# "What Kind of Culture Could Produce These?" Appeal of the Exotic as Entry into Japanese Culture

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## 日本文化への参入として「エキゾチックな他」の魅力

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### Abstract

Broadcast and print media, in all forms, remain the central avenue for attracting interest in other cultures. This paper presents a series of observations of and interviews with American university students studying Japanese as a foreign language in the United States. Though the qualitative nature of this research project precludes any broad generalizations, the study suggests that Japanese media products, particularly *anime*[1] and *manga*, have been added to triggers for interest in Japan and studying Japanese. However, though new media products have been added to the triggers for initial interest in Japan, this has not shifted the perception of Japan as an exotic "other." In short, to the previous views of Japan as both traditional and modern, a post-modern view of Japanese culture has been added.

**Key words :** popular culture, media, anime, images of Japan, othering

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　放送と印刷メディアは、他文化に対して興味を引き付けるための主要な方法である。当論文は米国で日本語を勉強している大学生の一連の観察によって結果を出したものである。この研究は特にアニメやマンガのような日本のメディアが、米国の大学生が日本文化に対する興味をもち、日本語を勉強することにさらに関心を寄せることに焦点をあてている。伝統的に、日本が「エキゾチックな他」として考察されると同時に「モダン」な日本が注目されてきたが、そこに「ポストモダン」な日本の様相を付加するものである。

**キーワード：**大衆文化、メディア、アニメ、日本のイメージ、「他者化」

# Introduction: Images and the Imaginary Exotic

## *Create an Image*

Close your eyes and create a picture. Imagine a calm garden, a simple wooden teahouse set next to a quiet pond. Add some willow trees, and a few pine trees as well. Put a bridge arching across the pond. Paint it red. On the far side of the pond, plant iris and see them in their purple splendor. Add the sound of birds, maybe ducks or swallows, and to that add the sound of water running softly into a bowl, see it flowing out from a bamboo pipe. Place yourself in the picture. Hear a few voices chanting in a language you almost understand in a building you cannot see through the foliage. Feel a soft breeze cooling you from the heat of the afternoon sun. Label this picture 'traditional'. Then erase it.

Next, picture crowds of people and busy city streets. Double the number of people. Picture buildings pushed together, much as you would push in one more book on a crowded bookshelf. Picture neon lights and people packed into trains. Picture bright, almost glaring colors. Add noises to these pictures: voices on mobile phones, the honking of taxi horns, the blare from speakers placed just inside doorways to game centers, the sound of the trains, vendors calling shoppers into stores. Put yourself in the picture, pushing your way through the crowd as you scurry to cross the lanes of traffic before the cars rush back. Mix it all together in a kaleidoscope of images. When you have the picture, label it 'modern'.

This third picture requires a drawing, not a photograph. Recall any Disney animated film, the movie *Alien* (Scott, 1979), and your favorite video game. Dress the female Disney character like the heroine in the space fantasy, perhaps with more skin. Give her wide-open eyes and flowing blond, pink or blue hair. Make the prince a bit more rugged, less perfect, and younger, even shorter. Dress him like an astronaut, but skip the helmet. Make the Seven Dwarves into robots, still human in form but definitely robots. Turn the pleasant woodland scene into a swirling background of colors, maybe stars and distant galaxies, or the harsh metallic city-world of *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), or both. Add an evil scientist and henchmen and the need for the hero to save the day, with help from the girl and the robots. Add a sound track that makes you think of the video game or a discordant combination of rock and jazz. Dialogue is optional. Once you have this picture, label it 'postmodern'.

Recall all three images: 'traditional,' 'modern' and 'postmodern'. Now, place the three images on top of each other. The resulting image provides one of the "imaginary" Japan. An "imaginary" is a mediated image; that is an image derived not from personal experience but through secondary sources, primarily mass media. Books, movies, comics, newspapers, magazines, and other products meant for reading or viewing that do not require direct contact between the creator and the consumer are mass media products.

### Western Invention of an Exotic

The imaginary of Japan has multiple layers, each added by a new generation. Raz and Raz (1996) place images of Japan into three periods, a) as "admired and studied as being the 'the most aesthetic of modern people'" (Chamberlain, 1902, cited in Raz & Raz, 1996, p. 162), b) as a "yellow peril" after its defeat of Russia and through WWII, and c) as a paradox encompassing both tradition and modernization. These three periods do not clearly encompass all the images of Japan. Littlewood (1996) isolates multiple images of Japan in the Western imagination over the 400 plus years of contact between the West and Japan, ranging from the blatantly condescending, to the outright admiring. In all these images, though, Littlewood sees a "tendency to package Japan in terms of paradox and contradiction" (p. 7). Similarly, Smith (1997) noted that the earliest Westerners to reach Japan, the Jesuit missionaries of the 16th Century, were quick to point out all the ways that Japan differed from Europe, but failed to permit the Japanese "their own history, a past by which their great and small differences could have been explained" (p. 5). The paradox and contradictions of Western attitudes toward Japan are clear in the titles of many of the books about Japanese society. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*[2] (Benedict, 1946), *The Lotus and the Robot* (Koestler, 1960), and *Saints and Samurai* (Austin, 1975) point to ways in which the contradictory images have been explored by the West. However, as Bellah (2003) points out, much of the writing on Japan that claims for it a uniqueness is superficial, though superficiality does not necessarily make it untrue.

