“SOFT” NATIONALISM AND NARCISSISM: JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE GOES GLOBAL

KOICHI IWABUCHI
International Christian University

In their book on the political economy of media globalisation, Herman and McChesney (1998, 104) argue that “Japan is supplying capital and markets to the global media system, but little else”. This statement echoes the widely held assumption that Japan has money and technology but does not have a cultural influence on the world. This established image has not readily changed, even though the prevalence of Japanese cultural involvement in media globalisation has been a topic of discussion both domestically and internationally since the late 1980s. These discussions initially focused on the cultural influence of made-in-Japan hardware (technological products) such as the Walkman, and subsequently on the inroads by Japanese manufacturers into the software business, as exemplified by Sony and Matsushita’s buy-out of Hollywood studios in the late 1980s in an attempt to gain access to the extensive archives of Hollywood-produced films and other “content” products. In either case, any new development is easily reduced to cliché, as shown by the words of a Japanese co-star to the American protagonist, Michael Douglas, in the Hollywood film Black Rain: “Music and movies are all your culture is good for... We make the machines” (quoted in Morley and Robins 1995, 159).

However, Herman and McChesney’s argument overlooks the dramatic increase in Japanese exports of popular cultural forms. From animation, comics, and characters to fashion, pop music and TV dramas, Japanese popular culture is now well received and enjoyed in many parts of the world. Japanese TV dramas such as Long Vacation and Love Generation have been passionately embraced in many parts of East Asia, Pokémon has become a global phenomenon and Miyazaki Hayao’s latest animation film, Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi, won the best film award at the Berlin Film Festival in 2002. Even if these developments in made-in-Japan popular culture did not capture the attention of some Western media scholars, they are enough to attract considerable attention within Japan. This paper examines how the rise of Japanese popular cultural forms in global audiovisual markets has engendered a “soft” nationalism in Japan—that is, a narcissistic discourse that
celebrates the transnational dissemination of Japanese popular cultural “software”, set against technological “hardware”. The growth of such a discourse within Japan might not be surprising, especially given that the international advent of Japanese popular culture provides a sharp contrast to the longstanding Japanese economic slump. The hitherto unthinkable diffusion of Japanese popular culture throughout the world seems to inspire a social and personal lift in Japan. However, it is taking this too far for these developments to be discussed in a chauvinistic manner that uncritically celebrates Japan’s status as a global cultural power.

As I have argued elsewhere, the discourse on Japan’s cultural exports to East/Southeast Asia is underpinned by Japan’s historically constituted desire for “Asia” and its lingering asymmetrical power relations with other Asian countries (Iwabuchi 2001). Here, Japan’s cultural superiority in Asia is re-asserted through the spread of Japanese popular culture. The increase in the export of TV programs to Asian markets is also assumed to serve Japan’s cultural diplomacy as it presents, from a Japanese perspective, an opportunity to enhance Asia’s understanding of postwar “liberated” and “humane” Japan. In either case, Japanese cultural exports are exclusively and effortlessly discussed in terms of furthering Japanese national interests, while the complexity inherent in transnational cultural flows goes unheeded.

A nationalistic impulse is differently but even more manifestly discerned in the discourse on the development of Japanese exports of animation and video games on global markets (including Europe and the United States). Japanese commentators on the global spread of Japanese animation and video games often take a self-satisfied pleasure in observing how these cultural commodities are happily consumed around the world. While the global spread of Japanese animation and video games seems to convince such commentators of Japanese cultural supremacy, I will argue that the chauvinistic nationalist discourse contains transnationalist ambivalence—an ambivalence associated with the difficulty in apprehending precisely what is “Japanese” about Japanese popular culture. The rise of Japanese cultural status in the world is confirmed only by disregarding the contradictory and decentred nature of global cultural power.

**TECHNO-NATIONALISM VS TECHNO-ORIENTALISM**

It was the predominance of Japanese consumer technologies in the world that first evoked Japanese cultural nationalist sentiment. Through an analysis of the domestic advertising strategies of Sony and Matsushita, Yoshimi (1999) explores what he calls Japan’s “techno-nationalism”—that is, how the export of Japanese consumer technologies has played a significant role in sparking Japanese national
pride during the postwar era. His analysis shows an interesting temporal lag between the moment when the advertising strategies of Sony and Matsushita stressed the international recognition of Japanese technological excellence and the moment when such recognition was an unambiguous reality. As Yoshimi points out, in the 1950s and 1960s Japanese manufacturers such as Matsushita and Sony emphasised the international presence of their products in their domestic advertising. Given that Japanese consumer technologies were at that time still regarded as cheap in the West, both in terms of price and quality, this emphasis on the fact that made-in-Japan products were exported to Western markets suggests the importance for Japanese manufacturers of promoting a prestigious image for themselves within Japan. Appeal to cultural nationalist sentiment was necessary precisely because of Japan’s low profile in global consumer markets.

However, in the 1980s, when Japanese economic power had become unequivocal, there were changes in the representation and narrative of the excellence of made-in-Japan consumer technologies. On the one hand, straightforward nationalistic claims were replaced by comical depictions of the encounter between Japan and the West in the 1970s and 1980s (Yoshimi 1999). This was a time when the nationalist slogan of kokusaika [internationalisation] became prevalent in Japan. The increasing encounter with foreign (predominantly Western) peoples and cultures enhanced the drive to pleasurably embrace the West without losing the sense of demarcation between “us” and “them” (Iwabuchi 1994). On the other hand, when the superior quality of Japanese consumer technologies had become widely appreciated around the world, the global reach of Japanese consumer technologies was attributed to Japan’s “creative and original refinement”, if not “pure originality”, rather than to its cunning ability to copy or imitate “the West” (Forester 1993). For example, VCRs were originally invented by an American company, but it was Sony, Matsushita and JVC that, with many original ideas, refined them and made them suitable for the consumer market (Lardner 1987). In 1991, NHK [Nihon Hōsō Kyōkai], the national TV network, broadcast a six-episode series entitled ‘Japan the Electronic Nation: an Autobiography’. The series documented the historical development of Japanese semiconductor technologies in the postwar era, and sought to identify a Japanese national character that was responsible for such developments (see also Morita Akio’s account in Made in Japan [1987] of why Sony, as a Japanese company, succeeded on a world scale). As Yoshimi (1999) points out, the basic assumption underlying the series was Japanese ingenuity in innovative imitation. Japanese technological superiority in global contexts was clearly associated with Japan’s adaptable ingenuity and indigenising capacity.

