Chapter 8

# The illegitimate ally: the hegemonic national narrative of Japan in the US (1945-2020)

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### Abstract

In this chapter, I explore how the depiction of Japan as a civilization at odds with modernity in US public discourse from 1945 to today enabled a framing of the Japanese identity as subaltern and how this fabricated identity was instrumental in legitimizing the Western discursive position of superiority in situations of conflict. Such analysis shakes the commonplace idea that the project of modernity in all its dimensions (political, technological, industrial, social, but also cultural) became the legitimizing axiom that ensured domination in the post-Enlightenment world. I propose a journey through the main tropes of the Western-built hegemonic national narrative on Japan as it has been produced and reproduced from one of the main poles of Western power, the United States. My goal is to analyze how various cultural sources describing and commenting on Japan, from statements issued by public officials to popular essays and fiction, contributed to shaping an image of the country as subaltern in the US public debate, thus reproducing the model of devising the non-Western Other decried by decolonial theory.

**Keywords**: Japan, hegemony; national narratives; decolonial studies; modernity

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### Introduction

On the early morning of September 2, 1945, the US battleship Missouri received two delegations at Tokyo Bay. The first one was comprised of representatives of several nations identified under the pact of the Allied Forces. The second boarded the vessel in the name of the government of Japan, headed by the minister of Foreign Affairs, as guests in their own country. Within less than an

hour, the documents confirming Japan's unconditional surrender were signed, ending WWII at least in terms of military confrontation of both powers. A flag was hanging on the wall in front of the table where the documents were officialized. Commodore Matthew Perry brought it back in 1853, when he first occupied that same cove, striving to coerce Japan into establishing trade and diplomatic relationships. Although the flag was stitched and hung backward to ensure its preservation, on September 2, 1945, it symbolized the same gesture as a century ago: US force just undermined Japan's autonomy.

According to an *Asahi*-sponsored poll conducted by Louis Harris, in 1971, 85% of the US population agreed that a friendship between the two countries was necessary despite cultural differences. Moreover, 66% considered Japan a peaceful democracy.[1] However, 18 years later, at the pinnacle of tensions between the two countries due to enduring trade imbalance, a *Business Week* survey showed that seven out of ten people in the US believed the economic threat from Japan was more dangerous than a military confrontation with the URSS and four out of 10 thought Japan would take over the US as the world leader.[2] Despite these views, a Pew Research Center study showed that around 70% of responders in the US went back in 2015 to trusting Japan, and only 8% believed the trade wars of the 1970s and 1980s were the most remarkable episodes between the two countries in the past 75 years.[3] While Japan never stopped being an official strategic ally of the US since at least 1952 with the signing of the San Francisco Treaty, these snippets reveal changing attitudes toward Japan. These approaches, which oscillated between animosity and friendship, complexified US-Japan relationships. The 2015 pool reveals that ambivalence persists. Indeed, most US responders still perceive Japan as an enemy from WW II, an episode that lasted six years, instead of the allied country it is for already three-quarters of a century (31% and 23%, respectively).[4]

In this chapter, I follow the development of the hegemonic national narrative of Japan in the United States from the end of WWII to today. I analyze how various cultural sources describing and commenting on Japan, from statements issued by public officials to popular essays and fiction, contributed to shaping an image of the country as subaltern in US public debate. These sources supported and legitimized the West's discursive position of superiority in situations of conflict. I defend the idea that Japan's designation as an ally of the West after 1945 was intended to build and project an image of Western superiority over a one-time enemy that later on turned into an economic rival.

There is a solid and commendable body of critical scholarship dealing with depictions of Japan in the US during the period covered by this chapter, produced by scholars like Sheila Johnson, Nathan Glazer, Akira Iriye, and Andrew McKevitt. Many of these studies focus on the images associated with Japan in the US and analyze them by reference to US domestic policies and broader social and political

developments. My contribution goes beyond these peculiar expressions. It considers the role of this discourse-building enterprise in the United States' self-proclaimed world leadership.

This study pursues two goals. First, it analyzes how the discursive representation of the 'Other' as subaltern contributes to and supports Western hegemony. There are many strategies for construing subalternity and many models of subaltern representation. Then, this chapter will demonstrate that reducing Western patterns of representation to clear-cut divisions between 'us' and 'them,' 'civilized' and 'uncivilized,' 'progress' and 'backwardness,' and 'friend' and 'enemy,' leads to oversimplification, thus preventing a proper assessment of international relations. By looking at how Japan, a former empire, a country that industrialized earlier than its neighbors and became very prosperous, an enemy to the West later turned into an ally and economic competitor, is described in the public discourse in the United States, the primary producer of Western culture, norms and values after 1945, I want to put the spotlight on the grey areas, faulty logic, and inherent contradictions of the West's claim of hegemony.

### Hegemony, national narratives, and the decolonial approach

I developed the term 'hegemonic national narratives' based on a materialist understanding of the relationship between discourse and institutions. Louis Althusser believed, like Antonio Gramsci, that hegemony was forced through a binary system of execution: the state apparatus, which is directly controlled by the ruling class, and the ideological state apparatus, which is constituted by agents of authority that look autonomous but exist in a situation of interdependence with the state. Educational organisms, the church, the mass media, and the arts enforce and reproduce the ideology of the dominant class and shape individual consciousness to make the subject accept the domination of those in power.[5] Raymond Williams nuanced Althusser's ideas. For him, hegemonic institutions (what Althusser called ideological state apparatuses) do not explicitly legitimate the domination of a class. They work at a higher and subtler level, legitimating hegemony itself. For Williams, "[hegemony is a] whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values."[6] Hegemonic institutions exist in a self-legitimizing system that naturalizes authority and integrates opposition into a stable status quo.

