

Mutual  
Images

ISSUE 6

SPRING 2019



MEDIATISED IMAGES OF JAPAN IN EUROPE:  
THROUGH THE MEDIA KALEIDOSCOPE

MUTUAL IMAGES

ISSUE 6 – SPRING 2019

# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

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MEDIATISED IMAGES OF JAPAN IN EUROPE:  
THROUGH THE MEDIA KALEIDOSCOPE

EDITED BY

MARCO PELLITTERI & CHRISTOPHER J. HAYES

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

## A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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*Mutual Images* is registered under the ISSN 2496-1868. This issue's Digital Object Identifier is: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/6](https://doi.org/10.32926/6).

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# MUTUAL IMAGES

## ISSUE 6

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

**MARCO PELLITTERI & CHRISTOPHER J. HAYES** (Shanghai International Studies University, China; Cardiff University, UK) .....1-6

### POP CULTURE OF JAPAN

Layers of the Traditional in popular performing arts:  
Object and voice as character – *Vocaloid Opera Aoi*  
**KRISZTINA ROSNER** (Meiji University, Japan) .....7-19

The re-creation of yōkai character images in the context of contemporary Japanese popular culture: An example of *Yo-Kai Watch* anime series  
**NARGIZ BALGIMBAYEVA** (University of Tsukuba, Japan) .....21-51

From *kawaii* to sophisticated beauty ideals:  
A case study of Shiseidō beauty print advertisements in Europe  
**OANA BIRLEA** (Babes-Bolyai University, Romania) .....53-69

### MEDIATISED IMAGES OF JAPAN IN EUROPE

Section editorial – Mediatished images of Japan in Europe  
**CHRISTOPHER J. HAYES** (Cardiff University, UK) .....71-74

Bullshit journalism and Japan: English-language news media, Japanese higher education policy, and Frankfurt's theory of "Bullshit"  
**KENN NAKATA STEFFENSEN** (Independent researcher, Ireland) .....75-91

The Outside Perspective:  
The Treaty Port Press, the Meiji Restoration and the image of a modern Japan  
**ADREAS EICHLETER** (Heidelberg University, Germany) .....93-114

The perception of the Japanese in the Estonian soldiers' letters from the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905)  
**ENE SELART** (Tartu University, Estonia) .....115-134

Utopia or Uprising? Conflicting discourses of Japanese robotics in the British press  
**CHRISTOPHER J. HAYES** (Cardiff University, UK) .....135-167

## REVIEWS

*Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* – Deborah Shamoon & Chris McMorran (Eds)  
**MARCO PELLITTERI** (Shanghai International Studies University, China) .....169-178

*The Citi Exhibition: Manga マンガ* – Exhibited at the British Museum  
**BOUNTHAVY SUVILAY** (University of Montpellier III and University of Paris-Ouest,  
France) .....179-181

*The Citi Exhibition: Manga マンガ* – Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere & Ryoko Matsuba (Eds)  
**BOUNTHAVY SUVILAY** (University of Montpellier III and University of Paris-Ouest,  
France) .....183-185

# Teaching Japanese Popular Culture – Deborah Shamoan & Chris McMorran (Eds)

Ann Arbor (Mi, USA): Association for Asian Studies, 2016, Series 'Asia Past & Present: New Research from AAS', no. 13, 307 pages.

Review by Marco PELLITTERI | Shanghai International Studies University, China

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.32926/2018.6.R.PEL.TEACH](https://doi.org/10.32926/2018.6.R.PEL.TEACH)

*Date of submission: 14 March 2019*

*Date of acceptance: 21 March 2019*

*Date of publication: 20 June 2019*

Deborah Shamoan, Chris McMorran, and Kam Thiam Huat organised a 'Teaching Japanese Popular Culture' international conference that was held at the National University of Singapore in 2012, with the support of the Japan Foundation. The book, however, more than a printed upshot of that athenaeum is a production of the Association for Asian Studies, which has its headquarters in the United States. In this sense, *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture* is to be framed as a US-American book, edited and produced in the United States by the Aas. I will get back to this detail in the final remarks of this review.

Now, anybody who ever edited a book formed of contributions by various and diverse authors perfectly knows about all the issues that may come along. One of the most frequent is to find an organic trajectory, a path, an overall meaningful structure out of what often is, at first, a discontinuous group of writings that not necessarily have much in common with each other.

If the editors are not inspired, or the materials selected or available aren't mutually matching enough, there is the serious risk to be in the presence not of an actual book, but of a simple — however respectable — collection of essays that are, possibly, very good when singularly considered but that do not make a deeper sense when thought of as an ensemble. I guess we all have read and used at least one of these collections, and we share about it or them that vague feeling of unaccomplishment or partial non-necessity, saving from them specific chapters that better intercepted our interests. This kind of edited collections is after all not so hard to meet in bibliographical searches or on our own

bookshelves, especially when they are the printed result of previously organised symposia, workshops, or particular conference sessions: there is a general topic that ideally bends together all the papers, but it is hard, with all your good will, to really spot an internal consistency in the whole collection in terms of theoretical framework, methodologies, writing styles, attitude toward the themes, and final ‘message’.

Therefore, when we are in the presence of a book of collected essays coming from a conference that overcomes all those possible shortcomings, it really is a pleasant reading and a useful tool. This is precisely the case of *Teaching Japanese Popular Culture*: a collective work that is not without limits (as I illustrate in the course of the review), but presents itself as a coordinated, interdisciplinary approach to the problems of teaching ‘on’, ‘with’, and ‘about’ Japanese popular culture (from now on, Jpc) or, at least, a selected set of themes from it. The editors have been very careful and able to interconnect the chapters, to insert cross-references between them, and in the end to give the reader an organic, internally consistent piece of scholarship.

The collection, after an introduction co-written by the editors, is organised in three parts: the first focuses on ‘The Big Picture: On Curriculum Design’ (three chapters), the second is titled ‘In the Media Studies Classroom: Teaching about Popular Culture’ (two chapters), and the third is on ‘Using Popular Culture in Teaching’ (five chapters). The conclusion by McMorran constitutes something like an eleventh chapter, because rather than summing up the discourses of the book, chooses to be a (useful) discussion on the future of teaching Jpc online: a destiny and, up to a point, a current situation shared by pretty much any field of academia.

Coming to a slightly closer analysis and assessment of the book’s contents.

What is Jpc? Equally important (and logically antecedent), what is popular culture? The theoretical issue of defining the meanings and explaining the dimensions of ‘popular culture’ should be the first main point to deal with in the context of this book not because every work on a given topic must reinvent the wheel, but because a collection of essays on how Jpc is taught should define in clear terms what we are talking about when we talk about it. Fortunately, the book starts in fact, in its introduction by the editors, with an indirect, by-induction-definition of Jpc, and then delves into a more explicit discourse on it: Shamoan and McMorran begin proposing an overview of initiatives, facts, and cultural forms such as the ‘Cool Japan’ project

initiated by the Japanese government, animation, comics, video games, films, pop music from Japan, so suggesting what Jpc could be intended as; and in the second section of the introduction they reflect upon 'Defining Japanese Popular Culture'. The editors show great intellectual honesty in declaring that they had and wanted to make a choice of cultural sectors and forms to include in the definition of Jpc, excluding others not out of a prescriptive attitude but because it would have been difficult to contain the entirety of the possible zones of Jpc in one book: the chapters in effect deal, besides the topics listed above, 'only' with film, fashion, tv drama, art, and design. The intellectual honesty moreover lies in that they also mention a fundamental precedent in the scholarship, that John Whittier Treat who in 1996 edited *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* and included, in the forms and formats by which Jpc can present itself, quite a varied array of things such as *sumo* and horse racing (Japan is a world-renown site also for this latter sport). But there also exist many interesting and informative sources for a wider audience, such as the dated and entertaining *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture* (1997) by Mark Schilling, in which the array of Jpc's facets is very wide. We have to understand, though, that this book's editors had a precise academic goal, which was to explain how to teach Jpc and how Jpc is taught, not to illustrate the entire universe of Jpc.

Hence, Shamoan and McMorran attempt to justify and ground the choice of fields analysed in the book. Nonetheless such selection, even within the context of a book about teaching Jpc and *not* about Jpc per se, still appears as a limitation that is both theoretical and empirical. Especially to younger scholars, this choice and organisation of topics and fields of Japanese popular culture in the university classroom might lead to an overrepresentation of forms currently *à la page* among many millennials around the globe: anime, manga, 'cute'-designed commodities, urban youth trends like the 'Gothic Lolita' fashion styles, etc. There is actually space, in specific chapters, for Japanese tv talk shows and soap operas, or for the usage and evolution of kimono; that is, for *mainstream* forms of Jpc. But the attention paid in the book to *subcultural* forms of Jpc is overwhelming and constitutes, on my opinion, a conceptual as well as operational bias in framing the core aspects of any popular culture. Popular culture can be intended according to different ideas of a society, of a culture, and of a populace; you may use Fiske, Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer, or Marx (and many more), but I believe you should not so overtly privilege certain areas of culture over others that

would equally fall within the field of the ‘popular’ and, moreover, are consumed by huge crowds. In the book, moreover, one has the feeling that the only recipients of Jpc are youths. But we know it’s not the case.

