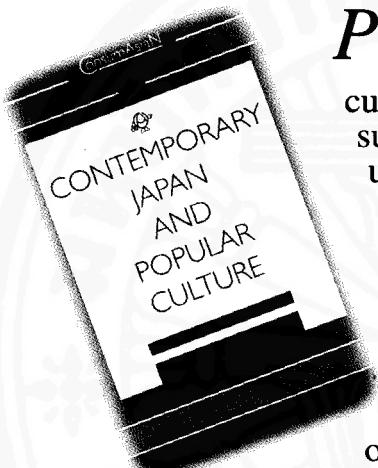# Discovering Hidden Stories: Mass Media and Japanese Popular Culture

REVIEW BY
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Popular culture and media

I once naively perceived the term culture as extending only to high culture, such as Thai dance or costume. As I grew up, however, and studied more and more literature describing the many forms culture can take, my understanding of the term was transformed into what Raymond William's defines as 'way of life'. Within this broader view, culture is deemed the culture of the people or 'popular culture', in place of the rather narrow 'high culture' which is dominated by powerful elites. Popular culture is now studied under the banner of 'cultural studies'- a subject area informed, to a large extent, by Marxist theory. Cultural studies are now popular within many Western countries, and more recently Asian countries as well. Much of the inquiry is focused on the influence of mass media on mass audiences. Many scholars believe mass media has become a powerful tool influencing the ideology of peoples throughout the world. Cultural studies create a window into the images, symbols and codes of popular living within contemporary societies.

Japanese popular culture

Post-Second World War Japan has become one of the great capitalist societies within Asia. Within this context, both Japanese and foreign scholars have been interested in researching Japan and popular culture for some time now.

One such scholar is John Whittier Treat who edited *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* which focuses on the influence of mass media within Japanese society. He has collected together a diverse range of articles written by Japanese and foreign researchers. All of the articles explore popular culture in Japan through the mainstream mechanisms of mass media - popular literature, advertising, music, film and television. The authors employ historical research and holistic research methodologies in the writing of their articles.

At first glance I thought this book might not provide any new insights into Japanese culture, but as I gradually turned each page I realised there are many hidden aspects of Japanese culture revealed in the text. I believed that my four years of Japanese study may have given me an advantage in understanding the cultural trends being presented in the book; however, the articles are very accessible to all people interested in acquiring an understanding of Japanese thinking and culture. I have selected four articles to discuss in this review which I believe reflect the diversity of Japanese culture being presented in *Contemporary Japan.*

Discrimination in Japan?

The first article, "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture", is written by John Russell who brings into the open the rarely talked about issue of racism in Japan. On reading this article I was shocked to realise that race discrimination exists quite strongly in Japanese culture. Russell claims that the "black" is the other in Japanese proverbs, such as *iro no shiroi wa shichinan kakusa* (white skin compensates for many deficiencies). Moreover, he finds that this idea is derived from Western racial categories and hierarchies from the early colonial period, with the importation of Dutch learning and Western science. He describes one incident in 1854 when Japanese officials were entertained by an 'Ethiopian minstrel show' performed by black slaves aboard a British flagship anchored in Edo Bay. Henceforth, claims Russell, the Japanese have associated black people with 'primitive' native cultures. Russell draws on numerous texts and graphics to illustrate his thesis, including the 1933 story book character of the 'nigger' child-king Dankichi, and various caricatures of Negroes which exaggerate their racial features (ie bulbous lips). These visual representations of 'blacks' are reminiscent of American animated cartoons of the same period. On completing this article, I had gleaned a better understanding of the social attitudes behind former Japanese prime minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's preposterous assertion in 1986 that the presence of 'blacks', including Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, was the reason behind a supposed decline in American intelligence levels.