Based on these definitions, I argue that the relationships between institutions shape hegemonic national narratives. A discourse is to be considered hegemonic whenever it is mediated by the state and the ideological institutions because its content legitimizes the power that holds the hegemony. National narratives, in their essence as discourses, follow the same logic. A national narrative may legitimize the actions and decisions of the established power, but content is not

enough for a discourse to be considered hegemonic. It is by its circulation and mediation through the state and the ideological institutions that the discourse/ national narrative reproduces and reinforces the ideology of power and therefore becomes part of the hegemony. Dominant powers change, the decisions and actions of power change, the structure and type of state and ideological institutions change, and the ways hegemony is manifested and exerted change accordingly. Discourses of legitimation adapt, and it is only when and if their relationship with institutions consists in the reproduction of the dominant ideology that they can be considered hegemonic. Hegemonic national narratives can be traced and analyzed circulating from and within ideological institutions like the mass media and the education system, but also public official cables and documents. The discourse of the hegemonic national narrative is dynamic; it evolves in response to the context and circumstances to keep up with the shifting needs of power. For this reason, the hegemonic national narrative is not a particular discourse but a type of discourse.

In this piece, I argue that the core legitimizing principle of Western hegemony that articulates this body of discourse is the construction and reproduction of the idea of Japan as unable to fully commit to modernity. This assumption departs from the vision of the project of modernity in its various dimensions (political, technological, industrial, social, and cultural) as the legitimizing axiom of Western domination in the post-Enlightenment world. This common wisdom contributed to the logic of domination developed and ingrained in the West through imperial imposition and was denounced by scholars like Aníbal Quijano, María Lugones, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Enrique Dussel, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and Ramón Grosfoguel. According to these authors, the project of modernity produces and sustains subalternity in its structural articulation of material subsistence and dialectical legitimation. Decolonial theory goes a step further from other postcolonial works by emphasizing the need to understand colonialism not as a product of modernity but as the very means for its subsistence. Consequently, for modernity on all its fronts (extractivist capitalism, Western cultural imperialism disguised as 'universal values,' and liberal democracy, for instance) to keep existing under the system of Western global authority requires the construction of a non-modern subject, the subaltern. The function of the subaltern is to sustain a hierarchy of development that would justify material exploitation. In the case of Japan, this mechanism would be used to enforce not direct plunder of the country but the disabling of potential contenders to the position of authority within this same structure of supremacy.

The notions put forward by decolonial thinkers share evident links with postcolonial theory, whose ideas regarding the relationship between material and discursive structures of oppression North-South have already been presented by

Marie-Josée Lavallée in her introduction to the present volume. Decolonial studies establish, however, a crucial difference from other postcolonial approaches in their epistemological proposal. From the perspective of this body of research, postcolonial theory suggests critical transformations within the same matrix of coloniality that produces and sustains it. It deploys theoretical tools from and to a circuit of transmission that ends up restricted to Western academia. Many of the conditions that constitute the discursive symbiosis between the national narrative of Japan and Western hegemony can be identified too, denounced by decolonial studies as part of what Aníbal Quijano calls 'coloniality of power'[7] and Maria Lugones narrowed it down to "coloniality of gender."[8] The critique of coloniality can also target the articulation of modernity as a source of legitimation, offering itself solely to the West in its discursive configuration.

As Walter Mignolo puts it, Dussel considers modernity as a European narrative that disguises a world phenomenon as a Western patent. Therefore, any attempt by peripheral nations to adopt and adapt the recipe of modernity as deployed in the West would not challenge hegemony. Such an attempt would keep these nations anchored in the same system, as there cannot be modernity without coloniality.[9] The matrix of power appropriated history to hail modernity as the cornerstone of any possible understanding of civilization. The project of modernity and its consubstantial structures of domination established a 'before' and an 'after' that essentialized subaltern alterity for not being able to claim a modern status that, in any case, is out of reach. The enforcement and naturalization of this paradigm effectively configured a paradoxical rupture between space and time. The 'developed,' 'developing' and 'under-developed' countries coexist spatially as agents in the same world system, but the last two are trapped outside the tide of time for being constituted previously to modernity. The rooting of Japanese identity in pre-modern times responds to the same logic, as it contradicts Japan's status as a 'developed' agent. To overcome the contradiction, Japan was exceptionalized, an option that precluded the search for a real alternative to the system of coloniality. To do so, Japan's identity, like that of other subaltern identities denounced in decolonial thought, is built and reproduced as an object in a classification system that denies the capacity for enunciation.

Sirin Adlbi Sibai explores this same dynamic of representation of the subaltern in her commendable attempt to apply decolonial ideas on Islamic identities to devise alternative feminisms beyond Western epistemologies:

> When the West represents us and talks for us by invoking the power bestowed in having physically and materialistically colonized us and having erected itself the 'center of the world,' at that moment we die, we stop existing. 'We do not exist' and 'we are not' because being is only possible when one has the faculty to 'speak' and exert self-representation

> […] The others […] have their channels of communication blocked because ontological knowledge is generated and disseminated from being. We will perceive ourselves and the rest of non-Western communities, cultures, and individuals from those discourses and images.[10]

In this passage, she refers to the capacity of coloniality to warp a shared perception of history in order to produce and entrap subaltern identities in a sense of perpetual contradiction. The construction of identities, which relies on a supposed conflict between tradition and modernity, as it has been shown predating the national narrative of Japan, "constitutes in itself and gives shape to the crisis it decries."[11] The prime strength of ego-politics of power lies in the masquerading of the Western-led hegemonic order as the objective, accurate, and universal means of producing and interpreting knowledge. The assumption and validation–albeit unconsciously–of discourses on the representation of the Other by and from hegemonic positions that do not assume their locus of enunciation devises a dialectic cage from which it is not possible to break out.

It should be noted that both Mignolo and Grosfoguel suggest that Japan is an exception to the system of coloniality of power. They claim that Japan needs to be considered an agent of hegemony because of its imperial enterprises deployed in the rest of Asia. I acknowledge that Japan re-appropriated the logic of coloniality of power to impose its rule on the territories and people it subjugated. I argue it is deceptive, however, to believe that Japan is not subjected to systematic representations as a subaltern nation by Western hegemonic discourses because Japan was not a direct colony of the West. I suspect this conclusion was reached without having devoted specific effort to looking at the case from the perspective of Western representation of Japan. Suggesting that Japan is an exception to the rule contributes to undermining the legitimacy of non-Western agents even when they obviously act as hegemonic authorities.