The image of uniqueness associated with Japan, particularly its exoticism, entered the West before Perry's arrival. Hart (1967) traces the foundations of this imaginary to a brief mention of "Iapon" by Marco Polo in his accounts of his voyages to China. As the exotic image grew, Japan became a goal. When the Portuguese arrived in Nagasaki in 1542, the West added substance to an imaginary. Trade opened, and Japan acquired Western technology, which Arnason (1996) sees as making possible the "the astonishingly rapid unification of Japan" (p. 66). This is also a statement of the West's imaginary; a 100-year period of war between individual Japanese districts that led to the consolidation of power in the Tokugawa Shogunate cannot be considered rapid. When Japan closed its doors to the West in 1641, it maintained contact through a fiction that one island in Nagasaki harbor, Dejima or Outside Island, was not Japanese territory, thereby permitting limited access to traders. This limited contact advanced the appeal Japan had in the Western imagination and allowed the West to create a far more exotic Japan than might have been created had Japan remained open.

When Perry showed up and Japan returned to participation in the world, the aesthetic representation of Japan in the Western imaginary deepened (Benfey, 2003). Those who followed Perry into Japan were consummate diarists and chroniclers, writing of the Japanese in terms of contradictions – unlettered heathens in need of guidance or teachers of simplicity,

imitators or creators (Benfey, 2003). Chamberlain (2007/1902) called it "topsy-turvy" in his 1902 dictionary *Things Japanese*.

Numerous authors have pointed out the tendency in the West to create two separate discourses about Japan – modern and traditional (e.g. Bellah, 2003; Boyle, 1993; Littlewood, 1996; Smith, 1997) – that can be traced back to these initial contacts. Ivy (1995) considers this a "parallel conscious" which represents Japan in a double way (p. 25). Hammond (1999) sees it as indicating an undercurrent of hostility and argues that the term "exotic Japan," used to encapsulate the notion that Japan looks modern but is in actuality traditional, is a coded form of racism permitted in both media and academic approaches to Japan (p. 313). Similarly, Luther (2002) sees a continuous use of the thematic image of Japan as double-sided. Her examination of the image of Japan in Western media found that the discussion of the country's economic achievements in the postwar period was primarily in terms "of a nation that managed to acquire economic achievements through unprincipled and dishonest means" (p. 65).

Though Japan's economic re-emergence is frequently linked to a surge in postwar exports, the decisive element in Japan's recovery was the Korean War, which brought Japan more than twice as much through U.S. military procurements as the $2 billion provided by U.S. aid programs (Benfey, 2003), and even more as it became a rest and staging site for American soldiers. It was this that led to a postwar re-emergence in the popularity of Japanese culture. When *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950) was released in 1950, sub-titles were soon added to allow the film to be shown to soldiers. The film was well received and Hollywood began to look to Japan as a site for movies. *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998; Verbinski, 2002) and *The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2000, 2004) are only recent additions to a long list of films remade in Hollywood. *The Grudge* represents a new step in remakes as the director of the Japanese original, Shimizu Takeshi, directed the Hollywood version. The earlier remakes include the films *Yojimbo* (Kurosawa, 1961), which depicts the lone samurai as savior, remade as the western *A Fist Full of Dollars* (Leone, 1967), *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1954) remade as *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges, 1960), and *Rashomon* remade as *The Outrage* (Ritt, 1964). The recreation of the Japanese aesthetic recast Japanese forms in Western terms. This is seen clearly in *The Last Samurai* (Zwik, 2003), where a non-Japanese "samurai" becomes the protector of traditional Japan.

The discourses of traditional Japanese culture, which includes Japan's pre-Meiji social structure and its artistic traditions, and those of Japanese modernity, which focus on Japan's emergence as a military and economic power from the Meiji period through the economic growth seen in the postwar era, are joined by a discourse of postmodernity. Jameson (2001/1983) links postmodernity to the emergence of a post-industrial "consumer or multinational capitalism" (p. 35). To Jameson, the two central features of postmodernism are a breakdown in historical understanding which leads to a form "schizophrenia" by which

reality is lost in its images and signifiers (pp. 29-32). Movies such as *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), set in a universal city seemingly modeled on modern Tokyo, based on the science fiction novel as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick, 1968), present the industrial-cityscape as dark and troubled. In effect, an alienating environment that isolates individuals within a crowded space, what Durkheim (1966/1951) termed *anomie* and others (Jameson, 1984; Lyotard, 1993) have labeled as a feature of the postmodern, post-Fordist, social structure. Similarly, *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003), set in Tokyo, cast the nation in terms of the alienating images of postmodernity.

A multiple number of discourses regarding Japan are extant in the mass media, that of the traditional, the modern, and the postmodern. Which returns me to my original question, "What is the main avenue for entry into Japan today?" or to phrase it in terms of a research question:

Research Question: What sparks interest in Japan among American college students?

