

BODY, SOUL AND MYTHS: ON THE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE CULTURE TO THE CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

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The “Japanese popular culture” has long ago interested theoreticians about its influence to the western culture. Japanese cinema, cuisine, television programs, manga, and music all developed from older artistic and literary traditions, and many of their themes and styles of presentation can be traced to traditional art forms. *Japonism* (from the French *Japonisme*, first used in 1872) is the influence of Japanese art, fashion and aesthetics on Western culture. The term is used particularly to refer to Japanese influence on European art, especially in impressionism. Why now a “dedication” to some Japanese cultural traits could be of importance for the analysis of postmodern (world) culture? It would be a banality to confirm that the contact between two different cultures always influences both cultures (in our case it is known that the contact between “Western way of Life” and the “Japanese way of Life” was at first very difficult¹). Japanese analysts and historians often mention the appeal of the Western culture in areas such as industry, technology, politics, economics, clothing, lifestyle and values; most people would anyway very easily agree in return, that traits such as Japanese food, martial arts or “manga” are part of the postmodern everyday culture; have been We believe that the Japanese cultural influence in a very dynamic way the postmodern cultural patterns (the cultural contact being bilateral).

Japan has very often played the role of Backwards World in the Western (and particularly in European) imagination. The archives are full of European documents detailing the astonishing facts of Japanese difference (600-plus observations recorded by Luís Fróis, a Jesuit missionary to Japan, in a Treatise on the Difference between European and Japanese Customs written in 1585). “When the traveler convinces himself that practices in complete

¹ As it is known, in 1543 Portuguese initiated the first contacts, establishing a trade route linking Goa to Nagasaki. In 1639, after suppressing a rebellion blamed on the Christian influence, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, which governed from Edo (modern Tokyo), presided over a prosperous and peaceful era known as the Edo period (1600–1868). The Tokugawa shogunate imposed a strict class system on Japanese society and cut off almost all contact with the outside world (having retreated into an isolationist policy, the *Sakoku*); during this “locked state,” contact with Japan by Westerners was restricted to Dejima island at Nagasaki. On July 8, 1853, the U.S. Navy steamed four warships into the bay at Edo and under threat of attack demanded that Japan open to trade with the West. Their arrival marked the “reopening” of the country to political dialogue after more than two hundred years of self-imposed isolation. Trade with Western nations would not come until the Treaty of Amity and Commerce more than five years later. The new national leadership of the following Meiji period transformed the isolated island country into an empire that closely followed Western models and became a world power.

opposition to his own, which by that very fact he would be tempted to despise and reject with disgust, are in reality identical to them when viewed in reverse, he provides himself with the means to domesticate strangeness, to make it familiar to himself.”²

For Lévi-Strauss, Japan occupied a unique place among world cultures. Molded in the ancient past by Chinese influences, it had more recently incorporated much from Europe and the United States; but the substance of these borrowings was so carefully assimilated that Japanese culture never lost its specificity. As though viewed from the hidden side of the moon, Asia, Europe, and America all find, in Japan, images of themselves profoundly transformed.

Lévi-Strauss was certainly not the only French intellectual to develop a fascination for Japan. Indeed, Japan's highly stylized rituals and philosophies of self-denial struck a particular chord with his contemporaries, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Lévi-Strauss's fascination for Japanese traditions, similar to his lifelong like for ethnography in general, stemmed in part from his feeling of alienation from modernity³.

The strange mixture of roles Japan has played in relation to world history — it was, at one point, a sort of limit-case for modernity itself; William Gibson once wrote that “Japan is the global imagination's default setting for the future” — makes it an especially rich territory for a thinker like Lévi-Strauss. For Lévi-Strauss was one of the great theorists of the anthropological nature of history, its relation to myth, and its role in constructing patterns of meaning designed to help any given society organize its relation to being and doing. He states that modern society uses history “to give itself reason to hope, not that the present will reproduce the past and that the future will perpetuate the present, but that the future will differ from the present in the same way that the present itself differs from the past.” Lévi-Strauss does not want the future to differ from the present in that same way⁴.