### The US favorite friend-enemy?

We must assess and analyze Western hegemony as sustained not only by economic, political, and military dominance but also through the imposition of an epistemic framework that defines the Other in terms that favor the West. The West's mere existence as a historical and socio-politically constructed identity depends on the design and perpetuation of this Other from which it could draw to build, assert, and justify its position of (self-perceived) superiority. The mechanism that reinforces this logic of identity formation is precisely the fear that this Other might take over the West's dominating position. This dynamic entails that the stronger the West is, the more it feels imperiled, and to be even stronger, the West needs a clearer and more concrete Other, thus galvanizing the same mechanisms that activate its fear of extinction. The Other must be a fierce enemy, albeit not powerful enough to be able to prevail. I argue

that the West's claim of a monopoly on modernity intends to delegitimize any potential contenders, no matter their actual level of development.

The case of Japan is exemplary of a portrayed identity that cannot be dismissed as non-modern but cannot be fully integrated either as 'modern' if the West is to keep its paramount position. Any form of suspicion cast upon Japan's modernity reinforces Western superiority. I organize the identified tropes constituting the hegemonic narrative of Japan in the United States as part of a combined strategy relying on two pillars. First, the hegemonic narrative depicts the Japanese relationship with modernity as merely superficial and instrumental. Allegations that catching up with the Western level of technological development was the main impulse of the Japanese enterprise of modernizing the state and society were essential to this hegemonic discourse. The latter was routinely nurtured at times when Japan's autonomous political agenda clashed with Western powers' interests. The idea of a Japan that 'uses' modernity instead of 'becoming' modern fundamentally entails the estrangement between the formulation of a community's defining identity and the articulation of its policies and institutions.

The second pillar of the hegemonic narrative is the construction of the Japanese identity solely on the basis of elements that predate the contact with the West and the development of a modern state. These elements would be constitutive of an alleged 'Japanese essence,' for example, geishas and samurai. Japanese culture is restricted to traits and practices viewed as representative of a preordained spirit and fossilized as 'tradition.' The trope of a Japan that is modern on the outside and traditional on the inside is coupled with a cultural identity forged from pre-industrial referents. Here, tradition is not used only to describe a historical legacy but also forces suspended asynchrony between the relentless progress of the country and the culture that is supposed to represent it. This process also underpins one of the axioms of the process of exoticism, namely, the 'aesthetic exceptionalization' of Japan. Karatani Kojin identifies this process as a direct inheritance of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory pouring out into cultural analysis. Aesthetic exceptionalization disguises the representation mechanisms of Orientalism in what seems a praise of beauty. It also reduces the nation's complex identity to a mere target of fascination that essentially objectifies the subaltern subject.[12]

The Western hegemonic discourse demands adaptation to–and imitation of–the West rather than accepting alternative blueprints of modernity. In the case of Japan, this requirement is reinforced by the repeated belief that the Japanese are incapable of abstract thought and just able to produce, devoid of inventiveness. They are seen as followers and not leaders because conceding autonomy of theory and thought to a non-Western nation could lead to opposition to the dominant order. To counterbalance this insistence on the imitative and the

'Westernized,' the hegemonic national narrative reifies perceived Japanese cultural particularities to mold and sustain a subject that is a permanent Other. The praise of particularism is founded on the exclusionary celebration of cultural practices that are identified from a pre-capitalist, pre-modern time, thus effectively de-modernizing the country. Failing to recognize the contradiction, this narrative of aesthetic admiration emerges precisely as an answer to the modernizing process, and in the words of Karatani, "appearing to be anticapitalist, it attempts to aesthetically sublimate the contradictions of the capitalist economy."[13]

### From curiosity to conflict

The history of Japan as a threat in Western eyes goes back at least to the end of the nineteenth century. The Japanese triumph over China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, despite China's diminished status at the end of the Qing Dynasty era, did not remain unnoticed. This victory brought to the world the proof of Japanese successful military modernization, displayed Japan's military might, and showed that the country was able to turn the tide of the historic power balance in its favor. If Western powers regarded these achievements with admiration, Japanese success in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 fostered a change of attitude. Westerners viewed the Japanese victory in this conflict as a threat to their supremacy over the region. If, up to then, they saw Japan's modernization as a worthy undertaking deserving support, modern Japan would become a menace and a reason for concern. This context would call for a thorough revision of Japanese identity as constructed by the West. Key cultural traits belonging to the hegemonic national narrative of the last fifty years, like those representing the Japanese as humble, peaceful, submissive, and friendly, became old fashioned. The new set of attributes would depict the Japanese as aggressive, deceitful, and power-hungry. Nonetheless, some characteristics of the former hegemonic narrative could be adapted to the new one because of their versatility: under some political circumstances, these characteristics are considered positive; under others, degrading. This is what Sheila Johnson calls the "traveling Asian stereotype":

> The favorable Asian stereotype includes such attributes as patience, cleanliness, courtesy, and a capacity for hard work; the unfavorable one emphasizes clannishness, silent contempt, sneakiness, and cruelty. There is a good deal of evidence that these two stereotypes alternate between the Japanese and the Chinese and that when one nation is being viewed in the light of the favorable stereotype, the other will be saddled with the unfavorable epithets. [14]

Johnson argues that there is a constant shifting between two main tropes: the Japanese as gentle, peaceful, effeminate, and exotic (bundled under the

representation of a geisha), against the Japanese as aggressive, fierce, diligent, masculine, and tireless (the Japanese as samurai). This binary portrayal defines the representation of Japanese in the United States, showing a different face of the coin depending on the historical configuration in which the relationship with Japan unfolds. This shifting back and forth between different interpretations of cultural attributes, like the two sides of the same coin, reveals the power-bound bias of the hegemonic national narrative. This discourse is not based on descriptions intended to contribute to the understanding of the Other. Rather, cultural attributes are identified to be judged and interpreted in a way that conveniently legitimates the actions of the dominant power.