Against this rise of Japanese economic and techno-cultural power, a condescending discourse emerged in the West—what Morley and Robins (1995) call...
“techno-Orientalism”. Morley and Robins (1995, 147–73) analysed how media and cultural globalisation has had an impact on the reconstruction of a European collective identity and the way in which the Orientalist representation of the Other has been recast in the process. According to their argument, Japan has become an emergent Other of the late twentieth century against which the West can project its own superiority. Unlike the premodern Other, however, Japan has achieved a high degree of modernisation and technological sophistication. “Japan has come to exist within the Western political and cultural unconscious as a figure of danger, and it has done so because it has destabilised the neat correlation between West/East and modern/premodern” (Morley and Robins 1995, 160). The West cannot maintain its presumption of technological and material superiority against this hi-tech Orient, as “Japan can no longer be handled simply as an imitator or mimic of Western modernity” (Morley and Robins 1995, 173).

In the discourse of “techno-Orientalism”, the West maintains its cultural and moral excellence by depicting a de-humanised picture of a technology-soaked Japanese society: “Within the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power. It represents the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress” (Morley and Robins 1995, 170). However, the other side of the Western image of Japanese people as “unfeeling aliens” who are “cyborgs and replicants” is Western envy that “these [Japanese] mutants are now better adapted to survive in the future” (Morley and Robins 1995, 170). Western ambivalence and feelings of “resentment and envy” towards Japanese techno-power make Japan a real threat to Western identity.

Morley and Robins’ purpose is to criticise the lingering Orientalisation of the non-Western Other inherent in the construction of a superior modern Western identity at a time when the legitimacy of the latter is being undermined by the rise of Japan as an economic superpower. From a Japanese point of view, however, Japan’s increasing confidence in its dominant position in the world economy generated its aggressive assertion of Japanese cultural power through technological excellence. One prominent example was Morita Akio and Ishihara Shintaro’s Japan that Can Say “No”! in 1989 (English version 1991), in which Japanese technological superiority was proudly associated with Japan’s ascendancy and America’s relative decline in the world. This interplay suggests that Japan’s economic power made Japanese self-asserted cultural uniqueness a matter for the construction of Western identity, in a context in which the rivalry between Japan and the United States in terms of trade surplus and technological excellence was a serious issue (see, for example, Miyoshi 1991; Robertson 1991). However, it should be noted that they are actually not in an antagonistic relationship. There is a complicit mutual othering of “Japan” here, as Western techno-Orientalism and Japanese techno-nationalism both stress the essential difference between
Japan and the West in order to (re)construct an exclusive national/cultural identity (Iwabuchi 1994). I will return to this point shortly as it relates to the Japanese narcissistic observation of the spread of Japanese popular culture. For the moment, I will address how Japan’s nationalistic posture is displayed in a more self-congratulatory manner in the Japanese discourse on the export of “software” cultural products such as animation and video games.

**SOFT NATIONALISM: JAPANESE DISCOURSE ON GLOBALISED OTAKU CULTURE**

Techno-Orientalism as discussed by Morley and Robins (1995) articulates a Western fear of cultural invasion and decadence brought about by the global circulation of Japanese high-tech cultural artefacts. However, Morley and Robins (1995) did not differentiate between hardware (consumer technologies and video game apparatuses) and software (e.g., animation and game characters). From a Japanese perspective, the source of Japanese cultural power cannot just be found in technological excellence but, more importantly, in the global dissemination of its “software” products and various cultural commodities. The focus of Japanese interest in its global cultural power has gradually shifted from the sophistication of its technologies to the appeal of its original cultural products—a shift from techno-nationalism to software-oriented, “soft” nationalism.

In the late 1980s, the significance of Japan in the global cultural market began to attract wider international academic and media attention. In addition to Sony and Matsushita’s buy-out of Hollywood film studios, various kinds of Japanese animation were being well received in Western markets, especially after the success of the animated film *Akira*. Subsequently, many books and articles on Japanese animation and video games have been published in the English-language world (e.g., Mediamatic 1991; Schodt 1983; Schodt 1996; Levi 1996). These developments in Japanese audiovisual cultural presence in Western markets have been accompanied by a surge of interest within Japan in its global cultural influence. In the early 1990s, there was an increasing Japanese interest in articulating the distinctive “Japaneseness” of cultural exports such as animation and video games. Popular cultural exports came to be an important element in the discursive construction of Japanese national identity. In 1992, the popular monthly magazine, *Denim* (September 1992, 143), included a feature article on made-in-Japan global commodities that began: “Who said that Japan only imports superior foreign culture and commodities and has nothing originally Japanese which has a universal appeal? Now Japanese customs, products and systems are conquering the world!” In this article, global Japanese exports were seen to include food, fashion, service industries, animation and video games. The argument was further

> It is a historical rule that an economically powerful nation in its heyday produces global popular culture whose influence matches its economic power. Such was the case with the British Empire, Imperial France, Weimar Germany and the United States of the 1950s and 1960s. What, then, has the Japan of the 1980s produced for the world? Has Japan produced anything that is consumed globally and influences the lifestyle of world consumers? (Akurosu Henshūshitsu 1995, 6).