Roland Barthes⁵ in 26 very short chapters on different aspects of Japan (such as food, chopsticks, calligraphy, pachinko, the haiku, the eyelid etc.) offers a broad-ranging meditation on the culture, society, art, literature, language, and iconography -in short, both the sign-oriented realities and fantasies- of Japan itself. For Barthes Japan is a test, a challenge to think the unthinkable, a place where meaning is finally banished. Although Japan is a real place, many analysis are close to those of travelers to a foreign country which is largely mythical, fictional, fantastic, trying to reflect on that country's institutions, casting light on the writers' own: they also reflect Western thought about Japan!

Barthes tries a kind of dialogue (between East and West), and this is reflected at sentence level; sentences seem to have two layers, the direct and the parenthetical: *A Frenchman (unless he is abroad) cannot classify French faces; doubtless he perceives faces in common,*

² Writes Claude Lévi-Strauss in a short preface to the French translation of Luís Fróis, *Treatise on the Difference between European and Japanese Customs* (1585), in 1998.

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'autre face de la lune, Écrits sur le Japon*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2011.

⁴ As analyzed by Eric Hayot, on *The Other Face of the Moon and Anthropology Confronts the Problems of the Modern World*, Printculture, April 14th, 2013.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *L'empire des signes*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2015.

but the abstraction of these repeated faces (which is the class to which they belong) escapes him. Barthes comments on his own comments. At the level of the discourse then, the book enacts that infinite supplement of supernumerary signifiers, nudging the reader into his own supernumerary signifiers. Although Michel Foucault did not exactly analyze Japanese Culture per se, many thoughts of his were related to his interest in Buddhist theory.

As far as it concerns our approach, it definitely seems very meaningful the fact that three of the greatest modern intellectuals tried to define significant structures of the Western thought (and consequently of the Western culture) comparing with Japanese expressions describing “similar social issues”. This kind of approach may of course be due to the fascination Japan (as a “myth”) exercises on the Western imagination (and imaginary) as the significant “other” (given that identity and otherness are complementary in a system of representations and that “otherness” is always somehow “desired” as the hidden side of self – the “other side of the moon”). Nevertheless, and even if it is so, we understand that main issues concerning the contemporary culture are reflected by the “mythic other” (and of course by the conceptions concerning this mythic other from one part and from the other). Therefore, this chapter (dedicated to the influence of the Japanese Culture on the Contemporary Culture), intends to “approach” some interesting elements of the contemporary everyday culture based on Japanese cultural patterns, to understand their signification and thus better understand the contemporary culture (world’s “patterns” of knowledge and communication): particularly because “in order to understand one’s own culture, one must regard it from the point of view of another” as expressed by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s well known dictum. Of course, our analysis cannot be exhaustive: on an indicative level, we have isolated three interdependent “instances”: the body (martial arts), the soul (haiku poetry related to “zen”) and the “mythic thought” (manga).

It is almost impossible today to imagine a society devoid of any reference to Japanese martial arts. One can realize that these are ubiquitous in the popular imagery and its consciousness. But the Japanese martial arts have infused western societies at an even more significant level, far beyond their obvious influence on literature, cinema, or even dance. The notions of honor, respect, strictness and self-sacrifice conjugated to a pragmatic and dreadful efficacy have helped to promote an entire system of values which seems to have implanted itself deeply and that does not seem to be going to disappear any time soon. Even though every civilization has developed its own combat forms, very few have managed to export it as successfully as the Japanese.

In popular culture, the juxtaposition of the words "art" and of the adjective "martial" (from Mars, the Roman god of war) is often made to specifically describe and separate oriental combat systems, especially the Japanese ones, from their western counterparts; the spiritual and physical considerations are two sides of the same coin. Europe in the early 50's was at a stage where canons and planes had replaced swords and horse riding, and after a war that had traumatized an entire continent, the way was now clear for the message of the budo to pass without having to be hindered by its martial burden. People were no longer getting ready for war but they craved for peace. Everyone was trying to become a better and fairer person through the tireless polishing of codified combat techniques that for most, had not be put in use in the battlefield for a very long time indeed. The success was instantaneous and Philippe Liotard⁶ explained it as follows: “There is a very clear break between modern and antique

⁶ Thierry Terret, Luc Robène, Pascal Charroin, Stéphane Héas, Philippe Liotard, *Sport, genre et vulnérabilités au XXI^{ème} siècle*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013.

sports; it is the notion of record (and therefore performance). Record and performance express a vision of the world that is profoundly different to that of the Greeks. The culture of the body is different. For the Greeks, this culture was ritual, cultural, religiously inspired while for the modern minds, the body is a machine with a yield." What Liotard describes here, is the most crucial point that the Japanese martial art proposed at the time. We can thus understand that Japanese martial arts represented a *journey back to the source of what real sport ought to be!*

