is work, so I am not paying so much attention from that point. However, it sometimes helps to get a positive attitude and leads to the happy moments. Whether you get humor or not depends on the situation. (IV9)

Thus, in some situations, humor is seen as useful for creating common ground, and vice versa; having more common ground and knowing each other better results in more humor:

In governmental meetings, the humor and telling jokes - that doesn't usually happen in the first meeting. But when you know the person well and get into a closer relationship, then you can be a bit informal and bring humor into the discussion as well. (IV8)

One participant implied that the Chinese representatives try to use humor as a way to build common ground:

When the Chinese make jokes, I think possibly they understand that we are from a different culture and if in our culture we have jokes, then joking will be a way to find a common task. I think Chinese are really trying to be one with Westerners. (IV3).

Turning to the specifics of what the Chinese would joke about in these situations, the interviewee shared further:

From what I remember, their jokes are maybe related to something they know about Finland, about snow, or how cold it is. I think they can sometimes make this kind of jokes, then they are really pushing themselves, they are really trying. (IV3)

A similar situation was also observed during the visit from Oulu to Suzhou. There were a few jokes about the cold weather in Finland, and after that it was noted that there was still plenty of snow in Rovaniemi in May, and that Oulu was only three hours away from Santa Claus.

To sum up, humor, joking and laughter are seen as an integral part of the visits that served the purposes of feeling more relaxed, improving the atmosphere, and being polite. Thus, it can be favorable for building common ground. There is a suggestion that the Chinese may have tried to joke as an adjustment strategy to the Finnish side. Jokes may make use of the common knowledge that the other side have, such as the coldness in Finland or the spicy food in China. Humor can have a universal nature and be experienced as such in Finnish-Chinese cooperation.

### **Differences in humor and the concept of face**

While using humor in negotiations can often be beneficial, the complex nature of joking and laughter in interactive business contexts is also clearly apparent. In the field of humor studies it has long been recognized that both that which counts as a joke may be culturally specific, and also that the sequencing and patterning of laughter may vary (Grindsted, 1997, p. 180). Attardo (1993) has explored the paradox of the communicative nature of jokes, which are defined as a type of text that may violate the principle of co-



operation. Humor involves accommodating two different face needs – the need for autonomy and the need for affiliation, one of which may be stronger in a particular culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One way to explain humor deals with superiority theory: we laugh at the errors of others because they enhance our feeling of superiority (Porteus, 1988). Boasting is a particular form of self-presentation, which can be done in a humorous way (Scollon & Scollon, 1983). With reference to positioning theory (Harre, 1991), when joking in these ways, a speaker tries to gain more power in the ongoing interaction and position him/herself more favorably. It is easy to laugh at a disassociated item, but disparagement of affiliated objects may cause insult. One also has to pay attention to team members and the face work of the whole group. While joking, one is involved in a dilemma, as it violates the need for personal autonomy. Not wanting to intrude on another person's autonomy may result in more self-ridicule joking (Grindsted, 1997, p. 172).

The participants of this study revealed their views on the differences between the Finnish and the Chinese sense of humor and expressed some puzzlement about topics that one culture laughed about and the other side seemed not to:

There is no black humor about death or some "dirty" things that we [the Finns] laugh about – I don't know if the Chinese are laughing about that. Also some absurd things that are funny for us are not funny for them. I have not really understood what is funny for them. (IV3)

Interviewees reported feeling cautious about using humor at times, as if perceived communication style differences would make one reluctant to use humor for building common ground:

Humor... it's an art in itself. So you have to understand when to make jokes, and if to make joke at all. To be safe, I would say, less is better. I have grown up in the Finnish-Western culture

and my facial and body language is more maybe US-American style, and they can sense it right away. But of course I am practicing to limit myself so that I can try to be as much Chinese as possible in front of the Chinese people. It's not that much fun, actually. (IV7)

Humor as a message may not get through: "There have been situations when I felt – ok, maybe they didn't get the joke at all." (IV3) However, one participant said that gradual adjustment process takes place in understanding humor and reading subtle signs:

Maybe somehow I also understand their humor, which I really do not understand, but maybe I can understand something about that. It is about understanding more about their culture and how to change my behavior from the signals that I can get on how they behave. (IV3)

Also another interviewee said that the knowledge of the other side is important: "I think sometimes when situation is right, you need to prepare even for humor, and you need to know your counterpart a little bit." (IV9)

Considering some of the complex dynamics of using humor in Finnish-Chinese co-operation, in particular participants spoke of the sensitivities they recognized surrounding Chinese 'face':

Surely, they have humor, but they are laughing at different things than Westerners; Chinese humor is very different from the humor in the Western world. In the Western world, we have a lot of irony; Chinese don't think about irony in that sense, because they kind of can't laugh for themselves because of losing their 'face.' (IV3) They like that kind of slap-stick humor - it is very direct about what happened to others, but not to themselves. If I say that Chinese can't laugh at themselves, I don't know if I am right, but sometimes I felt so. (IV5)

While these Finnish participants said the Chinese do not enjoy laughing about themselves much, it was also said that the Chinese would like to laugh about the Finnish stereotypical weakness: “they make jokes on us about drinking too much.” (IV6).

Referring to positioning theory (Harre, 1991), when one makes sure to assign certain roles to oneself and others in a way that enhances one’s own power position can be interpreted as involvement in the power play. During my observation of the Oulu delegation to Suzhou, on several occasions the Chinese laughed when learning about the small numbers associated with the Finnish population. During the visit, the delegation met a Chinese man whose son had studied in Oulu previously and had commented that it is “the smallest city in the world.” Making use of a contrast with China, a Finnish respondent said that Chinese like to joke rather boastfully about themselves: “they make jokes [about] the size of their organizations, and the size of China” (IV6).

To sum up, the difficulties in using humor experienced by the interviewees were related to the differences in the sense of humor, the topic of the jokes, and even body language during joking, all of which, however, can be gradually understood and adjusted to, to some degree. The Finnish representatives reported that it was important to get to know the Chinese representatives well in order to make such adjustments. Chinese ‘face’ was one area of sensitivity, where the Finnish interviewees said that generally, it was difficult for the Chinese to laugh at themselves, but they might joke boastfully about themselves at times. The Finnish stereotypical weaknesses of drinking and having small populations were reported as topics of laughter for the Chinese.

## Discussion

From the participants’ responses it emerged that humor in Finnish-Chinese co-operation negotiations can be seen as both a simple and a complicated area. If humor goes well, it can assist in building common ground and in improving the negotiation

climate. However, humor can also touch on sensitive and at times difficult areas, and draw upon different styles, acceptable topics and ways of joking.

Simply laughing a little can be seen as easing the atmosphere when, upon meeting, the participating sides feel a bit nervous for example. Laughing and humor can be seen as a universal language to be utilized in the context of a great deal of uncertainty. Jokes at times appear to draw from national stereotypes and comparison of contrasts, such as large China, cold Finland, spicy food in China, and drinking too much in Finland. These jokes may serve a purpose of self-introduction or show what you know about the other side and, as such, can be an effort to build a bridge and create some common ground.

The data suggest that both sides try to adjust their ways of joking according to their perception of the other side’s expectations. For example, the Chinese may force themselves to joke while negotiating, and Finns learned about the specifics of the Chinese sense of humor and try to adjust to that. This also demonstrates efforts to use humor to create common ground. The adjustment may also have to do with the location of the visit: if the Chinese had arrived as visitors, they may think that they need to adjust to the local ways of negotiating, and their behavior may reflect their belief of what humor is like in Finland.

Referring to the participants of the study, there are, however, differences in sense of humor, which may make it complicated to use humor for building common ground. In addition, the probability that a joke is not understood may have to do with the fact that English is not the native language of either side. The sensitivity of Chinese ‘face’ was a concrete area of difference and difficulty described in detail by the interviewees. However, Finnish participants implied that the Chinese can laugh at themselves in the context of their own boastful jokes. Laughing at the Finnish weakness of drinking a great deal, and at the small numbers of people in the Finnish population was also reported and observed.

The primary contribution of this study has been to document the meanings that Finns attribute to their co-operation with the Chinese. An obvious limitation is that it was not possible to interview Chinese visitors, whose views and perceptions on humor would be equally interesting and important to consider. Consequently, this study gives more voice to the Finnish interpretation of humor with the Chinese. There is also a power imbalance in the representation, in spite of some participants being Chinese who work for the Finnish side. Stereotyping in these interpretations cannot be ruled out. The perceptions of the participants may be subjective and their expressions can in themselves be seen as a part of power positioning. At the same time, however, it is one window to reality and to achieving a nuanced understanding about the area of humor. A larger amount of observation data would allow for stronger claims about humor in interaction between the two groups.

## Conclusion

Although the Finnish representatives mostly see humor as a site of a search for common ground, they also see that occasionally Chinese representatives may get involved in a humorous power play. With reference to Brown and Levinson (1987), it can be assumed that sometimes the autonomous 'face' needs to be accommodated, asserting the power positioning over the search for common ground. Hints of the autonomy of 'face' could be found in joking about others, boasting humorously and reluctance to laugh at oneself. At the same time, the 'face' of affiliation may manifest in attempts to adjust and joke during negotiations, even to the point of forcing oneself. It appears to be a complex endeavor to find the balance between needs of autonomy and affiliation when using humor as a means of expression.

This paper explored humor in the context of Finnish-Chinese co-operation, at a time when there is an emerging dynamic of Finns as sellers of investment targets and Chinese as investors. This newly developing intercultural communication context may

have similarities with what is happening in co-operation with China elsewhere in the world. Chinese adjustments to the perceived Western style of humor and the imitation of it in negotiations could be an interesting topic to consider in future research, as might the Chinese and other nationalities' perceptions of the Finnish sense of humor.

Returning to the fact that humor is believed to have a connection to playing (Boyd, 2004), a conclusion of this study is also that humor may deal with playful expressions of power; it involves power positioning in a playful way. Positions tend to be taken up according to an unfolding narrative depending upon the outcomes they generate (Davies & Harré, 1990). Adjustments in humor occur in hopes of reaping the benefits found in finding common ground, but in certain situations, autonomy and power may also be asserted.

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# Oh the horror!

## Genre and the fantastic mode in Japanese cinema

LEENA EEROLAINEN

Ever since the emergence of the so-called J-horror in the late 1990s and early 21st century, Japanese horror cinema has been a staple of both Japanese studies and film studies. Researchers, critics and film directors alike have been keen to observe and analyze the popularity and roots of the phenomenon. While many previous studies work extremely well on a detailed case-study level, there are many moments of confusion related to the general understanding of what horror actually is. My aim in this essay is to point out the various contradictions and differing opinions and, ultimately, to propose that we take an alternative outlook altogether. I suggest we approach the subject matter from the viewpoint of the fantastic, which I see as a mode visible in various genres including but not limited to, horror. This will position Japanese horror cinema as one element within the long tradition of fantastic representations in Japanese (popular) culture, both offering a new approach to old works and introducing new works as interesting analyzable content.

**Keywords:** Japan, horror, fantastic, film, genre

**J**apan is a country with a long tradition of weird and mysterious narratives. Be they a written text, a folk tale, stage art, a religious belief or a film, these narratives have permeated the society for years as central cultural tropes. In this essay, I explore the world of the Japanese dark fantastic in what is commonly referred to as horror. I discuss how the concept of 'horror' is used both as a marketing tool and a means for academic research, even though the very notion is anything but clear.

I am primarily interested in the difficulties of categorization one is bound to encounter when studying Japanese horror cinema. My aim in this essay is two-fold: to point out various contradictions that have emerged in relation to previous research and, based on that, to offer a new framework for further analysis of the horrific in Japanese cinema, namely that of the fantastic. I argue that the fantastic in these films works not as a genre but as a possibly subversive narrational mode crossing generic boundaries. I call this mode by its Japanese moniker *kaiki*, which could be defined as 'suspicious and strange thing or being', 'uncanny and eerie shape and form' or 'grotesque'. But apart from these, what then is the fantastic?

Theories on the nature and meaning of the fantastic are plenty, starting with influential works such as Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) structural analysis or Rosemary Jackson's (1981/1988) psychoanalytically inclined framework. I propose that in tracing the definition and understanding of the Japanese weird, the framework provided by Susan J. Napier (1996) seems the most valid. Napier suggests that

the fantastic "exists as a site of difference, one that privileges the alien, the illusory, and the irrational in contrast to a vision of modernity that subsumes all difference under a bland rubric of homogeneity, materialism, and rationality", and that it is to be seen as "any conscious departure from consensus reality" (1996, p. 9, p. 223). The latter part of the quote comes as a modification of Kathryn Hume's definition of "fantasy as any departure from consensus reality" (1984, p. 21). In these 'consensus reality' means a reality that is generally agreed upon. Furthermore, I suggest that this reality is often an official, hegemonic and constructed reality of a particular society during a particular time. The fantastic, thus, is all about negotiating alternatives.

In addition, the fantastic is not a genre but a mode as suggested by Jackson: "the fantastic is a mode that assumes different generic forms" (1981/1988, p. 35); by Zamora and Faris in relation to magical realism as "a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries" (1995/2003, p. 6); and by Bowers in her realization that "all of these concepts are difficult to consider in terms of one unifying genre and that they should be seen as constituting particular narrative modes" (2004, p. 3). Strange might exist where horror does not and vice versa.

