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Japan's Global Resonances: From ukiyo-e to la Nouvelle Manga

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Introduction

My interest in Japanese media and, more specifically, manga and animation, took a particularly sinuous path. Born and raised in France, educated in the United States and having lived in Japan in the mid-90s, I came of age as a scholar at the height of what CNN would soon characterize as the “Pokemon Mania” (Pokemon Mania, 1999). While the decade may have been lost in Japan (Fletcher, 2013), academics and public intellectuals in the United States were obsessing over the country’s Gross National Cool (McGray, 2002). Unfortunately, all they seemed to know about the vast and diverse Japanese media landscape was manga and animation. Disturbed by the frequent characterizations of these two, both in scholarship and popular culture, as mysterious, highly violent and quasi-pornographic quintessentially Japanese cultural forms, I made it my mission to introduce the US academic audience to other “more important” dimensions of the Japanese media. I did just that for more than 10 years.

It wasn’t until 2008, when, ironically, I started to conduct ethnographic research in France, that manga and animation reentered my consciousness. Their influence on European cultures was simply inescapable. Manga, and their animated versions, were everywhere: in bookstores, in people’s homes, in their daily conversations. Perhaps more profoundly, I was reminded of my own intense engagement with these texts while growing up in France. After all, I am a proud member of the Candy Candy/Grandizer generation — the first generation in France to be named after a Japanese text. The practice continues to this day (Garrigue, 2004).

My personal amnesia, albeit temporary, in many respects parallels that of the academic community both in Japan and the “West,” where the arrival of Japanese actors on the global popular cultural scene is frequently characterized as a millennial phenomenon born out of 21st century neo-

liberalism and the increase in transnational flows afforded by digital communication (Allison, 2006). The goal of this article, thus, is to complete and complicate the picture. First, in an effort to contextualize more recent waves of Japanese media fandom, I will revisit the long history of Japanese cultural influence on “Western” cultures, arguing that early trans-cultural contacts were much more culturally significant than they are typically given credit for. Then, I will examine the continuing legacy of these exchanges — and their contemporary manifestations — in France, making a distinction between non-English-speaking European contexts and other “Western” environments such as the United States or Britain with a much stronger history of global cultural exportation. Finally, I will ponder possible reasons, both political and theoretical, for the continuing amnesia vis-à-vis Japan’s history as a culturally influential nation.

Japanese cultural influence 1.0

In 1867 — about 14 years after Commodore Matthew Perry’s arrival on Japanese shores forced the country to open up — Japanese art hit the Paris exposition. By the time the Universal Exposition of 1878 (also held in Paris) closed its doors, enthusiasm for all things Japanese had, according to art historian Ernest Chesneau’s 1878 article *Le Japon à Paris*, “swept through the studios [of Paris] like a flame on gunpowder” (cited in Napier, 2007, 29). Speaking of the growth of all things Japanese in the 11 years between the two expositions, Chesneau concludes that “this is no longer a fashion, this is a passion, this is madness” (cited in *ibid.*, 34).

This, of course, is known as the Japonisme movement, which was at its height for about a 30-year period in the late 19th and very early 20th century as artists and intellectuals started to enthusiastically integrate elements of Japanese visual arts into their own work. Woodcut prints, published, among other things, in books called manga, were a central piece of this influence as famous Japonisants like the brothers Edmond and Jules Huot de Goncourt or writer Emile Zola, and, of course, artists like Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh or Auguste Rodin, avidly collected them. While I agree with media scholar Jaqueline Berndt (2008) that we need to be cautious not to draw too direct a link between these early Japanese art forms and contemporary manga for fear of essentializing the latter as quintessentially Japanese texts, a few points are nevertheless worth noting regarding this early wave of Japanese visual influence.

First, the Japonisme movement points to the fact that the cultural mixing of the Meiji Restoration was a two-way process. While historians of Japan tend to remember the period as a time of intense Japanese

importation of Western ideas, technology and lifestyles, it was also a time of intense and conscious *exportation* of Japanese cultural forms. It is not by coincidence that Japanese arts first appeared in the international expositions in the late 1860s and early 70s. The new Meiji government heavily invested in Japanese exhibits as a means to elevate its international prestige (Rado, 2015, 604-605). In the process, “various forms of Japanese ‘tradition’ were reconstructed and reinforced” for foreign consumption (Yoshihara, 2004, 976).