Consumer technologies, particularly the Walkman, have long been representative of Japanese global cultural commodities. The editorial team of the above volume (1995, 6–8) noted that in 1988 the team defined the term “global commodities” [*sekai shōhin*] in terms of things of universal or transcultural appeal that bear the creative imprint of the originality of the producing nation in their attempt to articulate the phenomenal global popularity of the Walkman. However, the made-in-Japan global commodities discussed in the 1995 book include not only Japanese hardware commodities such as the Walkman, instant cameras and VCRs, but also “software” products such as animation, video games and even the system of producing pop idols, a process predominantly exported to Asia.

In the above book, this shift in Japanese cultural exports towards software is addressed, symbolically, by the designer of the Walkman, Kuroki Yasuo. In retrospect, Kuroki laments Japan’s inability to produce the software that people consume with the Walkman, but he sees hope, in animation and video games, that Japan is shifting from being a hardware superpower to a software superpower (Kuroki 1995, 14). His comment signals a gradual shift in the structure of Japanese cultural industries in the 1990s towards the multimedia business. The realisation of the limits of the Japanese manufacturing-oriented economy brought about by the recent recession has turned Japanese towards the emerging business opportunities presented by animated and digitalised multimedia products, and this is reflected in Sony’s 1996 corporate image slogan, ‘Digital Dream Kids’ (e.g., *Dime* 7 February 1991; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 25 February 1996; *Nikkei Trendy* December 1998). In 1995 and 1996, NHK broadcast a second series of programs on Japanese electronic industries. This time, the main topic was computer software. The fourth episode of the series explored the history of video/video games. The series was similar to the earlier one on semiconductor products.
technologies in that the United States was, in both cases, the pioneer innovator of the new technologies, which Japan then copied and enhanced in accordance with consumer tastes. In the later series the emphasis was mainly on why the computer game industry survived the collapse of the bubble economy and succeeded not only in Japan but also in the US market (Aida 1997).

Accordingly, the promising global market value of Japanese animation and video games came to tickle Japanese national pride. Euphoria over the global dissemination of animation and video games prompted Japanese commentators to confer a specific Japanese “fragrance” on these cultural products. Numerous articles appeared in popular Japanese magazines, academic journals and daily newspapers dealing with the global popularity of animation and video games. Even the conservative bi-weekly magazine *Sapio* (5 February 1997; 11 June 1997) declared that animation and video games had become two of the things about which Japan could show pride to the world (see also Hamano 1999). A leading Japanese scholar of media art and aesthetics, Takemura Mitsuhiro (1996), coined the term “digital Japanesque” to propose a drastic restructuring of Japanese cultural and aesthetic capital in order to create a new Japanese national identity in the age of digitalised globalisation. As the development of entertainment businesses is the key to Japan’s survival as a global power, Takemura argued (1996, 197–98), it is no longer enough for Japan to create “faceless” products in order to produce global commodities: “Unless Japanese products embody a clearly articulated Japanese identity and sensitivity, they will not reach a global standard”. Japan, according to Takemura (1996, 210–25), must search again for its “cultural gene” and make it ubiquitous through global digitalised commodities. He claims that this would rescue the Japanese traditional cultural sensitivity and aesthetic from its status as a cheap copy of Western Japanesque and re-evaluate and appropriate it for the production of digitalised commodities by Japanese people themselves.

More recently, Pokémon has further provoked the increasing Japanese interest in associating global appeal with Japanese symbolic power, given that its success on the American market is not matched by any other Japanese animation and computer game character. Japanese scholars have observed that American children who love to consume Pokémon regard Japan as a cool nation capable of producing such wonderful characters, imaginaries, and commodities (Kamo 2000; Sakurai 2001).

The most eloquent spokesperson for the global popularity of Japanese animation and video games is Okada Toshio. As a *manga* and animation critic, he is frequently asked for his comments on the popularity of Japanese animation, and has published several works on this topic (e.g., Okada 1995; 1996; 1997). The most prestigious and authoritative university in Japan, The University of Tokyo, has employed him as a lecturer in a course on the cultural significance of
Japanese *otaku* ("nerds" obsessed with comics, animation and video games) since 1996. "*Otaku*" is a Japanese term that literally constitutes a second person noun. The term has been negatively associated with a maniac whose obsession with horror films blurs the boundary between the real and the imaginary. It came into such use when a Japanese man killed several children in brutal ways, all of which had been depicted in films. Japanese techno-culture evokes here a machine-like image of *otaku* kids who avoid physical and personal contact and are "lost to everyday life by their immersion in computer reality" (Morley and Robins 1995, 169). Adopting a similar viewpoint, prominent French film director, Jean-Jacques Beineix, produced a documentary on the strange hobbies of *otaku* in this discursive framework in 1994.

In contrast to the hitherto negative connotations of the term *otaku* in Japanese media representations and Western techno-Orientalist discourse, Okada gives the term a positive meaning, arguing that the subtle combination of comics, animation and video games gave birth to Japanese *otaku* culture, which he proudly claims is sweeping the world. Okada (1996; 1997) argues that cultural forms such as film, music, fashion and painting are all dominated by the West. No matter how Japan imitates and cleverly "Japanises" these Western originals, according to Okada, Japan cannot play a central role in these cultural forms. While admitting the American influence on the origin of Japanese comics and animation, he has stated that:

> Literature, music, art, are not a kind of Japanese culture on which we can pride ourselves. Even if Japan ceased to exist in the world now, there would be no impact on the world cultural scene . . . Japan is not the home of any sort of [Western] culture. The only exception is *otaku* culture, which makes Japan the Mecca of the world (Okada 1997, 6–8).

