

# Wacky Japan: A new face of orientalism

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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.

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**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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