## The Study: Entry into Japanese Culture

### Data Collection

American university students approach Japanese culture at a variety of venues. To obtain an understanding of how Americans develop an initial interest in Japan, I established three observation points for the unobtrusive data collection and arranged for a series of interviews with Americans enrolled in a second-year Japanese language course.

### Observation Data

The sites for the observational data collection were a) outside of classrooms as students waited for Japanese-language class to begin, b) at the public screenings for five anime feature films, and c) at a Japanese knowledge contest organized by the Japan-America Society, and at an Asia Day festival open to the community. Note taking followed by reconstruction of the notes according to ethnographic data collection protocols, and limited use of a digital data recorder (i-Pod), were used to obtain the data for the observational portion of this study. At all events, I adopted the role of participant observer, keeping my note taking unobtrusive and participating actively in the events.

### Interview Data

In addition to the unobtrusive data collection, I also conducted a series of interviews with nine Americans enrolled in a second-year Japanese-language course at one university in order to get a clearer picture of what attracts Americans living in the U.S. to study Japanese. These interviews built upon the comments heard during unobtrusive observations.

*Participants*. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 32, with an average age of 21.8. Four interviewees were female and five were male. Five interviewees identified themselves

as Americans of Chinese (male and female), Korean (female), Japanese (female), or 'Asian' (male) descent.

*Structure of interviews*. The students were interviewed in pairs, with each interview lasting for at least 45 minutes. The longest interview was 80 minutes. One subject was interviewed twice when the partner of another interview subject did not show up for the interview. The interview sites were classrooms at the university. All interviews were then transcribed and the comments from the students compared to yield the qualitative data described below.

## Results and Discussion
### Observational Data

The observations allowed for broad categories to be drawn regarding the ways in which Japan attracts the interest of college students in the U.S., a process that helped to determine the direction to take in the interviews with the Japanese-language course students. Table 1 provides an overview of the observational data. As can be seen, when the traditional culture of Japan was mentioned, it was in the context of a competition on knowledge of Japanese society, where the questions included those on Japanese history and literature. For the most part, when outside the competition or the classroom, conversations were more likely to revolve around recent Japanese cultural products or Japanese martial arts such as judo and kendo than those aspects associated with traditional Japanese culture.

**Table 1.  Attractions of Japanese Culture Mentioned at Observational Sites**

| Cultural Attraction Mentioned | Outside classrooms | Asia Day Events | Japan Bowl Competition | Anime class movies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anime, manga | X | X | X | X |
| Architecture, traditional | | X | X | |
| Art, modern | | | | X |
| Arts, traditional (ikebana, hanga, etc.) | | X | X | |
| Comedy (rakugo) | | | X | |
| Drama, traditional (Noh, kabuki, bunraku) | | X | X | |
| Gardens, landscaping, farming | | X | X | |
| History | | X | X | |
| Kanji or calligraphy | X | X | X | |
| Literature, Meiji to Postwar | | | X | |
| Literature, pre-Meiji | | | X | |
| Martial arts (kendo, judo, karate, aikido) | X | X | X | X |
| Modern literature | X | | X | |
| Music, J-Pop (rock/pop music) | X | X | | |
| Music, Traditional (shamisen, koto, etc.) | | X | X | |
| Religion (Buddhism, Shintoism) | | | X | |

X = Mentioned at least once during the observations.

*Popular culture overheard: 'I brought that DVD.'* Consider these three scenes:

1) I am standing in the lobby waiting for classes to let out and the room to become available. A student approaches a group waiting near me. They great each other, then the new arrival says, "I brought that DVD I told you about. That *Twelve Kingdoms*[3] program." The DVD is pulled out and passed over to a student in the group. The other two with him lean to read the cover and make appreciative comments.

2) Another day. Two people near me are discussing movies and one man asks the other if he has seen *Lost in Translation*. He says no. I listen more closely. Then his friend says, "You've got to see it. I love the lady who does the translation during the commercial."

3) A class leaves the classroom. Outside, someone asks Sean[4] if he wants to get something to eat. Sean says he can't because he is going home to sleep since he was up all night. The first student asks if he was studying. Sean says he was playing *Gundam*[5] for eight hours straight. Both laugh and talk about video games before they split up.

All three incidents give a clear idea of the types of conversations about Japanese media and popular culture that took place in the lobby before and after Japanese classes were being held. The only other discussions about Japan were related to food or coursework. No one talked about other aspects of Japanese culture. If they talked about Japanese culture, they talked about video games, anime, manga, music, or movies set in or about Japan. Overheard conversations about Japan suggest that popular culture is one avenue for entry into Japanese culture. It is not the only avenue, but during my interviews and at the Japan-related events I attended, popular culture emerged as a clear reason for initial interest in Japanese culture.

