



Constructing Japan in Travel Writings: Notes on Continuing Research

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Recent Scholarship on Travel Writings

NOW MORE THAN EVER, travel literature has finally been given the scholarly attention it has long deserved. Long treated as embodying the realm of the fantastic that only served the imaginative, adventurous, and escapist, travel texts have recently been examined for the insights they reveal about cross-cultural encounters and as testimonies to historical eras. In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, editors Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (2002)—the latter the founding editor of the groundbreaking journal *Studies in Travel Writing*—affirm the power of travel literature to impinge on other academic fields. According to Hulme and Youngs, “the academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome their previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously” (2002, 1).

This “previous reluctance” was prompted by a gradual rethinking of travel writing not only as a “subliterary” compendium of narratives stacked in library and national archives but also as artifacts that illumine the complex and sensitive area of cross-cultural encounters. Resisting easy categorization that may pin it to one academic discipline has been travel writing’s richness and complexity. In it can be located many discursive practices employed as well in literature, history, geography, and anthropology. For critics, this melding of disciplines or, rather, the traversing of discursive borders, can become a rich site of contestation.

Be that as it may, many historians assert that if travel accounts were to be considered as sources of historiography, scholars should be cautioned not to see them as wholly transparent documents and neither should they be taken at their face value. They are to be approached as “problematic sources” that at best contain personal observations of geographies and cultures, reflective of the writer’s biases, prejudices, and values. This claim stems from the fact that travelers often do not have the intent to verify information. Their mobility dictates the pace and depth of their interaction with a locality and its inhabitants. Also, many travelers tend to write without any deep knowledge of a place. Whatever observations they make would always be assessed through the prism of their own interests and cultures. In the history of travel literature, it is of little wonder then that charges were made against the excessiveness of the writers’ descriptions and the authenticity of the information found in their accounts.

Yet, one may posit a question: why do travel writings possess a steady and compelling appeal to people? Discussing the origins of the travel genre, Hulme and Youngs concur with other scholars that the strength of travel writing, despite earlier allegations of its propensity for “fictitious” reporting, is its “privileged seeing.” To see is to witness and, therefore, to end speculations. Justin Stagl (1995), in his extensive study, *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel 1550–1800*, argues for the relation of travel and knowledge in the context of Europe’s rise as a powerful modern nation. Stagl claims that what researchers know today as methodologies of the social sciences (e.g., surveys, statistics, and interviews) had their birth as early as the fifteenth century because of Europe’s keen interest in systematizing information into useful knowledge. Travel and documentation were intimately linked tools of empirical knowledge whose applications were even governed by rules relating to the excesses in comparing the country visited and the native country. Soon enough, documentation centers and academic institutions were established in strategic parts of Europe, which undertook the encyclopedic gathering of data about unknown lands.

It is not surprising then that explorations and voyages of the earlier times financed by merchants and imperial sponsors were organized using

the information gathered earlier. Motivations of such enterprises had largely been the promise of wealth and fame, which inevitably sanctioned Europe's incursions into other territories. However, although "curiosity" may be considered the impetus for travel to foreign lands, the ensuing encounters recorded in travel accounts largely teemed with value judgments that serve to critique the unfamiliar people and culture. "Savages," "cannibals," "head-hunting warriors," and "wanton Oriental women" inhabited many of these travel texts and occupied the imagination of readers for a long time. With the dawn of empires where profit and rule became the bloodline for the unflagging conquests of frontiers, these denigrating images served to justify the Euro-American civilizing presence in colonial possessions.

In this regard, recent scholarship on travel texts has convinced scholars to take a closer look at the writings "against the grain" by applying new analytical approaches that allow the deep structure and dynamics of the narratives to surface. With academic interest in travel texts reaching an unprecedented height, scholars have gone so far as to insist on travel narratives as being the first proofs of international relations. And it is with candid proof that such an opinion is made by Jerry Bentley (2009) of the University of Hawaii. He argues for the effectiveness of travel texts in teaching world history by citing historical periods when merchants and pilgrims, lured by the images of grandeur and enticing remoteness of ancient worlds and civilization, were motivated to go on journeys on account of the information circulated through travel narratives. Yet, productive analysis of these documentary artifacts can only be approached, according to Bentley, by asking specific questions about authorship, form, motivations, and influences.

