

Japan as Other: Orientalism and Cultural Conflict

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Abstract

This paper tries to show how cross-cultural conflict often occurs between Japan and Westerners as the result of imposing one's own cultural meanings onto another culture. Interpretations of Japan, as well as other Asian cultures, often carries an implicit assumption that the West is rational (and superior) whereas the East is bound by ancient traditions (and is inferior). "Orientalism" has been identified as the particular form that Western stereotypical understandings of Asian cultures has taken. Intercultural communication becomes highly problematic as long as stereotypes are held and as long as the other culture is seen as foreign and wholly other. By transcending this "Orientalism" we will be in a better position to understand and communicate with those from another culture without having to set up a dichotomous boundary between "us" and "them." Conflict with Japan is focused on 1) because there seems to be a lot of it, and 2) because Japan represents a unique culture field which is, in some ways, both modern and familiar, yet in other ways seemingly foreign to Western interpretive structures. This paper will call into question some of the stereotypes that Westerners often project onto Japan as being a monolithic culture which is excessively authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal. We will try to offer some other interpretive options for understanding a culture which has suffered from intercultural communication problems for so long.

keywords: cross-cultural conflict, cultural meanings, implicit assumptions, Orientalism.

Orientalism is a total mis-seeing of the other through a veil of interpretations of reality which are relatively impenetrable and resistant to change. It is a form of ethnocentrism which has evolved into cultural myth, invariant in its imaginings, and imperialistic in its aims. This paper argues that so-called Orientalism is a way of life, and not just an out-dated way of knowing from the colonial past; it is an integral part of modern consciousness. Ethnocentrism is the imposition of one's own culturally mediated system of understandings onto others. It is the interpretation and evaluation of others through this epistemological screen, with the implicit assumption that one's own mode of understanding is superior because it is invariantly true. (Erchak 1992:90) In psychological terms we can say that ethnocentrism is a kind of cognitive orientation which understands the world in terms of rigid schemata; Orientalism is a particular historical manifestation of this ethnocentric orientation. It is based on a Western consciousness which "includes a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections." (Said 1993:90)

Orientalism as cultural myth had been articulated through metaphors which characterize the East in ways which emphasize its strangeness and otherness. The Orient (whatever that term may signify) is seen as separate, passive, eccentric, backwards, "with a tendency to despotism." (Said 1993:36) What Edward Said says of stereotypes of Middle-Eastern peoples applies to East Asian stereotypes as well: the Oriental person is a single image, a sweeping generalization; an essentialized image which carries with it the taint of inferiority. (51) The cultural myth of Orientalism is, as Said convincingly demonstrates, fueled or reiterated by academic Orientalism. Although in the United States it is now more politically correct to refer to "East Asian studies" when speaking about research related to China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, the University of London still boasts The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)- perhaps a throwback to colonial days. This is an appellation which lumps just about all the peoples from Turkey to Tokyo under one rubric, which all its connotations of exoticism and foreignness. Below we will be looking at some examples of how academic Orientalism has helped perpetuate certain stereotypes of Japan as Other.

A look at how metaphors comparing and evaluating the Chinese compared to the Japanese in America, bears testimony to how mythic paradigms inform understandings of others, such that we create artificial divisions between the people we may be trying to communicate with. In the 20th century at least, Chinese stereotypes have been far kinder than images of Japanese people and culture. Even though the Second World War clearly separated the Chinese and Japanese into friend and enemy respectively, earlier, pre-war stereotypes as well, evaluated Chinese people and culture in a far kinder light. (Johnson 1988:23)

American ideological thinking about the East has generally found Chinese culture to be much more accessible than Japanese- the Chinese are seen to be "more like us": frank and direct, individualistic, rational, educated, pragmatic and practical. Even the cuisine is much more accessible/comprehensible to Western palates, it seems, than the Japanese fare such as raw fish and miso soup. Not only is Japan what Geertz has called, "the last other to be discovered," it seems to us to be the most attenuated of civilized cultures (aboriginal hunter-gather cultures being completely beyond the ken of Western commonsense understandings of reality). Japanese social institutions signify Japan to be a culture with a high level of sophistication in Western eyes, yet it also appears as highly feudal and totally anachronistic to the moral imperatives of the modern world; the culture as a whole tends to be quite opaque to us- Japanese cultural mores are exotic, quixotic and even absurd. The paradigmatic example of this is self-immolation, total self-sacrifice- whether it is killing oneself for one's feudal lord or for the company by overwork.