'Enka' - Symbol of the Japanese post-war psyche

"Mournful Tears and Sake: The Postwar Myth of Misora Hibari", written by Alan Tansman, impressed me greatly. In this article, we are introduced to a kind of Japanese song, known as *enka* (sad ballads), and to the story of popular singer, Misora Hibari. *Enka* songs became famous in Japan after the Second World War when a destroyed Japanese society was attempting to rebuild itself. *Enka* are enthusiastically sung by people from a broad spectrum of Japanese society, from women wearing traditional *kimono* to middle-aged, working class men. The term *enka* originally referred to songs of political resistance, and later to songs of social and personal lament, such as the pain of lovers separating. These stories of lament are told through images of harbours, rain and tears. *Enka* songs inspired Japanese people to endure defeat and destruction, and to look to the future with hope. Tansman believes the popular *enka* singer, Misora Hibari, has come to personify the people's voice during a time of tumultuous and cruel destruction because her personal life was also tragic. She embodied hope within struggle. The 1966 *enka* hit, *Mournful Sake*, was popularised at a time when Japan's economy was beginning to take off. This sad song ironically protests against a future of promising economic success which threatens to erase the memory of Japan's past and its troubles. The song's mournful tones at a time of increasing prosperity reveals a less than confident Japanese people, who, despite their new fortunes, remain mindful of their recent tragic history and fearful for the future. The rural Thai folk songs or *Luktung*, perhaps reflects Thai society in a similar way.

TV and collectivity

This book not only provides fresh insights and perspectives on Japanese culture, but also discusses local and national ideologies within Japanese society. In "Japanese Daytime Television, Popular Culture and Ideology", Andrew Painter argues that the influence of communicative, popular TV is transforming Japanese social experience. He reveals that Japanese television is a form of 'quasi-intimate' communication between TV performers and viewers, and that this entertainment style is patterned on the sort of informal interaction found only within intimate group contexts in Japanese society. The reason this format is so appealing is that Japanese culture is characterised by "elaborate politeness and formality" so the communicative 'informality' presented on TV is very welcome. Everyone in Japan, regardless of status, time, place or behaviour, shares in the same social meanings presented on television. As an example Painter uses "Zoom-in Morning", a program which broadcasts via a distance network to all points in

Japan, thereby bringing Japan to the Japanese and contributing to collective social experience and consensus of opinion.

Beyond selling: Advertising and cultural transpositions

Brian Moeran's article "In Pursuit of Perfection: The Discourse of Cars and Transposition of Signs in Two Advertising Campaigns", attempts to decode both advertising which is generated in Japan for external consumption and advertising by foreign companies for a Japanese market. Drawing on the relationship between denotation and connotation in advertising messages (Barthes, 1977; Williamson, 1978), Moeran suggests that although advertising pursues selling in the first instance, a deeper transposition of cultural concepts and values through advertising signs is also occurring. He explores this theme through what he terms the "discourse of cars" because automobiles both symbolise and project cultural and social values. In car advertising, for example, the advertising agency is not only creating a new idea, but also rethinking and reflecting the character of the audience as a consumer. Moreover, Moeran claims that Japanese culture is used to transpose advertising signs. For example, when advertising in Europe, Toyota presents perfection in automotive technology against the backdrop of a Zen garden. On the other hand, the European advertising gurus promoting PKW vehicles in Japan, locate their image of the car in front of a well-known Japanese restaurant in an attempt to convince the Japanese consumer that Western technology is a truly timeless and borderless quality, surpassing even Japanese technology.

I have discussed only four out of the 10 very interesting articles presented in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture,* but readers are sure to enjoy the other articles which range across such colourful topics as fashion, music and film. Lisa Skov's "Fashion Trends, Japonisme and Postmodernism" examines why Japanese fashion has become so popular. In "Finally, I Reach Africa: Ryuichi Sakamoto and Sounding Japan(ese)", Brian Currid explores world music. Susan Napier's article, "Panic Sites: The Japanese Imagination of Disaster from *Godzilla* to *Akira",* describes Japan's post-war cinematic vision of destruction and loss. *Contemporary Japan* is a fascinating walk through the mosaic and bizarre world of Japanese popular culture.