Okada bases his praise of Japanese *otaku* culture on its passionate consumption in the West. Often stressed in Japanese media is the emergence of Western *otaku*, obsessively devoted fans of Japanese animation in Western countries whose love of Japanese animation makes them wish they had been born in Japan. Many images of Western fans playing at being Japanese animation characters, wearing the same costumes and make-up, have been presented in popular Japanese magazines as evidence of the "Japanisation" of the West (e.g., *Shūkan Shincho* 24 July 1996; *Shūkan Bunshun* 5 September 1996; 13 November 1997; *Asahi Shinbun* 23 October 1997; *Newsweek Japan* 30 July 1997). Okada (1996, 52–56; *Shūkan Yomiuri* 2 June 1996, 30–31) argues that "the term 'otaku' connotes something stunning and attractive [in the United States]", so much so that Japanese animated culture and imagery evoke, to a certain degree, a sense of Western yearning for "Japan":

For example, in a love-story animation, *Kimagure Orenjirōdo*, the hero and heroine never confess their love for each other and their relationship is full of misunderstanding to the end. This might look ridiculous in the United States where everyone is supposed to express everything s/he thinks and feels. However, I met many American fans who said to me that they wanted to experience that kind of love affair. These Americans long for Japanese ways of interpersonal communication (*Shukan Yomiuri* 2 June 1996, 30–31).

Okada has reported in a jingoistic tone on several occasions that many American fans of Japanese animation express their dream of visiting Japan, seeing and walking through the scene of their favourite animation—they wish that they could become Japanese (e.g., Okada 1995; 1996, 31). Comparing this passionate Western consumption of Japanese animation with Japan’s and his own experience of yearning—via the consumption of American popular culture—for “America”, the nation of freedom, science and democracy, Okada (1995, 43) proudly argues that to these Western *otaku* Japan “looks a more cool country” than the United States.

**DISJUNCTIVE TRANSCULTURAL FLOWS SUPPRESSED**

While it is true that *otaku* culture has come to be associated with those who love to consume Japanese animation and comics in the United States (Schodt 1996, 43–49), such chauvinistic views of Japan’s cultural exports are not shared by all Japanese media critics and academics (see, for example, Ōtsuka 1994; Ueno 1996b; Mōri 1996). Some caution against proclaiming “Japaneseness” in animation and video games, not only because such a discourse risks articulating Japanese culture in nationalist terms, but also because the view of global “Japanisation” is groundless: the number of Western fans of Japanese comics and animation is actually rather small (see e.g., *Nikkei Entertainment* May 1997, 48; *Newsweek Japan* 30 July 1997; Ono 1998).

There is also the fundamental difficulty of articulating distinctive “Japaneseness” in the transnational consumption of products such as animation and video games, which can be characterised as “culturally odourless” or “mukokuseki” [racially, ethnically and culturally unembedded and/or erasing national/cultural characteristics] (Iwabuchi 1998a). This is not to say that Japanese animation does not embody any specific cultural characteristics that originate in what we call “Japanese culture”. Those American fans who find the appeal of Japanese animation in the narratives of romance are inescapably “dependent upon Japanese
culture itself” (Newitz 1995, 12). Rather, the issue at stake here is that Okada’s celebratory view of Western “Japanisation” exposes the ambivalence entrenched in the international spread of mukokuseki popular culture; it at once articulates both the universal appeal of Japanese cultural products and the disappearance of any perceptible “Japaneseness”. One cultural critic, Otsuka Eiji (1994), for example, warns against euphoria about the global popularity of Japanese animation, arguing that it is simply the mukokuseki, the “odourless” nature of animation, that is responsible for its popularity. Likewise, Ueno (1996b, 186) argues that “the ‘Japaneseness’ of Japanimation can only be recognised in its being actively a mukokuseki visual culture”. What is suggested here is that it is one thing to observe that Japanese animation and video games are influencing children’s play and behaviour in many parts of the world and that these children perceive Japan to be a cool nation because it creates cool cultural products such as Pokémon. However, it is quite another to say that this cultural influence and this perception of coolness are closely associated with a tangible, realistic appreciation of “Japanese” lifestyles or ideas as Okada’s analogy with a yearning for “America” seems to suggest.

Neither is this to say that Okada’s hypothesis on the Japanisation of America is totally groundless. In relation to the above-mentioned Japanese romantic comedy animation Kimagure Orenjirôdo, the American researcher Newitz (1995) also observed American fans’ fascination with the Japanese mode of romance it depicted—“a form of heterosexual masculinity which is not rooted in sexual prowess, but romantic feelings” (Newitz 1995, 6). Nevertheless, Newitz’s (1995, 13) analysis shows that this ardent American consumption is articulated in the form of a nostalgia for “gender roles Americans associate with the 1950s and 60s”. Here, like the Japanese consumption of Asian popular culture that I have discussed elsewhere (Iwabuchi 2002), it might be that Japan is marked by temporal lag and consumed in terms of a sense of loss. This nostalgic longing discerned in American viewers’ positive reading of the Japanese animation, it can be argued, implicitly displays their denial that they inhabit the same temporality as Japan (see Fabian 1983). The question of whether and how the consumption of Japanese animation positively evokes “Japaneseness” indeed merits further research, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. It can at least be suggested from the above example that such an investigation needs to not lose sight of the contradictory facets embedded in transnational cultural flows, which tend to be easily disregarded in the desperate search for Japanese global cultural power.

More importantly, we need to consider the significance of the international popularity of Japanese animation and video games in the wider context of transnational media integration. The rise of Japanese media industries attests to
a new phase of global cultural flows dominated by a small number of transnational corporations (Aksoy and Robins 1992; Herman and McChesney 1997), and testifies to the increasing trend towards global media mergers that aim to offer a “total cultural package” of many media products through a single media conglomerate (Schiller 1991). Clearly, animation and computer game characters play a significant role in the packaged multimedia business. The comic-book characters are intertextual and can be used in a variety of media such as video games, movies, TV series, CD-ROMs and toys. Kinder (1991) describes the multiple possibilities of transmedia intertextuality as representing a “supersystem of entertainment” that has come to be a dominant force in the global entertainment business (see especially chapter 4). The worldwide popularity of Pokémon depends on the multimedia strategy, in which gameboys (small game gadgets), comics, animation and playing cards are all interrelated.