A more systematic inquiry of travel narratives has led to the production of a body of critical works, such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Campbell's *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (1992), and David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993). These works have engaged

the concepts of “truth,” “knowledge,” and “representation” of the so-called others at whose expense travel texts have established their authority. The unearthing of passages devoted to descriptions of landscape, strange cultures, and peoples has given way to new approaches that now include the relation of travel/mobility with notions and practices of geography, race, and gender.

Complex conditions can be inferred from travel writings, often marked by force, coercion, subjugation, and maneuvering—through which certain agreements, “discoveries,” and treatises were forged. Thus, to retrieve what were once considered personal writings—such as letters, diaries, and journals—and read them against the grain—has been a way of recuperating the voices not only of marginalized peoples but also of those who implicitly affirmed imperial domination. This process can obtain various insights into political and historical disruptions beneath the peaceful veneer of “home.”

Overall, the deconstruction of “representations” has become central to travel studies. This stance is made on the argument that a “representation” of a culture and people significantly results from the writer’s motivations, interests, and values colliding and conflicting with an unfamiliar territory. To make sense of such strangeness or unfamiliarity, the writer resorts to his or her own cultural codes in “understanding” what he or she faces as a different environment. What inevitably results when a writer fixes his or her perspective using his or her cultural lens is a discursive binary that assigns values of superiority, more often than not, to one’s own culture. It is this inequality that renders it vital to identify aspects in travel accounts wherever this binary becomes apparent in cultural encounters.

Japan in Travel Narratives

It is of little wonder that travel narratives have the power to perpetuate perceptions that greatly influence the construction of certain geographies. Asia, for the most part, is a continent that has been both constructed and imagined many times over for its undiminished allure.

An array of its representations inheres from the exotic, grand, and mystic, which the West has long fancied this ancient continent to be. Asia's "primitiveness," for instance, signifies the promise of the pristine. This resulted in creating attributes such as "childlike men and women," which render the place of Asians less threatening and pliant to the mentorship of the West.

Although many places in Asia have historically been known by the same descriptors, Japan as an object of curiosity in travel narratives seems to have been uniquely situated. While it was seen as displaying the same "exotic" traits as the other places in Asia, its tenacity to gain a modern stature was simultaneously viewed as merit and threat by the West. Thus, the rapid changes that heralded Japan's modernity during the Tokugawa period marked the start of Japan's struggle with a geographical sphere—the West. Not only did the period embody Japan's march into intellectual and economic progress but it also defined Japan's consciousness as it anxiously desired the West's privilege in the community of nations though fearing, at the same time, the cultural costs or loss that such desire entailed.

On the other hand, the West, in its curiosity about this "singular" nation that had determinedly isolated itself for 265 years and kept its civilization intact, was triumphant for having opened Japan's waters to world trading. The relation that ensued from this encounter was one of uneasy mentorship as Japan eventually shed off some of its traditional ways to the coercive lure of the Occident. This period was often depicted as a whirlwind romance between the innocent, feminine East and the knowledgeable, conquering West. Japan eagerly learned Western ways whereas the West was ambivalent toward Japan's "mimicking" its ways and appearance. Many commentators had likewise voiced their alarm at the rapid pace in which Japan embraced Western values. One writer sadly noted "the incalculable cost in beauty, refinement, courtesy"—a greatness that could only belong to ancient Japan (quoted in Pham 1999).

Of the tropes that emerged from the writings of this time, the binary of the "old" and "new" dominantly portrayed Japan as a nation caught

between the traditional and ancient, and the modern and automated. The binary, of course, is not peculiar to Japan alone. Clive J. Christie (1994), for instance, in his study entitled “British Literary Travelers in Southeast Asia in an Era of Colonial Retreat,” refers to a period of literary production in which the “old” Asia giving way to a “new” one can be viewed more as a backdrop to the decline of empires. Yet, why this dichotomy of “old” and “new” particularly haunted Japan is explained by anthropologist Marilyn Ivy in the nation’s own anxious complicity in engendering icons of “past” while adopting everything there is about the West (see Ivy 1995, 1–28).

The image of the “old” and “new” Japan from the time of Japan’s opening in 1853 has survived and been circulated in writings. It became a commonplace description in travel writings as the inflow of people into the country welcomed more diverse groups of people. The dichotomy of “old” and “new” was further colored with a romantic tone as ordinary travelers were now able to travel freely into the countryside where many claimed “authentic” Japan was located, a world of sprawling beautiful landscapes and quaint houses. Once more, descriptors such as “strange,” “exotic,” “mystical,” and “spiritual” abound in travel writings that inscribed Japan as an object of curiosity. The tone is nostalgic and at times unforgiving of Japan’s modern lifestyle that prefers the fast-paced neon urban life over the once leisurely, aestheticized yet idyllic living.

As Japan rose as a world power in the last century, the image of it still straddling between the “old” and “new” worlds remained central to the many perceptions produced during Japan’s military and economic height. However, Japan’s dramatic defeat in World War II and its economic revival that impressed the entire world necessarily rendered it this time as an object of envy and veneration, which hearkened to the glorious past that had originally cast Japan as a mystery. The postwar period ushered in a new body of writings on Japan that undeniably turned it into an economic model whose fortitude and resiliency had been elucidated by the martial values of bushido. The figure of the samurai that was found xenophobic and fiercely repulsive by foreigners who came much earlier to Japan has been revived and encoded as the national spirit behind Japan’s fast postwar recovery.

In brief, what charged the writings of this period was the desire to see in Japan the embodiment of a “unique” cultural repository from which everyone could learn and on which they could model a formula for success. It is no wonder that the enormous interest in Japan once again, much as it was in the prewar, gave way to a more systematic and disciplinal approach to the study of Japan that spared nothing of the nation’s identity.

Readings of “Old” and “New” Japan

Ruth Benedict’s *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum* (1946), a work that greatly influenced the postwar anthropological discourse on Japan, was written from a distance, without Benedict traveling to Japan. Cognizant of the dangers that such a trip during the war might entail, Benedict instead gathered newspaper clippings, relied on observations of her American informants, and referred to earlier travel writings on Japan. The project was meant to know the “enemy” by creating knowledge supposedly shaped through the rigors of the social sciences.

That *The Sword and the Chrysanthemum* became one of the key texts that influenced the postwar discourse on Japan and, in fact, became a “must reading” for students of what is now known as “Japanese Studies” would reveal the powerful political context through which the construction of Japan as an “aggressor” was made possible. The icons of the “sword” (Japan’s martial prowess) and the “chrysanthemum” (the fragile, aestheticized, elegant Japan) are part of the metaphors recuperated from earlier writings on Japan, which essentially depicted the nation as an ancient civilization whose sudden venture into modernity unsettled values long held as truths. Yet, more important, the use of these images were more strategic as Benedict held them up to mirror the “ideals” of American society vis-à-vis Japan’s national character (see Minear 1980).

Although the United States could not be taken as singularly representative of the “West,” its role in World War II had established it as a “moral” leader who claimed the initiative to conclude the war. Hence it can be argued that the divide between East and West pervading the writings

evolving from this period complicated the once dominant geographical divide into a new set of parameters that include political and cultural values. This dichotomous worldview influenced many of the writers' descriptions that extended while reconfiguring the discourse of "old" and "new" Japan. Their narratives cast the "old" Japan as the ancient great civilization peopled with elegantly kimonoed men and women while the "new" Japan was portrayed as a fledgling country mimicking the modern West. So while travel accounts largely rhapsodized on the beauty of Japan's landscape and its traditional arts, many also lamented the erosion of cultural and environmental refinements as remote villages and their paddy fields were bulldozed to give way to more modern infrastructures.

Writings modeled on the "East-West," "old-new" dichotomy did more than describe and explain the historical and physical changes in Japan. For example, despite the "objectivity" academic writings claim as their hallmark—a quality that elevates them to sources of "authoritative" information on Japan as a nation, culture, and civilization—the contents and the broad claims they make on Japan assign essentialist values that entrenches the gap between the two spheres. These information feed into the writings of the ordinary travelers who most of the time consult so-called veritable sources of information before embarking on their journeys.

Sharing the same stature as Benedict's work, other writings on Japan that have been hailed as "authoritative" were those authored by such stalwarts as Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese* (1890); George B. Sansom, *A History of Japan* (1958–1963); and Edwin O. Reischauer, *The United States and Japan* (1950). Minear's (1980) study threads the career of these three Japanologists in order to trace their influences among the later scholars of Japan Studies (see Stempel 1948). In examining their works, he claims that these three scholars have inadvertently subscribed to a rather *orientalist* depiction of Japan not only by seeing Japan as the cultural opposition of the West but also by imagining Japan as a repository of comparisons against which the West has been allowed to affirm its own "superiority."

Miner's methodology is simple but distinct. By looking at the intersections of the careers of the authors and inquiring into the discourse of their individual work, Miner is able to discern common perceptions and points of departures. The three authors cited above share the notion that despite Japan's highly valued ancient tradition, it still does not equal Europe's greatness. Where Japan is found excelling in political and social aspects, it is given the same footing as the West (British and Americans); but in matters where Japan disagreeably differs from the West, it slides into the category of being Oriental with all of the denigrating nuances such term possesses.

In today's theoretical parlance, the process by which Japan has been represented in these narratives reflects the "constructions" of Japan as an Orient through its geography, race, culture, and custom. However, the term "Orient" as it relates to Japan also implies a complex web of geopolitical relations with the West, relations that has been better understood since the theorizing of Edward Said's landmark work, *Orientalism* (1978).

In the study of historical and travel accounts, it was Edward Said's *Orientalism*, considered a precursor to postcolonial studies, that endorsed a systematic reading of centuries of writings "innocuously" authored by scholars, voyagers, explorers, diplomats, missionaries, and travel writers who were all supposedly in search of knowledge. According to Said, implicit in the act of representing other cultures and peoples is a power structure that relies on a more explicit exercise of domination over the place and people. It is, in fact, by virtue of their being different that they end up disenfranchised and their voices silenced in the texts. In the mobility of the Western writers, in their act of landing on an unfamiliar place and declaring it as "discovered," can be glimpsed an exercise of power manifesting in the creation of an "Orient"—with all of the word's denigrating nuances—passing it off as a "real" given that his presence and being an actual "witness" allows him an authoritative voice. Yet, as Said asserts in his book, the Orient, the vast expanse of difference drawn and

catalogued from various geographies and cultures, are more of “imagined geographies” that serve the writers’ interest and worldview and remotely depict the place’s reality.

The case of Japan, however, differs when the value of the Orient is examined in terms of its unique position in the eyes of the West. P. L. Pham’s study, “On the Edge of the Orient: English Representations of Japan, circa 1895–1910” (1999), analyzes how Japan complicates the discourse of Said’s *Orientalism*. Although Japan was long regarded as the exotic and mysterious orient of the West, Pham argues that Japan’s “exceptional position”—being at par with Western nations but remaining essentially an outsider to it—complicates the category of Japan as Oriental (1999, 163).

To support his contention, Pham chose to consider generalist texts instead of specialized writings by British writers in order to extract the larger structure through which Japan has been imagined (1999, 165). Three aspects were examined in the construction of Japan through these writings: (a) locating Japan within a “conceptual universe,” (b) the specific metaphors and metonyms used to describe Japan, and (c) the attempt to find Japan’s essence through images used to describe the country.