*Asia Day and kids*. The annual Asia Day, sponsored by the university's Center for Asian Studies, is ostensibly for all ages but attracts a large number of parents with children. Asia Day provides an opportunity to experience a number of East Asian cultures, with 11 sessions on Japan, 10 sessions on China, three on India, two on Korean, one each on Cambodia and Tibet, one session on both Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, and one session labeled "Kid's Room". In the room set aside for tasting the various snacks on offer, I noted between 50 and 60 children and 40 to 50 adults. An exact count was not possible as people came and went during the time snacks were available, but I estimate that about half of those in attendance were children. This is reflected in the events. Seventeen of the 30 sessions were specifically for children. In addition, the Kid's Room provided children with an opportunity to participate in a variety of Asian crafts and games. Only two sessions were listed as "not suitable for young audiences" on the program.

Of the 11 sessions on Japan, seven were specifically for children, including a calligraphy session, a session on the Japanese celebration of Doll's Day[6] and related paper crafting of dolls, a kite making workshop, a Japanese tea ceremony demonstration, the TV program *Big Bird in Japan* (Stone, 1988), traditional Japanese children's stories, and a Japanese *taiko* drum

performance. For mixed ages, there was a showing of the documentary *The Colonel Comes to Japan* (Nathan, 1981), and talks on Shinto in Japanese life, working at a Japanese hot spring, and *kyogen* comic theater. Also set up were booths from the Japan-America Society of Colorado, the JET[7] program, and the Center for International Exchange-USA, which was recruiting host families for Japanese students in Boulder for the summer and arranging a "grassroots" trip to stay with Japanese families in the Nagoya area in June.

As I wandered through the site, I saw volunteers dressed in the traditional clothing of countries represented and observed people watching or trying the various traditional crafts or art of the areas. As I did, I heard one boy, of about 12, ask his mother where the comics were. She replied that there weren't any. He was obviously disappointed and said he only came because the thought there would be comics or martial arts. In another room, I watched the demonstration of Japanese *taiko* drums, following dances and songs from other Asian nations. Another boy, again about 12, was obviously impressed by the athleticism of the drummers. At the end of the performance he approached the group and asked how they had learned *taiko*. In the lobby, two children showed their father the kite they had made and talked about the way kites are used in Japan. A young girl, wearing a pink shirt with Hello Kitty on it listened to a Japanese folk tale.

For those at the Asia Day event, traditional cultural forms were clearly an attraction of Japan, with many of the non-Japanese, probably those who had lived there, wearing *yukata* or *haori* as they worked as volunteers. To me, they represent those enamored with traditional Japan. What was missing, however, were the current offerings of Japanese culture — anime, manga and video games.

*Showing off knowledge*. The 8th Annual Japan Bowl Regional[8] competition, held at the University of Denver, provided the opportunity to observe another avenue to knowledge of Japan. Ten regional high schools and two universities sent teams. Winners at each of the levels[9] in the high school competition compete at the national event.

As the preliminary competition is closed to all but contestants, the event also provided demonstrations of Japanese martial arts, manga, anime, *go*, and Japanese culture during the morning preliminaries. When I arrived, I saw some high school age students reading a Japanese manga together. A small group watched two people play *go*. One man was wearing a *happi*-coat, showing him to be a member of Yomiuri Giants club. He, like other volunteers, speaks to people in a mix of English and Japanese. The volunteers are from the Japan-America Society of Colorado and most work at local firms that conduct business with Japanese firms. Their conversations are about work, the competition, and catching up on personal news.

The Deputy Consul General of Japan in Denver opened the final competition, giving a speech about U.S.-Japan cooperation and urging all students to do their best to learn about

Japan. The competition itself asked questions primarily about the Japanese language, not surprising since the students were studying the language. However, questions related to Japanese culture were primarily about traditional culture. At every level, several questions asked for translations of old proverbs or for information about traditional arts such as *kabuki*. None of the questions asked about historical events. None asked about modern Japan. One question asked about a modern Japanese author in a sentence the contestants had to translate. None of the questions touched upon those things that the students seemed most interested in, anime, manga, martial arts, or games like *go*. None asked about Japanese society today.

One Japanese woman watching the competition remarked she couldn't understand why they focused on such old fashioned parts of Japanese culture like *kabuki* and *rakugo*[10] and didn't ask about modern culture. Students made similar comments about seldom used proverbs and onomatopoetic expressions.

Three different views of Japan seemed to be operating among the participants and observers at the competition, one centered on traditional culture, one on the Japanese business environment, and one on popular culture. The first two were observed primarily in the volunteers running the competition and the teachers accompanying the students. The students, however, displayed more interest in martial arts, manga, J-Pop music, and other aspects of Japanese youth culture.

*Visual narratives and cyberpunks*. A university course titled "Japanimation and Cyborg Culture" had an open film showing each week during most of the term. Most films were anime first shown in Japan. All explored the hazards and benefits of technology. With the exception of *Akira* (Otomo, 2001/1988) and *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954), all the films were made in the past 10 years. The weekly film screenings, held on campus, attracted both students in the course and their friends. At the screenings I attended, two things stood out. First, studying Japanese was secondary for most of those in attendance. Some studied Japanese, but for the most part they were interested in the films rather than the language. Second, and more importantly, those attending know anime. They talked about other films made by the directors. They compared the anime with the manga they are derived from and explained scenes to each other. Consider a typical conversation heard before one film:

Man 1: What do you think of Tezuka?