However, what is crucial here is that the Japanese animation and video game industry was only able to become a global player with the help of the power of Western media industries. The inroads of Japanese animation into the global market reflect the ever-growing global integration of markets and media industries. The expansive force of globalisation has intensified the merger and cooperation of transnational corporations that originate in different countries, so that transnational corporations can simultaneously enter various markets such as the global, supra-national, regional, national and local. This promotes “the decentering of capitalism from the West” (Tomlinson 1997, 140–43) through increasing integration, networking and cooperation among worldwide transnational cultural industries, including non-Western ones.

However, finding a local partner is much more imperative for non-Western cultural industries and products if they are to penetrate global (i.e., including Western) markets. If Sony’s encroachment on Hollywood articulates Japanese exploitation of American software products in order to become a global media player, it has become clear that Japanese media products cannot successfully become transnational players without being incorporated into the Western-dominated global distribution network. For example, it was the investment and the distribution channels of a British and American company, Manga Entertainment—established in 1991 as part of the Polygram conglomerate—that made The Ghost in the Shell a hit in Western countries. Similarly, it was Disney that distributed Miyazaki Hayao’s animated films worldwide. The global success of Pokémon also has much to do with US partnerships. Most noticeably, Warner Bros, one of the major Hollywood studios, handled the global distribution of Pokémon the first movie, as well as televising Pokémon on its own US-wide channel. No less significant is the way in which Pokémon has been localised or Americanised “to hide its ‘Japaneseness’” (Time 22

November 1999, 68–69), as part of its global promotion strategy. Significantly, it is the re-made-in-the-US version of Pokémon that has been exported to other parts of the world (apart from Asia). Thus, the successful marketing of Pokémon as a global character owes much to an “Americanisation of Japanisation”.

Furthermore, precisely because they have come to be universally consumed, such cultural products are destined to be copied, studied and indigenised outside Japan. Thus, Hollywood is trying to develop a new global genre that makes use of Japanese animation. Likewise, US film producers and directors are recruiting Japanese animators to develop American animation and computer graphics (Aera 29 July 1996; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 5 January 1997; 9 June 1997). US production companies, with the help of Japanese animators, have begun producing Japanimation in the United States (Ôhata 1996; *Nikkei Trendy* October 1996), and the South Korean government has decided to foster the local animation industry to boost the future development of the national economy. A Korean conglomerate has entered the animation business by investing in both domestic and Japanese animation industries (*Nikkei Shinbun* 3 September 1996; Aera 29 July 1996).

On the other hand, although the economic potential of the animation industry has been recognised, it has not yet led to the encouragement of, or investment in, the industry within Japan (Takemura 1996, 72–105). This situation is often likened to the fate of *Ukiyoe* [Japanese woodblock prints], many of which have been taken from Japan and exhibited in Western art galleries since the mid-nineteenth century. The West (the United States) may again deprive Japan of animation while Japan itself fails to recognise its (commercial) value (see, for example, *Dime* 6 October 1994; *Bart* 22 January 1996; *Nikkei Trendy* October 1996). The Japanese government has been criticised for its failure to promote what is Japan’s most lucrative cultural software industry in the digitalised world (*Dime* 3 June 1997). In response to such criticism, the Agency for Cultural Affairs belatedly decided to support multimedia software content in 1997 and established a Media Arts Festival in Tokyo in February 1998. Its purpose was to encourage the domestic production of animation, comics, computer graphics and computer game software. The Agency for Cultural Affairs also vowed to stamp out the piracy of Japanese software in Asia (*Asahi Shinbun* 22 January 1998). However, the scale and efficacy of governmental support for Japanese animation can be seen as inadequate in the face of the increase in the number of competitors (see e.g., *Chûô Koron* September 2000). Animation and digitalised software have somehow become an officially recognised form of “Japanese culture”, but the progress of globalisation only exacerbates a deep-seated uneasiness about keeping Japanese animation industries “Japanese”.

“GROTESQUE JAPAN”: NARCISSISTIC OBSERVATION OF GLOBALLY APPROPRIATED “JAPAN”

Just as US distribution power is indispensable for the globalisation of Japanese animation, Japanese global cultural power still needs to be confirmed by Western approval. Most important for the Japanese media’s articulation of Japanese animation and video games as representative of Japanese global cultural power is the fact that they are appreciated by the West. Japanese animation and comics have been more popular in Asia than in the West (see Ono 1998), but their popularity in Asia has not been enough to affirm their emerging hegemony. As recently as 1990, there was an article in a weekly magazine, Aera (12 June 1990), published by the influential newspaper, Asahi Shinbun, entitled, ‘The pleasure and excitement of Japanese comics cannot be appreciated in the West’. The article discussed why Japanese comics were not accepted in the West, and also mentioned their popularity in Asia. Given that the article was an examination of the uniqueness of Japanese culture, it is not surprising that the reason for this lack of acceptance was sought in the cultural difference between Japan and the West; according to the magazine, the storylines of Japanese comics were too emotional and the illustrations were drawn in a monotonous and flat fashion that was unappealing to Western audiences.

Six years later, however, the same magazine featured an article entitled ‘The world’s eyes are glued to Japanese animation’ (Aera 29 July 1996). This article dealt with the popularity of Japanese animation and comics in Western countries such as the United States, France and Italy in the 1990s. Concern with Japanese cultural uniqueness had been replaced by a fascination with the global reach of Japanese animation. The popularity of Japanimation and video games in the West endorses their significance in the world cultural arena.