The history of the American haiku movement can be said to have begun when Commodore Matthew Perry negotiated a treaty between the United States and the Japanese governments in 1854, opening the way for trade and communication between the West and Japan. Japanese art, seen as exotic, quickly became popular in Europe, especially France, where it exerted a strong influence on the Impressionist painters. At the same time information on the poetry of Japan began to circulate. There were close connections among French artists, musicians, and poets in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, and Japanese art as well as poetry influenced the group known as the Symbolist poets of France. In Great Britain and America the Imagist poets drew inspiration from this French group. One of several influences on both French and American poets was the Japanese haiku. The relationship of haiku to Zen is another question that has absorbed the attention of the haiku community throughout its development. Unquestionably, the early impressions were that haiku were inextricably linked with Zen.

It's well known that many haiku poets were first led to haiku through an interest in Buddhism. The haiku verse form is a superb means of studying Zen modes of thought and expression, for its seventeen syllables impose a rigorous limitation that confines the poet to vital experience. In just over 100 years, haiku, a Japanese genre perched somewhere between poetry and spirituality, synthetic but enormously popular on its home ground, has been discovered by the West, translated, imitated, and integrated into Western culture. Haiku's succinctness, objectiveness, concreteness, and minimalist approach to poetics were a tonic to diverse poets. The spiritual depth of haiku continues to challenge scholars even while the simplicity and directness of these short verses made the genre immediately popular among a broad segment of the Western public.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Japan has become the world's second largest exporter of cultural products. Manga has conquered 45 per cent of the French comic market, and *Shonen Jump* – the most important manga weekly for Japanese teenagers, whose circulation reached 6 million during the mid-1990s – has begun appearing in an American version. Manga, long considered fit only for children or poorly-educated youths, is starting to seduce a sophisticated generation of thirty year old! The first encroachment of Japanese pop culture onto the western market was crucial for what followed. Young fans of *Goldorak* and *Candy Candy* – the two most popular Japanese animated TV series among French youth at the end of the 1970s – grew into adults who would open the French market to manga with the all-conquering translation of *Akira* in 1989-90. It may be cheaply mass-produced, but manga is also a high-quality consumer good. In this sense, the global success of Shueisha or Kodansha is no different from that of Toyota or Sony. As a product of exceptional quality, it brings pleasure to the mind by satisfying six fundamental psychological needs^{7*}: the will to power, the need for accomplishment, for security, for excitement, for escape, and the need to be

⁷ Jean-Marie Bouissou, "Japan's growing cultural power. The case of manga in France" in Jaqueline Berndt (ed.), *Reading Manga from Multiple Perspectives*, Leipzig, Leipzig Universitätsverlag 2006.

distinct. Manga's success in that respect is due to the exceptional freedom allowed to it since the end of the Second World War, and increasingly to a number of peculiarities of Japanese culture.

Despite its stereotype, Japanese culture is much less repressed than western cultures, which are constrained by Judeo-Christianity and “political correctness”. It is much less inhibited about sex. Phantoms, superstitions, numerous spirits, monsters (friendly and not), and a healthy dose of the irrational all survive in Japan's collective unconscious (thanks to the country's late entry into modernity, its ignorance of Cartesian philosophy, and its lack of intolerant monotheism).

The taste for tears and for miserable heroes runs so deep that even Prime Ministers have been unashamed to weep in public. All this finds its place in manga *Dragon Ball*, world champion of all categories of manga which may have horrified western parents and teachers, but it embedded itself deeply in the youthful imagination worldwide. The pre-modern Japanese world of *kami*, *oni*, *yokai* and *yure* (spirits, demons, monsters, and ghosts) was spared the “ethic” ravages that destroyed their Western counterparts and they might respond to a latent demand!

Body, soul and myths: the “upside-down” reflect of the Western Civilization is discreetly (?) questioned by a “Far Eastern other”: the articles which follow⁸, show some aspects of this contemporary dialogue which amazes and inspires.

⁸ These articles were presented during the special workshop on the influence of the Japanese Culture on the contemporary society, organized by the RC 13 of ISA, the GT21 of AISLF at the University of Athens and held on June 16th 2014.