It is true that some works of a more gory nature might become unavailable in this context. Also, genres might still be the best way for the general audience to discuss films. It is, however, clear that utilizing the fantastic mode that is free from the restrictions of an existing genre not only yields a

new understanding of old material, but also promotes films previously considered an uneasy fit in the category of horror as suitable targets for analysis. Through its departure from ‘the real’, the fantastic actually helps us to understand these realities as portrayed in film. It is a viable new approach through which the subject matter in all its horrific, shape-shifting and mysterious forms can be observed. Ultimately the fantastic is about providing alternatives that can be quite terrifying from an official (=consensus) point of view (=reality).

### **Navigating the conceptual jungle**

Cinema emerged in Japan towards the end of the 19th century, very soon after its initial introduction in the west. Given its long history, Japanese cinema has been one of the world’s most important national cinemas both historically and theoretically (Miyao, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, the introduction of this new art form overlapped with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when Japan opened its borders after two hundred years of national isolation. According to Napier, “in a desire to beat the West at its own game by transforming Japan into a first rate capitalist power, a new, ‘modern’, identity was implemented by the country’s own leaders under the slogan ‘Civilization and Enlightenment’” (Napier, 1995/2003, p. 452-453). During this period of rapid modernization, cinema too was utilized as a representation of Japan’s modernity and technological prowess. Kazuki Uchiyama (2008) argues that film was actually a link between modern rationality and traditional superstitious beliefs. According to him, in the dark of the theater, the spectator was whisked away to worlds previously unseen to the human eye. Even the techniques used were such as to portray supernatural phenomena: overlapping figures, stop motion and such continued to surprise spectators during the early periods of film (Uchiyama, 2008, p. 10). It was thus only natural to see famous tropes from folklore, like the avenging female motif, make their way into early cinema.

However, despite the popularity and prevalence of the fantastic in Japanese cinema, much of the research in both Japan and the west has tended to concentrate on altogether different genres or masters, such as Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu. Inuhiko Yomota’s (2010) fieldwork in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand provides an interesting counterpoint. In these countries, known for the richness of their own fantastic and supernatural storylines, Japanese cinema, too, has manifested itself in the form of films or series like *Gegege no Kitarō* (originally a *yōkai* [spectre] manga series, created by Shigeru Mizuki in the 1960s) or *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998). Notable here is that these two are rarely put together in Western studies, maybe because it is difficult to classify *Gegege no Kitarō* as “horror”.

In the wake of the success of the original *Ringu* and the various Hollywood adaptations of contemporary Japanese horror films, there was a newly-found scholarly interest in Japanese horror cinema (see for example McRoy, 2005; McRoy, 2008; Balmain, 2008; Harper, 2008; Wada-Marciano & Choi, 2009; Lacefield, 2010; Ōshima, 2010; Wee, 2014). However, in many of these works Japanese horror is often analyzed in relation to genres easily identifiable in the west, such as ghost, slasher or apocalypse films. McRoy, for example, suggests that postwar horror films generally conformed to two dominant genres: the vengeful spirit narrative and the disaster narrative, best exemplified by giant monster films (2008, p. 6). This division presents not only a simplified model, but also as a fairly reductive one.

Furthermore, a plethora of problems emerge in relation to the audience’s understanding of the genre. Based on my discussions with Japanese audiences, the Japanese are quick to debunk the claim that monster films are horror; rather they consistently point out that they are special effects films (*Gojira* [Honda, 1954] being an exception). *Kaidan* ghost stories that incorporate the avenging spirit motif can also be understood not as a subgenre



of horror, but rather that of period drama (Shimura, 2014), which is one of the most prominent Japanese film genres. It is also possible that both monsters and ghosts belong to the realm of the fantastic, as suggested by Napier (1996, p. 95). Thus, it is clear that McRoy's division offers a framework in which one can locate much of the earlier research on Japanese horror, if not the vast field of the subject matter itself. Culture-specificity does nothing to make the categorization simpler and thus, transcending the notion of a genre in the form of a mode would provide a beneficial point of departure for analysis.

### **Ghosts, monsters and WWII: The roots of Japanese horror?**

As the J-horror boom took off at the turn of the 21st century, many films were labeled as horror in a bid to create a common body that could be analyzed academically and marketed profitably. I would like to highlight that no matter how sharp the analysis or how influential the work, there is a vague sense of arbitrariness of what is considered horror. However, once this acceptable body of works was canonized, only a few studies have been interested in approaching the subject matter in different terms.

'Japanese horror' often appears to be synonymous with 'J-horror'. The two should not, however, be confused. J-horror has commonly come to mean Japanese horror films from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, and even more narrow definitions are readily available. Critic Akira Asada (2000) has argued that the use of the letter "J" helps to anchor anything including it into a certain time of Japanese history. He sees the emergence of the so-called J-culture as a response to the postmodern cosmopolitan capitalism of the 1980s during the economically unstable Lost Decade of the 1990s. While Japanese horror has been around for several decades, even centuries, J-horror has its roots in the aftermath of the collapse of the studio system in the 1980s. A good explanation of J-horror is provided by Kinoshita (2009) who discusses it according to director Kiyoshi Kurosawa's writings

in Japanese. J-horror is not a genre *per se*, but rather a body of works with a definable historical background and thematic concerns; it may be described as a local movement from the late 1990s that comprised of films, TV series, and film critique from filmmakers, and which places particular emphasis on everyday life and media (Kinoshita, 2009, p.103). With regard to the latter, it is similar to the *nuuberu boogu* (Nouvelle Vague, The New Wave) movement of the 1960s where directors created thematically like-minded films that were informed by both changing Japanese society and film studio policies. J-horror, too, "specifically refers to a group of relatively low-budget horror films" which "concentrate aesthetically on the low-key production of atmospheric and psychological fear, capitalizing on urban legends proliferated through mass media and popular culture" (Kinoshita, 2009, p. 104).

As the above attests, filmmakers themselves were keen to analyze the new phenomenon. Similarities can be found between them and the writers of modern Japanese pulp fiction, who "gathered within the space of supposedly 'lowly' pulp not only to express their own opinions but also to exchange sophisticated and potentially subversive ideas with others" (Kawana, 2005, p. 119). It is not, however, solely the observations of the filmmakers that have provided boundaries for research. Japanese horror has metamorphosed from a folkloric notion to a multicultural commodity, in which profitability is more important than an accurate understanding of the nature of things. It is a site where research and capitalism mix with discursive J-horror becoming a viable marketing strategy and a distribution category of 'Asia Extreme', thus providing researchers with borders for what is considered horror. Asia Extreme, a DVD label from Tartan used for the release of Asian (cult) films to foreign audiences, is purposefully "loosely designated in order to include a range of Asian cinema that seems exportable" (Wada-Marciano & Choi, 2009, p. 5). Cult films and horror films, however, are not the same.