As noted earlier, the Japanese discourse on national identity has been deeply complicit with Western discourses in essentialising Japoneseness (Iwabuchi 1994). The Western Orientalist gaze on Japan has been indispensable to the Japanese self-Orientalising construction of a unique national identity. It can be argued that Japanese soft-nationalism is also collusive with Western techno-Orientalism. Japanese hyper-real culture, in which comics, animations and video games feature, has replaced Western Orientalist icons such as geisha or samurai in the complicit exoticisation of Japan (Ueno 1996a; Mōri 1996). Even if the relationship between Japan and the West is no longer conceived in terms of a straightforward Orientalist dichotomy, Japanese indulgence in soft-nationalism still depends on the gaze of the dominant Western other.

In her analysis of the domestic tourism campaigns of Japan National Railways during the 1970s and 1980s, Ivy (1995, 29–65) points out that while the somewhat anguished, nostalgic self-representation of a “lost Japan” prevailed in the

1970s “Discover Japan” campaign, the “Exotic Japan” campaign of the 1980s exhibited “nostalgia as style” through a cheerful appropriation of Western Orientalist images of Japan. Here Western Orientalist images of Japan, such as Buddhist temples, geisha and Mt Fuji were playfully and stylishly featured to promote the domestic consumption of the exoticism of Japanese traditional culture among Japanese urban dwellers. As the campaign playfully renders “Japan” its own exotic “foreign” object, we can see an intriguing interplay between “the non-Japanese seen through Japanese eyes” and “Japan seen through Westerners” (Ivy 1995, 50). Kondo argues that this shift testifies to the:

incorporation of Western elements and a Western gaze that beats the West at its own game, and subverts, as it reinscribes, Orientalist tropes. It marks a moment in historical, geopolitical relations, where autoexoticism and the appropriation of the West in a refigured, essential Japan indexes Japan’s accession to the position of powerful nation-states (Kondo 1997, 84).

The Japanese exploitation of Western Orientalist representations of Japanese culture for self-representation was supported by the strong Japanese economy and the relative decline of US power in the world.

Nevertheless, such a strategy is akin to what John Caughie (1990), in an analysis of US media domination of the world, calls the process of the subordinate’s double identification with see-er and seen: “playing at being American”. Here, the subordinated empowers him/herself by objectifying the centre and rendering it as its own other; these are “the permitted games of subordination” (Caughie 1990, 44). In the game of television viewing, the subordinated adopts a tactical “ironic knowingness” that “may escape the obedience of interpellation or cultural colonialism and may offer a way of thinking subjectivity free of subjection” (Caughie 1990, 54). In Japanese self-Orientalism, however, what occurs is less “playing at being American” than “playing at being (America’s) ‘Japan’”, as the game is played through the objectification of the Western colonising gaze. In this objectification, “Japan” as the object of Western cultural domination is suspended by setting up the subject position of “Japan” outside the ground of domination. It is not a double identification with subject and object but a substitution of the unstable doubleness articulated in the relationship between games and tactics for a pleasurable game overlooked by otherwise subordinated Japanese spectators. By suspending Japan’s position as the object of domination, “Japan” is kept out of reach of the coloniser; the game attempts to claim that there is no “Japan” that can be the dominated object of the Western Orientalising gaze.

Similarly, looking at the Japanese response to Western techno-Orientalism in the 1990s, we can see that Japan’s self-Orientalising strategy still takes a self-
ironical stance. Apart from denouncing it as humiliating (Sapio 14 July 1994), a notable Japanese reaction to Western techno-Orientalism is to mock the lingering Western fascination with de-humanised representations of Japan. For example, recent Western representations of bizarre Japanese cultural phenomena such as techno-culture and weird sexual practices were reported in a weekly magazine article entitled ‘Such a pleasantly distorted image of the Japanese’ [Kono tanoshiku yuganda Nihonjinzo] (Yamagata 1993, 130–32). Referring to several articles on Japanese techno-culture in Wired and Mediamatic—English-language information technology magazines—as well as some science-fiction novels by William Gibson, in which the image of Japan is predominantly associated with technology-soaked otaku, the author of the article suggested that readers should not become angry with distorted images of Japan: “Whether you like the image or not, we cannot deny the fact that such a distorted image of Japan is disseminated in the world. All we can do is enjoy the way Japan is distorted” (Yamagata 1993, 132). The same defensive tactic can be seen in the response of Japanese audiences to the American film Rising Sun (1993). In the United States, the original novel was severely criticised for its racist representation of Japan, and many Japanese-Americans protested against the film (see Kondo 1997, 240–51). However, Japanese people and the Japanese media did not react strongly to it (Saitō 1993; Monma 1998, 167). The overall response of viewers in Japan was not anger but cool mockery: “they still misunderstand us in such a bizarre manner” (see, for example, Enokido 1994; Okano 1994). One film critic, Okano (1994, 25), contended that labelling the film “Japan-bashing” did not capture the essence of Rising Sun. Rather, the film produced an ironic appreciation among Japanese audiences. It represented, Okano suggested, a “smile-provoking misunderstanding” of Japan performed by Sean Connery and other Americans that was consumed by bemused Japanese people.

Pleasurable Japanese consumption of Western images of distorted Japan is not based upon Japan’s dominant position vis-à-vis the West, but is nevertheless one of a few tactics available to the dominated. However, Japan’s pleasurable reading of such distorted images of Japan produced by the West takes this defensive self-Orientalism one step further, where the concern with the international consumption of Japanese culture is championed by Japan’s increasing international cultural exports and influence. Here, a narcissistic view is manifest in the claim of Japanese global cultural power through the observation of international (mainly Western) (mis)appropriation of Japanese culture.

