

Preface

In December 1941 the Canadian troops defending Hong Kong were assured that at least one thing was in their favour: no Japanese were going to risk a night-attack by sea. As a race, they were prone to seasickness and their slant eyes were bad for night vision. The attack, of course, came by night from the sea. Fifty years after the end of the war, this sounds like a story from another age. We know more about the Japanese now; we eat their food, drive their cars, rub shoulders with them in the street. But how much have our ideas really changed?

This is not a question that can be answered by turning to standard academic texts. Popular impressions of Japan owe little to historians or social scientists; they are more likely to have been scrambled together from a cultural miscellany of television programmes, bestselling novels, gadgets around the house and fading echoes of the Second World War. The great names of modern Japanese studies have no place here, unless, like Ruth Benedict, they have worked their way into general currency. In this hall of mirrors, where the object of enquiry is the image rather than the reality, the ten-second advertisement can be more revealing than the expert's monograph, the casual reference more significant than the detailed survey. It is one area where a book's cover sometimes tells us more than its contents.

Take the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Japan* (1993). The picture on the front is of Mount Fuji seen across Kawaguchi Lake against a cloudless sky. On the back are four more images: a class of *kendo* students, their faces indistinguishable behind the masks;

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an elegant woman in kimono leading her two small daughters, also in traditional dress, down the steps of a shrine; the moon rising beside a temple in Kyoto; finally, the interior of a McDonald's, a scene that might have been photographed anywhere in the world, except that the westerner's eye is drawn straight to the incongruous band of Japanese writing across the top of the service counter. What do these snapshots add up to? Against the primary image of essential, unchanging Japan, they set out for us the four most familiar faces of Japanese culture: the Japan of warriors in masks, of women in kimono, of temples in a poetic landscape, and of ordinary Japanese – a people whose daily lives show them to be like us and yet not like us, marked always by an ineradicable difference. By accident or design, these pictures highlight the main categories that have dominated western perceptions of Japan. In this book I have called them Aliens, Aesthetes, Butterflies and Samurai.

To give them a rough context, we can divide the history of our relations with Japan into four stages: the initial contacts, which began in the 1540s and ended a century later when Japan shut itself off from the outside world; the period after its reopening in the mid-nineteenth century, during which, under the generally patronising gaze of the west, it developed into a powerful modern state; the Second World War and the ensuing years of regeneration; and the last three decades, which have seen Japan's rise to the status of economic superpower. This is the broad framework within which western images have been formed.

Two points should be made at the outset. First, to talk of 'the west' as a single entity is to lump together a vast range of disparate and conflicting responses. I have not tried to do justice to their complexity. My aim has been to select from them those images of Japan which recur most often and which have left the deepest imprint on popular attitudes.

Second, it is not my intention to suggest that stereotypes are necessarily foolish or valueless. As a rule, in spite of aberrations, they have gained acceptance because there is a basis of truth to them. If the sadistic Japanese soldier retains his hold on our imagination, it is in part because the atrocities of Nanking and the POW camps were a well-documented reality. If Japan is still associated with images of aesthetic refinement, we need only step inside a traditional Japanese inn to understand why.

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Western visitors to the country are often struck by how reliably it confirms their expectations. Amid polite, bowing people, they find themselves in just the world they were told about, where the trains are a miracle of punctuality, the Ginza is a dazzling stretch of neon, and cherry trees line the paths to ancient shrines. One by one, the time-honoured images turn out to be true. But in doing so, they obscure all the other things that are true – which is why they are dangerous. They teach us what to look for, and that is what we find; everything else becomes a background blur. We are left with a reality selected for us by our stereotypes.

The process is not peculiar to the west. The concepts of racial difference which underpin these stereotypes have been embraced no less eagerly by the Japanese, with results no less pernicious. But old habits of thought can be revised, and there is at least a possibility that this is starting to happen. For as long as we have known about Japan, it has been our natural opposite. East to our west, it has helped to maintain the crucial axis along which the world is divided. Today we cannot be so sure. As we begin to talk less of the cultural divide between east and west and more of the economic divide between north and south, there are signs that our imaginative map of the world may be changing. If this weakens the grip of established attitudes, it can only be to our advantage. The chapters that follow present a Japan which we have turned into a place of myth, an image either of our fears or of our fantasies. It belongs to the past. The Japan we must live with at the end of the twentieth century has grown too important to be left to the mercy of clichés.

Chapter 13, pp. 130-35: 'a very lewd and lascivious people'

Among the first westerners to set foot in Japan in the nineteenth century was John Henry Preble, a young officer who arrived with Commodore Perry's squadron in February 1854. His diary of the next four months records a series of shocks to his moral system which all confirmed the indecency of the Japanese. It began before he'd even stepped ashore in Yedo Bay: 'The inhabitants crowded the hill, and beckoned us on shore, and by the most unmistakable signs invited our intercourse with their women. One female went so far as to raise her drapery and expose her person to us. They are either a very lewd and lascivious people, or have catered before this, to the passions of sailors.'⁸

He was not long in doubt. 'Among the presents received by Com. Perry', he writes five days later, 'was a box of obscene paintings of naked men and women, another proof of the lewdness of this exclusive people.' At a meeting in mid-March he notes 'another instance of this people's sensuality': 'Capt. A. remarking to the interpreter that it was a rainy day. Yes, said he, a fine day for lying with the ladies.' Such casual depravity was a prominent feature of the society: 'The remarkable sensuality of the Japanese is everywhere evidenced by their habit[,] conduct and actions.' Even the places of worship are not safe. Resting at a temple near Hakodate, he notices a pretty unmarried girl among the crowd. A man comes up to her, whispers, then takes her behind a screen five feet away: 'Her companions were not slow, to show us, by the most indecent signs in which the old priest joined, what they had gone for. The women laughing heartily as though it were a first-rate joke and no uncommon occurrence to so pervert their Temples.'

For Preble, as for many early visitors, the focus of these mis-

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givings was the public bath-house, 'where old and young, male and female are mingled promiscuously in a state of unblushing nudity to the gaze of strangers'.⁹ There were two standard responses to this. For one sort of traveller it was evidence of prelapsarian innocence. 'In Japan,' wrote the Comte de Beauvoir, 'one lives in full daylight; modesty, or rather immodesty, is unknown there; it is the innocence of the earthly paradise, and the costume of our first parents has nothing which shocks the sensibilities of this people who still live in the golden age.'¹⁰ For the other, and more common, sort of traveller, this lack of shame was a mark of natural depravity. What particularly offended Preble, at both temple and bath-house, was the light-heartedness of it all: 'The only separation of the sexes I noticed, was that the men kept to the right side of this room, and the women to the left. Both would look at us and laugh and point at what every other human being I have ever heard of savage or civilised seeks to conceal. Laugh. It was disgusting.'¹¹

Exactly a fortnight earlier another young ensign with Perry's squadron, Edward Yorke McCauley, had paid an even more traumatic visit to the bath-house, where he found a mixed crowd of old and young squatting on the stone floor 'without rag enough to cover a thumb nail': 'They invited us to join in and take a wash – but I was so disgusted with the whole breed, with their lewdness of manner and gesture, that I turned away with a hearty curse upon them for putting evidence conclusive to the unwelcome theory, that "women as a body of beings, can become thoroughly corrupt"'.¹²

A few years later, George Smith found no improvement. He writes indignantly of 'one shameless throng of bathers without signs of modesty or of any apparent sense of moral decorum'.¹³ Pitched into the midst of 'one of the most licentious races in the world', the bishop was hard pressed to keep his bearings. It wasn't enough that he left his visiting card with a respectable dame who turned out to be the mama-san of one of Tokyo's brothels, he also managed to buy a set of porcelain cups which proved on closer inspection to be decorated with

pornographic designs. Not surprisingly, the bishop had some harsh things to say about Japanese morality.

There were plenty of commentators to endorse his views. 'A more licentious people does not exist,' declared John Tremenheere in 1863. 'The very toys of the children are designed to inoculate the infant mind with vice; shame is unknown, and indecency of language and conduct is all but universal.' This was echoed by Robert Fortune, who offered the opinion that 'no people in the world are more licentious in their behaviour than the Japanese'. By this time Edward Barrington de Fonblanque had added his voice to the chorus. 'The Japanese', he wrote, 'are depraved, sensual, and obscene in every sense.' Indecency was all around, 'painted on their porcelain, embossed on their lacquer, carved in their ivory, and surreptitiously conveyed into their fans'. Everywhere he found evidence of 'that utter absence of modesty and that morbid craving for the obscene which is universal in Japan'. The tone is rather different from that of Robert J. Collins, but the picture of a sex-drenched society is the same. Frank Harris was one of few Victorian visitors who admitted to viewing Japanese sexual attitudes without disapproval, though his summary of them agreed with that of the moralists: 'The sexuality in Japan is perhaps more marked than in any country on earth.' To his delight he found the people even freer than the French: 'Bit by bit I came to understand that there was not a trace of sexual modesty in Japan from one end to the other; most of the women even did not understand what Europeans meant by the concept.'¹⁴

The immodesty of the women was a particular subject of comment, because it seemed unrelated to the usual categories of sexual delinquency. Baron de Hübner was one of many who expressed surprise that well-conducted Japanese women were willing to laugh openly at indecent displays. Much the same point is made by Fonblanque. What shocked him, as it had Preble, was the tolerance of indecency shown by *ordinary* women:

Respectable mothers of families, and young girls of otherwise irreproachable conduct, will take an undisguised pleasure in sights

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and scenes that would shock an English street-walker; and little innocent-eyed children, toddling by their fond father's side, or nestling in their mother's bosom, may be seen playing with toys so indecent, that one longs to dash them from their tiny hands and trample them under foot.¹⁵

Fonblanque's reference to the English street-walker is suggestive. The lack of sexual shame which westerners found in these people was of an unfamiliar kind. It was not the shamelessness of the Victorian underworld, where the harlot's immodesty served as a foil to the purity of the angel in the house. Here, it seemed, the immodest woman quite often *was* the angel in the house. This was shocking, but it was also irresistibly attractive. The titillating descriptions of Japanese prostitution got their charge from precisely this combination. The sexual promise is sharpened by the social propriety, and those nineteenth-century travellers who, with a murmur of gentlemanly reticence, lead their readers into the streets of the Yoshiwara are fully aware of it.