Scriptwriter Dario Fuji (2009) has suggested

that horror booms tend to appear within certain periods of time: with no imminent crises looming on the horizon people are able to enjoy fictional horror but, as horror films are often cheap to make, economic downturns also provide an opportunity for the production of these films. By contrast, Noël Carroll contends that horror and sci-fi films proliferate during times of economic and political anxiety because they allow the expression of the “sense of powerlessness and anxiety that correlates with times of depression, recession [...] galloping inflation and national confusion” (Carroll, 1981/1999, p. 159). Almost as an answer to Carroll’s assertion, Jay McRoy emphasizes that although horror cinema existed in Japan prior to the end of WWII, the Japanese film culture of the 1950s and 1960s was “a site for a virtual explosion of tales of terror and apocalypse” (2008, p. 6). Although accurate, this statement runs the risk of trivializing pre-war products of the horror genre and emphasizes the role of WWII in the creation of horror in Japan.

McRoy’s approach is internalized by many academics: Lowenstein (2005) sees *Onibaba* (Shindō, 1964) as allegorical to Hiroshima; Linnie Blake analyzes *Ringu* as set against and read in the light of both the classics of postwar Japanese horror and Gore Verbinski’s Hollywood remake, stating that it decodes “the traumatic changes wrought to Japanese society and hence national self-image by the militaristic build-up to the Second World War and its apocalyptic closure” (2008, p. 10). Colette Balmain, too, suggests that “perhaps most crucial are Japan’s experiences during the Second World War and the subsequent Allied Occupation, the trauma of which underlies many, if not all, Japanese horror films from the 1950s onwards, as demonstrated through the prevalence of the discourse of *hibakusha* [the victims of the A-bomb]” (2008, p. 7). National trauma is seen to manifest itself in a plethora of works but, interestingly, some works explicitly concerned with WWII, such as the *Henshin ningen* trilogy (Nakata & Fukuda, 1958-1960), are almost completely omitted. Interestingly, the *Henshin ningen* films have even

been distributed in the U.S., but as science fiction, not as ‘Asia Extreme’. This simple fact may be the reason behind their relative invisibility.

In addition to war and apocalypse, ghosts seem to provide an instant symbol for horror. The presence of a ghost might be horrific indeed, but it does not automatically make a film horror. I am yet to see Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece *Rashōmon* (1950) analyzed as horror even though a spirit appears. A real woman incorporating the motif of a vengeful spirit appears both in Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985) and Takashi Miike’s *Audition* (1999), but only the latter is considered horror. In Nobuhiko Ōbayashi’s *Ijintachi to no natsu* (1988), the protagonist spends most of his time with benevolent ghosts. There is a malevolent entity, but the overall tone of the film is not that of horror but that of mystery and nostalgia. In Kenji Mizoguchi’s classic *Ugetsu monogatari* (1953) a potter leaves his wife and child in order to work in the city. He is seduced by a beautiful ghost of an aristocratic lady. Benevolent and malevolent spirits are both present but in the case of *Ugetsu* it is clear that reality is actually much more horrible than any ghost. If we want to call *Ugetsu* horror, it is because of its unfair and totally horrible treatment of its women, not because of the emergence of a ghost.

### **Does genre deliver?**

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano argues that as Asia Extreme and J-horror were imported to the Western market and constructed as pragmatic categories in the DVD market, it ultimately led to a shuffling of media and history. For her the most blatant strategy has been to repack non-horror films of the 1960s as precursors to J-horror, which has led to a distortion of both the analysis of Japanese horror and the conceptualization many spectators have of it (2009, p. 33, 37). She explains that to analyze works such as Yasuzō Masumura’s *Mojū* (1969), Shōhei Imamura’s *Fukushū wa ware ni ari* (1979) and Nagisa Ōshima’s *Ai no koriida* (1976) as horror is not solely a matter of genre categorization, but a “failure to acknowledge connections among a text, its historical

context, and the discursive subject” (Wada-Marciano, 2009, p. 34). Jasper Sharp (2009) speaks of a similar feeling of frustration:

“Why so many studies so far have delimited the subject by looking at ‘the origins, themes and conventions of Japanese horror cinema from 1950 to date’ when works based on the *kaidan* such as *Yotsuya kaidan* were being made in the 1910s, early German precursors to the genre [...] were making it to Japan within years of their domestic releases, and the *ero-guro* literary genre led by writers like Edogawa Rampo thrived in the 1920s. And why, oh why, do so many insist on looking at Nikkatsu Roman Porno films [...] as being made for the horror market?”

Indeed, the violent erotic-grotesque torture films released in the 1960s and 1970s had less to do with war horrors and more to do with catering for the audience that during the time of their release could not afford TVs, namely young men who moved to large cities in the hope of finding a job.

Horror is often used as an instant canon, an easy category to include a random body of works that contains some horrific aspects. Sion Sono, for example, was branded a horror director before his recent output, which ranges from artistic drama to splatter musicals. Even though there are faint elements buried deep within the structure that can be said to have derived from supernatural films, it is difficult to label Sono’s films as horror (Calderini, 2012, p. 103-104). On the other hand, many of them are explicitly fantastic in their setting and narrative concerns. Recently, Hideo Nakata’s *Gekijōrei* (2015) was marketed as J-horror but, as scriptwriter Hiroshi Takahashi (2015) points out, it belongs more to the category of the strange and fantastic, *kaiki*. Also, discussing *Zan’e* (2015) in the terms of (J-)horror (see Schilling, 2016) does not give justice to the terrific sense of mystery in the film. Horror is but an end product. Further, what of Kiyoshi Kurosawa? Kurosawa is often called ‘a horror film director’, but in light of the expectations delivered by this moniker, these films are sure to disappoint: *Akarui*

*mirai* (2003) has weirdly multiplying medusas, but that does not make a film horrific. *Doppelgänger* (2003) almost becomes a farce when the battle of the minds between the protagonist and his alter ego accelerates, or when the protagonist gets chased by an enormous disco ball. What we have here is a double-edged sword. Genre is both a promise and a curse: fall too easily for its lure and it will only let you down with a false set of expectations.

Japanese horror has been much analyzed but, as I have shown, interesting case studies may be compromised because they lack attention to historicity and/or emphasize false intertextuality. We need a concept that will help us understand the subject matter in its various manifestations. The location of a genre is so difficult to pinpoint (Altman, 2005) that I am willing to turn away from it and rather introduce the fantastic as a mode that is present in works across various genres. All of the films mentioned above can be argued to incorporate a fantastic element or two and thus may be approached through the lens of the fantastic. To quote Laetitia Söderman, “in order to avoid ideas becoming stagnant we need to approach the subject matter of our research from a fresh and original angle, that enables us to shed more light on the questions that interest us” (2014, p. 105). It is clear that a more comprehensive category or framework, which takes into account both the historicity of the films as well as their true subject matter is needed.

## Conclusions

As I have highlighted in this essay, genres work in mysterious ways. They are like monsters, shape-shifting and always on the move. They are a part of our everyday knowledge and often used for marketing purposes, but does this kind of classification really provide the best results for deeper discussion on the narrative and thematic concerns present in films? Does it even satisfy the audience? In addition, should we as academics yield to the lure of the ready-made categorization that is based on a marketing category created to maximize sales?