Inoue Shōichi’s Gurotesuku Japan [Grotesque Japan] (1996) is a case in point. A researcher at the International Research Centre for Japanese Culture, which was established in 1986 by then prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, Inoue attempts in the book to explore the distorted international consumption of Japanese culture. He claims (1996, 215–18) that he is no longer surprised at the
spread of made-in-Japan commodities throughout the world, nor interested in the Western Orientalist image of Japanese exoticism. Rather, he is fascinated to find things of Japanese “origin” grotesquely localised and indigenised in different parts of the world—for example, the transformation of the rules and rituals of judo and the decontextualised use of “zen” for the name of department stores:

What attracts me is how Japanese culture is distorted at others’ convenience. If the method of distortion follows the classic, Orientalist, exotic image of Japan, however, it does not capture my attention. There is no fresh surprise to me in seeing the conventional stereotypical image of Japan which I know too well. My curiosity is aroused by a grotesquely distorted Japanese culture which betrays my expectation (Inoue 1996, 216).

Inoue (1996, 217–18) distinguishes himself from hard-line nationalists who become angry at seeing Japan misunderstood or distorted and insist on the importance of exporting a correct image of Japan. His intention is not to deplore, but to enjoy, the ridiculously distorted image of Japan and the foreign (mainly Western) misappropriation of an exotic Japanese image. Inoue’s fascination with a distorted “Japan” is a different kind of nationalist strategy that claims Japanese transnational cultural power, a power that allows for the preservation of a “pure Japan” in a hermetically sealed space. He writes that some commodities, such as tatami mats and tanuki dolls [folk culture figures of well-endowed badgers that are said to bring good fortune and wealth], may embody essential “Japaneseness” precisely because they are not exportable (1996, 23–29; 54–60). The impossibility of any foreign appreciation of “authentic” Japanese culture ensures that Japanese cultural uniqueness remains inviolate and intact, safe in its transcultural encounters with others.

More significantly, Inoue’s indifference to the conventional exoticism of Japanese culture, I would argue, demonstrates a strong desire to take the initiative from (Western) others in cultural representations of “Japan”. This is demonstrated as he laments the self-exoticisation of Japanese composers who try to exploit traditional images of Japan in order to sell their music in international markets: “To be honest, I tend to feel disheartened by such musical compositions, as it seems that after all only ‘exotic Japan’ satisfies foreigners. It appears to be the only way for Japanese to make inroads into the international arena” (Inoue 1996, 187–88). Inoue is clearly aware that Japan’s self-Orientalism is ultimately controlled by Western Orientalism. In contrast, the “Grotesque Japan” that Inoue found outside Japan subtly escapes a defensive Japan’s self-Orientalism, at the same time as demonstrating the growing Japanese cultural influence in the world.

Inoue (1996, 217) somehow admits this himself: “It cannot be denied that I am taking a positive view of ‘Japan spotlighted in the global arena’, even while poking fun at it. I may be a so-so nationalist” [도도도도 니 나쇼나리스토]. Japan has only to observe narcissistically Western (and global) distortions and misappropriations of globally circulated Japanese culture in order to affirm its symbolic power status.

A similar tendency can be discerned in the work of one of Inoue’s colleagues at the Centre, Shirahata Yōzaburō—**Karaoke, anime ga sekai o meguru** [Karaoke and animation spanning the globe] (1996). While the International Research Centre for Japanese Culture has often been criticised for being too involved with the international dissemination of a particularistic image of Japanese culture to examine the international spread of Japanese popular and consumer culture (see Noda 1990, 56), Shirahata (1996) discusses Japanese cultural influence mainly in terms of **karaoke**, comics/animation and video games, although he also deals with food, bathing, gardening, **bonsai**, **haiku** and martial arts. His book is a demonstration, like Inoue’s (1996), of appreciation of and indulgence in the global success of Japanese cultural products through the observation of their international consumption and localisation.

Referring to the local appropriation of Japanese cultural products such as **karaoke**, and to the mukokuseki nature of animation and video games, Shirahata (1996, 240) argues that unlike traditional Japanese high culture, such internationally consumed Japanese cultural products are not self-assertive about their “authentic Japaneseness”. Rather, they leave their use-value to consumer tastes and cultural traditions outside Japan:

> “Rigid” **[kingen]** Japanese [traditional] culture whose original features tend to persist even at the level of transcultural consumption has not been well received outside Japan. In contrast, “flexible” **[jūnan]** culture which is open to local processing spreads even to places least expected (Shirahata 1996, 240).

Shirahata thus acknowledges the culturally odourless nature of globalised Japanese life cultures (1996, 231–43). The universal appeal of Japanese cultural products, in this instance, is demonstrated by their openness to local appropriation in other parts of the world.

This approach to Japanese cultural presence in the world is reminiscent of Pico Iyer’s (1988) *Video night in Kathmandu*, which deals with the creative indigenisation and appropriation of dominant American popular cultures in Asia. In analysing the process of negotiating American cultural hegemony in Asia, Iyer (1988) elucidates modes of “postmodern boundary violating and syncretistic cultural intersections” (Buell 1994, 5) that produce “a carnivalesque profusion of hybrid forms” (Buell 1994, 11). As Appadurai argues, Iyer shows that “if a global
cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity and a bottomless appetite in the Asian world for things Western” (Appadurai 1996, 29).