Western images and metaphors for Japan are not all negative, of course- a romantic version of Orientalism paints a picture of Japan whose sophisticated culture with its indigenous traditions are in close harmony with nature (a myth popular in Japan, as well, it might be added); tiny bonsai trees, exotic geisha girls in kimono, manicured rock gardens, the unfathomable mysteries of Zen Buddhism, shiatsu and macrobiotic cooking, signify for us a people who are deeply intuitive and aesthetically attuned in a way that we are not. Nevertheless, this romantic Orientalism is less salient than its shadow side- we could say, is overshadowed by its shadow, which sees the Japanese as basically fanatical, deceitful, with a tendency to cruelty in their private lives and totalitarianism in their public practices. The image which predominates here is of the unquestioning company man/woman who sacrifices all their individuality and humanity for the organization- who submerges their entire identity in the group.

To give one powerful example of this essentializing process of image formation which is entailed by Orientalism, we quote from a book entitled, *When Culture's Collide*, by Richard D. Lewis (1982), a kind of manual for those traveling and doing business around the world to help them understand the alien cultures they come in contact with. By no means the worst of its kind, Lewis' book expresses very well the way we use metaphors to trivialize another culture in a totalistic way, so as to make it easier to capture it in the network of our own understandings.

- Japanese children are encouraged to be completely dependent and keep a sense of interdependence throughout their lives.

-Everything must be placed in context in Japan.

-Japanese are constrained by their thought processes in a language very different from any other.

- They do not like meeting newcomers.

- They represent their group and can not therefore pronounce on any matters without consultation- cannot initiate an exchange of views.

-Westerners are individuals, but the Japanese represent a company which represents Japan

- As we all know, Japanese do not like to lose face.

- The Japanese go to incredible lengths to be polite.

(Lewis 1988:262)

This kind of Orientalism carries with it the implication that Asian people are much more conformist than we are, and less respecting of the dignity of individual rights, i.e., inferior. Social and cognitive

psychology tells us that stereotyping is a kind of mental schema making designed to help us grasp reality- to make things more understandable and less threatening; these mental schema such as stereotypes provide us with the illusion of understanding by dividing up and categorizing the flux of experience into easily manageable cognitive maps. (Augustinos 1995:33) Orientalism has been the prevalent mode by which this cognitive need to schematize has manifested itself in apprehending Asian peoples. In recent history, Japan bashing has been a reiteration of the ethnocentrism exhibited during the war, carrying with it negative consequences in terms of cross-cultural understanding/communication. America reacted to the economic defeats and recession of the 1980's with patent hostility towards Japan, which included such things as Congressmen smashing Japanese radios on Capitol Hill, and the murder of an the Chinese man in Detroit, because he was thought to be Japanese. To some degree, we have witnessed the darkest sorts of racism which characterized our appraisals of Japan during the Second World War. The numerous corporate takeovers of Hollywood movie studios and famous real estate has, of course, exacerbated these fearful stereotypes which signify the Japanese has wholly other; they carry the implicit assumption that "they are not like us- they don't play by the rules of decency; they don't play fair." (Buruma 1996:256)

The film The Rising Sun features the corporate takeover of America by the Japanese. In this movie, the Japanese are portrayed as almost entirely immoral; the Japanese corporation is analogized as being like the Mafia; in fact in the film, the Japanese Mafia (Yakuza) and the corporation are seen to be in contiguous (metonymic) relationship. The clear message to the Americans who saw the film or read the book is primarily this: watch out- the Japanese corporation and organized crime are morally/ideologically and organizationally/structurally one and the same. The Japanese are coming, and by virtue of their deceitful practices which stem from their underworld gangland power structures and arcane feudal social system, they will accomplish their sinister aims; if we are not on our guard, they are likely to completely usurp American economic power and take away our freedoms too (freedom being contiguous with free market capitalism in American cultural ideology).