Man 2: I liked this last movie a lot.[11]

Man 1: It showed a lot of complexity. I mean, doing that with anime, like that.

Man 2: I'd rate it as one of my top 5.

Man 1: What's first? *Akira*?

Man 2: That's good, but I like the series stuff. *Neon Genesis*.[12] Those are great.

Man 1: Yes, the way the psych stuff works in.

Man 2:  And, you know, the kids doing it, you know, piloting, and the Evas.[13]

Man 1:  Yeah, I really wanted to get one of those. Zip around in different shapes.

As the conversation continued, they talk about the animation films they like best, the various robots they like, and their preference for Japanese style animation because it gives move room for imagination. One mentions a web site for getting pirate copies of recently released Japanese anime, though the site name is never mentioned. At another screening I heard:

Man 1:  Have you seen *Akira* before?

Man 2:  Yeah, when I was in high school. My brother and I watched it.

Woman:  That's when I saw it, too. I was blown away. I couldn't believe how good it was.

Man 1:  Yeah. When Tetsuo uses his psci powers. Wow.

Woman:  Yeah, I was like, you know, really blown away. The whole …

Man 2:  Tetsuo's so radical. He's got it all.

[Graduate Teaching Assistant starts the film.]

Or another conversation:

Man 1:  Could you believe it? Sexy cartoons.

Man 2:  Was this your first anime?

Man 1:  No, I've seen to a couple of them, but this one was over the top. I mean, this sure ain't Disney.

Man 3:  Not even close.

Man 2:  You should come next week. It's really edgy.

Man 1:  Yeah.

Man 2:  Yeah. Next week is *Metropolis*. A classic. Classic cinema remade as anime. Osamu [Tezuka] really hits it.

[speakers move out of range]

At each of the screenings I attended, the conversations I overheard dealt primarily with the anime that was going to be shown or other films by the same artist. The conversations showed the speakers knowledge about the films and their obvious interest in the films themselves. How interest in anime translates into interest in Japan is something I explored in the interviews.

### Interviews

The events I attended and the conversations I overheard led me to speculate on what creates initial interest in Japan. To understand these impulses, I arranged for a set of interviews with students enrolled in a second-year Japanese-language course. These interviews provided a more in depth view of the trigger for interest in Japan. Table 2 provides an overview of the topics mentioned during the interviews.

Table 2.  Attractions of Japanese Culture Mentioned During Interviews

| Cultural Attraction Mentioned | Jerrod & Mike | Carol & Brian | Autumn & Sonia | Laurel & Jerrod | David & Maria |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anime, manga | X | X | X | X | X |
| Architecture, traditional | | | | | |
| Art, modern | | | X | | |
| Arts, traditional (ikebana, hanga, etc.) | | X | | | |
| Comedy (rakugo) | | | | | |
| Drama, traditional (Noh, kabuki, bunraku) | | | | | |
| Gardens, landscaping, farming | | X | | | |
| History | X | X | X | | |
| Kanji or calligraphy | X | | | X | |
| Literature, Meiji to Postwar | | X | | | |
| Literature, pre-Meiji | | X | | | |
| Martial arts | X | | X | X | X |
| Modern literature | | X | | | |
| Movies (not anime) | X | X | X | X | |
| Music, J-Pop (rock/pop music) | X | X | X | X | X |
| Music, Traditional (shamisen, koto, etc.) | | | | | |
| Personal or family ties | | | X | | |
| Religion (Buddhism, Shintoism) | | X | | | |
| Television programs (not anime) | X | | X | X | |
| University course requirements | | X | X | X | X |

X = Mentioned at least once during interview.
All names are pseudonyms.

*Popular paths to interest*. The comments from Jerrod encapsulate the impulses for current American college students:

> For me, it was 2001, Fall 2001. I, they re-released *Akira*[14], as a 25-year special edition, and I had watched a little bit in high school and never really understood it. So I was like 'Hey, that looks cool,' so I picked it up and watched it and thought it was really good, so I grabbed a couple of other anime series, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*[15], any one of them, and the *Martian Successor Nadesico*[16]. And from there, I was like, 'Wow! What kind of culture could produce these?'

He was not the only one to first become interested in Japan through its media and cultural products, but the cyberpunk appeal of anime is not the only way an interest in Japan is created. Play and American television also play a role. Play begins with games not unlike those reported by Berggreen (1998) in her study of Chinese-American children's play. Berggreen found that pre-school children's play is often built upon the video games they play and the programs they watch. Similarly, Mike says,

> Actually, it all begins from something really stupid, you know. Running around when I was a kid pretending to be a ninja. Dressed up like a ninja. That's sort of it, the beginnings of all that samurai movie stuff, the weird things, TV shows, *Mutant Ninja Turtles*[17], that sort of thing. When I was a kid I used to watch all those ninja cartoons. *Mutant Ninja Turtles* and all that. Just kids' stuff, but I think that's what made me interested.