As Japan turned capitalist, entrepreneurs also came to see the potential of a global market. Japanese expatriate art dealers and merchants soon joined European intellectuals and artists in promoting Japonisme, and newly industrialized Japanese companies started to actively produce for the foreign market. Silk retailer Takashimaya — which would transform into one of Japan’s first modern department stores in 1910 — sent its executives to Europe and the United States to “investigate artistic, industrial, and commercial trends” and sold modified versions of kimonos to Western customers (Rado, 2015, 586). Thus, one thing we learn from the Japonisme movement is that there is money to be made in tapping into the imagination of “the Other.”

Second, the intensity and historical significance of this exchange is worth mentioning. As art historian Siegfried Wichmann (1981) notes, Japonisme simply revolutionized European art. In a book overall focused on Japan’s influence on French literature, literary scholar Jan Walsh Hokenson (2004, 17) speaks of “a shift of Copernican proportions, marking the end of Eurocentric illusionism and the beginnings of a new, modern way of seeing and recording the world.” Monet himself explained that “[w]e needed the arrival of the Japanese prints in our midst, before anyone dared to sit down on a river bank, and juxtapose on canvas a roof which was bright red, a wall which was white, a green poplar, a yellow road and blue water. Before the example given to us by the Japanese this was impossible” (cited in Lambourne, 2007, 48).

Van Gogh who produced numerous paintings ostensibly based on Japanese prints wrote to his brother Theo in 1886: “In a way all my work is founded on Japanese art ... Japanese art ... takes root again among the French impressionist artists” (cited in Wichmann, 1981, 52). Of course, what van Gogh is describing here is a process of hybridization and mixing — he referred to the impressionists as “the Japanese French” (cited in Buttor, 1995, 90). As Hokenson concludes, “what ‘japonais’ meant in France, and French ‘gaijin’ in Japan, was and remains fluid, and always mutually revisive. To watch writers counterposing their motifs of Japan and France

is to watch a dynamic process of intertextual creation, in one moment of transnational aesthetic reception” (2004, 33). And, of course, this process was tinted with Orientalism — Wichmann characterizes van Gogh’s paintings as “more Japanese than their Japanese models” (1981, 42).

However, this moment of transcultural exchange between Japan and the “West” went far beyond common historical interpretations solely focused on Japan’s importation from the West or on European Orientalism. While the movement eventually faded in intensity, its influence continued well beyond the impressionists to shape, for instance, the Art Nouveau prints of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard or Jacques Villon, the works of the French cubists and surrealists and even the works of such diverse French intellectuals as Marguerite Yourcenar, André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous (Hokenson, 2004).

It is also worth noting that while most often associated with the European — particularly French — context, Japonisme nevertheless quickly spread beyond France’s borders. The Japanese exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 set off a “Japan craze” on the American continent and by the 1880s “Japonisme had become a popular trend that shaped US decor, architecture, and popular culture as much as it did aesthetic debates and the development of fine arts” (Patterson, 2015, 667). Art dealer Siegfried Bing’s Paris-based Japonist review *Le Japon Artistique* [Artistic Japan], which had editions in French, German and English, was read across Europe and the United States (Rodman, 2013, 490). As performance-studies scholar Tara Rodman demonstrates in her analysis of the movement’s influence on modernist theater, diversely localized strands of Japonisme developed from Boston to Seattle. Japanese influence would eventually permeate virtually all aspects of European and American culture — from fashion and advertising (Wickmann, 1981) to literature (Patterson, 2015), theater (Rodman, 2013), music (Stankis, 2015) and architecture (Nute, 1993).