By utilizing the notion of the fantastic, it is possible to transcend the current focus of research on postwar Japanese society and instead draw a line between cultural products across different eras and media. In Japan, myths, legends and folklore manifest various grotesques and fantasies, as do the works of respected authors such as Junichirō Tanizaki and Natsume Sōseki. My aim is not, however, to argue that these motifs have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. This would paint a reductionist picture of a society that never changes, that never faces new challenges.

In addition, in order to avoid cultural essentialism, it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind that Japan is by no means the only country in the world with a rich fantastic tradition. Japanese fantastic cinema has been heavily influenced by western narratives and motifs throughout the times, and even the “Japanese” ghost story genre was originally introduced from China. As Torben Grodal (2009) points out, there are basic biological factors that affect our preference to see and experience expressions of monstrosity on screen. However, the meaning of these biological experiences can be said to change according to one’s cultural background knowledge and socialization. Certain topics arise during certain times in certain cultures. To negotiate the hidden aspects behind the official state of things, consensus reality calls for the intervention of the fantastic present in an array of cultural works, some of which are horrific, some of which only vaguely lament the contemporary human existence.

Modern Japan may have become civilized and enlightened but only at the cost of transforming itself into a country where outside harmony hides a variety of interior grotesques (Napier, 2003, p. 453). The contemporary, post-postwar, postmodern Japan fares no better. Cinema acts as a platform for directors to express their possibly subversive ideas about consensus reality in the guise of the fantastic. Studying the fantastic in Japanese cinema provides connections between previously unrelated times,

spaces and authors. Fantasy is, at times, more real than reality itself and cinema is but one in the long line of popular culture products that have been used to discuss what lies beneath the surface of the seemingly peaceful everyday life.

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# Wacky Japan: A new face of orientalism

WESTER WAGENAAR

The way that Japan has been represented in the West has been problematic, the West is considered the norm, and Japan is set aside as the Other. Since Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* was published in the late seventies, the concept of orientalism has been used by scholars to better understand how these kinds of representations work. In the case of Japan, academics have tended to agree that there are two models of orientalism: traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism. This paper claims that in the twenty-first century, these two models are still applicable but that there is a new framework through which Japan is perceived, most notably in popular culture and the media. The West increasingly judges Japan and its people as weird and this phenomenon can be understood with a third model: wacky orientalism. By using this framework of Japan as bizarre, the West confirms what is normal.

ASIA IN FOCUS

**Keywords:** Orientalism; popular culture; techno-orientalism; traditional orientalism; wacky Japan



**J**apan, the country of samurai, robots and ... tentacle porn? Japan has long been perceived by the West as a traditional society filled with geisha and samurai, until this image got entwined with robots and other symbols of technological progressiveness. In academia these two perceptions of the country are understood as traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism respectively, and both models are still used by academics to understand common Western representations of Japan (e.g. Goto-Jones, 2015; Holt, 2014; Marchart, 1998; McLeod, 2013). The power of images of seductive geisha, fierce samurai warriors, cutting-edge technology and hard-working salarymen are, thus, well understood by scholars, yet a third mode of orientalism has not been established yet.

Nowadays, popular articles on Japan often characterize the country by its supposed weirdness, discussing the myth of used panty vending machines or cuddle cafes (Ashcraft, 2016; The Telegraph, 2016). In addition, captions such as “WTF Japan” (an abbreviation for the rather crude phrase “What The Fuck Japan”) regularly accompany images considered strange in the English-speaking part of the internet. This paper argues that in the popular discourse and media of the West, perceptions of Japan as weird are prevalent and that these can be understood as a form of orientalism. I thus make the case for *wacky orientalism* as a new framework through which Japan is gazed at by the West. As understood here, orientalism is the act of perceiving cultures as radically different in such a way that it hierarchizes them pejoratively in respect

to the onlooker’s own culture. By framing Japan and its people as weird, the West thus confirms its normalcy.

When observing a foreign country, it is natural to find strangeness at face value as, in this sense, one’s own country and another are different. Yet, in the case of Japan it goes further. As a popular media article states: “[i]t’s practically a meme in the West: The Japanese are insane. But, you know, loveably insane - all squid-penises and liquor vending machines” (Davis, M., & Yosomono, 2012). One manifestation of the prevalence of this perception is that when South Korean artist PSY became an international internet phenomenon with Gangnam Style (2012), the song, dance and video clip were perceived as strange, but this strangeness was not attributed to South Korea. Yet, when a year before J-pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu’s first major single PonPonPon (Warner Music Japan, 2011) went viral, many commenters on the video seemed to understand it through the lens of weird Japan and it was thus perceived as just another example of the supposed strangeness of the country and its people (Michel, 2012).

This article serves to understand this relatively new image of Japan by explaining it within an orientalist framework and establishing the concept of wacky orientalism. I touch upon the scholarly works on traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism, the two known and most common models the West uses to gaze at Japan. This essay lays out these two conceptions and provides examples depicting how these embodiments of orientalism work in practice,

providing the framework for what I call wacky orientalism. I develop the concept through examples from popular culture and different media. Lastly, I problematize this form of orientalism. The scope of the essay is limited to Western perceptions of Japan and I thus purposefully lean towards a Western centric view of Japan. It is important to note that the frameworks of orientalism discussed are not used by everyone, but that these can be said to be dominant in Western media on Japan.

### **Orientalism and two models of Japan**

As Said (1978, p. 3) states, orientalism is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”. In other words, it is a way for the West (the Occident) to shape and impose their understanding of the East (the Orient). This is usually not done consciously, but is instead embedded in supposedly objective texts on the Orient. Of course, as both geographical and cultural regions, the Orient and Occident are to be considered man-made and exist as a way to strengthen the identity of the West differentiating itself from the East. As such, the Orient is a textual construction of the West and not an actual place (Said, 1978). It is a matter of Us and Them, where the Us shapes parts of its identity by mirroring itself against its imagining of the Other. Embedded in the framework of orientalism is an uneven power balance, where the supposedly superior West creates its identity of the inferior Other without allowing it to speak for itself. There is not just one Other for the West though; for about five centuries now, Japan has been among the West’s Others (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 147). As stated above, academia has reached consensus on two types of orientalism when referring to Japan: traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism.

### **Traditional orientalism**

Japan became an orientalist object in the discourse of most Western countries when it ended its policy of isolation. As Jenny Holt remarks, from the 1850s until the beginning of the Second World War, the

Anglophone literary marketplace got flooded with texts on every aspect of Japan, among which John Luther Long’s *Madame Butterfly* (1898) and the works of Lafcadio Hearn (Holt, 2014, p. 37). Instead of attributing many of the negative characteristics usually connected to non-western others, Western observers tended to focus on Japan’s perceived exotic features and aestheticized its traditional culture and fetishized its people. This is the context we nowadays consider to be the traditional orientalism of Japan.