Through the three aspects above, Pham was able to identify the plural, dynamic, and textured images that have been applied to Japan. British writings, for instance, have depicted the nation as a “broker between East and West” or as a people who “think as Orientals [but] act as an Occidental people” (1999, 166). This ambivalence has been defined as one between the “old” and “new” worlds, which locate Japan in a temporal positioning against the West from which other values can be inferred.

Accompanying these binaries are metaphors and metonyms that reinforce Japan’s subordinate position to the West. The tropes of the “diligent student” and the insistence of the feminine Japan through the images of the “traditional” woman are all part of the rhetorical packaging of Japan as an Oriental. The sheer recurrence of these images in travel writings over time has rendered these images as “truth” that has defined

Japan's essence. In this sense, Pham asks why Japan has been known for its refined rituals such as the icons of the kimono or the teahouse. The "spectacular" and "consumable" qualities of these metaphors have made Japan more accessible to ordinary people and distinctly locate Japan in a particular world.

In another study, "Lighter Than Yellow, but Not Enough': Western Discourse on the Japanese 'Race', 1854–1904," Rotem Kowner (2000) surveys another mode of representation of the Japanese within the period. The racial stereotyping of Japan is theorized by Kowner as a method of introducing what used to be an "unknown" and "insignificant" Japan to one that rose rapidly as a modern threat to the West. As Kowner traced the racial discourse on the Japanese race, he also reveals the relevance of Japan's political significance to the West. Known as the "yellow race," this racial difference was publicized in many writings that ranged from diplomats' account of their mission in Japan to travelers' romantic or nostalgic writings on the mysterious Japan. In the range of writings, one notices the discourse of race intensifying or lessening depending on the period during which the account was written. Kowner, for instance, cites that after the Sino-Japanese War in 1904, the Japanese were no longer seen in its former stereotypes, such as the "childish, immature, fun-loving, and good-humored people," but as "aggressive, insolent, and even dangerous imperialists" (2000, 130).

In a study undertaken by Jean-Pierre Lehmann (1984), the "duality" latent in the Japanese character is taken up once more. Focusing on specific Western images of Japan, Lehmann observes that the New and Old Japonisme distinction is Europe's response to Japan's presence. The Old Japonisme emanates from the Edo era and is mostly the "world of the senses" that hailed Japan as possessing aesthetic superiority (1984, 758). On the other hand, New Japonisme celebrates Japan as an industrial model for the Europeans. The flurry that characterized Japan's rise as an economic power contributed to the growing interest of Europe in studying and adopting the "Japanese way" of doing business. Yet, despite the distinction and shift from the Old to the New Japonisme, it is undeniable that Old

Japan's appeal as an "exotic" and "mysterious" nation has remained strong for the European. (A good example of the "romantic" writing on Japan as mentioned by Lehmann is the works of Lafcadio Hearn who is hailed as the "interpreter of Japan." Hearn's writings rely significantly on the argument that the social malaise that Japan has started to experience is mainly due to the influence of the Western civilization.)

Even after World War II, it is notable that old images were never completely abandoned. The powerful image of the samurai was clothed in a new sheen. Despite the radical changes Japan had undergone, the image of the samurai has relentlessly found a rebirth in the modern businessmen.

A longer and more detailed study of the images of Japan in the Western mind, particularly of how the Japanese had been viewed by the British during the Edo period, is Toshio Yokoyama's *Japan in Victorian Mind: A Study of the Stereotyped Images of a Nation, 1850–80* (1987). The author explores the "construction" of Japan by examining the magazine articles written during the decades 1850–1880—a period that was significant to the opening of Japan to the Western world. As Britain pursued Japan (after being closed to other countries for over 256 years), the diplomatic officials involved needed to be equipped with cultural knowledge of how it had long resisted interaction with the Western world. Many of the magazine articles during the mid-1800s, for instance, mentioned the cultural practices that allowed the British to compare their own cultural practices with the Japanese people whom they considered as surprisingly "civilized." Favorable descriptions of the ways of the Japanese were emphasized and served as stark contrast to the age-old comparison between China and Japan, with the latter being favored racially.