As Masao Miyoshi says in his insightful book, Off Center, popular works such as these tell us much more about the people writing (and reading) such them, than about the people/culture's they purport to be reporting on. (1991:46) They tend to focus on what is right and wrong with a culture. Karol Van Wolferen's book from this period, The Enigma of Japanese Power is one such example of casting these sorts of rigid value judgments on the culture one purports to be studying, albeit this time in the form of "academic Orientalism." Though the book is based entirely on factual data, the data is organized and interpreted in such a way as to skew Japan in the direction of being portrayed as a fundamentally fascist country. What needs to be pointed out is that from page 1 till the end, the rhetorical strategy behind his marshaling of numerous facts about the workings of Japanese institutions is this: to evoke a clear picture of Japan as one of the most totalitarian societies in the world. This is clearly an imperialistic/Orientalist agenda insofar as it implies that European culture is the repository of enlightened rationalism, and humanism, with its attendant concern for democratic principles and individual human rights.

The classic work, which established our academic understanding of Japan, was Ruth Benedict's Chrysanthemum and the Sword. (1946) As Clifford Geertz points out, this ethnography from afar starts out trying to expose the workings of Japanese society to make it more accessible, but by the end of the book has succeeded in accentuating its strangeness and has persuaded us that they are a truly odd people. (Geertz 1988:87) She represents Japan as being a totally homogeneous culture immune to democratic principles and thinking. In this imaginative construction of another people's culture, Japan has become, in the words of Geertz, the Impossible Object, "an enormous something, intricate, and madly busy, that , like an Escher drawing, fails to compute- a challenge not just to our power, but to our powers of comprehension." (85)

Of course, labeling someone as an Orientalist or ethnocentrist or imperialist can easily become another form of essentializing, resulting in the creation of a divide between us/them; the labeler can feel politically correct, hence superior, remaining all the while unaware of his or her own fixed structures of interpretation/orientation. In psychological terminology, relying on cognitive schema types is the normal mode of (unreflective) perception. (Erchak 1992:56-59) Ethnocentrism is the natural way of being in the world for cultural beings—social scientists included- a state of affairs where action is mediated by fixed structures of interpretation such that the other is completely obscured and dialogue runs the risk of becoming meaningless.

What might be the way out of the prison house of cognitive structures which have spawned the historically mediated illness of Orientalism? Can there be a way out of this epistemological nightmare or crisis of understanding? A program of emancipation has been proposed by professor Antonio T. DeNicolas in his translation/interpretation of the Hindu document, the *Bhagavad Gita*. In his book Avatara: The Humanization of Philosophy Through the Bhagavad Gita (1976), he argues that the *Gita* itself proposes just such a plan for emancipation from an ethnocentric orientation wherein particular epistemological structures which condition our interpretations of other peoples/cultures have come to be embodied - "... a crisis wherein the present is fed by the habits of the past- a theoretical past substituting for the actual present." (1976:252)

To escape from the seemingly no-exit situation of imperialist interpretations of Asian or other foreign people- of Japan bashing- the *Gita* proposes a radical program of sacrifice of one's perspectives- a seeing through of those structures which, by their very nature, tend to resist being seen through. Through this radical sacrifice, "The multiplicity of actual human empirical spaces for man's [woman's] interaction and communication may be made possible. The 'other' for Krishna's way of knowledge becomes the possibility for emancipation and radical constitution." (247) This program of emancipation requires that we not only acknowledge crisis as an element of man's life, but that we uncover its presuppositions." (248) Crisis, in this view, may lead either to despair (or Japan bashing/people bashing)- or it may engender a radical reorientation- surrender to the control of those in authority- or the kind of orientation/activity which will make knowledge transparent to itself.

Claire Kramersch says much the same thing in her book, Context and Culture in Language Teaching, (1993) She argues that foreign language learning itself contains within it the means to facilitate cross-cultural communication insofar as it has an intrinsic quality of tending to deconstruct invariant structures of ways of knowing. It is principally through dialogue, in her view, that crisis/conflict can become a catalyst for change, because it involves, "fundamental realignments of value and perceptions among the participants." (232) This means that cross-cultural communication can become part of a systematic effort to desensitize one's embodied/invariant ways of knowing- the way out of the no-exist world of interacting with one's projections. Ethnocentrism is this kind of invariant way of cognizing or imagining, and Orientalism an historical instance of this fixation-projection, a stance which occludes any adequate vision of either the other or ourselves. Unfortunately, at this particular juncture in history, Orientalism seems to be the predominant context for interpretations and interactions with Asian peoples, and programs for emancipation have yet to become apart of mainstream culture.

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