Of interest here is the fighting theme of this program and its group character. Berggreen (1998) reported that the Chinese children, as well as other Asians she observed, did not engage in transformative play, which is playing a role based on a book or film character, and that "battles and fights seemed to be prominent in Chinese children's fantasy themes" (p. 82). However, for Mike, an Asian-American, transformative play seems to have been a part of his childhood. Jason, a Chinese-American, also reported transformative play based on the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Japanese films, not just animated films, also attract people to an interest in Japanese culture. The older films of Akira Kurosawa remain popular, with all interviewees mentioning at least one they enjoyed, though for many interest in film followed from interest in anime, though interest in film could also be the initial entry, as it was for Brian. He says,

> I'd say for me, that in high school, I kind of got interested in film. And, uh, so I started watching foreign films. And I came across *Seven Samurai.* And I was like, 'this is pretty interesting'. So, I sort of looked at, I watched a little anime, I learned a little bit about the history. Not a whole lot, but I've always been kind of disappointed that in high school they only teach you Western history. You didn't really learn about anybody except for Europe and the United States. And then, I got into college and I had to take humanities courses and, for a requirement. And I was like, 'Well, I'll take a language. I like languages.' And, uh, Japanese was a requirement, no, it was, like, accepted by my department, so I said 'I'll give it a try'.

Even when they are not the initial draw, films seem to help deepen interest in Japan. Carol turned out to be a fan of Japanese horror films, finding them scarier than those produced in the U.S. Though her own initial interest was in traditional culture, she also reported an interest in the popular literature and movies. Carol says,

> I am more into, actually, Japanese horror movies.  … We have a region free DVD player, and basically I am able to get them through friends, and, um. And I basically, I like *Ju-on*[18] and *Ju-on II* and um, *Shi koku*, *Country of the Dead*, that is a movie we just got. Those are fun to watch, in part because, because there's not much dialogue, so I don't really need the subtitles as often.

Other media and cultural products also draw Americans to Japan, especially video games, as those who cited them said they perceived Japanese games as more advanced and exciting than those produced in the U.S. Another draw is American media products about

Japan, including films such as *Lost in Translation*.

Popular products also are a route to interest, though this connection is less clear than that of other Japanese cultural products and can be seen as on off-shoot of an interest in anime for some. *Sailor Moon* (Sato, 1995), a manga character that became a widely popular television anime in the U.S. and Japan, has a full range of products. Sonia says,

> My dad actually went to Japan. And at the time, I was really into, like *Sailor Moon*. I had all the *Sailor Moon* stuff. So, like I guess I have always been interested in Japan. In Japanese. In Japanese animation. … I was really interested in that, I guess, when I was younger. I liked to draw it, an all that, so….

But not all products based on characters have a connection to anime. Hello Kitty, a popular Japanese characters who was first designed by Sanrio to sell products to Japanese girls, has become a popular cultural product in the U.S. and another route toward interest in Japan. Maria says,

> Maybe when I was a kid, it could have been something like Hello Kitty. You know about that? It was really popular about 15 or so years ago and I love pink. I still do. But I didn't know it was Japanese until, I don't know, maybe when I was in high school.

An additional route to interest in Japan can be seen as the appeal of traditional culture. One interviewee, who had more difficulty tracing a specific influence for her interest in Japan, connected it to several factors, including her Buddhist faith and requirements for her degree requirements. As Carol says,

> I also just like the culture. My fiancé lived in Japan for three years. And I have that connection and I have someone to practice with after school. It's been fun, so far. And I would like to teach English in Japan, too, because they make more than working, than working here. So there you have it. I had to study a second foreign language and I thought I'd get more balanced worldview from adding an Asian language. Plus, I am a Buddhist, so Japanese seemed a good choice.

Among the Americans I talked to, Carol was the only one to cite an interest in traditional culture as one of the reasons for her initial interest in Japan.

Language requirements and study must also be taken into consideration. As Brian said above, films provided an initial interest, but course requirements led him to take Japanese courses. Carol also reported a need to study related to her course work, but also said the desire for a challenge was part of her reason for taking the Japanese course. She says,

> Well, I needed to choose a second language for my degree, and out of all of them, I mean I could have took Italian just to cheat because I spoke Spanish. But I wanted to challenge myself, and I have always been interested in Japanese. I tried to learn on my own for many years, and figured that the pressure of quizzes and tests would be good for me.

The three interviewees who were majoring in East Asian Studies or Japanese also had a clear

reason for being in the course. One said that although she initially had no interest at all in Japan, she found that as she studied she became more interested in Japanese culture and language. Laurel says,

> I'm an Asian Studies major and I am really more interested in Chinese. But now, well, I find I like the Japanese course at least as much. And, even though I am Chinese, I mean it wasn't something I was really interested in at first but now I enjoy it and some parts of the culture are really, well, fun, especially, like, the older movies.

Finally, one person did not cite an aspect of culture for her initial interest in Japan. For Autumn, the interest had more to do with her own family than with cultural products. Autumn says,

> My dad is Japanese, but he never talked about Japan. Not much. Or what I remember. You know, beyond food, and his home. Since I have family there, I, like, thought I should know more.