Many wrote with great interest and admiration on the figure of the samurai, whom many British officials viewed as honorable men. On one specific occasion, a samurai, distrusting the presence of the foreigners, carried out an attack on the British soldiers without the specific orders from a shogun. As this strained the ongoing treaty negotiations, the samurai

was ordered to commit seppuku. Relevant British officials were invited to this spectacle that was featured in many well-remembered articles during that time and which eventually etched the image of the samurai in the minds of the British readers.

As decades went by and treaties did not result in favorable advantages, writings on Japan took on a more distant tone as it was now relegated to the status of a “remote” country. Magazine editors’ interests in political matters waned, and they were more inclined to publish articles that would certainly make the magazine sell more.

The change over the decades, however, brought out a sympathetic writer in A. B. Mitford (Yokoyama 1987). The sympathetic attitude has been argued by Yokoyama as a product of the writer’s knowledge of the language. Acquiring it in the year that he arrived in Japan, Mitford started writing more on the people’s ways that as a whole argued for the homogeneity of cultures. The Japanese were portrayed as sharing characteristics, both positive and negative, with people not only in Britain but anywhere else in the world. This change in the writing style brought on a new wave of writing on Japan. Mitford had proven false some of the earlier writings on Japan since he had the chance to confer with Japanese intellectuals on the intricacies of Japanese thought and culture.

The later wave of writings on Japan essentially defined Japan as a “remote” country and, being remote, the descriptive quality of these writings did not adhere to any principle of authenticity. In short, the accuracy of details counted less in importance than the imagined Japan—the “elfland” that came out of such writings.

In the last chapter of Yokoyama’s book, the author argues that with the attention shifting from the treaties to ordinary travels to Japan, the “romantic” Japan was significantly energized by the ordinary travelers who came mostly from Hong Kong or China. It was during this time when travelers preferred to visit the rural areas, which were deemed to embody the “lost” Japan or the “old” Japan and where one could still experience the lingering traditions that defined the arts and crafts of these artistic people.

Conclusion

The travel literature on Japan is a voluminous body consisting of magazine articles, diary entries, reflections, diplomatic observations, letters, and guide books. Given the recent interest in travel studies, many of these writings, long kept in library archives, have been collected, systematized, and analyzed to reveal information on historical periods, the ways by which intercultural relations were carried out, and the discursive aspects that framed the travel genre.

Critical studies on the travel texts have clearly shown that both the favorable and unfavorable images and perceptions of Japan were a function of the shifting political relations that marked Japan's entry as a modern nation and the West's pursuit of this once "hermetic" land. It became known that positive perceptions by the West of Japan were cast in admiration of its ancient civilization. But as Japan and the West entered an uneasy alliance, with Japan proving its military prowess, descriptions of the Japanese people and culture that emerged in magazines sank into negative images. The trope that particularly served as framework to many of these accounts was that of the binary "old/new" Japan.

The aftermath of the Second World War witnessed a rise in images of Japan that had its core in the "old" and "new" dichotomy. A noted example is that of the samurai. Previously seen as a fierce and unrelenting xenophobic, the samurai—specifically, its code of bushido—was appropriated to explain Japan's rise as an "economic animal."

Continuing studies on the travel literature on Japan have begun engaging the "old/new" binary. The concern focuses on whether this dichotomy has been superseded by other concepts or representations since recent books have drawn in on descriptions such as "vanishing," "lost," and "hidden" Japan. Future studies may find it worthy to inquire into aspects of how these images actually recuperate the same hermeneutic layers through which Japan has remained an object of curiosity until now.

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