Again, we must be wary of drawing too direct a link between *ukiyo-e* and today’s manga. What the Japonisme movement powerfully illustrates as historical case study, however, is the fact that Japanese visual aesthetics have long been involved — both influential and influenced — in the global circuit of cultural exchange. While the impressionists copied woodcut prints, manga artist Kitazawa Rakuten — who, incidentally, was awarded the Legion d’Honneur for services rendered to France in 1929 — borrowed from American comics (Houot, 2018; Stewart, 2013), but also commented on Japan’s relationship to the West. Japanese

manga in all of their different forms have long been part, in other words, of global hybridity.

Thus, the influence of *ukiyo-e* is present to some extent in the visual aesthetic of European *bandes dessinées* just as contemporary Japanese manga are, as Jaqueline Berndt (2008) notes, the product of broad trans-cultural borrowing. It is no surprise then that more contemporary versions of Japanese manga should easily be integrated into European cultural consumption, particularly in France where the Japonisme movement was perhaps the strongest and where, I would argue, the transcultural exchange with Japan was always particularly powerful. Indeed, I do want to draw a distinction here between the United States — with its history of extreme global cultural influence and relative lack of awareness, or recognition, of cultural borrowing — and other parts of “the West,” and perhaps even the world. As I have argued elsewhere, the United States is not really a particularly representative example when we are looking at global media (Darling-Wolf, 2015). Thus, the following sections focus on France partly because that is the context with which I am most familiar, but also because I do believe that elements of France’s situation apply in other global contexts as well, albeit not necessarily the US.

Japanese cultural influence 2.0

In many respects, the French comics scene is more similar to Japan’s than to that of United States. Ever since the 1929 arrival of Tintin, the young Belgian reporter, on the Francophone popular cultural scene — followed by the Franco-Belgian *Spirou et Fantasio* in 1938, *Lucky Luke* in 1946, *Gaston Lagaffe* in 1957, and the legendary Gaulois *Astérix et Obélix* in 1959 — *bandes dessinées* (or BD) have become an integral part of France’s cultural identity and a celebrated component of Francophone global cultural capital.

As noted, just like manga are difficult to avoid in Japan, BDs are omnipresent in France. In my years of conducting fieldwork in the country where I grew up, I am yet to encounter a French household that doesn’t own at least a few. Two of the three floors of the small community library I frequently visit there, located in a small rural community of approximately 1200 people, are entirely dedicated to BDs and graphic novels from around the world. When conducting interviews with French media consumers I could not find one person who did not grow up avidly reading these texts. This was in stark contrast with my informants in the United States who read American comics only occasionally.

BDs are also more similar to Japanese manga than to American comics in their stylistic and thematic diversity, which ranges from historical narratives to science fiction and fantasy to youth-oriented fare such as *The Smufs*, and in the fact that they are targeted at and read by adults as well as younger audiences. The huge influence of Japanese animated series based on famous manga starting in the late 70s — I mentioned *Candy Candy* and *Grandizer* (or *Goldorak*, as he is known in France) earlier but there were numerous others, including classics like *The Rose of Versailles* — served as additional “vectors of penetration [*vecteurs de pénétration*] of manga culture” (Hermelin, 2000, 142) as they shaped younger generations’ visual aesthetic. The cultural significance of these texts, and the nostalgia they still generate today, cannot easily be overstated — a small Goldorak-inspired inflatable boat recently sold at an auction in France for more than €18,000 (\$22,000).

Of course, these original texts were hybridized in interesting ways into the French context. For instance, a “Candy” book I recently purchased at a flea market in a small French village features the characters from the animated series — Toei animation owns the copyright — in a style mixing elements of manga, *bandes dessinées* and cheaply-produced children’s books. It is worth noting, however, that a French-language version of the original Japanese manga did also make its way to the French market in the early 1980s. In a similar vein, a three-volume BD version of *Goldorak* was released in France starting in 1979 (while the animated series was still airing) and a bimonthly magazine published by *Télé-Guide* further featured the character, albeit in adventures with very little connection to the series or the original manga.

As a result of these multiple and complex waves of cultural exchange, the cultures of manga and *bandes dessinées* are tightly interrelated today. Manga are a prominent part of the Angoulême festival, the “Mecca of Franco-Belgian BD” (Garrigue, 2004, 109). The festival’s 2018 edition featured a huge retrospective on comics author Tezuka Osamu titled *manga no kamisama* [the god of manga] (in Japanese). Manga artists’ contributions to the broader graphic arts culture, and French culture in general, are frequently recognized both by consumers of *bandes dessinées* and by the French government always actively engaged in cultural policing. Manga artist Taniguchi Jirō, for instance, was knighted “*Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et des lettres*,” a government award given to individuals who have “significantly contributed to the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance,” in 2011. He may arguably be a more common household name in France than in Japan.

At the production level, such movements as comics author Frédéric Boilet's Nouvelle Manga, which "aligns like-minded creators of *bande dessinée* (BD) and *manga* under one conceptual banner" (Vollmar, 2007, 34) and encourages French and Japanese artists to collaborate, have helped to forge bridges between the two types of comics, and Boilet himself has translated some of Taniguchi's work into French.

At the distribution level, the works of Japanese artists are widely available, making France the second largest market for manga after Japan, with 15 million sold in 2017 (Levent, 2018). The small library I mentioned earlier in this text has most of Taniguchi's oeuvre, including the relatively lesser known "*Botchan*" *no jidai* [Au temps de Botchan] produced in collaboration with writer Sekikawa Natsuo. In the vast "BD sections of French bookstores, Japanese texts are often prominently displayed along those of French and international artists. Particularly celebrated manga authors — such as Tezuka Osamu or Urasawa Naoki — may be awarded a dedicated section, but their Japanese origin is not their main differentiating characteristic. In fact, the term BD is frequently used as a shortcut to refer to a wide variety of graphic works — such as, for instance, when Taniguchi's *The Millennial Forest*, published posthumously in 2017, is referred to as "his last bande dessinée" on the book's cover. Not surprisingly, the terms "Japanese *bandes dessinées*" and "manga" are also frequently used interchangeably.

At the textual and visual levels, manga artists frequently nod to this close connection, as when Taniguchi and Kusumi's *Kodoku no gurume* [Solitary Gourmet] is featured reflecting on the nature of Japanese cultural identity in an Algerian restaurant in Paris, or when Taniguchi ostensibly uses a layout more reminiscent of *bandes dessinées* than manga in his last work. *Les Gardiens du Louvres* (2014) is perhaps the most interesting example here. Produced in collaboration with the museum and published by its press, the book uses the traditional manga format opening from left to right. In it, Taniguchi's main character, a manga artist who decided to spend a few days in Paris after attending the International Comics Salon in Barcelona, finds himself in the company of such figures as painter Jean-Baptiste Corot — who, we are told, was first exposed in Japan in 1889 during the first exhibit of the art association *Meiji Bijutsukai* and again in 1903 along with painters Gustave Courbet and Alfred Sisley (Taniguchi, 2014, 37, 55) — and Asai Chū, a Western-educated Corot admirer and disciple of painter Antonio Fontanesi who brought Western oil painting techniques back to Japan (*ibid.*, 45). Asai notes that his studies in Europe coincide with the Universal Exposition in Paris

(ibid., 46). His biography, which is included in the back of the book, squarely places him in the context of the Japonisme movement, stating that “while Asai’s generation had endeavored to learn academic techniques in the West [...] he discovered in Paris that the young Parisian artists and decorators were in the process of freeing themselves from these academic residues by taking for model Japanese techniques.” After briefly returning to Japan at the time of the 6th Exposition of the Pacific Circle of Occidental Painting, incidentally attended by novelist Natsume Sōseki (ibid., 50), Taniguchi’s character has his most significant encounter in the book — lasting a full 11 pages — with no less than van Gogh who shares his passion for Japanese print and tells him that he has “so many questions to ask about Japan” (ibid., 69).

So if manga artists and their characters can revel in the long history of Franco-Japanese cultural mixing, why are these connections not more assertively discussed in academic and popular discourse? Where, in other words, does the amnesia come from?