In general, the Western imagination of Japan focused on two approaches: the country could be characterized either in terms of its aesthetic, elegant qualities, or through the martial culture. As such, exotic keywords like geisha, kimono, tea ceremony, woodblock prints and zen can be pitted against violent terms like kamikaze, ninja and samurai. This perceived ambiguity only served to make Japan more mysterious and exotic.

The dichotomy was most notably emphasized and popularized by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1946 in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. She was tasked by the US military to research Japan and the Japanese to understand Japanese behavior in order to predict their actions and ended up writing in binaries: Japan was the ‘chrysanthemum’, as well as the ‘sword’. According to Benedict, “[t]he Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways” (Benedict, 1946, p. 2).

The stereotypical framework in which Japan is understood as aesthetic yet menacing conceals a mechanism where the West dominates Japan and decides the identity of the country. It is Western writers who decide what Japan’s characteristics are, what is beautiful and what is not, and what Japan is and should be. There is also room for fascination and admiration, but this is usually centered around

decaying traditions. In addition, the dialogue between Japan and the West is traditionally framed as Japan's absorption of the West, instead of a process that goes both ways. The style of Japonism was an imitation of the Japanese aesthetic, but this is rarely described, while Japan's imitation, adoption and reinterpretation of Western technologies and ideas is often mentioned explicitly (Holborn 1991, p. 18). Therefore, we can argue that there was no equal dialogue between Japan and the West and that Japanese culture was not considered a threat to the integrity of the West (Lie, 2001; Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 148).

Despite the name, traditional orientalism still manifests itself today. Images of cherry blossom, girls in kimono and other supposedly "uniquely Japanese" symbols are still deemed an essential part of the Japanese material culture (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2001). In Western popular culture similar imagery is evoked. The exotic and escapist geisha novel and movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 1997; Marshall, 2005), for example, serves as an excellent example of traditional orientalism in practice (Allison, 2001). Edward Zwick's *The Last Samurai* (2003) patronizingly depicts a white Westerner teaching modernizing Japan how to honor its traditions. More recently James Mangold's *The Wolverine* (2013) brought the American superhero movie genre to Japan. Besides fight scenes in locales such as temples and Japanese gardens, in typical orientalist fashion, we are introduced to Mariko, a beautiful Japanese girl who is the first choice for succeeding her dying father as heir to their tech company. In the movie her credentials as a competent leader or businesswoman are not shown and instead she plays the role of a damsel in distress, only to get rescued by the American, Logan. As Japanologist Susan J. Napier (2013, para. 8) notes, "The message is clear: it is American masculinity that keeps the Japanese woman safe".

### **Techno-orientalism**

Against the backdrop of the 1980s, with the rise of Japanese economic power and Japan catching up

with Europe and the United States in terms of technology, a new form of orientalism emerged. Since the traditional condescending image of Japan as a more or less backward society did not apply anymore, David Morley and Kevin Robins (1995, p. 168) argued that "a new techno-mythology is being spun", wherein "Japan has become synonymous with the technologies of the future—with screens, networks, cybernetics, robotics, artificial intelligence, simulation". In describing this new discourse, they coined the term techno-orientalism.

Japanese technological prowess has increasingly been associated with Japanese identity, and its technologies also embody a form of exotic Japanese particularism. Yet there is a resentful and racist side to this discourse. In the eyes of the West, Japan not only has an obsession with artificial intelligence and robotics, the society itself is "dehumanised" (McLeod, 2013, p. 259). Techno-orientalism reinforces the idea of Japan as a cold society, where people themselves are like soulless, efficient machines serving under an authoritarian, bureaucratic culture (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 169). The techno-orientalist discourse presents Japan as the dystopian future of capitalism. Even so, there is anxiety and envy. According to Morley and Robins, the West possesses an image where the "Japanese are unfeeling aliens; they are cyborgs and replicants. But there is also the sense that these mutants are now better adapted to survive in the future" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 170).

Through techno-orientalism, the West manages to assert moral and cultural supremacy over Japan by enforcing a conception of the country and its people as robot-like and lacking humanity. As suggested, perhaps Japan is a mirror of our own anxieties. Through techno-orientalist projections, the West creates and fortifies stereotypes. Whereas orientalism usually concerns the dichotomy between Them as barbaric and Us as civilized, here "they" are robots while "we" remain human" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 172).

The examples usually provided by academics on the subject of Western imagining of techno-orientalism are Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner* (1982) and William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) (e.g. David Morley & Kevin Robins, 1995; Goto-Jones, 2015; McLeod, 2013). Both play on fears of hyper-conformity against a futuristic Japanese backdrop. As Ken McLeod (2013) points out, another prevalent conception of techno-orientalism is the hit song *Mr. Roboto* by the rock band Styx (DeYoung, 1983a, track 1). The chorus of the song is characterized by the iconic electronically produced phrase “*dōmo arigatō, Mr. Roboto*” (thank you very much, Mr. Roboto), which became a catchphrase in the eighties. The song quite literally criticizes the prevalence of Japanese technology and Japan's dehumanizing society through lyrics like “you're wondering who I am, machine or mannequin, with parts made in Japan, I am the modern man” (DeYoung, 1983b, para. 2) and album liner notes stating the “present ...is a future where Japanese manufactured robots, designed to work cheaply and endlessly, are the caretakers of society” (DeYoung, 1983c, para. 2).

The examples above point to the prevalence of techno-orientalist views in the 1980s, but such conceptions of Japan still persist today. In Alex Garland's science fiction thriller *Ex Machina* (2015), the robot most devoid of humanity is played by Japanese actress Sonoya Mizuno. In the movie, she is repeatedly humiliated and follows the whims of her American creator. These views are not limited to the depictions of Japan and the Japanese in entertainment. In the photos used in the reporting of the 2011 Triple Disaster, Jocelyn van Alphen (2015, para. 8) notes, the notion of the “Japanese as an anonymous mass, emotionless robots or exotic masked characters, is enforced” (original in Dutch).

### **Wacky orientalism: a third model**

Conscious endeavors or not, both traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism can be considered attempts by Western countries to dominate Japan through imposing its stereotypical images of the

country, depicting it in an inferior fashion. Admiration for elements of the traditional culture and envy with regards to technological advancements, on one hand, are accompanied by portrayals of the country as backward, violent and inhuman on the other. Orientalism is based on an uneven power structure, where the voice of the Other is ignored and instead the West speaks for the subject. This provides fertile soil for the perpetuation of certain stereotypes. This is also the case for wacky orientalism, the third form of orientalism regarding Japan.