Even Autumn, whose reasons for interest in Japan were less connected to popular culture than the other interviewees, had clear knowledge of Japanese cultural products. Autumn, though she clearly did not like anime, calling it "stupid" at one point in our conversation, enjoyed Japanese popular music and mentioned several Japanese television shows on video tape she enjoyed watching, with a particular favorite being *Iron Chef* (Umakoshi & Ichishima, 1993).

*Building on interest*. Once an interest in Japan has been established, the interviewees all reported they tried to find out more about the country. Whether this involved engaging family members in conversations about Japan, as Autumn and Sonia reported doing, surfing the Internet to find anime and manga, as Jerrod and Brian reported, or visiting the English sites for Japanese newspapers, as done by David and Mike, all found a way to deepen their interest of Japan through engagement with Japanese popular culture. Sonia says,

> My dad, actually, is a black belt in *aikido*, so he was like always trying to teach me that stuff, and I was like "I don't want to learn, leave me alone." Then, I actually ended up taking *aikido* last year for a little bit, at the [name deleted] Dojo.

Her interest in Japan, mixed as it is with her family's history, has "grown" beyond anime and developed other interests about Japan.

Others were far more outspoken in having moved beyond anime and see it as a narrow aspect of Japanese culture. Mike says,

> I am constantly disappointed with some of the people I meet.… It is a continuing / a thing in my Japanese language career. These people are like, they are like just interested in anime and they're not, like, interested in the rest of the culture or whatever. It's like, it's just disgusting to me, to tell you the truth. I know you have to get interested in it somehow, but come on. There's a whole culture there for you.

The whole culture that Mike and others are interested in includes Japanese philosophy, literature, religion, communication, linguistics, sociology, and history. No single interest could be identified because they are as varied as the interviewees.

All interviewees reported they visited a variety of Internet sites for additional information about Japan outside of class time. Some sites were related to language study, others provided news or cultural tidbits. A few reported visiting sites to download anime or keep up with anime fan clubs. All used the Internet as their primary source of information as well as the site of most of their research about Japan. One student had not realized there was a collection of Japanese magazines in English in the library not available on-line and vowed to "check it out." Because they are enrolled in a Japanese-language course, it is difficult to extrapolate beyond this population, however, the Internet seems to be the preferred source for information about Japan.

## Conclusion: The Exotic of Cyberculture

The exotic continues to appeal, but a more recent image of postmodern Japan seems to have been added to those of traditional and modern. That is the image of celluloid cyborgs. Initial interest in Japan for these young Americans was primarily found in the appeal of the cybernetic, futuristic culture of popular anime and manga. Though I had realized that anime held a certain amount of appeal among Americans, its predominance as the path for initial interest in Japan was something I had not anticipated.

Ueno (2002) considers the growing popularity of anime outside Japan to be a case of globalization and the creation of another imaginary.

> If the Orient was constructed and invented by the West to build up its cultural identity, then the techno Orient has been invented to define the images and models of information capitalism and the information society. (p. 97)

In his analysis of the similarities of raves and animation, Ueno points to a number of ways the two features associated with youth culture in the last 10 years are responses to globalization that allow youth a way of "resisting global capitalism" (p. 108-109), as well as how anime creates a shared experience. He also questions much of the Western scholarship which makes pronouncements about Japanese culture based on the study of anime and uses the neologism "Japanimation" to explain how the stereotypical views of Japan in the West have been transferred onto a "cybernetic landscape" (p. 98). LaMarre (2006) considers the *otaku* culture of anime and manga as representing a site of resistance to the commodification of society. Iwabuchi (2002) sees within the growing interest in Japanese popular culture the West a contradiction. "[T]he international spread of *mukokuseki*[19] popular culture from Japan simultaneously articulates the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and

the disappearance of any perceptible 'Japaneseness'" (p. 33). Similarly, Kawashima (2002) sees in anime and manga, with their "white looking" characters, a challenge to the cultural conditioning associating race with colorization; though *Sailor Moon* might be considered 'white' in color, her actions and the world's she moves within show her as Japanese.

A similar challenge can be see in the sexuality of manga, especially when compared to the chasteness of most American animated films. *Sailor Moon*, which was popular among schoolgirls for the strength of the five female characters, "includes several lesbian relationships, characters who convert between female and male, crossdressing, … and (in the anime) female nudity" (Cornog & Perper, 2005, p. 4). In addition to sex, anime and manga depict "gender-bending" transformations, rape followed by revenge on the rapists, the connection to sex and pregnancy ("Sex makes babies.") and the idea that sex can be funny (p. 5).

Cultural products like Hello Kitty, as comments from Sonia show and research by Iwabuchi (2002) has indicated, do not appear Japanese to their global markets. Though anime was clearly identified as a Japanese cultural product, one that was identified as Japanese on all the Internet sites I visited in an unscientific sample of the more than 11.8 million sites devoted to anime, it is a cultural product that can become easily accessible to a global audience through the addition of soundtracks in other languages. This ease seems to be a major factor in its predominance as the entry point into Japanese culture. For Sakai (2006), this is, however, a continuation of "the rhetoric of Japanese culturalism [that] has been obsessed predominantly with the image of Japanese distinctiveness" (p. 187) while ignoring that it is constructed in this way in order to provide a contrast with "a mythical" West (pp. 166-167).