Despite this and the other, previously hinted-at possible flaws in the theoretical ground and operational execution of the book’s proposal on the delimitations of Jpc, the collection is pure gold: it offers a rich set of didactic frameworks and practical experiences that could be followed, adopted, and reproduced by other teachers who organise courses related to aspects of Jpc. More: one of the core features of the book is, as I wrote at the beginning of this review, the fact that it deals with the three possible ways of managing Jpc (or any other topic, I would add) in the classroom: the ‘on’, the ‘with’, and the ‘about’. Great emphasis is in fact devoted to the teaching of Japanese language and of more general traits of Japanese society and history using popular culture, not as a bait and switch but as an unavoidable area to consider if we want to learn about a country, its people, and their national culture.

#### [A summary description of the Table of Contents.](#)

The introduction (Shamoon and McMorran) explains the book and presents some core considerations on the academic pedagogy of Jpc, crucially useful for any teacher in the field.

Chapter 1 (McLaren and Spies) is titled ‘Risk and Potential: Establishing Critical Pedagogy in Japanese Popular Culture Courses’ and is a key to understand the different ways in which Jpc can be thought of before being taught. The authors list five ‘paradigmatic approaches’ that they call *pop to prop*, *proper prop*, *pop as propaganda*, *poco pop*, and *pop to prep*. This typology is very useful for teachers or potential teachers as well as for scholars at large. However, it also repeats a frequent conceptual and lexical ambiguity between *popular* and *pop*, whereas the latter is a wide subset of the former, but they are definitely not synonyms. This ambiguity returns in the book regularly and I would say it is not a bias of *this* book but a conceptual flaw of much, multidisciplinary scholarship (not only in English) on popular culture. That said, this first chapter is a precious contribution to orient any scholar in framing Jpc.

Chapter 2 (Armour and Iida) is titled ‘Talking Japanese Popular Culture at an Australian University’. It is a beautiful case study that holds a more general validity, in that it can be applied to courses on any topic in the humanities and still, it is highly insightful on the peculiarities of teaching Jpc to non-Japanese students. Among the most useful elements,

there is the set of reflections on how Jpc influences non-Japanese observers to form representations of Japan.

Chapter 3 (Wagner) is titled 'Teaching Popular Culture through Research-Oriented Learning at a German University'. I looked at this specific chapter, personally, with particular consideration and curiosity for two reasons: because it is the only European example in the book and because the initiative that Wagner recounts about her didactic work (2007-13) at Goethe University in Frankfurt included invited lectures by external scholars, and I happened to be one of those scholars who gave a lecture there, in June 2009. The 'Cool Japan working group' established at that university saw the active participation of teachers and students, and consisted of many classic and less conventional activities, informed by a critical and interactive teaching method, typical enough of German approaches to humanities. The initiative ideally culminated in a student trip to Japan in 2010. It consisted of official meetings with local authorities and scholars in important universities, visits to some key sites such as big comics publishers and video game companies, and the writing of individual and group reports, as well as more informal but highly useful visits to core places of Jpc, namely in Tokyo and Kyoto.

Chapter 4 (Sugawa-Shimada) is titled 'Contested Classrooms: Reconstructions of "Japaneseness" through Anime'. It opens the second part of the book and is a particularly revealing essay because it is about a Japanese professor teaching on Jpc in a Japanese university to Japanese and non-Japanese students, using both the English and Japanese languages. The author explains her experience about a daily reality of Japanese Studies departments around the world these days: the main motivation of many students who pick courses on/with Jpc is their previous and current engagement with specific forms of Jpc such as manga, anime, or subcultural trends linked to Japan's youth cultures at large. From the relative familiarity with Jpc, a diversified range of ideas about 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness' stem in the minds of young students, and these ideas largely vary among *Japanese* and *non-Japanese* students. Here steps in the concept of 'contesting class' introduced by Sugawa-Shimada, who illustrates how notions of what is supposed to be 'Japanese' in Jpc may be in mutual contrast not only between Japanese and foreign students but also within the subgroups of Japanese students and non-Japanese students. The experience of teaching to multinational student groups, however, is to be assessed (as the author did) positively, in that it constitutes a rough portrait of the variability of Jpc's impact on the ideas about

Japanese culture and society, and can constitute a solid base upon which to conduct educational discourses on stereotypes, prejudice, and misconceptions.