The fascination of the Yoshiwara was not that it was an urban area set aside for commercial sex. This was common all over Europe. What distinguished it was the very un-European mixture of commercial sex and social decorum. Western influence, according to Mitford, had somewhat disturbed the atmosphere of the Yoshiwara in the Treaty ports, but in Yedo 'and wherever Japanese customs are untainted, the utmost decorum prevails'. By the standards of most foreigners, even the ports were seemly. 'Nothing quieter, or more decent, could be imagined,' remarked Gilbert Watson of the Yoshiwara in Kobe. 'All is outward propriety and decorum,' wrote another visitor.¹⁶ Here were streets of brothels, run with impeccable propriety and peopled by creatures whose exquisite manners suggested a high degree of refinement. Writers never tired of pointing out how narrow was the line that could separate the respectable daughter from the common prostitute. Griffis approaches the topic with what might almost be mistaken for relish: 'The Japanese maiden, as pure as the purest Christian virgin, will at the command of her father enter the brothel tomorrow, and prostitute herself for life.

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Not a murmur escapes her lips as she thus filially obeys. To a life she loathes, and to disease, premature old age, and an early grave, she goes joyfully.¹⁷

The image, and all it implied about Japanese culture, was deeply intriguing. The coming together of social propriety and sexual abandon provided the material for a potent fantasy, of which Madame Butterfly – sexual toy, loyal wife and self-sacrificing mother – is a celebrated example. Pornographers long ago realised the erotic appeal of wimpled nuns, uniformed schoolgirls and demure secretaries; the sexual invitation they offer is a thrilling repudiation of their public claim to propriety. In the west, where the madonna and the whore are separate entities, these could only be images of fantasy, but in Japan that seemed not to be the case. The pious daughter who blithely offers herself for sale in the Yoshiwara is both.

And she is so young. This is almost equally important. Loti's geisha in Kyoto were 'scarcely ten years old'. Madame Butterfly is only fifteen, little more than a child. It's an emphasis that lends piquancy to her sexual appeal, adding another tang of the forbidden to this exotic fruit. Like the decorous bearing of the prostitutes in the Yoshiwara, the childlike appearance of the Japanese woman is belied by an undercurrent of sexuality. 'What a child Mûsmé is!' says Holland's narrator. 'And yet there is an indefinable charm inseparable from womanhood about her.'¹⁸ Butterfly's coquetry is 'almost that of a child'. As Pinkerton watches the 'squirrel-like movements' with which she takes off her wedding garment, he muses on her childish appearance: 'To think that this plaything is my wife. My wife! But she displays such grace that I am consumed by the fever of a sudden desire.' This while he smokes a cigarette on the verandah, looking through at her in the bedroom. (The pre-coital cigarette, privilege of the prostitute's client, is a mark of domination as surely as the post-coital one is a mark of self-satisfaction.)

Pinkerton's discriminating commentary on the fifteen-year-old with whom he's about to go to bed reflects another sexual fantasy which the Japanese woman promised to fulfil. The idea of the *ingénue libertine*, the fresh young girl who displays a

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flattering aptitude for sex under the tutelage of an older man, had been enthusiastically promoted in the eighteenth century, notably in France, and its continuing appeal is attested by numerous aspects of Victorian life, from the brisk trade in child prostitutes to the vogue for photographing naked waifs in poses of coy invitation. It's impossible to read much Victorian literature without recognising a characteristically gloating tone in its treatment of young children, especially young girls. There is often a sinuous thread of sexual anticipation, even of sadism, just below the avuncular surface. Dickens parodies it in the figure of Daniel Quilp, the hideous cigar-smoking dwarf who torments the grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop* with his compliments on the charms of Little Nell:

Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,' said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; 'such a chubby, rosy, cosy little Nell! [...] She's so,' said Quilp, speaking very slowly, and feigning to be quite absorbed in the subject, 'so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways . . .'¹⁹

Dickens conveys vividly the sexual excitement that bubbles through the clichés.

The ambiguity of Victorian responses to children carries over into their images of Japanese women. There is the same uneasy mixture of sentiment and sex. As so often, the attraction of the east is that it offers a context within which the prohibitions of western life can be dissolved; in this case, the child can become the bride, or at least the sexual partner. In *The Real Japan* (1892) Henry Norman summarises the qualities that make the Japanese woman such a versatile source of fantasy:

If you could take the light from the eyes of a Sister of Mercy at her gracious task, the smile of a maiden looking over the seas for her lover, and the heart of an unspoiled child, and materialise them into a winsome and healthy little body, crowned with a mass of jet-black hair and dressed in bright rustling silks, you would have the typical Japanese woman.²⁰