For over a decade, ‘memes’ such as “because Japan” or “WTF Japan” can be regularly observed when browsing the internet. Huge pink phalli on portable shrines at the Kanamara Matsuri (literally Festival of the Steel Phallus), for example, are understood through images and videos with headings and captions like “WTF” and “because Japan” (e.g. Alliance Rainbow, 2016). Serious attempts to understand the Shintō fertility festival are then moved to the background and the stereotype of Japanese as weird is enforced as a result. That some Japanese also might not consider the purchasable phallus-shaped goods to be normal is not a part of the discourse in the West. Chikako Nihei (2009, p. 89) argues that “[o]nce people form an impression of a culture or a nation, they will believe that they have enough knowledge”, and striving for a more accurate understanding then becomes superfluous. This is a central element of how wacky orientalism persists.

As is the case with orientalism in general, there is a confirmation bias at work. Some tourists search for this ‘wacky’ side of Japan, but when you start actively looking for it, it is natural to start seeing it. J-Pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu catered to this image without appealing directly to audiences overseas. In the video clip of her first major single *PonPonPon* (Warner Music Japan, 2011), Kyary is standing in a playroom with heaps of colorful props, while surreal images dominate the screen. Kyary's cane comes out of her ear before ending in her hands, and slices of bread with eyes float mid-air. Before

starting her singing career, Kyary modeled in the Harajuku fashion scene. Her eclectic mix of clothes are in fact Harajuku fashion and the strange accessories and props reflect this industry and the Japanese thus might have a better understanding of what is going on. As for the West, it sees something strange and exotic and Kyary thus unintentionally provided Western audiences with exactly what they wanted: “something that made them think Japan really is weird” (Michel, 2012). As is the case with traditional- and techno-orientalism, most of the perception of Japan emanates from the minds of Westerners who are unable or unwilling to make the culture intelligible (Larabee, 2014, p. 428). It is just funnier when the supposed weird remains that way.

On the other hand, there is also a certain amount of catering towards this image. This is not entirely unlike the self-orientalization visible in lucrative contemporary Japanese self-presentations of the traditional orientalist kind (Goldstein-Gidoni, 2001). Japan’s supposed strangeness simply sells. An example is the Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku where scantily-clad women on sci-fi contraptions interact with robots and other dressed-up characters. Judging from the thousands of reactions from foreigners on popular tourist website TripAdvisor, a visit to the Robot Restaurant would be the “quintessential Japanese experience”. Yet, guests are mainly foreigners and it is hardly a typical night out in Tokyo (Bradbury, 2013).

It is important to note that the narrative on wacky Japan is fluid. In the 1980s, Japanese men were regarded as hypersexual, yet today they are supposedly hypo-sexual. Regardless of the difference, the bottom line in the media is that Japanese men are strange. An example is the BBC2 documentary “No Sex Please, We’re Japanese” (Holdsworth 2013), first broadcasted on 24 October 2013. It explores Japan’s declining population. Only two men below pension age are interviewed in the hour-long program. Japanese men’s interest in virtual girls or dating simulator games is purported to be one of the root causes for the country’s population decline,

even though people who are into these games are a small minority in Japan. Despite young men playing video games of the dating sim genre all over the world, one fifth of the documentary was devoted to this subject, only serving to reinforce the notion of Japan as the weird Other (Hinton, 2014, p. 102–103).

Central to wacky orientalism is the unilateral direction of its projection. By imagining Japan as weird, the West creates and strengthens the norm of what is normal. Japan does not possess a voice in the creation of this narrative imposed by the West, nor can it really change it. One example of this in popular culture is Charles Beeson’s *Changing Channels* (2009), an episode from season 5 of the American drama series *Supernatural* (2005–present), where the main characters, Sam and Dean, find themselves in a Japanese game show. Answering incorrectly sees them punished by a hit in the scrotum by a machine, and a scantily-clad Japanese woman only serves to remind the host of the show of the tastiness of certain crisps. Tellingly, the two American protagonists are the only ‘normal’ element in the absurd Japanese setting.

## Conclusion

There are things considered abnormal in any country, but in the case of Japan, this is understood by the West within a certain psychological framework. This article argues for wacky orientalism, the Western perception of Japan as ‘weird’, as a narrative in the orientalist mold. Similar to how traditional orientalism and techno-orientalism function, the dialogue between the West and Japan is a unilateral one where the West speaks for Japan rather than allowing it to have its own voice. Thus, Japan is framed as weird, without it being able to challenge that image. By differentiating itself from this strangeness, the West confirms its normalcy. There are three elements playing a role here. Firstly, people do not want to get a better understanding of the ‘weirdness’ they see, for it would not be as funny anymore if they did. Secondly, there is a confirmation bias at work, where Westerners search for

weirdness. Thirdly, this stereotypical image is catered to because it sells.

Further research on wacky orientalism is required. Firstly, to better understand how it functions, it is necessary to find out how this form of orientalism came to be. Possible explanations could be the popularity of pornographic material originating from Japan on the internet. Most notably, *hentai* (erotic cartoon material), tends to be shocking. Even in today's Western societies, cartoons are considered products for kids and erotic ones do not fit this image. Secondly, I have suggested that the Japanese themselves might think some elements of their own culture are bizarre, and extensive quantitative research is required to find out to what extent this is the case. At least one difference between the Western and the Japanese perception is that in Japan these supposedly strange things are not seen through a wacky orientalism framework. The things wacky orientalism depicts are usually outliers, uncommon elements in Japanese everyday life.

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# The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands:

## How media narratives shape public opinion and challenge the global order

Ed. by Thomas A. Hollihan. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. vii, 316 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-44335-9.

KIM JARLE WROLDSEN

**T**he Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands explores the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands controversy from the perspective of media diplomacy. In the introductory chapter, Hollihan specifies that the compendium seeks to explore how the governments of China, Japan, and the United States have “used the media to communicate simultaneously with their domestic and overseas audiences” (p. 3).

The compendium consists of ten chapters, including an introduction and conclusion by Hollihan. Except for one chapter about the theoretical aspects of media diplomacy, the remaining chapters compare the content of the narratives of the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as presented by legacy media, social and digital media, as well as by history textbooks. All of the authors have a background in media studies and journalism.

One of the main arguments is that when each country produces their own respective media narratives, they are, in the words of Joseph Nye, participating in “a contest of competitive credibility” (p. 235), the goal of which, in this case, is to reach a diplomatic solution to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands issue. In support of this argument, Takeshi Suzuki

and Shusuke Murai describe how Japanese mainstream media speaks of an irrational China counterfeiting arbitrary territorial claims, while Zhan Zhang describes how Chinese state media speaks of an unrepentant Japan and a victimized China. Zhang’s comparison of how the August 2012 anti-Japanese protests were covered differently in Chinese, and English language editions of Chinese state media is particularly informative.

The authors, notably Patricia Riley, further contend that territorial disputes in a process of entrenchment often become more and more intertwined with other issues over time, making a diplomatic solution gradually harder to achieve. The argument is substantiated by Shubo Li and Hiroko Okuda’s accounts of how history textbooks have contributed to “issue-linkage” and the institutionalization of the conflict in China and Japan (p. 238). It is also supported by the chapters by Zhan Zhang, Miao Feng, Elaine J. Yuan, Takeshi Suzuki and Shusuke Murai, on how the conflict was covered in legacy, social and digital media.