First of all, the idea that Japan has long been a hugely influential force in Europe does not easily fit the cultural narratives of either parties. On the European side, and perhaps particularly in France, a healthy dose of cultural arrogance positions one’s own country as a historically influential rather than culturally influenced nation. Furthermore, when European encounters with the Far East are evoked, “the provocative comparative model of Orientalism has become an obvious referent” (Genova, 2009, 455) for academic critique (see, for example, Evett, 1982; MacKenzie, 1995; Yoshihara, 2004). While the lens of Orientalism — particularly the more nuanced and complex versions of the concept found in contemporary post-colonial theory (see, for example, Hedge, 2011; Stam and Shohat, 2012) — is certainly useful in assessing the racial dimensions of the Japan/“West” encounter, the blanket application of Edward Said’s concept to *all aspects* of Euro-American engagement with Japanese culture is not particularly productive. In fact, if European racism tinted artists and intellectuals’ engagement with Japan, it may also explain the tendency to fail to acknowledge the full extent of the debt European cultural productions owe to Japanese aesthetics — or, ironically, the tendency to interpret it solely through an Orientalist lens. It simply may be easier to believe that 19th and early 20th century European artists were racist than to wrap our head around the fact that Japan was a globally influential nation prior to its WWII defeat and its spectacular recovery.

The broader conceptualization of “the West’s” relationship to other parts of the world in global media studies, however, is also at work in

promoting the amnesia. A fully detailed analysis of the field's epistemic blind spots is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say here that global cultural dynamics are (1) "predominantly studied in terms of how the Rest resists, imitates, or appropriates the West" (Iwabuchi, 2002, 50) and (2) premised on an essentialized conceptualization of "the West" as mostly represented by the United States. As a result, relationships outside a US-non-West dyad — where the "non-West" is the presumed victim of "the West" — fall to the wayside. As sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse puts it, "the differences between North America and Europe are papered over. In fact, historical revision may well show that there are much greater historical affinities ... between Europe and Asia than between Europe and North America" (2003/2009, 50).

Finally, Japan's role in (re)writing the narrative of its historical relationship to "the West" cannot be easily dismissed. Far from an innocent victim of Western erasure, Japan justified its colonial violence through the kind of East/West binaries frequently found in theories of Orientalism. As cultural-studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi notes, "[t]he advocacy of a cultural and racial commonality between Japan and other Asian nations naturally conferred upon Japan a mission to rid Asia of Western imperial domination and to itself civilize Asians instead" (2002, 9). In other words, emphasizing racial and cultural similarities between Japan and other parts of Asia allowed Japan to position itself "in but above Asia" (ibid., 8) and justify its imperialist aggression.

In order to bring this "strategic hybridism" (ibid., 53) to fruition, however, Japan also had to culturally distance itself from Europe and the United States. Thus, "Japan is represented and presents itself as a culturally exclusive, homogeneous, and uniquely particularistic through the operation of a strategic binary opposition between two imagined cultural entities, 'Japan' and 'the West.'" (ibid., 7). Or, as literary-studies scholar Pamela Genova puts it, "Japan's political quest for national identity dovetailed with the Western cultural undercurrent searching for renewed exoticism," as "[t]he stories on both sides were crystalized on the same hybrid imagery of the Orient" (2009, 609). This strategic positioning, of course, continued in the postwar era as Japan worked to erase the history of its colonial past, reinterpret itself as a war victim, and renegotiate its national identity (Duus, 1998; Gluck, 1993). Japan's long history of trans-cultural exchange did not sit well with the move to construct Japanese culture as unique and impenetrable to outsiders — which takes its strongest form in the conservative *nihonjinron* discourse on Japanese purity. As Iwabuchi concludes: "To put it bluntly, the idea of a Japan lacking in ex-

ternal cultural power has been collusive with a post-war strategy of constructing an exclusive and unique Japanese national identity.” (2002, 6).

Said himself wrote that “cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality” (1994, 14). It is thus time for us to get over our amnesia of Japan’s long history of global popular cultural influence to think about manga’s hybridity in all its complex messiness.

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