

Japan in the Foreign Imagination

This project began as course taught at Keio University and Saitama University. It analyzes the often distorted image of Japan given in English language media. The period covered is primarily the post bubble (1989 and after) era otherwise known as “the lost decades.”

Among the themes of this research are the following:

“Americans ain’t got no culture.” English writing on Japan typically explains issues in Japan such as suicide or corporate malfeasance in terms of culture. For the same issues in the US case, there is no mention of culture. This leads to the conclusion that “Americans ain’t got not culture.”

English language writing about Japan often appears to be intended to make the reader feel good or superior because he or she is not Japanese rather than to actually inform about Japan.

This takes the form of what I call stealth whataboutism.

This is negative articles about Japan aimed at elites in foreign countries that do not explicitly say, "Well, yes, we're FUBAR, but WHAT ABOUT JAPAN?"

Who cares whether "[Japan still uses faxes](#)" or whether it preserves [antique German carousels](#) or whether contemporary Japanese politics is in chaos? Who cares whether there is graffiti on the walls or trash scattered in the streets of some sleazy part of Tokyo?

Do undocumented migrants fearing ICE will grab them worry about such issues? Do Yanks or Brits living in high crime social housing projects worry about such issues? Do bus drivers in London or NYC have any interest in such issues?

Why would anyone outside of Japan be an audience for such reports unless they are looking for "what about Japan" stories that reassure them of their cultural/racial superiority?

Who needs such reassurance? Members and people who have dreams of becoming members of the PMC (professional managerial class) in some "Western country" that is circling the drain compared to Japan. Japan is a challenge to their world view.

Japan is an affront to (white) liberals especially in the US. Japan is "conservative and male dominated" but it has progressive structures that Yankee liberals cannot dream of achieving: strict gun control, low cost universal health care, easy access to abortion nationwide, national geriatric care insurance, nationally mandated locally implemented means tested daycare for children, mandatory paid parental leave, and much much more including a female head of state.

Yankee liberals in particular cannot grok a country not led by people like themselves that functions far more smoothly than countries led by people like themselves. They want stories that reassure them that despite appearances to the contrary, Japan is really FUBAR and that they themselves and people like them really are superior. That's who.

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