One concern pertains to the bias shown in some of the articles. For example, in her chapter on Chinese state media, Zhan Zhang make statements

such as, “An *analytical* report by Xinhua News on December 2 blamed the United States for the unfolding crisis [...]. Despite these efforts to urge the United States to *keep its nose out of the dispute*, however, on January 18 [...] Clinton again acknowledged that the Diaoyu islands were under the administrative authority of Japan” (p. 101; emphasis added). These kinds of biases are perhaps related to the Chinese narratives in the compendium being provided by Chinese scholars, and the Japanese narratives being provided by Japanese scholars. Still, it may be argued that Hollihan compensates for this pitfall by providing an equal number of articles from Japanese and Chinese perspectives.

Another concern is the title of the compendium. According to the title, the main topics are “how media narratives shape public opinion” and how they “challenge the global order.” The first problem is that the authors describe social and digital media discourse as an indicator of “public opinion” (p. 14) while, at the same time, analysing social and digital media discourse as a narrative in its own respect. To some extent, this equates the question of “how media narratives shape public opinion” with “how public opinion shapes public opinion” or “how social and digital media narratives shape social and digital media narratives”. This indicates, at best, a sloppy use of terms. Secondly, although “global order” appears to be an important term in the compendium, Hollihan’s introduction does not clarify how the concept is to be understood. He does mention that controversies such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute “can be deeply disruptive to the interconnected global order and economy” (p. 3), but what this order refers to, be it multilateral international institutions, political and social stability in East Asian countries, or the hegemonic dominance of the United States, remains a mystery.

Critical marks aside, *The Dispute Over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands* is the most elaborate, up-to-date work that applies media diplomacy theory to the specific case of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands conflict. It provides elucidating empirical examples

of how government representatives of China, Japan, and the United States attempt to use media to attain domestic and foreign political goals. While many of these examples should already be familiar to the keen observer of East Asian politics, the compendium’s meticulous account of the events leading up to the riots of August 2012 provides some novel insights.

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# The EU's Human Rights Dialogue with China: Quiet diplomacy and its limits

Kinzelbach, Katrin. Routledge, 2014, 236 pp., ISBN: 9781317610489 (e-book).

SERENA DE MARCHI

ASIA IN FOCUS

**K**atrin Kinzelbach's book *The EU's Human Rights Dialogue with China* is a valuable contribution to the world of human rights diplomacy. It sheds light on how the European Union approaches China in this particular field. Kinzelbach provides new information on the relations between the two sides and discusses the validity of the EU's methods. Through the collection and analysis of EU confidential documents and official reports, and interviews with key actors in the European Commission, the author manages to outline the 20 year-old evolution of human rights diplomacy between the EU and China.

Kinzelbach is the Associate Director of the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin and a professor at the Central European University in Budapest. The book can be inscribed as within the field of EU-China relations, however, its originality is that it approaches the relations from the perspective of human rights. This is the first book to provide a detailed reconstruction of EU's engagement with China in the field.

The relations are traced back to 1995, when the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue was established. The platform was meant to be a confidential exchange, and can be inscribed into the so-called policy of "quiet diplomacy". As a matter of fact, in the

mid-nineties, the EU's approach towards China followed the US policy and was known as *constructive engagement*. Direct confrontation had to be avoided, and a form of a "behind closed doors" diplomacy was to be implemented instead. At that time, China was significantly worried about the position of the US in the Commission on Human Rights at the United Nations, therefore it saw the Dialogue as a means to try to convince European States not to support the US resolution at the UN.

The participants from the European side included government officials, NGO representatives and academic experts, while the Chinese delegation was composed of officials from various departments and so-called *establishment intellectuals* from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). No dissidents or independent rights experts were ever present.

From an EU perspective, it was the lack of tangible results from the Dialogue that was the cause of frustration and disappointment among European actors. They felt that the Chinese counterpart acted in a pre-defined, staged manner, often replying to the most thorny issues by simply reading standard and empty formulas. One more interesting aspect is that the Dialogue's more or less assertive attitude was subject to singular European presidencies. In other

words, countries with stronger human rights traditions would push China more actively, while countries whose relations with Beijing had just started to be fruitful (in terms of economic exchange) were more reluctant to push the People's Republic on the most sensitive human rights concerns.

Kinzelbach's book is a key instrument for those who are interested in human rights diplomacy between China and the EU. Using a critical approach as her research method, she provides detailed and well-supported evidence of how the EU's quiet diplomacy has essentially been of little use in terms of influencing China's behaviour in the field of human rights. As Kinzelbach lucidly puts it, "Intended human rights promotion and protection in China, should it materialize in the medium or long term future, will not be causally linked to the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue" (p. 196). In the end, quiet diplomacy turned out to be the wrong choice. Instead of taking a stronger stance and backing the US with the resolution on China at the UN, the EU actually "diluted international pressure and weakened existing incentives" (p. 197) that might have led China to pursue a more internationally accepted behaviour on human rights, in light of possible concessions. The dialogue also failed to integrate NGOs and, moreover, the EU eventually bent to Chinese requests in order to prevent possible repercussions on the economic relations. Eventually in 2010, unconcerned about the EU's protests, it was China that walked away from the Dialogue, refusing to participate in the biannual sessions.

Why is the Dialogue still on then? Why do European diplomats still engage in confidential discussions with China on human rights? Kinzelbach argues that it is because the Dialogue is a small risk initiative and guarantees a semblance of diplomatic bonds between China and the EU on this very sensitive topic. According to the author, the weakness of the EU attitude and the overall failure of the Dialogue could also be dependent on European civil society, namely on the lack of protests about the Dialogue's ineffectiveness. The author links this problem to the

fact that the majority of Chinese dissidents reside in the US and not in Europe (p. 197-198). This passage is a little ambiguous though, and Kinzelbach does not provide a clear definition of "European civil society", which is a concept that might be worth deeper analysis.

As the Dialogue proved to be an insufficient tool to address China regarding human rights concerns, what are the alternatives? According to Kinzelbach, EU member states should engage in a stronger effort to better coordinate demarchés towards China, if they want them to be effective. Secondly, and more importantly, EU member states should re-think the issue of the arms embargo, as it might be a much more interesting incentive for the Chinese compared to the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue on its own. "With the lure of a credible offer on the arms embargo, Chinese diplomats would at least listen attentively to the EU's priorities" (p. 199), and this may possibly lead to the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The embargo should be lifted only if China agrees to re-assess the Tian'anmen massacre, to allow an independent investigation, and to stop censoring the memory of the incident. The final stance that the book takes is based on the author's belief that the EU would potentially be able to make use of the embargo (which has now been in place for 25 years) as a powerful incentive for China. This should be done, however, "before Chinese leaders stop worrying about its symbolic power in the same way they have stopped worrying about a UN resolution" (p. 199).

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