Another of the most visible manifestations of this shifting dynamic in the hegemonic national narrative is the treatment of race. As Rotem Kowner points out, the West's use of racially charged discourses has been a way to produce and maintain the specific power relations that would legitimize their superiority over the rest of nations, colonies, or competitors.[15] Racial discourse devises and emulates the convenient hierarchical structure of the dominant over the subjugated based on the belief that 'the white' would be 'racially fitted' to rule. In Kowner's argumentation, the West's delayed racialization of the Japanese was linked to Japan's challenge to this logic of hierarchy. During the first decades of Meiji, the Japanese were depicted in vague racial terms. Some authors even tried to strike resemblances to white phenotypes when describing the fair hue of courtesan women's skin.[16] The Japanese military triumphs changed Japan's ambiguous position in Western racial discourse. Japanese, from then on, would be associated with 'Mongoloid races' of Western classification and ultimately categorized as 'yellow.'

This process of racialization ran parallel to the changing needs of the West in maintaining supremacy over East Asia. Japan's dare to strive for regional control and the political push for an autonomous domestic and international agenda triggered a change in the hegemonic narrative. To trivialize the country's self-assured call for power, deemed threatening to the Western states, the Japanese became cataloged more openly as an inferior race. The 'yellow peril' leitmotif was most famously promoted at the time by Kaiser Wilhelm II to encourage tighter control over China after several revolts hurt Prussian interests in the late 1890s.[17] Japan became one of the embodiments of the 'yellow peril' after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, despite Western powers' support during the conflict. This trope would dominate the hegemonic national narrative with different intensity degrees during the first half of the twentieth century.[18]

Away from the deference the Japanese inspired when regarded as Western modernity's pupils, which characterized the discourses of the nineteenth century, the 'yellow peril' would dominate the hegemonic narrative from the annexation of Korea to the Japanese empire in 1910 to the outbreak of hostilities in

1941. As Akira Iriye points out, the perception of Japan as a military threat was mainly fed by a US neo-mercantilist agenda, which viewed economic growth as a race between nations. According to this logic, Japan's change from trade partner to bitter rival and competitor favored US interests.[19] It is within this rhetorical environment that the US drafted in 1907 what was known as War Plan Orange, a report outlining the procedures to follow in the event of a Japanese invasion. The fantasy of a Japanese assault was implanted and nursed in the US imagery in what Kenneth Hough calls the 'Japanese invasion sublime.' In 1909, a film called *The Japanese Invasion* in which a made-up 'General Noki' conquers the US Pacific Coast was screened in New York. One year later, novelist Jack London, a war correspondent during the conflict in Port Arthur–whose repeated clashes with Japanese authorities probably reinforced his acute racism–, published a story named "The Unparalleled Invasion." In this tale, a Japanese-influenced China decides to conquer the West through planned migratory waves until Western powers stop it through biological warfare.[20]

There was a period of relative rapprochement after WWI. During the Taishō years (1912-1928), Japan deployed an international agenda that sought to legitimize its imperial aspirations by having them accepted by the other great powers. This strategy reaped some benefits with several land concessions in the Treaty of Versailles, but the rise of tensions at the end of the 1920s and 1930s (a combination of global anti-communism, escalation of fascism and militarism, Japan's imperial expansion over continental Asia, and the financial crash of 1929) reignited a latent hostility. As Iriye states, "once the theme of competition was introduced, it was difficult for some to develop a vocabulary of mutual association in which Japanese would remain friends while becoming competitors."[21]

It was in these conditions of discursive animosity that the Pacific War broke out. During the conflict, the Japanese were depicted as brutal, aggressive, and almost inhuman because of their disposition to sacrifice themselves in battle. Racially prejudiced caricatures portrayed them with aesthetically ungraceful traits by Western standards that were generically associated with the Asian phenotype: slant eyes, yellow skin, short height, and protuberant frontal teeth. In 1945, the US War Department commissioned director Frank Capra a propaganda documentary that would be screened to soldiers ready to be deployed to the Pacific front, *Know Your Enemy: Japan.*[22] Its clear intention was to describe Japan and the Japanese in a way that justified American entry into the war and the coming battle to feed soldiers' patriotism. This film, whose production started in 1942, shows in great detail the main tropes of the hegemonic national narrative held by the United States at this historical juncture. One should take into account, though, that the context of production and openly propagandistic intentions of the film infuse the documentary with a self-aware sense of discursive bias.

*Know Your Enemy: Japan* is in line with other visual and textual wartime documents. The anthropological and historical knowledge from which the movie pretends to draw in its portrayal of Japan and the Japanese would hardly pass tests of actual accuracy. The country is depicted as ruled by 'warlords' who only modernized from fear of being conquered and were convinced they could finally achieve an alleged national desire to rule the world. Democracy was 'borrowed' as a 'cruel joke,' and Japanese modernization is represented as not aimed at improving the people's standards of living. Instead, the film suggests that modernization initiatives were tightly regulated and motivated by the agenda of the warmongering elite and its imperialist aspirations. As seen in the movie, the white-collar Japanese works with modern machines but in his house he puts on the kimono and lives like his ancestors in the Middle Ages. The tape describes the Japanese as bound to follow a pre-modern frame of mind that is hierarchical and submissive. Individuality is suppressed, and the country is portrayed as functioning like a gigantic hive that makes each citizen a devoted automaton compliant with state domination. This dehumanization process would serve to justify an apparent insensitivity toward death, including self-inflicted. The trope that the Japanese are indifferent to death and would rather die than surrender builds on previously laid axioms of objectification and deprivation of agency.

