



Japan in the U.S. Press: Bias and Stereotypes

July 2005

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Since Europeans first encounters with Japanese, reportage of Japan has been riddled with stereotypes and paradox—rendering Japan as the West’s exotic Other. Of course cultural differences and stereotypes exist everywhere, but it is the negative manner in which information is conveyed about Japan that is disturbing and damaging. While the context of the articles may have shifted over time, these distortions still find their way onto the pages of the most elite newspapers in the United States. Despite the proliferation of electronic forms of media, daily newspaper articles often still function as the original source of reporting from which television and Internet sources borrow and truncate (Downie and Kaiser 2002).

History of Distortions

There is a long history of reportage, literature and other forms of media that portrays Japan in a negative light or stereotypes the Japanese. Before Japan closed its doors to the outside world in the seventeenth century, European missionaries and traders were perplexed by their inability to contain Japan within existing stereotypes of non-European “savages,” rendering Japanese people as a paradox—quasi savages prone to politeness and valor (Littlewood 1996, p3). After Japan defeated China in 1895, the Japanese were recognized as a threat by West European leaders for the first time, and the term “Yellow Peril” came into vogue as a discriminatory term for the mysterious and inhuman Japanese (Littlewood 1996, p36). World War II journalist Ernie Pyle helped popularize representations of Japanese people as non-human, comparing them to cockroaches, while explaining that the German enemies in Europe were at least “still people” (Ernie Pyle in Dower 1986, p96).

In postwar Japan, “national character” anthropologist Ruth Benedict formalized the “paradox” of Japanese culture and society in her legendary book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, writing, “The Japanese are to the highest degree aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite...” (Benedict 1971, p2-3). During the 1980s and early 1990s, as Japan’s economy threatened to overcome the United States’, “revisionist” journalists and scholars explained Japan’s “economic miracle” as a function of “unique” characteristics of Japanese culture, history, and society (Cumings 1993).

Although “Yellow Peril” is no longer in vogue, over the past decades four types of biases persist on the pages of the top U.S. newspapers: (1) caricatures of the Japanese people; (2) the portrayal of Japanese as monolithic people; (3) the resort to culture as an explanation for everything, or cultural determinism; and (4) the assumption that Japanese society is irrational and inferior when compared to the United States or the West. (Zipangu 1998)

Caricatures of Japanese People

Caricatures of Japanese people reinforce commonly held stereotypes of Japan as a “warrior society” that has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. Everyday events are sometimes imbued with this samurai ethic. In describing *koshien*, the annual

high school baseball tournament in Japan, the *Los Angeles Times* invoked caricatures of the samurai baseball player:

[*Koshien*] is a testament to *gambaru*, the samurai fighting spirit and dogged persistence so admired in Japan...” (Magnier 2000)

The “samurai spirit” and “dogged persistence” reinforce the image of the baseball warrior without recounting one play from those games or giving voice to current players. In doing so, the Western reader is rewarded with feeling satisfied that this “new” information confirms his previous knowledge of “the Japanese.”

The Portrayal of Japanese as Monolithic People

Other articles contain generalizations and all-encompassing phrases that stereotype Japanese people as a monolithic group without diversity, remaining unchanged over the ages. For example, a *Washington Post* article reads:

And because the *Japanese are* [emphasis mine] a fundamentally pragmatic people... (Reid 1992)

“The Japanese are fundamentally pragmatic,” renders the Japanese people as monolithic—the encapsulation of them as people whom all harbor those specific traits. Similar trends can be found in articles published in *The New York Times*:

...the famous capacity for compromise among the Japanese seems to have reconciled them to the nearly irreconcilable. (French 1999)

...you can’t rebel in Japan. (French 2002)

When the Japanese get fed up, they don’t kill their neighbors, as in America. Instead, they kill themselves. (Kristof 1997)

All the examples above entail the presumption that all Japanese act alike. Articles in which individual voices are suppressed and generalizations are made without sufficient evidence of their existence are constructed within an “acceptable” framework that reproduces stereotypical images of Japanese people as an anonymous mass.

Resorting to culture as an explanation for everything/cultural determinism

Newspaper articles may also introduce bias by weaving cultural threads throughout the text in an effort to explain every phenomenon. These articles often assume a fixed immutable cultural essence, assuming that certain traits are unique and innate to Japanese people or society.

