

JAPANOPHILIA: BECOMING THE OTHER*Marcel Koniček***Abstract**

Even before the dissolution of Shogunate and the Meiji Reforms around 1868, which opened Japan to the world, Japan has been of considerable cultural influence on the English-speaking world. This remote country in East Asia has for a long time been a foil to the Western view of the world in the 19th century, with its isolated culture that willingly refused “superior” western culture and religion and was perceived as developing in a unique condition of complete isolation.

With its opening Japan aimed to embrace modernity and distance itself from its tradition, but its efforts attracted various artists, such as van Gogh and Monet, who admired the traditional Japanese art and incorporated it into their works. At the same time, foreign scholars invited by the government to industrialise Japan and teach the young elite, started to see Japanese art and culture as superior to the European. They not only regarded Japan as their new homeland but also strove to become Japanese themselves.

Today Japanese culture is again gaining popularity, this time the interest being centred around animation and popular culture. This current wave of Japonophilia shares many similarities with the 19th century one. Current fans of all that is Japanese also frequently strive to attain Japanese identity and also interact with the fantasy of an “eastern Other” in complex ways.

This paper will discuss the comparison of these waves and how this relates to historical and cultural issues surrounding the relationship between the Anglophone and Japanese cultures.

Keywords

Japanophilia; Japonisme; Anime; Otaku; acculturation; impressionism; Meiji period

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SINCE the end of the 20th century Japanese popular culture has become very influential around the world. This can not only be seen in its influence on many successful Hollywood productions such as *The Matrix* series, but also in the proliferation of the direct consumption of Japanese video games, comics, toys, and animation by the global public. This rise to the mainstream can be best seen in the change in consumption of Japanese animation. What used to be the domain of DVD bootleggers and fan-made subtitles has become a multi-billion-dollar market within the

domain of internet streaming platforms such as Crunchyroll and professional voice-acting. In 2018, overseas sales of Japanese animation were estimated to be \$8.81 billion, more than tripling since 2014 (Blair 2018). However, this swelling of interest in Japan had a precedent in Japonisme, an artistic movement of the second half of the 19th century promoting the collection and imitation of Japanese art creations called Japoneries. Many famous European artists, such as Monet, Gauguin, and Van Gogh were part of this movement and shared the same interests in Japanese art. This article focuses on various parallels between these two waves of Japanophilia, how Japanese products were consumed in both periods, how this influenced culture both in Japan and the Western countries, and how in both cases the fans of Japan incorporated “Japaneseness” into their own identity.

Even before the advent of modernity in Japan, heralded by the Meiji revolution and the restoration of imperial power in 1868, Japan had played the important role of the Eastern Other to the Euro-American worldview as an isolated country on the other side of the world that actively refused Christianity and Western civilisation to focus on its internal matters and starkly opposed any outside intervention. Japan, however, was much less isolated from Western civilisation than it seemed since throughout the isolationist period of 1639–1853 it never terminated its trade with the Netherlands. The Dutch also kept regular diplomatic ties with the Japanese in the form of regular tributary missions to the Shōgun. Japanese physicians and intellectuals learned of the developments in the western sciences and an gained appreciation for them, and the importance of these Dutch studies, *rangaku* in Japanese, steadily increased throughout the period (Kazui and Videen 1982, 283–285). Conversely, the works of authors in Dutch employ such as Engelbert Kaempfer in the 18th and Philipp von Siebold in the 19th century also served as the principal source of information about the realities of Japan for Europe. However, their intermittent publications could not do much to dispel the prevailing mystique surrounding Japan.

This mystique was highly appealing to many Americans and Europeans around the middle of the 19th century. This is clearly shown by the role Japan plays in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Therein, Japan stands among the exotic places as a location of “danger, seductive mystery, and frustrating impenetrability” (Reising and Kvidera 1997, 288). Events such as the *Morrison* Incident of 1837 where a British ship carrying Japanese castaways was attacked on sight by Japanese coastal defences (Jansen 1989, 137), or the harsh treatment of American castaways from the ship *Lawrence* in 1846 by the Japanese which led to the death of several of the castaways only deepened this image of “a harsh, threatening, impenetrable land” (Reising and Kvidera 1997, 289). However, the arrival of the American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 forced this impenetrable land to open itself and find a new place in the international order.

After the opening of the country and the end of the Shogunate government, which led to the reestablishment of the imperial power in 1868, the Japanese government embraced a policy that appeared to show that the true way to resist colonialist pressures was to embrace western technology and concepts and to make them their own. This policy, embodied by thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, whose cultural hero “was [...] Peter the Great” (Jansen 1989, 337), aimed not only to match the Westerners in military and economic power, but also to transform Japan into a modern country that could leave what they viewed as a backwards Asia behind and enter the ranks of a civilised Europe. To gain the recognition of the Western powers the Japanese started extensively promoting Japan abroad. The diplomatic Iwakura Mission of 1871 and the Japanese exhibits at the International Exposition 1876 in Paris were, in that regard, great successes, as was the visit of US President Grant in 1879. The Japanese would have preferred showing the rest of the world the fruits of their modernisation at the International Exposition, and of “beating the West at its own game” (Napier 2007, 15), but in the absence of these they exhibited mostly their own traditional culture and art. However, it turned out to be an excellent choice, gaining them more than just a few admirers.

The Japanese presence at the International Exposition in 1879 created “a fascination with Japan, that was sweeping over Europe” (Napier 2007, 23), a fascination that turned many of the artists of the time like Monet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Degas, and later Klimt and Proust into avid collectors of everything Japanese. These artists not only collected Japanese art, but they also included their collections in their own works such as Monet’s *La Japonaise*, where he portrays his wife in Japanese clothing surrounded by fans hanging on the wall flaunting his collection, or Van Gogh capturing his Japanese prints in background of *Portrait of Père Tanguy*. They were also influenced by the aesthetics and techniques of the Japanese artists. For example, Van Gogh’s paintings of flowering trees not only follow the long Japanese tradition of cherry and plum trees as art objects, but he also tried “to learn to paint lines in the Japanese fashion as well as to learn Japanese methods of composition” (Walker 2008, 96). These Japonists also regarded the authors of these prints as their artistic equals or even superiors. This can be illustrated by a quote from Pissarro where he claims that: “Hiroshige is a marvellous impressionist” (Napier 2007, 11).

Japonisme didn’t remain limited to the artistic world but also spread to a wider audience. As Napier states: “Ultimately the cult of Japan would spread from the bohemian artists and intellectuals, who became fascinated by the new vision that Japanese culture seemed to present, to upper-class women wearing the latest kimono-inspired fashions, to newly emergent middle class, who would decorate their parlours with Japanese curios and fans” (2007, 24). For some time, Japanese art or

their imitations were almost omnipresent. This does not mean that the attitudes of this wider audience towards Japan was not influenced by their preconceived notion of Japan as a foreign, primitive, and ultimately inferior, in Saidian terms Orientalist, Other. This is shown by the 1885 comic opera *The Mikado*. *The Mikado* is set in a faux-Japan which is used as a primitive and exotic foil to masquerade its critique of British institutions, society, and is a satire of the Japanese fad itself. Its portrayal of the country had more to do with the preconstructed fantasy of Japan, as their Eastern Other, or the enjoyment of its aesthetics, than with any real interest in the culture of the country. This opera even sparked some degree of controversy in Japan and has led to this play not being performed in Japan until very recently.

The Japanese sellers of traditional art used this ignorance to their advantage and catered to the Orientalist perception of Japan as an exotic and foreboding place to heighten the desirability of their wares. The scope of their operation was extensive, as in Japan “literally millions of fans were made in 1880s for the export market” (Napier 2007, 24), and these fans would be seen in Europe as objects of genuine artistic value rather than a mass-produced profit-oriented kitsch. The critique of the times was not oblivious to that fact. Even Oscar Wilde famously said: “The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country” (Wilde 1923, 22), implying that the reality of Japan was much different from the projections of the people outside the country.

This does not mean that Japanese art was simply a fashion to be appropriated and consumed by western audiences while Japanese culture was considered inferior. On the contrary, the Japonists found the Japanese decorative arts superior to their counterparts in America and Europe and something to learn from. For example, Ernest Chesneau when viewing the Japanese exhibition in 1876 felt, “‘humiliation’ and ‘discouragement’” (Napier 2007, 29) when comparing it to the French art. Chesneau, one of the leading Japonists, argued that since the Japanese were now learning from the West about “our mechanical arts, our military art, our sciences [the West should in exchange] take their decorative art” (Napier 2007, 28). For him Japan represented an equal partner to Europe and America and their relationship was one of equal cultural exchange – technology for artistic vision. And this vision was employed by his contemporaries. Monet used Japanese elements to add a sense of exoticism and eroticism (clearly inspired by the Japanese erotic art he collected) and Van Gogh found his ideal of the simple artist in Hokusai, a famous woodblock print artist, and tried to emulate his style. Japanese art served as an alternative font of inspiration and technique to the art of the time which the post-impressionist artists wanted to distinguish themselves from.

It is not surprising that sooner or later some of the intellectuals with an interest in Japanese art went on to study it in Japan itself. To do so, they frequently managed

to find employment in Japan; up until 1900 the Japanese government hired hundreds of professionals and scholars, from civil engineers to art critics, who would teach various subjects at newly established universities and even manage government institutions. Hundreds more were employed by private educational institutions, sometimes helping to found them (Jansen 1989, 480–481). These Japanophiles however had a profound influence on dispelling the Japanese inferiority complex that the Japanese had felt since the forceful opening of the country in 1853. Two influential thinkers who show how people influenced by Japanese art could, in turn, influence Japan are Ernest Fenollosa and Lafcadio Hearn. With these two Japanophiles we can also see how the Japanophiles strived to embrace the Japanese identity as their own.

Fenollosa, an American Hegelian, came to Japan in 1878 to teach philosophy and economics at the Imperial University in Tokyo. However, very soon he and his students started working in another field: the study and preservation of traditional Japanese art, an art that was viewed as obsolete by many Japanese at the time. Fenollosa had a different view. Similarly to Chesneau, he considered Japanese art to be superior. He stated his beliefs in a famous lecture *On the Truth of Art* in 1882 which with the works of his contemporary philosopher Nishi Amane is now considered the basis of the modern study of art in Japan. In this lecture, Fenollosa stated that “techniques of Japanese painting are preferable to those of Western painting because they allow the artist to manifest the Idea more clearly. He predicts that Western artists will begin to borrow these techniques and use them themselves” (as cited in Marra 2002, 101) and that the Japanese should try to pledge more support to the export of the current Japanese paintings. He also proposed that new institutions should be founded to support Japanese art and the standing of Japan as a nation. He urged Japan to get rid of its inferiority complex and he wanted the traditions of Japan “[to] be renewed, revived, in order that a new Idea (might) come into being” (107).

Fenollosa embraced his role as the defender of Japanese art very seriously. He studied traditional Japanese painting under the guidance of the Kanō school, a prestigious school of the Shogunate, and his artistic vision found realisation in a novel style of painting called nihonga, a “neoclassical” (Anderson 2009, 77) style of painting combining Japanese techniques and materials with the western concept of “painting as representation” (Anderson 2009, 77) to create the style of art, both modern and Japanese, he was promoting. He also became a Buddhist monk, receiving the name Teishin, and helped found the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1887 which became the public institution supporting Japanese art that he had spoken of in his lecture.

Fenollosa did not just passively appreciate Japanese art as a pretty curiosity, his appreciation of Japan had led to him to gain a very much Japanese perspective of the world and to act as a paragon of Japanese art and towards the national cause

of promoting the idea of cultural and political emancipation for Japan on the world scene. This acquisition of a Japanese identity, becoming the Eastern Other himself, is even more clearly visible in the case of Lafcadio Hearn an American who came to Japan in 1890 as a journalist. Even though his work as a journalist was quickly terminated, he stayed in Japan as a high school teacher. Disillusioned with his earlier life, he became enamoured with the old Japan and its spiritual heritage, which he viewed as being free of unrelenting modernisation, and he started studying and collecting both the old art of Buddhist monasteries and folk stories. Through his collection, a defining feature of Japonists of the time, he constructed for himself a new, Japanese, identity. He married a local woman of samurai descent, converted to Buddhism and after becoming a Japanese citizen in 1896 started using the name Koizumi Yakumo, the name he is known by in Japan even today. He fully embraced his new Japanese identity and started seeing himself as a native Japanese who only later in life “found his way back home” (Napier 2007, 63). Thus, the previously exotic Eastern Other became Hearn’s new identity.

Unlike Fenollosa, Hearn was not supportive of Japan becoming a modern country and he saw modernisation as the ultimate end of the spirituality of the old Japan he had adopted as his new homeland. He despised modernised Tokyo, finding it “soulless” (Napier 2007, 65), and although he was forced to accept the Japanese success in modernisation, his writing on the topic was “tinged with sadness, even bitterness, rather than celebration” (Napier 2007, 62). Hearn was more interested in a Japan that was than in a Japan that is, in his fantasy of it rather than in the reality of it. However, it cannot be said that this position was an unproductive one. To stave off modernisation, Hearn put much work into preserving his disappearing old Japan for posterity. He was a very active writer and he wrote around a dozen books between 1890 and 1904. Among them his collection of Japanese supernatural folk tales, *Kwaidan*, which formed the basis of a scholarly understanding of the genre even in Japan.

The modernisation despised by Hearn was incredibly successful in making Japan a western superpower. After a series of military successes, first against the Chinese in 1895, and then against the Russians in 1905, the fact that Japan had become the major colonial power of East Asia could not be ignored. However, this change of position from being source of artistic curiosities into being a colonial empire also changed Western attitudes towards Japan, which shifted from admiration and interest to the fear and hate frequently hidden in the guise of a “Yellow Peril” rhetoric. This was not left without a response by the Japanese who, during these years, embraced a more confrontational policy towards the white colonialist powers and led to the rise of fascism and to Japan becoming one of the Axis powers. The Japanese became an “inhuman brutal enemy” (Napier 2007, 16) and any sympathy for them was out of the question. With this, the first wave of Japanophilia came to an end.

The Second World War became the moment when the history of the cultural interaction between America, Europe, and Japan was severed and, of course, it constituted a great watershed moment for Japanese culture itself. In any case, after the war Japan once again became a mysterious and foreboding country to the Americans. The main exception to this were the Beatnik writers such as Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder who were influenced by the writings of D. T. Suzuki on Buddhism. For them, Japan was a fantastical land of Eastern spirituality embodied in Zen and was seen as an alternative to the reality of America. In their interest in Buddhism they mirrored Hearn, and Snyder also mirrored Hearn in travelling to Japan and living there both in Buddhist temples and hippie communes. The few crossover hits in America like *Godzilla* (1954) and the pop song “Ue wo muite arukō” (1961)¹ only managed to change American perceptions of Japan from being an enigmatic WWII aggressor to being a weird foreign country “that was for some reason under almost constant attack by giant mutated creatures” (Napier 2007, 78). However, barring these, Japan remained in the cultural background, or what Kelts calls “the cultural backwater” (2006, 181), until the 80s when the popular cultural produce of a newly economically resurgent Japan reached the US again.

The situation has changed with the current wave of Japanophilia the beginnings of which we can trace back to contacts between an American audience with Japanese animated films and series such as *Akira* (1988), *Sailor Moon* (1995), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), and more recently *Naruto* (2002), as well as Japanese videogames and electronics. A telling sign of this is that the number of people studying the Japanese language in America sharply rose from “127, 000 in 1997 to an estimated 3 million in 2006” (Kelts 2006, 179). This rise of a new wave of Japanophilia has not remained unnoticed by the cultural critique in Japan, of course. For example, Ryūichi Sakamoto claims that: “For three to five hundred years there has never been a period where Japanism was as trendy as it is now. Even more so than the popularity of the [19th century] woodblock prints” (Okada 2008, 230). However, the comparison between the waves is not as straightforward as it may seem.

This wave is, of course, similar in many respects to the 19th century one, mostly in the way Japanese production is consumed, the focus on collection cultural artefacts, and the fact that western fans embrace many aspects of what they perceive to be the Japanese identity as their own, but it is important to state that the Japan of today, or even the fantasy of the Japan of today, is very different when compared with that of the

¹ The curious fact that the song was retitled in America to “Sukiyaki”, a popular Japanese dish that has nothing to do with the original content of the song, further shows how obscure Japan was to Americans.

19th century. In the 19th century the identity was connected to the lauded aesthetic ideals of Zen Buddhism and of the Samurai, the woodblock prints and fans that were collected, while today these have been replaced by toys such as robots from the series Gundam and new terms such as *kawaii*, meaning “‘cute’, as well as chic, hip, and kinky-sexy” (Yano 2009, 682), symbolised by the mouthless fashion mascot Hello Kitty, and *moe* (childlike quality eliciting affection), symbolised by big-eyed anime characters. The beauties on prints by Utamaro have been replaced by the virtual singer *Hatsune Miku* bearing the quintessential aesthetics of current Japanese animation.

The cultural critique calls this shift of sensibilities “the complete transformation of Japanese culture after the war by the wave of Americanization and consumerist society” and “a pseudo-Japan manufactured from U.S. produced material” (Azuma 2009, 20) but that does not mean that Japan has become more of a familiar cultural landscape for American Japanophiles. Of course, Japan is much more accessible today than it was in the times of steam ships, but the fantastic quality of Japan has not been reduced, even though now its fantasy seems to be a pink land of neon cuteness rather than the stern but pure land of the samurai. Paradoxically this “pseudo-Japan” seems to be more fascinating than ever before and its cultural produce is once again considered superior by Japanophiles.

Many Japanophiles cite the reason for their interest in Japanese cartoons as being “characters that are complex and three-dimensional” (Napier 2007, 173) compared with their American counterparts and generally see American production to be inferior in the same way that Chesneau saw the inferiority of the French art of the time in 1876. However, in contrast with the woodblock prints, Japanese animation mostly does not seem to be explicitly Japanese and carries many universalist notions, “the final human feelings are the same” (Napier 2007, 172). And in the same way many of the collectors of Japanese art have also travelled to Japan and embraced Japanese identity. Many current Japanophiles dream about living in Japan or at least about a “pilgrimage” to Akihabara in Tokyo, the Mecca of Japanese popular culture.

Both groups have also created an art which imitates Japanese production, be it the Japonerie of the Japonists or the original English manga of the current Japanophiles. However, there is a significant difference between them in their levels of success. While the Japoneries were highly regarded, international manga has never really caught on despite extensive support by the Japanese government and the use of the manga format to bring English classics such as Shakespeare to young audiences. “The international manga production never reached the success of the translated Japanese comics and (somewhat ironically) of various drawing textbooks for the manga style for its aspiring authors” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 277). A much greater success has, however, been garnered by works that do not try to be mere copies of Japanese production but still bear a clear resemblance to the mainstream Japanese style, such as

the *Matrix* movies, James Cameron's *Avatar*, or the Nickelodeon show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* which are all highly regarded by critics and audiences.

Another point of comparison can be made in relation to how the Japanese government is curiously involved in the spread of Japanophilia overseas. In the 19th century it was the continued support of various diplomatic missions and artistic exhibitions by the government that was instrumental in igniting the Japonisme craze and fuelled the vision of Japan as an exotic country, but the current involvement of the Japanese government has reached a much larger scale. The Japanese government has embraced the anime aesthetics as their own and is using it in their diplomacy. For example, in 2008 the fashion mascot Hello Kitty was named “the cultural ambassador to China” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 201) because of its popularity there, and in 2009 three young fashion designers were named “Japanese ambassadors of cuteness” (206) to promote Japanese popular culture, and the notion of *kawaii*, abroad. Each of them symbolises one of three different fashion styles that Japanophiles all over the world are interested in: the Lolita style,² the schoolgirl style³ and the style of the fashion district Harajuku.⁴

All these initiatives are part of a comprehensive government project called *Cool Japan* that started in 2010. This project has a considerable budget and even though many of its aims are economic, intended to increase Japanese exports in the area of fashion, comics, animation, and movies, its central aim is to use the identity-transforming qualities of Japanese cultural produce as a form of “soft power” to “increase (the) prestige of Japan and improve its position upon the global stage” (Křivánková et al. 2017, 120). However, the results of this approach have been debatable at best. It is seen by many as “a downward spiral of wasted tax money” (SoraNews24 2018) or as lacking in a “sophisticated strategy” (Saito 2017). Even those who do not view it as a financial black hole or a symbol of systemic corruption are sceptical towards its political goals and view it only as something creating more Japanophiles:

It is not clear if *Cool Japan* project has reached its goal and proven itself as a true “soft power”, but it is clear, that it has been a positive influence on

² Lolita fashion is a culturally hybrid style of clothing using romanticised Western 19th century clothing to express the Japanese ideas of sweetness, cuteness, and innocence that, besides the name, “has no direct reference to Nabokov and his novel, and generally in relation to the fashion, it has no sexual connotations” (Monden 2008, 28).

³ A style of fashion inspired by the Japanese school uniforms using elements such as miniskirts, high socks, and ties. Examples of this style can be seen in the costumes of the idol group AKB 48.

⁴ Harajuku is a district of Tokyo viewed as the hub of youth culture and fashion. The multitude of eclectic fashion styles originating there, characterised by a high usage of accessories, colourfulness, and layered clothing, all fall under the designation of Harajuku style.

the image of Japan as a country, proven by the increased interest of the public in studying Japanese as well as traditional Japanese culture, but its real influence on the position of Japan on the global stage is close to zero (Křivánková et al. 2017, 120).

On the other hand, the fact that it is not only Japan, but also South Korea, for example, that is trying to employ similar policies, shows the perceived importance of spreading interest in popular culture as a political tool to build a positive global image.

Japanophilia still seems to be on the rise. Recent Hollywood adaptations of Japanese animation classics such as the 2019 *Alita: Battle Angel* that features a female lead bearing all the characteristics of *moe* and *kawaii* sensibilities are evidence of that. It might lead to American culture getting Japanized, as theorists such as Eiji Ōtsuka are suggesting is happening already, with *kawaii* becoming a much more widely spread phenomenon and Japanese sensibilities becoming an accepted part of American culture without people even considering them Japanese. Japanophilia is thus not just a fascination with the exotic Other, but also an acceptance of that Other as an integral part of our own culture, and its far-reaching cross-cultural influence surely deserves attention.

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