To enhance the animosity towards the Japanese, the screenplay also exploits the tropes of treacherousness and unreliability. Historically, these traits have been attributed in turn to the Japanese and the Chinese: in Johnson's terms, it is a 'traveling stereotype.' Bushidō and the so-called 'samurai code,' which was widely accepted at the turn of the century, was reinterpreted then as 'the art of treachery and double-cross' while remaining a philosophical foundation for the nation. 'Honor' and 'loyalty,' usually associated with the alleged 'warrior' spirit of the Japanese, became synonymous with 'deceit' and 'trickery.' These features would characterize the way the Japanese fight and their trade policies. For instance, a segment of the movie is devoted to accusing the Japanese of stealing patents to undersell other nations and feed 'their war machine.'

### Japan in the immediate postwar: the enemy of my enemy…

The Pacific War affirmed the United States' military supremacy over Japan, but it was no ordinary victory. Japanese were the direct victims of the first use of nuclear bombing, but beyond this, the American attacks of Hiroshima and Nagasaki opened a new era in international relations. As winners of the war, the Americans would be in a privileged position to neutralize Japan from within. The occupation period and the geostrategic imperatives of the Cold War, especially during the military struggles in the Korean peninsula, favored a complete turn in US perceptions of the Japanese. The deployment of Allied

troops in mainland Japan officially ended in 1951, although full sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands was only restored in 1972. During the first years of the occupation, the enforcement of a restructuring process of the Japanese state and institutions was accompanied by a thorough attempt to de-galvanize discourses on Japan as a potential threat. The Japanese Constitution of 1947 declared the country a parliamentary democracy, thus turning it into a potential 'friendly country' of the United States. The famous article 9, which forbade Japan from maintaining armed forces capable of waging war, guarded the Americans against future threats from this formidable enemy.

The success of these rapid and drastic changes in perception can also be attributed to the fact that many of the agents, structures, and resources of discourse reproduction were already in place from the time of wartime propaganda. Before and after the Pacific War, the United States hired a group of scholars for strategic purposes: most of them came from the social sciences. Some of them would produce works that would become not only very popular but also highly influential in shaping the hegemonic national narrative. The most famous case is Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, published in 1946. The book's great success was not surprising: it aligned harmoniously with the aforementioned axioms of the hegemonic national narrative. Despite Benedict's distinguished background as an academic, an analysis of the conditions of production of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* raises questions over the work's accuracy. The Office of War Information invited Benedict to research the Japanese even though she had no previous knowledge of the country, which she had never seen with her own eyes. She based her study on secondary literature and interviews with a small and non-representative group of subjects: Japanese-American citizens imprisoned in concentration camps. Richard H. Minear, analyzing the reception of Benedict's opus, underscores the sample issue, which makes "her picture, if valid … grossly out of date."[23] In his view, Benedict also "overestimates the homogeneity of Japan."[24] Regardless of this, the book was a hit in Japan, where it sold two million copies. C. Douglas Lummis considers it a precursor of the *Nihonjinron* genre, which consists of discourses on Japanese particularism developed mainly by Japanese scholars. This genre became markedly popular in the afterwar until the 1990s.[25] Previous to *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Benedict had done work on Native American peoples and expressed in her book *Patterns of Culture* the belief that cultures were a combination of thoughts and actions that could be explored and understood more or less like an individual's personality. She structured her understanding of Japan as a binary system of tropes. On the one hand, she described the Japanese as meek, delicate, sensible, and lover of the arts, characteristics embodied in the chrysanthemum. On the other, the Japanese would be prone to violence, fierceness, and competition, traits represented by the sword. In fact, Benedict saw her work as an attempt to describe not how the

Japanese are, in her words, "it is not a book specifically about Japanese religion or economic life or politics or the family."[26] For Benedict, "it examines Japanese assumptions about the conduct of life […] it is about what makes Japan a nation of Japanese."[27]

Moreover, Benedict was a staunch believer in values such as democracy and individualism that she perceived as American. Echoing the still in force 'yellow peril' trope, she held that Japanese imperialism was to be expected from a people she considered predisposed to viciousness. This violence would manifest itself outward in warrior-like enterprises and inwards through the supposedly traditional culture of ritual suicide. She was not alone in her reinforcement of the warrior theme of the hegemonic national narrative. John M. Maki believed that "the Japanese must be re-educated 'so that they will be able to understand and to make workable a system of democratic government.'" [28] Edwin O. Reischauer agreed with him and stated that 'a solution' should be found for the Japanese, and he believed it could only be democracy.[29] These judgments imply that otherwise, the Japanese could not democratize independently.

Others refrained from such paternalistic condescension and tried to portray a Japan that was merely reacting to the pressures and economic embargo from the United States and their allies. Helen Mears, in her book *Mirror for America: Japan* (1948), a treatise on the history of the country intended for a general American readership, put forward a peculiar interpretation of Japanese enmity during WWII. This behavior would result from fear of being colonized if the Japanese failed to keep up with their hectic developmental agenda. Charles Burton Fahs and John Fee Embree were also critical of American assumptions made during the Occupation of Japan, which supported the United States' efforts to coerce the Japanese into compliance. They considered too harsh American bashing of Japan for not having committed itself to democracy right off the bat.[30] None of these authors were justifying or defending Japan's bellicism. The importance of their works lies elsewhere: they conceded Japan some degree of political autonomy and legitimacy to build an agenda departing from Western interests. These studies, therefore, did not fit the hegemonic discourse. However, they did not circulate as much as those authored by their aforementioned peers, at least during the first decades of the postwar period.[31]