Chapter 5 (Bardsley) is titled ‘Teaching Fashion as Japanese Popular Culture’. It is perhaps the most explicit essay on how an entire course on Jpc is built and carried out: Bardsley explains the features and technicalities of her course on Japanese fashion, opening her chapter with a thorough discussion on the conceptual aspects of her course’s topic. In this sense, this chapter can be used as a very solid paradigm on how to lay out a course for today’s students; and it also constitutes the tale of an actual experience, in that Bardsley explains the reactions of her students to the classroom activities. The essay is, besides, a very pleasant reading per se, because it illustrates elements of Japanese clothing and fashion that are not the daily bread of most scholars of Jpc (this reviewer included). Notwithstanding the absolutely interesting facets of Japanese fashion related to the negotiations of gender through (or in spite of) clothes.

The book’s third part starts with Chapter 6 (King), titled ‘Confessions of an Anime and Manga Ignoramus: Approaches to Japanese Contemporary Popular Culture for the K-12 Classroom’. While the chapter does not offer particular insight on Jpc — as the author candidly declares — it gives a very useful and technical description and explanation of some internal mechanisms of academic pedagogy and didactics in the humanities. King is a scholar of Japanese modern and contemporary art, hence her courses involving Jpc have the broader aim to introduce arts to students, at times also through popular culture (and, by extension, popular arts). The key case she uses to illustrate her teaching is a discourse on Takashi Murakami and the problematic threshold between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art, in general and in Japan especially. In Murakami’s art works are (not so) hidden many critical aspects of past and current Japanese history and society, and King explains how she handled them for/with her students. Particularly interesting and cogent is the section on cultural appropriation/’appreciation’, with reference to the famous/notorious music video-clip *Unconditionally* by US pop-star Katy Perry. The discussion opens the floor in the classroom to lively and educational debates on sensible topics such as Orientalism, ‘white privilege’, stereotypes, exoticism, and other related themes.

Chapter 7 (Shamoon) is titled ‘Co-Teaching and Foreign Languages Across the Curriculum’. It recounts the important experiment of explaining Jpc through teaching Japanese language *and vice versa*, conducted with a fellow teacher. After contextualising and illustrating the practice of co-teaching and its pros and cons as established in the



field so far, Shamooin tells us how she engaged, at the University of Notre Dame (United States) in 2004-5, in co-teaching Jpc together with Japanese language teacher Noriko Hanabusa. The account is very precious in that it explains the delicate measure to take in order to build and conduct a functional, clear course and at the same time valorise the role of both teachers, without penalising the figure and academic authoritativeness of the language teacher as a mere support to the Jpc teacher. However, the chapter is not only this, and it delves into many more details and pedagogical considerations on both aspects of the course: critical thinking upon Jpc's contents and effective language learning in context, through examples and situations that are more lively than usual.

Chapter 8 (Yamada) is titled 'Using Japanese Television Media in Content-Based Language Learning'. Like all the chapters that focus on areas of Jpc going beyond the holy trinity of manga-anime-video games, this is a very interesting essay on how mainstream popular culture is used to teach Japanese. Television, in Japan like everywhere, is an extraordinarily precise looking glass of real language used by real people in real situations. The tv programs selected by the author, moreover, offer the chance to learn much about the representations and representational reinforcements of some aspects of Japanese society, such as differences in wording as class- or gender or psychological markers, and the usage of certain terms or phrases as mean of confirmation of national cultural identity that is underlined by these television shows. The validity of these materials, I will add, go far beyond the teaching and understanding of Jpc and Japanese language, and can be used in courses of sociology and mass communication.

Chapter 9 (Dorsey) is titled 'Performing Gender in the Prisonhouse of a (Foreign) Language'. It is an essay 'Blending Japanese language teaching and cultural studies', as its subtitle explains, and was for me a very intense reading, one that should interest any sociologist and any scholar in gender studies, besides researchers and teachers of Jpc and Japanese language. The chapter, however, looks to me a bit too engaged and thesis-driven in the topic from a heavily 'western' (read: US-American) standpoint. In other words: it bears an implicitly judgmental approach to the ways gender roles and conventions are reproduced in the Japanese language. In this sense, there is some exoticist, top-down perspective involved here that can hardly please scholars sharing instead more disenchanting and relativistic attitudes towards the symmetries and asymmetries of Japanese (or any) language in positioning and reinforcing societal norms.

The last chapter (Seaton) is titled ‘Pop(ular) Culture in the Japanese History Classroom’. The author is the one who, on my opinion, more clearly and explicitly posits the fundamental distinction to be made between *popular* and *pop* culture. Seaton is a historian of Japan and what he provides is a lively example on how to teach Japanese history using popular and pop cultures, putting them in a diachronic perspective and thus explaining and recontextualising not only the facts of Japan in the modern and contemporary ages, but also the transitions and evolutions of Japan’s pop/ular culture over time and space. The most significant contribution of this excellent chapter (among many others) is the notion, very useful to students and historians alike, that artifacts pertaining to popular and pop culture — manga, advertising, cinema, etc. — do bear a historical value and documental validity as objects of analysis that can tell us much on the era and the people such items come from. What is additionally interesting is that Seaton does not limit the materials of his classes to *Japanese* artifacts, historical pictures, and comics dealing with historical topics — magnificent in this sense his analysis of a wartime picture of uncertain origin and the political manga books by Yoshinori Kobayashi — but also includes cultural products made abroad and representing, in various ways, ‘Japan’.

The factor I highlighted in the review’s opening (that the book implicitly presents itself an US-American production, despite being composed of chapters written by scholars from different countries) makes the collection highly interesting both in positive and, if you will, somewhat in negative. I will argument this perception of mine in three short, conclusive remarks.

The first remark that came to my mind after having read the book is that, although some of the approaches proposed may give the feeling that they could be applicable to classrooms and universities located in English-speaking countries only, the general issues explained and the methodologies suggested can hold a more general validity.

The second remark is that it appears to me that the teachers/contributors are, anyway and in partial contrast with the above observation, mainly speaking to an audience of fellow scholars who teach in the English language, no matter what country they are working in. This may be read as a limit, if we see a book in English as necessarily, inexorably in a ‘globalist’ perspective; however, what should be underlined and respected about this preference is — as far as this reviewer sees it, at least — that the editors apparently chose a specific audience for their book that is not, vaguely, anybody

teaching Jpc but, more cogently, either Anglophone scholars teaching in English or, anyway, non-Japanese teachers delivering mainly to a 'foreign' (that is, here, a non-Japanese) studentship. I believe this notion holds its validity also when pointing our attention to the chapters written by Japanese contributors and/or by teachers working in Japanese universities, because today many courses on Jpc offered in Japan see a growing participation of students from overseas.

The third remark is that the references of almost all the contributors oscillate between sources in Japanese and sources in English, bypassing or ignoring the many and necessary existing sources in other languages (or even those originally written in other languages but also available in an English translation). The only exception, from a summary check, seems to be Cosima Wagner's chapter, which also presents a couple of sources in German, given the author's nationality. Saying it more explicitly: the linguistic 'monism' of the book, as that of the majority of the books mainly or exclusively composed by English native speakers, entails what to this European reviewer appears as a disarming and self-isolating cultural localism. Which, in the context of Area Studies, is only mitigated by the presence of sources in the studied Area's idiom— Japanese, of course, in our case. I wonder: is it really so hard to expand one's bibliography to non-Anglophone, non-Japanese sources?

Finally, two sharp notes on the editorial choices. These are meant as suggestions not only for the future publishing endeavours of this book's authors and for scholars at large, but also and especially for academic publishers and for any wannabe or professional editor.

1. The book places endnotes at the end of each chapter. After the endnotes, the chapters also present their own bibliography. The problem is that, a few discursive notes aside, all endnotes have the mere function of hosting long and detailed bibliographic references. This generates a nonsensical and (to me, at least) irritating duplication of the very same information in every single chapter: endnotes and bibliography redundantly repeat exactly the same data. I wonder how this editorial absurdity was even possible. If the editorial norms chosen by the publisher had been more rational and elegant, the book would have been about 50 pages shorter and therefore a few cents or dollars cheaper. Without mentioning, easier to read.

2. The logotype of the Japan Foundation is not displayed in the frontcover, or the backcover, or in the book's colophon. Given that this institution supported the initiative the book stemmed from, this reviewer would have spontaneously included the logotype in the book instead of merely (however graciously) mentioning the conference funder in the Acknowledgments — even if, as it seems the case, the JF took no part in the funding of the book itself. But a direct display of the logo of an institution that anyway played a certain role in the overall endeavour, usually, implicitly favours in the future new successful outcomes from the same applicant...

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Marco PELLITTERI** is a media sociologist. He teaches in the School of Journalism and Communication of Shanghai International Studies University. He has published extensively on histories and theories of Japanese pop cultures and soft power, television, video games, animation, and comics. Among his publications, the books *Mazinga Nostalgia* (1999, 4th ed. 2018, 2 vols) and *The Dragon and The Dazzle* (2008, Eng. ed. 2010).