However, there are no such contradictory scenarios in Shirahata’s (1996) discussion of the non-self-assertiveness of Japanese cultural exports. Rather, Shirahata’s (sketchy) observation of the decontextualised international consumption of Japanese cultural products is, like Inoue’s (1996), disturbed by a narcissistic impulse demonstrated by frequent mentions of his impression of the Japanese animation and computer game “occupying” or “conquering” the world cultural scene. While Iyer writes of the decline of American cultural hegemony through the depiction of the vivacity of local consumption, Shirahata claims the rise of Japanese global cultural power through reference to the elasticity of Japanese cultural products for local consumption. He compares Japanese cultural exports to kaitenzushi [fast food sushi rotating on a conveyer belt] (Shirahata 1996, 1–3; 242–43), where customers choose items at will:

All those Westerners who seek sashimi and tofu for health reasons, Asian children who passionately read Doraemon comic books, and boys and girls around the world who watch Japanese animation with a gleam of interest remind me of my own childhood. At that time, kaitenzushi plates were full of American culture . . . Japan, which was a poor but ardent customer of American culture, has become a shop owner and a powerful purveyor of culture in the world.

With the kaitenzushi metaphor, Shirahata does not simply stress the capacity of Japanese culture and cultural products to be appropriated in each locale. The global consumption of Japanese mukokuseki culture reminds him (1996, 242–43) of his own past when Japan eagerly pursued American cultures and commodities—hence, he suggests that Japan’s global power status today is analogous to that of its American counterpart in the past.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the discourse of what can be called hybridism confers a global cultural power status on Japan in terms of its own capacity for cultural hybridisation and indigenisation by denying the occurrence of other modes of cross-fertilisation (Iwabuchi 1998b). Likewise, the narcissistic discourse on Japanese cultural exports, as exemplified by Shirahata (1996) and Inoue (1996), endeavours to elevate the mukokuseki nature—that is, non-self-assertively evoking “Japaneseness” in a traditionalist manner—of Japanese cultural products to being Japan’s distinctive, universally appreciated cultural traits, by discounting the complexity of global cultural flows. In other words, I suggest, it can be read symptomatically as a display of the difficulty of claiming Japanese cultural power in the face of the contradictory and unforeseeable con-
sumption and indigenisation process in every corner of the world. Transnation-
ally circulated images and commodities, I would argue, tend to become cultur-
ally odourless as origins are subsumed by the local transculturation process. By
appropriating, hybridising, indigenising and consuming images and commod-
ities of “foreign” origin in multiple unforeseeable ways, even American culture is
conceived as “ours” in many places (see, for example, Miller 1995). Narcissistic
appreciation of an appropriated-Japan-in-the-world resolves, if temporarily, the
ambivalence about the fact that the international circulation of Japanese culture
and cultural products has become conspicuous at a time when the dynamics of
local cultural indigenisation tend to downplay the straightforward cultural power
of any country of origin.

DE-CENTRING TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL POWER

This paper has examined the ways in which the complexities and contradic-
tions imbricated in transnational cultural flows are discounted in Japan’s soft
nationalism and narcissism, the project of articulating a distinct Japanese cul-
tural excellence in the transnational consumption of Japanese popular culture.
Japanese narcissistic discourses attempt to newly articulate the nationally delin-
eated desire and imagination out of transnational cultural flows by suppressing
the ambivalence and uneasiness that are entrenched in the act of making them
“national”.

This is not to deny the increase in the presence and influence of Japanese
media and popular culture in transnational flows. The point is that any attempt
to interpret the increase in Japanese popular cultural exports in terms of an
“Americanisation” paradigm would misjudge the nature of global Japanese cul-
tural power. Globalising forces have made transnational cultural flows much more
de-centred, non-isomorphic and complex than can be understood in terms of a
centre-periphery paradigm (Hall 1991; Appadurai 1996). While there is no space
for further exploration here, it is only through well-attended empirical analysis
that we can grasp how these contradictions and the attendant ambivalence are
disentangled, and how cultural unevenness and dialogue are newly articulated at
the site of the production and consumption of Japanese popular culture (see
Iwabuchi 2002).

It should be reiterated here that the de-centring process of globalisation makes
it untenable to single out the absolute symbolic centre that belongs to a par-
ticular country or region; however, this does not mean that global cultural power
has disappeared—it has been dispersed but also made more solid. A series of
events since 11 September 2001 has highlighted US economic and military
supremacy, and the view that equates globalisation with Americanisation has thus
regained momentum. However, such a view is misleading in analysing the cultural dimensions of globalisation, not simply because the exercise of US cultural power is deeply intermingled with local practices of appropriation and consumption of foreign cultural products and meanings. More importantly, it also conceals the fact that the unevenness in transnational cultural flows is intensified not solely by US cultural power but also by the various kinds of alliances among transnational media industries in the developed countries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are compelled to recognise, through the sudden, massive media attention to the hitherto forgotten nation of Afghanistan, how the disparity in economic and cultural power between the haves and have-nots has increased and how that disparity itself has been left out of commentaries on global media communications. Critically attending to how Japanese media industries and products are collusive in producing cultural asymmetry and indifference on a global scale has become more imperative than ever before.

NOTES

1 The Sony Walkman has been chosen for analysis, as the most appropriate example of a global cultural product, by a British Open University cultural studies textbook, itself prepared for global distribution (du Gay et al. 1997).

2 For example, ‘Nipponhatsu otaku bunka ga sekai e ryûhutsuchû’ (Made-in-Japan otaku culture spreading across the world), (Spa! 25 March 1992); ‘Sekai o seka suru kokusan anime’ (Japanese animation conquers the world) (Hôsô Bunka October 1994); ‘Nihon no manga ga sekai o seifuku!’ (Japanese manga conquering the world) (Elle Japon April 1996); ‘Nihon anime no sekai seifuku’ (Japanese animation conquers the world) (Bart 22 January 1996); ‘Manga wa sekai no kyôtsugo’ (Manga has become a global language) (Nihon Keizai Shinbun 25 May 1996). All of these articles boast of the ascendancy of Japanese animation and video games in the West and of Japanese children’s culture conquering the world.

3 Doraemon is a fantasy featuring a cat-like robot that makes the wishes of children come true. It is one of the most popular animation series in many Asian countries, though it has never become popular in Western countries.

REFERENCES