In line with this rapprochement between the West and Japan, a wave of Japanese aestheticism appeared during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the United States. The renewed interest in pre-modern Japanese artifacts, architecture models, and practices like *ikebana* and *bonsai* care promoted yet again the geisha-like interpretative facet of the hegemonic national narrative. Zen Buddhism attracted the attention of Westerners, specifically in the art world, and mainly through the mediation of figures like Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki. Similarly to what Okakura Kakuzō suggested with his famous treatise on the tea

ceremony, published in the US at the beginning of the century, D. T. Suzuki's *Zen and the Japanese Culture* was both produced and interpreted as a reference work that appointed *Zen* as the privileged vehicle for understanding the Japanese national 'essence.'[32] It is less known, however, that Suzuki's first draft of the book in the 1930s linked Zen to an alleged Japanese warrior spirit. This connection gained the admiration and following of high-ranking Nazi officials like Karlfried Graf Dürckheim.[33] Suzuki's work was reduced to the tame aspects of Zen: this proves how far a narrative can change the framing of a particular text. Warner Mettler underscores this dissociation of Suzuki's contributions from his previous claims of association with a so-called Japan's samurai spirit.[34] She also makes the distinction between the way the general public understood Zen, emphasizing "the religion's sense of reflective serenity and self-discipline," and how artists from the so-called Beat generation approached it.[35] These artists regarded Zen as a "confrontational aesthetic" they could adopt to oppose the dominant drive for materialistic accumulation.[36] In the end, nonetheless, the craze for Zen Buddhism that channeled the 1960s construction of mainstream Japan offered, in all its variations, a cohesive rendition of the Japanese nation.

This short truce through culture would make way for another round of rivalry, this time on the economic ground. The Nixon Shock and the 1973 oil crisis created a new atmosphere that would provoke a shift towards animosity in the hegemonic national narrative. Throughout the 1970s, Japan's positive trade balance was framed as an unfair advantage over the countries they were doing business with. Japanese economic policies had made the country the leading buyer of US Treasury bonds, and by 1984, the possessor of the largest net foreign assets.[37] Western protectionist discourses would resuscitate the old phantom of Japan's desire for world dominance. Instead of soldiers, Japanese businessmen and industrialists were compared with and even symbolically attired as samurai. The 'yellow peril' would make a comeback, this time threatening Western supremacy not with conventional weapons but with economic subjugation, as Pulitzer Prize author Theodore H. White decried. In his 1985 piece "The Danger from Japan"–which appeared in *The New York Times*–,[38] he even warned the Japanese of retaliation similar to the American response to Pearl Harbor. This interpretation was not original: it appeared first at the beginning of the century and again in wartime propaganda. With Japan's military power dismissed, the hegemonic national narrative framed potential aggressiveness in economic terms.

The shaking of the 'yellow peril' ghosts during the years of trade imbalance emerges in striking contrast to the tone of relative reconciliation of the 1950s and 1960s. While the prewar and wartime hegemonic discourses focused on the military danger embodied by Japan, the post-1945 discourses represented the country as a competitor rather than an enemy. Priscilla A. Clapp and Morton

H. Halperin defined this relationship as "inevitable harmony."[39] Setting up the discourse of Japan as a friendly nation responded to geostrategic imperatives: forging an alliance that could enhance the American position in the struggle for regional control against the influence of China and the Soviet Union. This approach changed with the shift in the geopolitical order that came after Nixon and Mao re-established diplomatic relationships in 1971. Since Japan was no more the indispensable Asian partner, incentives for cultivating this 'inevitable harmony' diminished. The new correlation of forces would allow criticism of Japan's trade policies. Reminisced derogatory tropes infused the hegemonic national narrative once again at a moment when Western interests, especially those of the United States, were challenged. This dynamic is described in Christina Klein's *Cold War Orientalism.* She explores how the US turned Asia into a subject upon which it could define through action (its geopolitical policies) and opposition (what they are is what we are not) its self-perception as leader of the 'free world.'

During the 1980s, fear and admiration for Japan would merge with discourses on the likeliness of the Eastern bloc's collapse, which would profoundly impact international power relations. As neoliberalism was gaining ground, defining strategies to make countries more productive and richer was an essential issue. At the time, Japan was perceived as both an example of success and a menace among scholars, journalists, intellectuals, and other policymakers whose views matched the public opinion. Andrew McKevitt distinguishes two streams of interpretation of this dual image. The authors of the first group, whom he calls 'structural revisionists,' believed that the key to Japan's achievements lay in its corporative structures, labor laws, and the market and the government's strategic confluence. This view was common among specialists and serious writers on Japan. The scholars of the second group are labeled 'cultural revisionists': they argued that Japan's cultural 'uniqueness' stood behind its triumphs. This position was routinely defended by non-specialists and tended to unbalanced views that brought them accusations of racism and unabashed chauvinism. They nevertheless dominated public discourse until the end of the decade and up until their unanswered cries of impending doom from across the Pacific proved unanswered, when it became clear that Japan would not overcome the United States as the next leading superpower.[40]

### The great bewitchment?

Western powers pressured Japan to reevaluate its trade policies during the 1970s and 1980s and reshape its international agenda in the decades-long recession that followed the crash of Japan's market between 1989 and 1992. The so-called Fukuda Doctrine, first implemented at the end of the 1970s, was a plan for the international commercial opening of Japan through the promotion

of Japanese cultural exports. This strategy would bolster investment and soothe international negotiations by creating an appealing and friendly image of the nation. Koichi Iwabuchi notes how at the turn of the twenty-first century, out of the belief that the soft power campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s were fruitful, "Japan's pop-culture diplomacy was firmly institutionalized with the 'Cool Japan' policy discourse, which sought to capitalize on the popularity of Japanese media culture in global markets (notably Euro-American markets)."[41] There was consensus among Japanese institutions to keep up with the effort of promoting the 'Cool Japan' nation branding. This has been an outspoken commitment from Japan's state and ideological institutions since Prime Minister Koizumi discussed it in the Diet, and subsequent cabinets would leave it untouched.[42] Whether or not these 'Cool Japan' campaigns have actually helped promote the Japanese economy by attracting foreign investment and smoothing the edges during international summits for more beneficial deals (that is, whether or not they are useful in factual diplomacy) is still debated. Nobuko Kawashima points out that Cool Japan products failed to secure a long-term revenue crucial to the building of a solid, viable, and enduring national industry.[43] Gerry Groot argues that while there was substantial growth in Japanese cultural exports, and despite its popularity in the US–as pointed out by Roland Kelt in his book *Japanamerica*–, these exports slowly declined in the past ten to fifteen years instead of increasing or stabilizing.[44] As for the sudden bewitchment of US audiences for anime and manga, Casey Brienza points out that

> Manga did not in fact 'conquer' America; it would be more appropriate instead to assert that the book publishing industry in the USA has, in answer to twenty-first-century pressures on its business model of importing content from Japan, made manga more American in terms of the concrete social and economic conditions of its production. This, in turn, implies that manga will not be a vehicle to deliver Japanese soft power.[45]

Even if the 'Cool Japan' efforts have proved to be economically subpar and no direct diplomatic success can be attributed to them, the integration in US hegemonic discourse of many traits associated with this agenda should not surprise. The image of Japan promoted through soft power campaigns complied with previously circulating notions constituting the hegemonic narrative. There have been instances where Japan's cultural export campaign has been regarded as the new guise of enduring Japanese desire for conquest, which could not be satisfied through military and economic means. During the most fruitful years of the 1990s and early 2000s' Japanese cultural soft power campaign, Japan's popularity was mitigated by ideas of 'invasion' and 'Japanese wave,' which perpetuated the fear instilled by the 'yellow peril' motive. Soon, other East Asian countries would also appear as potential military, economic, and cultural threats to Western eyes. During the first decade of the twenty-first century,

there was speculation over the forms of soft power that would accompany China's rise to the position of great power. China's corporate acquisitions strategy, its idiosyncratic consumer market, and its very discrete presence on the Western cultural front strongly contrast with the Japanese pattern during the same period. It was also miles away from the sudden and great success of South Korean cultural products–particularly its music industry–in the United States, where they experienced a skyrocketing rise in popularity at the end of the 2010s.

Japanese soft power campaigns, in their articulation of a non-threatening Japan, had a major role in the shaping of the hegemonic national narrative in the past 30 years. By conveying traits such as meekness and passivity, the geisha or chrysanthemum tropes have contributed more than others to rob Japan of political agency in popular perceptions, thus keeping the pendulum on their side. It is worth pointing out the gendering of Japan as 'male' or 'female,' which conveys an ingrained sexist understanding of power hierarchies. Whenever Japan was aggressive and assertive, the country was defined as masculine by invoking warrior tropes; conversely, when it has to be depicted as peaceful, collaborative, passive, and meek, female figures, especially geishas, are dominant. This gendering practice not only exports a depraved logic of inequality that links anything female to a position of naturalized oppression: it also uses the realm of national narratives as a ground where it could take roots and perpetuate its patriarchal paradigm of understanding. This gendered shifting from the Japanese as geisha to Japanese as samurai and vice versa has been strictly linked to the coming and going of the 'yellow peril' trope.

In Japan, these developments were paralleled by the rise in popularity of *Nihonjinron* discourses.[46] Similar to the debates of the 1980s, defenders of Japan's perceived cultural particularism were drawing from imagery asserting the 'uniqueness' of the country to feed their arguments, even if their positions had no impact on academic scholarship on Japan. Alt-right movements flaring up during the 2016 presidential election used their pipe-dream idea of Japan to defend a vision of a mono-ethnic United States.[47] I hold that through its hegemonic national narrative, the West commodified Japan as a place and an entity of delimited and achievable consumption.

This process is not free from contradictions. Emphasizing a cultural essence of the exotic that comes from pre-modern times clashes with the popular–but inaccurate–description of Japan as a hyper-technological, post-industrial, late-capitalist society, and it does not go without difficulties. David Morley and Kevin Robins argued in 1995 that by looking at Japan primarily as an economic entity, the Western discourse was reproducing the exotic objectification processes which made up Orientalism. They called 'Techno-Orientalism' this iteration of the narrative, which provides new arguments to the contestation of the Orientalist tradition.

Techno-Orientalism, like Orientalism, places great emphasis on the project of modernity–cultures privilege modernity and fear losing their perceived 'edge' over others. Stretching beyond Orientalism's premise of a hegemonic West's representational authority over the East, Techno-Orientalism's scope is much more expansive and bidirectional, its discourses mutually constituted by the flow of trade and capital across the hemispheres. [...] Western nations vying for cultural and economic dominance with Asian nations find in Techno-Orientalism an expressive vehicle for their aspirations and fears.[48]

By depicting Asia as an economically and technologically developed region that caught up with and even surpassed the West, Techno-Orientalism posits a future where Western authority is a thing of the past. However, this de-Westernized future is a dystopian projection of the worst social and environmental downsides of the project of modernity. Techno-Orientalism, therefore, becomes a new iteration of discourses on the 'yellow peril' that articulates a defense of Western domination by anticipating a situation of unrest, defeat, and total alienation if Asia were to lead.

In the 2010s, Japan experienced socioeconomic crises–a stagnant economy, a disenfranchised youth, an aging population, and the 2011 triple natural disaster, which made the country aware of its ecological vulnerability–but passed through a period of exceptional political stability. As his government stayed in power from 2012 to 2020, Abe Shinzō became the longest-serving Prime Minister in Japan's democratic history. Abe's conservative policies, which turned Japan into a discrete actor on the international stage, for instance, by attracting attention to China's rise, intended to make the country look like an ally to the West. In the United States, the idea of Japan remains a subject of commodification, a floating signifier that both evoked the best promises and worst nightmares of life in a globalized, late-capitalist world. As Matt Alt describes it:

Japan represented something of a neatly packaged fantasy in and of itself: an easy-to understand, miniaturized version of the world at large, a nation-sized virtual reality, which made the fantasy-delivery devices its citizens clung to as survival tools all the more relevant abroad. Which is why, if one were to draw a Venn diagram of shared interests—with circles for Japan's otaku and netto uyoku net-rightists, for the far-left Antifa and the alt-right, for Gamergaters and YouTubers and edgelords who define themselves by outraging others, for Black Lives Matter supporters and for LGBT activists—the overlap would center, improbably, on things Japanese: manga, anime, and the idea of Japan as a fantasyland in and of itself.[49]

## In lieu of conclusions

Although Japan was never colonized and was actually an imperial power on its own, the country has been subjected to tropes routinely used in the discursive construction of the Other–primarily but not limited to the Asian Other–that ensures Western legitimacy. In its earlier stages, when Western powers were interested in economic partnership, the hegemonic national narrative described Japan as a peaceful and friendly nation. However, as soon as the country proved it could defeat a Western country and potentially affect the regional balance of power, the social and technological developments associated with the Japanese project of modernization, which remained unchanged, were interpreted in a different light. During those instances, Japan has been a-critically accused of 'using' modernity solely to match the West's level of development. Perceived Japanese successes were deemed acceptable as long as they testify to a 'limited' modernization that could not turn the country into a potential contender for Western authority. Whenever Japan pushed an autonomous agenda, the national hegemonic depicted Japan's initiatives as expressions of an inherent national inclination to belligerency. This supposed propensity to conflict would be the legacy of a past essentially made up of repeated military struggles. However, Japanese ferociousness, commonly symbolized by the image of the samurai, was not only invoked in times of military confrontation but also when economic and cultural domination was at stake. As shown in my analysis, the use of the tropes is contingent on the historical moment. The images associated with Japan in the 1940s are different from those of the 1950s, 1980s, or 2000s. However, as I have argued, these images rely on a grammar and a structure conceived to define an Other that would be epistemically subjected to the self-imposed superiority of Western hegemony, enacted by the monopolization of modernity's legitimation and the exclusion of Japan as a valid power. Raising critical awareness of this dynamic becomes more pressing precisely because Japan was an imperial power of its own whose regional hegemony was also based on a system of epistemic subalternation of its respective Others. The hegemonic epistemic structures currently in place show their inner strength in their logic of oppression and control of the narrative of the Other when they dare and succeed in sustaining this narrative for a superpower like Japan.

As to the 'yellow peril' trope, invoked time and again to frame Japan as a potential enemy of Western interests in disguise, it would eventually encompass these three spheres. This trope, designed to delegitimize Japan's right to contest, used a pre-modern warmongering imagery to characterize Japan's means to approach conflict and ended up affirming the West's paternity of modernity. It did this by sourcing the essence of Japanese culture in a moment that predates contact with the West and the development of a modern state. Other tropes, geishas and samurai, resulted from the reduction of Japanese culture to

traits and practices hailed as referential to an essence preordained and fossilized as 'tradition.' Tradition is not only used to describe a historical legacy but also forces suspended asynchrony between the relentless progress of the country and the culture that is supposed to represent it. The trope of a Japan that is modern on the outside and traditional on the inside is coupled with the pinpointing of its cultural identity in pre-industrial referents. The Japanese nation is defined as essentially constituted of non-modern cultural patterns instead of accepting the natural flux and blending of past and present that is culture, as Stuart Hall defined it, in its every contemporary instance. The process of describing Japan as an object seen from the distanced viewpoint of aesthetic appreciation can also be understood through more contemporary forms of admiration, institutional but also intellectual and academic, that have a resonance in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's criticism of a subaltern that is deprived of a voice to define itself.

Ironically enough, whenever Japan is described as 'Westernized,' that is, when it breeds social or cultural phenomena that depart from the mainstream image based on pre-modern tropes, the country is 'demodernized.' Japan embodies a mix of qualities and attributes regarded as Western in origin and others that came into existence with the industrialization process. The modern imagery (cars, suits, factories) grafted to the narrative is regarded as Western, although they exemplify trends common to a host of industrial and post-industrial societies, including consumerism–also global–in its 'last stage.' This process stems from the understanding of modernity as a Western patent. Every instance of successful national industrialization is interpreted as mimetism of the West. 'Modernization' is exchanged for 'Westernization,' and in this tradeoff, the West assimilates and monopolizes modernity and its Hegelian legacy of development and providence.

As a concluding remark, I would like to briefly hint at Japan's constant meddling in the hegemonic national narrative of the country as held in the West. There are instances in which the actions of the Japanese state and ideological institutions are interrelated with the construction of the hegemonic discourse as it circulates in the United States. One can see, for instance, how, during the nineteenth century, Japanese intellectual and political elites wished to articulate the project of modernization as a constant debate over what was later summarized as the tension of *wakon-yōsai*, or 'Western technology with a Japanese spirit.' At the same time, the contribution of Fukuzawa Yukichi and his peers, which emphasized the need for Japan to develop technologically to avoid being colonized by the West, sided with the hegemonic argument of a Japan torn by an inner divide between a native pre-modern essence and superficial modernity embraced for merely utilitarian ends. Similarly, Mari Yoshihara explored how the Japanese played an active role in the maintenance of 'geisha-like ideas' of

Japan through the promotion or at least non-rebuttal of extremely popular cultural productions in the West like Madame Butterfly.[50] This fame is not fortuitous. It is not that these texts are directly mediated in authorial production that makes them hegemonic. Instead, it is the fact they are read and rendered within a system that legitimates the agents in power and, as such, appear circulating through the institutions that comprise it. In the end, I wish to stress that there is a better insight to gain by focusing not on the intention a text was created for but on how it is interpreted once it becomes part of the dominant discursive ecosystem.

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## Notes

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[30] Ibid., 573.

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[32] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959).

[33] For reasons that have to do with extension and relevance to the present object of study, I don't devote more attention to this fascinating period. For readers interested in getting in touch with a very detailed account of this relationship, see Brian Victoria's "Zen Nazi in Wartime Japan: Count Dürckheim and his Sources," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 12, 3-2 (2014), https://apjjf.org/2014/12/3/Brian-Victoria/4063/article.html.

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