As we consider how Western views of Japanese cultures are created, and re-created, the emergence of another imaginary to add to the Western view of Japan, the postmodern imaginary of a cyberpunk world, should not be a surprise. Further examination of how anime creates an imaginary is clearly called for, with attention paid to how Western audiences interpret Japanese culture based on their viewing of this Japanese cultural product. The ways in which anime fans read and understand the tension between technology and humanity in an emerging "techno Orient" represents another area for future study.

The question of "what type of exotic culture" could produce anime which Jerrod voiced seems to echo the questions asked about Japanese art and culture by earlier generations. Are there vast differences in what Jerrod relates to Roland Barthes' (1982/1970) words?

If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give in an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object… I can also … isolate somewhere in the world (*faraway*) a certain number of features,… and out of these features deliberately form a system. It is a system which I shall call: Japan. (emphasis original, p. 3)

Barthes considers Japan a creation; an idea that the West has imagined. It is also an imaginary that exists, which gives Japan an appeal that has been identified as exotic.

Returning briefly to the initial exercise I set, the three pictures represent, for me, the three broad imaginaries the West has created about Japan. Each of the three, traditional, modern, and postmodern, are competing for attention, with the postmodern becoming the route for initial exposure for some American college students. At the various venues where I observed Americans interactions with Japanese culture, and with the college students I interviewed, the popular cultural image of Japan, the Japan of celluloid cyborgs and futuristic visions associated with postmodernity, dominated.

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## Footnotes

1. Anime is the Japanese for animation, which is derived from the French word animé. It refers to a specific genre of animation that is unlike the animated films created in the Disney tradition. Films such as *Akira* (Otomo, 2001/1988) are described as "cyberpunk" (Standish, 1998), versus the anime generally considered to fall into the category of children's cartoons such as *Sailor Moon* (Sato, 1995). Manga is the Japanese for graphic novels. The terms anime and manga have entered the English lexicon through fan groups.

2. Benedict's work, written before the author had been to Japan, represents an interesting example of what Said (1976) would later point to as Othering in reference Asian studies in the West. See Daniel Ben-Ami (1997) for an examination of Benedict's work.

3. *Juuni kokuki* (Record of twelve kingdoms) (Kobayashi, 2002).

4. All names, except for the author's, are pseudonyms.

5. Bandai Productions has created several video games in the Gundam series: *Gundam Battle Assault, Gundam Battle Assault 2, Battle Assault 3 – Gundam Seed,* and *Mobile Suit Gundam: Encounters in Space.*

6. Doll's Day, originally Girl's Day, is a traditional Japanese holiday held on March 3. During the weeks before the holiday, families with daughters display dolls. Though the traditional dolls are dressed in costumes of the Heian period, modern displays include dolls dressed to resemble Japanese and international celebrities.

7. JET stands for Japan English Teachers. The JET Program places recent graduates of American, British, Australian and New Zealand universities in classrooms as assistant English teachers at Japanese schools. The program started in the 1980s and has grown in popularity since it was initiated. The program is very popular and has become highly selective in its recruitment.

8. The Japan Bowl is a national quiz bowl competition sponsored by the Japan America Society with support from the United States-Japan Foundation, and The Japan Foundation, which has as one of its missions to increase Japanese-language education in other countries and create a positive image for Japan.

9. It was explained to me that Level I is first-year high school level Japanese in a four-year American high school. (The number of years in elementary, junior high, and high school vary by school district, with the 5-3-4 and 4-4-4 patterns most common in Colorado.) Levels II to IV correspond to the 2nd year through the 4th year of Japanese study. Only one level was set for the college competition. High schools and colleges can enter as many teams as they wish. Ten schools in Colorado and Wyoming entered the high school competition and two universities, with two teams from each university, entered the college-level competition.

10. *Rakugo* is a Japanese comedy style performed by a comedian seated on a cushion. The comedian tells humorous stories using only a folding fan as a prop.

11. *Metropolis* (Tezuka, 2001).

12. *Neon Genesis Evangalion* is the English title for the *Shin Seiki Evangelion* (Ando & Anno, 1995) series.

13. A reference to the robot-ship-bodies of the *Evangelion* series that are "piloted" by children.

14. Jerrod's memory is a reference to the 1988 original version of *Akira*, which was re-released in the U.S. in 2001. Otomo Katsuhiro created the original manga (comic) series and directed the animated version.

15. *Shin seiki evangelion* (Ando & Anno, 1995).

16. *Kidō senkan Nadesiko* (Sato, 1996).

17. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Eastman & Laird, 1987).

18. *Ju-on* (Shimizu, 2000a); *Ju-on II* (Shimizu, 2000b). *Shi koku* (Nagasaki, 1999).

19. Iwabuchi (2002) defines *mukokuseki* as "'something or someone lacking any nationality,' but also implying the erasure of racial of ethnic characteristics or a context, which does not imprint a particular culture or country with these features."