For example, after the economic bubble burst in the 1990s, and the Japanese “threat” receded, articles seeking to explain the recession resorted to Japanese culture as the reason for the economic implosion. A *Chicago Tribune* article that examines the relationship between Japanese firms and government resorts to the “unique” cultural traits of the Japanese that form the “deeply incestuous bond in Japan between business and bureaucracy, which allows such scandals to occur in the first place.” (Yates 1991, p1).

Meanwhile, the following illuminates how the peculiar inner-workings of Japanese society led to the complete breakdown of the Japanese economy:

“Sometimes approval is indicated with a grunt or a gesture. Sometimes it is done via a moment the Japanese call *isshin denshin*--a kind of "instant mental communication..." (Yates 1991, p3)

Here, “grunting” and “gesturing” render Japan as primitive and equally mysterious. Japan’s economic decline is transformed into the “Japan problem”—part threat of Japanese dominance, part inability to comprehend the Other.

The assumption that Japanese society is irrational and inferior when compared to the United States or the West

The nature of our (U.S.-Japan) shared histories, dominant economies, and transnational flow of culture might predicate these comparisons. However, Japan is often portrayed as irrational and inferior when compared to the West or United States. Western scholars, journalists, and Japanese nationals (see Self-exoticism) make these explicit and implicit comparisons that ultimately infer that the United States is superior.

For example, Japanese “democracy” is often portrayed as unequal to the United States, and the Japanese government is rendered incapable by “Western standards.” For example, *The New York Times* makes outright disparaging comparisons between Japan and the United States:

Japan is returning to its rightful place in the world, that of a middling country of vastly diminished and still declining importance in the world....

...Japan is still frozen in denial about a dysfunctional political system built on institutionalized cronyism. By contrast, the United States is already seeing strong stirrings of reform just weeks into a crisis over business ethics. (French 2002)

The implication is that Japan should and will stay in its “rightful” place in the world until it can learn to emulate the United States.

Causes of distortions/bias

There are several factors that can cause these negative stereotypes or representations of Japan to persist. As outlined earlier, there is a historic accumulation of reportage, literature and other forms of art and media that have long represented Japan and other Asian nations as exotic, submissive and backward. This “Orientalist” view, however, is not all-encompassing and these distortions or representations can be partially attributed to Japanese themselves in the form of self-exoticism, and structural constraints of newspaper environments and journalists in the United States and Japan.

Self-exoticism

In some cases, Japanese people quoted in articles might reinforce these negative Western images or representations of Japan and Japanese. For example, cultural themes such as groupism, Japanese hierarchy, and “uniqueness” are appropriated as a means by which Japanese have differentiated themselves from the Western world and their Asian neighbors. These theories of Japanese “uniqueness,” or *Nihonjinron*, have been appropriated by some Japanese in an effort to justify their *superiority* over the West.

Structural Constraints of Newspapers

Newspaper environments in the United States and Japan each have structural constraints that affect the quality and quantity of

articles about Japan. Misinformed coverage of Japan is often attributed to foreign correspondents who have little or no training in Japanese language or culture. A foreign correspondent typically reaches this coveted position by being an excellent writer, not necessarily by being a linguist or multi-culturalist. In addition, U.S. newspapers tend to dedicate limited physical space for international news and exotic stories and images sell newspapers. Meanwhile, the Japanese “press clubs,” or *kisha kurabu*, are often criticized as government pawns that limit the flow of critical news coming from Japan. This combination of ill-informed journalists, an American newsroom that rewards the exotic, and a Japanese media system that prevents critical coverage contributes significantly to negative images of Japan.

Discussion points for using Japan-related articles in the classroom

- 1) Is Japan exoticized in any way in the article? (Do you see words like *mysterious*, *strange*, *unique*, etc. when describing Japan or Japanese people?)
- 2) Is Japan treated as a monolith or unchanging? (Do you see expressions like, “The Japanese are...,” or “fundamentally Japanese?”)
- 3) Are samurai or warrior images misappropriated in any way?
- 4) Are Japanese people regarded as inferior (pre-modern, “traditional”) and/or placed in a context with the United States acting as a more advanced, rational big brother?

Teaching Resource

Mukai, Gary. 1994. *Media in U.S.-Japan Relations: A Look at Stereotypes*. Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (\$54.95). The goals of this 5-lesson unit of study are to help students distinguish fact from opinion, identify point of view and objectivity, understand bias, and recognize multiple perspectives in the media.

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The National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies is made possible through the generous support of the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership.