

**Reality, Identity, Truth.  
Images of Japan in American Literature  
Before, During, and After World War II**

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## Introduction

The search for meaning seems to be the guiding principle in every human being's existence. Even the nihilists find a common motive in their negation of meaning. A purpose in life appears as a fundamental prerequisite for the ability to accept one's being of this world. There are infinite approaches to create meaning – as many as there were, are now and will be in future, people on this planet. Each approach relies on a certain understanding of "reality" and "truth". The blueprint which every one of us assumes as the roadmap for his or her actions is grounded in this understanding. Some – like the pragmatists – conclude that there is no such thing as the ultimate truth. They argue that truth is a construct based on beliefs, majority agreement and reference to a model way of life. Truth for them is a consensus man voluntarily subscribes to in order to find his place in a national, or, more likely, social community. Then there are the realists who are firm in their conviction that the law of nature defines truth. They "believe" in an external objectivity which is contrasted to an internal, sometimes fact with fiction confusing subjectivity. In their view of the world what corresponds with visible nature is true. The pragmatist (and the sceptic and the deconstructivist) would surely ask: who has the authority to interpret nature's doings and appearances? What if two people see/describe the same natural phenomenon in two different, even contradictory ways? Who is the omnipotent judge? The religious would answer that God is the only judge, explaining away the discrepancies of life with the inexplicable, with "God's mysterious ways". They, however, have not been able to answer why there are different Gods in different religions proclaiming different "realities" in any other way than saying that these "false-believers" (or heathen) have not yet seen The Light. Religious communities have defined their figues of authority, who because of their enlightened status act as the spokesmen (and male they almost exclusively are) of "truth". The Roman Catholics have the Pope, who by definition is infallible (even though he his not selected by God but voted into his position by majority decision). The Muslims have the Imam, who claims to be the only just and right interpreter of Allah's word. Each religion naturally assumes its superiority over other, "unenlightened" or "misguided" beliefs, and some are more militant than

others in driving home that point. The gods of the age of Enlightenment were intellect and reason, good and bad were accordingly defined by rational thinking, which in this worldview *must* lead to the (only possible) right decision. Yet, all of them – the religious and the rationalists – are believers. They believe in knowledge acquired by facts or divine guidance, in reality presented by science or spirituality. In each case they perceive the world in accordance with a pre-set frame of mind. They can even come to the conclusion that what see, feel and hear cannot be right because it does not correspond with what they believe/have been taught to be true. Individual identity is grounded in these beliefs. The religious believer is part of a community that has accepted a certain conduct as the means to achieve the ultimate goal: salvation and Paradise (in this world or after death). The rational thinker accepts his place in a community in which proper behaviour is deduced from a conviction that everything has a (natural) meaning/purpose so that his role in life is just as predetermined. The third group, the "non-believers" who do not believe in either divine or scientific truth, seem to watch the ongoing battle between the first two with a "knowing" smile. They are firm that the world and being in general are mere illusions. They are believers too, of course, in that they believe in the rule of opinion as opposed to knowledge, in appearance as opposed to reality, in reality constructs as opposed to truth.

My thesis is meant to demonstrate the existence of each these views of life in the first place. There are those who "believe", those who "know", and there is ample reason to question the grounds for these hard to shatter convictions. This study then investigates human perception. My argument is that perception is the foundation on which identities and realities are created. The following discussion rests on my conviction that the assumption that there is one truth and one objectivity, which reside above everything, may be the necessary mortar for any society but is nevertheless an illusion. In his collection of essays on the human brain *Into the Silent Land* Paul Broks recounts an incident from the Italian writer Italo Calvino's novel *Mr. Palomar*. Palomar tries to capture the rays of the setting sun which are reflected on the surface of the sea and seem to divide the world with a "sword" of dazzling light.

"Mr Palomar understands that nothing he sees exists in nature.  
Nature is a bundle of abstractions – particles in the fields of force.

The sun, the sea, the sword and the sailboards are inside his head.  
He floats among phantoms."<sup>1</sup>

Broks concludes that there is "objective reality" and Palomar's "private universe" and a little further on states that "a human being is a story-telling machine. The self is a story."<sup>2</sup> Who then is the judge? Who has the authority to say what is real and what is private fiction, if all human beings are story-telling machines?

To illustrate my argument I selected various examples for American literature which reflect on the image of Japan. Part 1, Chapter 1 takes a look at the literary canon on the island country and what has come to be known as "nihonjinron", an officially sanctioned self-awareness of Japan. Part 1, Chapter 2 examines social reality constructs, which are what in my view we all contribute to for the sake of finding our place in the world.

Part 2 of this work discusses texts from the period of time between the opening of Japan in the 1850s to World War II. The relationship between the United States and Japan was a "troubled encounter"<sup>3</sup> at several stages in world history, but there are many positive accounts of the foreign culture and people. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw what Benfey calls "The Great Wave"<sup>4</sup> of American travelers who sought exotict adventure and spiritual renewal far away from home. Many of these sojourners were so enchanted with Japan they bought shiploads of art and furniture to take back home to create an oasis of simplicity and peace for themselves. This abruptly ended with the rise of new nationalism in Japan and the developments that led to the Pacific War. Part 2, Chapter 2 takes a close look at how stereotypes are created and instrumentalized for the sake of a "common" goal. The authors I selected for this chapter prove that the "enemy" could be viewed very differently.

Part 3 focuses on the postwar years from the occupation of Japan to the Beat poets' fascination with Asian culture. Part 3, Chapter 1 may be the most vivid demonstration of the pull something as foreign to the United States' value system as Japan could have on Americans and how this is perceived as dangerous by

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<sup>1</sup> Broks, Paul: Into the Silent Land. Travels in Neuropsychology. New York, Grove Press, 2003, p.40

<sup>2</sup> Broks, p.41

<sup>3</sup> Neu, Charles E.: The Troubled Encounter. The United States and Japan. New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1975

<sup>4</sup> Benfey, Christopher: The Great Wave. Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics and the Opening of Japan. New York, Random House, 2004

some. Often used concepts such as "democracy" are looked at more closely here, and it becomes evident that the perception of the Other is crucial for the perception of the Self and the creation of identities. Part 3, Chapter 2 closes the circle I drew from the Transcendentalists to the Beats. There seems to be an attraction in the land of the rising sun which inspired writers from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Jack Kerouac. At the same time this points to an *Urerfahrung* which is shared by all men, an understanding of the essence of being which those who were disappointed by the spiritual development of the American soul could rediscover in Japan.

Part 1:

The Self and the Other



*Freut euch des wahren Scheins  
Euch des ernsten Spieles:  
Kein Lebendiges ist Eins  
Immer ist's ein Vieles.*

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Epirrhema*

## Part 1, Chapter 1

### The Nihonjinron

#### Institutionalized Self-Awareness in Japan

In his textbook for history classes at Penn State University, Gregory Smits introduces the subject to his students by stating:

"It would be unusual to hear the expression 'the Americans' come up regularly in a course on the history or culture of the United States. Even without formal study, most residents of the United States are well aware of the diverse groups of people and cultures residing within that country's present-day boundaries. [...] But why, in our manner of speaking, should we deny Japan its diversity, its multiple points of views, its political, economic, social, and intellectual disputes? Why might someone feel uneasy about saying 'the Americans' but readily talk of 'the Japanese'?"<sup>5</sup>

By now, a growing number of scholars have challenged the notion of a national Japanese culture, both in America and in Japan<sup>6</sup>. But there is a still lively tradition of what is called *nihonjinron*<sup>7</sup>, that is the "discourse on the Japanese". *Nihonjinron* aims at determining "Japaneseness", but rather than relying on scientific evaluation of empirical data or field study, this faculty grounds its "observations" in an arbitrary amalgam of materials:

"The *nihonjinron*, in their attempt to define the specificity of Japanese identity, range over the whole complex of Japanese historical culture, choosing their illustrative material from classical records, folklore materials, historical chronicles, contemporary news, dictionaries of

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<sup>5</sup> Smits, Gregory: "Topics in Japanese Cultural History", Online textbook for HIST 172 at Penn State University, <http://www3.la.psu.edu/textbooks/172/contents.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Ref. to the works of Befu, Dale, Kawamura, Miller, Morris-Suzuki, Mouer & Sugimoto, Yoshino, and others, some of which are quoted in this study.

<sup>7</sup> The genre of the discourse on Japanese identity is also referred to *nihon bunkanron*, *nihon shakairon* and *nihonron*. It is difficult to date the first use of *nihonjinron*, however, for my discussion I found it more important to show the dependency of this genre on Japanese nationalism. I will therefore use the term *nihonjinron* in the sense that it describes an understanding of a unique and in many cases superior Japanese culture.

Japanese usage etc. They include highly abstruse discussions of oriental thought and ephemeral journalism on characteristic knacks of behaviour in everyday life."<sup>8</sup>

*Nihonjinron* is about the alleged uniqueness of the Japanese people and their culture, a uniqueness which *per definitionem* excludes the possibility of non-Japanese onlookers to achieve a complete understanding of its essence, values and mechanisms. The assumption of uniqueness is supported by a massive flow of Japanese and, remarkably, also a large amount of Western literature<sup>9</sup> dating back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with both genres drawing examples from whatever serves to sustain the respective theories. In his study "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", Harumi Befu calls *nihonjinron* "a minor national pastime"<sup>10</sup>, and one could add: also an international one. According to his research, between 1945 and 1990 more than 700 titles were published on this popular topic<sup>11</sup>.

We will go into detail about the motives behind the creation and continuous fostering of this particular type of cultural identity later. First I would like to give a brief overview of the historical context of *nihonjinron* as a verbal expression of Japanese nationalism.

### **The Historical Context of *nihonjinron***

In 1888, a group of Japanese intellectuals known as the *Seikyôsha* founded "Nihonjin" (The Japanese), a journal,

"whose express purpose was the 'preservation of the national essence' ... The phrase became popular among writers of the day, and there was much debate over the nature of the national essence that should be preserved."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dale, Peter N.: *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. New York, 1986. Introduction"

<sup>9</sup> This is remarkable because by confirming that only "the Japanese" can authoritatively speak about their culture these *gaijin* (foreign) authors deny themselves the very legitimization to make valid statements about Japaneseness.

<sup>10</sup> Befu, Harumi: "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*". in: Befu, H. (ed.): *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia*. Berkeley, CA, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993, p.107

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.109

<sup>12</sup> Pyle, Kenneth B.: "Meiji Conservatism". in: Jansen, M.B. (ed.): *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Vol. 5 *The Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, 1989, p.692

Japan had just experienced a crucial shift in its historical development with the reopening of the country after two hundred years of almost<sup>13</sup> complete isolation (*sakoku*) from external influences, a process known as the "Meiji Restoration" (1868). Before this, there had been occasional contacts with China, which still strongly served as a model according to or against which Japan had been shaping itself, and information about the outside world had sifted through by accounts of Dutch tradesmen at Nagasaki port. However, within these two hundred hundred years Japan had been mostly left alone to develop its own culture and to refine its traditional values within a feudal system. Confronted with the sudden challenge of Western democratic principles, technology and thought, and with the Western way of social conduct, which many Japanese saw as superior, the national identity seemed to be at stake. In order to survive in the new world order, Japan had to both adopt the concepts of "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*), and to differentiate itself as a nation by creating a comprehensive cultural entity.

"Although Japan was never a 'closed country' in the sense that *sakoku* literally implies, it did awaken from two hundred years of substantial 'national isolation' in the last half of the nineteenth century to devote its full energy toward the realization of one goal – the establishment of a modern nation-state."<sup>14</sup>

The urge to make Japan a modern nation-state was widely felt by representatives of political conservatism and intellectual liberals alike. Ôkubo Toshimichi (1830-78), one of the political leaders of the pre-Meiji era, stated that

"at present all the countries in the world are directing all their efforts toward propagating teachings of 'civilization and enlightenment', and they lack for nothing. Hence we must imitate them in these respects."<sup>15</sup>

### **Japan's Need to Integrate**

Why was the need to integrate into the "family" of nations felt so strongly? Why was there so little debate about this necessity but extensive discourse on how it

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<sup>13</sup> In spite of *nihonjinron's* repeated emphasis on the homogeneity and purity of the Japanese race, there had indeed been contacts not only with its former model China but also with the West in the form of Dutch tradespeople.

<sup>14</sup> Hirakawa, Sukehiro: "Japan's Turn to the West". in: Jansen: Cambridge History of Japan, vol. 5, 1989, p.432

<sup>15</sup> Ôkubo, Toshimichi: "*Seifu no teisai ni kansuru kengensho*". as quoted in: Hirakawa: "Japan's Turn to the West", p.433

could be achieved? Before the *Meiji* Restoration embraced all aspects of Japanese living, during the *Tempo* Era (1830-1844), the country had been shaken by domestic crisis<sup>16</sup>. The economical situation was difficult, there had been many crop failures between 1824 and 1832, which brought hunger and despair to the country. In 1833 the north of Japan suffered from famine, and in 1836 the whole country was affected. This brought about currents of resistance and criticism among the population against a political system unable to achieve improvement, and against a value system which demanded the severest sacrifices from those who were already suffering. Beginning in 1814, several religious movements with messianic tendencies (today known as the *Shintô* sects) started to form in the peasantry, most of them focusing on faith-healing and worldly happiness. At the same time, although one could not yet speak of effective open protest, criticism on all areas of society was voiced by the intellectuals, who in retrospective can be regarded as the forerunners of the restoration. However, these were the warning voices of individuals who were not able to gain wider support within the population, and this did not result in political organizations. There was violence in the towns and in the country, indicating a strong dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, but again no political upheaval or revolutionary tendencies evolved from this. The *bakufu*<sup>17</sup> was well aware of this unrest and sought change for the better through various reforms, but they were not successful in fighting the problems with traditional means. Among the *samurai*<sup>18</sup> desperation and the will to take over grew, and the *bakufu's* apparent inability and helplessness fostered anger and further unrest. Also the larger *han*<sup>19</sup> became active in initiating change and eventually played an important role in Japan's modernization. This serves to illustrate that before its reopening Japan was in no way a passive, ailing state. Actually, domestic difficulties were recognized as such and improvement was sought. The challenge of the approaching West was clearly not underestimated, there was a strong will to reform the country and to resist the overpowering influences from outside. In 1844, Japan was still decentralized, with each *daimyô* looking after his *han's* political and economical needs, but unifying tendencies were already underway.

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<sup>16</sup> The following historical outline is indebted to John W. Hall's Das Japanische Kaiserreich. Frankfurt, 1987. pp.229ff

<sup>17</sup> *Bakufu* = the Shogunate government, which during the period of *sakoku* (isolation) was led by the powerful *Tokugawa* family. The *Tokugawa* period dated from 1600 to 1868.

<sup>18</sup> *Samurai* = the warrior class, who after the *bakufu* enjoyed the highest social status in feudal Japan. The feudal system included four "casts": the *samurai*, the peasants, the workers and the merchants. This *bakufu* presided over this system, at the bottom of which were the *eta* (outcasts).

During the next century almost all aspects of Japanese life, from its governmental and social structure to its lifestyle were to undergo dramatic changes as a result of the challenge from the West. Japan's encounter with the West became a turning point in its history, however, it cannot be said that Japan simply allowed the foreign powers to overwhelm its culture in every respect. Buruma states that at the time of the forced opening of their country,

"... the Japanese elite knew more about America than Americans knew about Japan. Indeed, despite their relative isolation, the Japanese knew more about the West than most other Asian countries did, including the Chinese. The extent of their knowledge of American and British politics, of Western science, medicine, history, and geography, was truly remarkable."<sup>20</sup>

The West forcefully made its way into Japan's ports and trade, sent missionaries propagating new values, implemented Western law, and initiated a revision of the Japanese constitution after Western models. Still, it was out of its own accord that Japan after 1853 developed into a modern state, which bore the characteristics of an advanced society. Western ideas "helped to emancipate Japan from the Chinese cultural orbit".<sup>21</sup> Intellectuals<sup>22</sup> and government went hand in hand in this. Hashimoto Sanai (1831-1859) published his views in one of the magazines of the time stating that Japan should

"adopt mechanical devices and techniques from the West but retain the benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and filial piety of Japan."<sup>23</sup>

"Yokoi Shōnan (1809-1869) agreed and urged his countrymen to 'make manifest the Way of Yao, Shun, and Confucius and to obtain a thorough knowledge of mechanical techniques from the West.' Sakuma Shōzan also spoke of 'Eastern morality and Western techniques.' The future Meiji government accepted these goals under the slogan 'Adopt what is best in the culture of Europe to compensate for shortcomings in that of Japan.'"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Han* = the provincial governments of feudal Japan, which were under the reign of the *daimyō*, the feudal lords, who also belonged to the *samurai* class.

<sup>20</sup> Buruma, Ian: Inventing Japan. 1853-1964. Random House, New York, 2003, p.14

<sup>21</sup> Buruma, p.22

<sup>22</sup> Here it should be noted that many of the intellectuals of the *Meiji* period came from the former *samurai* class, whose members had always enjoyed a high level of education and who, in times when martial arts were cultivated as a form of expression rather than for the battlefield, had directed their attention to intellectual discourse.

<sup>23</sup> Hashimoto, Sanai: "Letter to Murata Ujihisa" as quoted in: Hirakawa: "Japan's Turn to the West", p.444

<sup>24</sup> Hirakawa: "Japan's Turn to the West", p.444

Thus the credo was clear: no one doubted that Japan had to adopt or even imitate certain techniques from the West with regards to organization of the state and scientific achievements. However, there were almost as many voices calling for a reinforcement of traditional, "uniquely" Japanese, customs and values in order to retain the national identity and pride. Sakuma's saying "*tôyô dôtoku seiyô geijitsu*" (Eastern ethics, Western technique) was to become a famous phrase for the following generations of intellectuals, politicians and economists both from Japan and abroad. In the course of this study, I will take a look at those who propagated unconditioned "capitulation" to Western technology and thought by giving up everything recognized as Japanese.

What had been true for China also applied to Japan: the modernization process was closely connected to a strong political resistance against the old rule. But remarkably, this moment of "crisis", that is the sudden change from the traditional system to a modern state after two hundred years of feudal rule, did not tear the country apart. Japan was able to adjust to and maintain its national entity at the same time. There was no political upheaval which resulted in revolution. The change was led by the old powers, the *daimyô* and *samurai*, and was based on strict compliance with traditional values of loyalty.

The arrival of Commodore Perry's "black ships" in 1853 did not take Japan's *bakufu* by surprise, because information about the intentions of the American government had already been accessible through the Dutch. In addition to this, some Japanese political and intellectuals had already spent time abroad, and now the wish to explore what was perceived as the birthplace of modern civilization and scientific progress became even stronger.

"One of the striking phenomena of mid-nineteenth century Japan is the strong desire of educated Japanese to see the outside world. With an eighty-year history of Dutch studies behind them, many Japanese grew dissatisfied with relying solely on books to learn about the West. Presented with the evidence of Perry's 'Black Ships' that Japan had fallen behind during its two-century absence from the stage of world history, many young men resolved to meet the challenge posed by technological superiority of Western civilization by investigating Western civilization at its source."<sup>25</sup>

The political elite of Japan was quite aware that this time there was no way to maintain the country's isolation. The coming of the West was regarded as a

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<sup>25</sup> Hirakawa: "Japan's Turn to the West", p.448

threat to national security and as an impulse for reform at the same time. Japan's fear of conquest united the country after its two hundred years of separating political rivalries among the different *han*.

### **Modernizing Japan: *Bunmei kaika* and New Conservatism**

The *Meiji* Restoration brought about two major schools of thought, which had conflicting ideas about Japan's future as a modern nation-state. The *bunmei kaika* movement welcomed Western influence in all areas of public and private life. Its followers were eager to do away with traditional Japanese values, because these were regarded as the stumbling blocks for progress in Japan.

"The *bunmei kaika* brought a wholesale delivery of the entire Western liberal tradition. The Enlightenment writers associated with the society known as the *Meirokeisha* – Fukuzawa, Nishi, Tsuda, Mori, Kanda, Katô<sup>26</sup>, and others – were among the most self-conscious initial advocates of the cultural revolution that swept over Japanese society in early *Meiji*. [...] in the 1880s a new generation of writers, of whom Tokutomi Sohō<sup>27</sup> was the most representative, sought to press the *bunmei kaika* ideals to their ultimate conclusion by demanding the Westernization of every aspect of Japanese society."<sup>28</sup>

Thereby, every aspect of Japan's traditional belief system, its traditional social and political organization was questioned. Values like the Japanese *ie*<sup>29</sup> with its emphasis on filial piety, women's unconditioned subordination, and ancestral rule did not go along with Western democratic principles of equality, individual freedom and liberation from feudal hierarchies. The *bunmei kaika* representatives called for a complete severance of the ties which had, in the eyes of their opponents, provided two hundred years of relative stability in a country that had experienced constant turmoil before Tokugawa. This fostered fear among many Japanese and gave ammunition to the nationalist movement. The unequal treaties<sup>30</sup>, which the West had imposed on Japan, further provided the conservatives with reason to propagate a re-establishment of the traditional value system.

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<sup>26</sup> Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), Tsuda Sôkichi (1873-1961), Mori Ôgai (1862-1922), Kanda Kôhei (1828-1898), Katô Hiroyuki (1836-1916)

<sup>27</sup> Tokutomi Sohô (1863-1957)

<sup>28</sup> Pyle: "Meiji Conservatism", p.676

<sup>29</sup> *ie* = family. The concept of *ie* stands for the Japanese family system of mutual cooperation and obligation and will be explained in detail later.

One of the more prominent voices to articulate this view after the restoration had implemented some of the new democratic values, was Motoda Eifu (1863-1957), who had been a tutor and personal advisor to the Meiji Emperor. In 1879, Motoda wrote in "The Great Principles of Education" (*Kyogaku taishi*) about the damage Western ethics were inflicting on Japanese education and on the country's "most basic institution – the Japanese family system"<sup>31</sup>. Motoda stated that this could only be helped if the education system and instructions to the young should be

"founded upon the Imperial ancestral precepts, benevolence, duty, loyalty, and filial piety, and Confucius were made the cornerstone of our teaching and ethics."<sup>32</sup>

The Principles of Education were "issued as an imperial rescript", which "put the Emperor's prestige behind the preservation of Japan's 'customary ways' as part of every Japanese child's schooling"<sup>33</sup>. This was meant to give the views of Eifu and his conservative contemporaries the approval and authority of the Japanese *tenno*<sup>34</sup>, who until the country's capitulation in 1945 was widely accepted as the "divine father" of the nation<sup>35</sup>. From the 1880s, a new conservatism was underway in Japan. Where the *bunmei kaika* had left no room for a Japanese cultural identity, the re-awakening of *nihon dōtoku ron* (discourse on Japanese morality) made way for a new wave of a national(istic) self-definition and thus preceded the *nihonjinron* approach.

### ***Kokugaku* and Cultural Nationalism**

To understand *Meiji* Conservatism one has to take a look at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the beginning of *sakoku*, Japan's self-sought isolation. At that time China was the only country Japan was officially allowed to maintain contact with, and China had been Japan's most important model during the latter's history. Chinese characters (*kanji*) had been adopted to provide Japan with a sophisticated writing system. Chinese thought was the pillar of Japanese philosophy, religion, science and government. Chinese confucianism dominated the Tokugawa scholarly world and was the governing principle for all aspects of

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed description of the unequal treaties, which granted extraterritorial rights to Westerners in Japa, ref. to Pyle, p.688-690

<sup>31</sup> Pyle: "Meiji Conservatism", p.678

<sup>32</sup> Motoda, Eifu: "*Kyōgaku taishi*", as quoted in Pyle, p 682

<sup>33</sup> Pyle "Meiji Conservatism", p.682

<sup>34</sup> *Tennō* = the Japanese Emperor. The Japanese ideograph (*kanji*) for this term implies that the emperor is of heavenly/divine descent.



Japanese life. The newly established "ancient learning", which later became *kokugaku* (Japanese learning), repudiated the overpowering Chinese influence and sought a way to go back to the "true Japanese heart".

"Japanese learning (*kokugaku*) held that the pristine 'true Japanese heart' could be discovered only by rejecting the 'spirit of China' that had come to muddy it in later ages and this could best be done through studying the *Kojiki*<sup>36</sup>, the *Manyōshū*<sup>37</sup>, and other ancient Japanese classics."<sup>38</sup>

The spirit of going back to the nation's roots in order to re-instate its identity against Westernization was the driving power of *Meiji* conservatism and the ensuing nationalist movement. To the new nationalists the "essence of Japan" had been "muddied" by the country's turn to the West. While this group welcomed technological progress as a means to help Japan become a modern nation-state, it fiercely rejected what had become fashionable, i.e. the uncritical imitation of everything that bore the stamp "made in the West". The crucial question was: How could Japan meet the Western challenge and the demands of "civilization and enlightenment", maintain its own "unique" character *and* make way for social progress – all at the same time?

"Japanese identity is the anti-image of foreignness and, as such, can only be affirmed by formulating the images of the Other; namely, the West (or in a previous age, China). In general terms, ethnicity may be understood, to a certain extent, as the symbolic boundary process of organising significant differences between 'us' and 'them'. [...] China and the West have constituted the two 'significant others' from which the Japanese have borrowed models and against which they have affirmed their identity."<sup>39</sup>

This is to say that, once Japan accepts China or the West as the model it has to live up to, then the urge to define its own civilization by a set of distinctive

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of this see Part 2, Chapter 2, "The Japanese Emperor".

<sup>36</sup> *Kojiki*, the "account of ancient incidents", dates back to 712 and records the creation of Japan, the birth of the gods, their genealogy and deeds, the life of the first god-sent Emperor Jimmu-*tennō* and his successors. The *kojiki* ends with Suiko-*tennō*'s reign in 628. Before *kokugaku* the *kojiki* had remained mainly unnoticed.

<sup>37</sup> *Manyōshū*, the "collection of ten thousand sheets", dates back to the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century and is the oldest and most concise collection of Japanese poetry. The *manyōshū* consists of about twenty volumes and records some 4500 poems in traditional syllabic style.

<sup>38</sup> Hirakawa: "Japan's Turn to the West", p.445

The idea of a pure "Japanese heart" would become a source of awe for many Westerners who were intrigued by ancient Japanese cultures, such as Lafcadio Hearn and Kenneth Rexroth, who will both be discussed later in this study.

<sup>39</sup> Yoshino, Kosaku: *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*. London, New York, 1992, p.11

features becomes an existential task, which serves to justify the country's divergence from the role model. In other words, if a country totally imitated the Other in all aspects of life from the material to the spritual, what would be left to legitimate its independence?

In 1891, Miyake Setsurei, the founder of *Nihonjin*, published an essay under the title "*Shinzenbi nihonjin*" (The Japanese: truth, goodness, and beauty). In his view Japan could only contribute to world civilization by acknowledging its own different environment, experience and resulting value system. Although the West seemed to be the highest form of civilization in terms of scientific and political achievements at that time, being Japanese called for more than mere adherence to new rules. Cultural nationalism therefore became legitimate because it emphasized the country's specific identity and defined its role in the family of nations.

"Cultural nationalism was not only a matter of self-defense, ..., it was also a contribution to the progress of man. In his preface, Miyake wrote: 'To exert oneself on behalf of one's country is to work on behalf of the world. Promoting the special nature of a people contributes to the evolution of mankind. Defense of the homeland and love of mankind are not at all contradictory.' It was a brilliant argument designed to appeal to the young by persuading them that preserving Japanese cultural values was not a reactionary stand against progress but was, rather, a contribution to the development of civilization in the world."<sup>40</sup>

Cultural nationalism stems from a country's felt fundamental want of self-esteem. This want is felt strongest in times of "crisis", turning points in the country's historical development, political or economic difficulties, during conflicts with other nations (including war), and when confronted with recurring waves of external influences.

"Cultural nationalism aims to regenerate the national community by creating, preserving or strenghtening a people's cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking, inadequate or threatened. The cultural nationalist regards the nation as the product of its unique attributes. In short, cultural nationalism is concerned with the distinctiveness of the cultural community as the essence of a nation."<sup>41</sup>

After the *Meiji* Restoration, a group of Japanese including intellectuals, opinion makers and politicians believed that the national community was falling apart.

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<sup>40</sup> Pyle: "Meiji Conservatism, p.693

The "unequal treaties" which had been imposed upon Japan since its opening, granted preferable treatment to Westerners in Japan and nurtured resentment among the conservatives. They were no longer willing to accept the inferiority of their home country which the *bunmei kaika* liberals had formulated. The remaining years of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gave birth to the formation of a new movement, which found its voice in the *nihonjinron* canon of texts. Miyake's *Nihonjin* had been the foundation, and between the 1890s and the 1910s a massive flow of publications articulated the quest for a unique Japanese identity.

"Virtually every key axiom in the contemporary literature on Japanese identity could be tracked down to work done in the critical years of 1909-11. A sociological explanation of the ideology, as a reaction to the crisis of later Meiji, thus <presents> itself."<sup>42</sup>

### **What is *nihonjinron*?**

*Nihonjinron* can be understood as the ideological stance of Japanese cultural nationalism. Befu distinguishes between active and passive nationalism. In his terms active nationalism is "the intense identification of the patriot with the nation-state and the willingness of people to commit themselves to political action"<sup>43</sup>. *Nihonjinron* constitutes a form of passive nationalism in that it supplies the intellectual basis for nationalistic action, which is no less important or potentially dangerous.

We have seen that the coming of Western democratic principles and the occidental rule of *ratio* and *logos* questioned the traditional Japanese value system, which was influenced by Confucianism, Zen and Shintoism. Democratic principles contradicted the *ie* system of paternal reign, subordination of the other family members and the lowly social status of Japanese women. Western scientific achievements, guided by the laws of logic, posed a threat to the beliefs that negated the validity of objectivity and rational thought. Therefore, according to the nationalists the challenge Japan was facing was not just a matter of strange looking citizens from the Western hemisphere who invaded the small island with new technology and unfamiliar clothing. They saw the Japanese

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<sup>41</sup> Yoshino: Cultural Nationalism in Japan, p.1

<sup>42</sup> Dale, Peter N.: Myth of Japanese Uniqueness. "Introduction". For details on Japanese writers of the 1890s refer to: Pyle, "Meiji Conservatism", and Kato, Shuichi: Geschichte der japanischen Literatur. Bern, München, Wien, 1990, esp. chapter 9, "Die Meiji-Ära".

<sup>43</sup> Befu: "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", p.107

culture as a whole in jeopardy, and feared that the West was about to conquer, overtake and destroy what had been held true and precious for the last thousand years. But there was no way to keep these new influences out, some of which appeared to be quite useful after all. Therefore, an increasing number of Japanese reacted by demanding that the learning process should take place as quickly as possible so that the country could (re)gain a status of independence and equality within the global community.

"Hard as Japan tried to ward off the 'hairy barbarians', the guns on the black ships, symbolizing Western military might, proved too much for even the very best swords of Japan. [...] To come to terms with the military and technological gap experienced with the West, Japan entered a frenzied period of catch-up through borrowing and adaption of Western technology, institutions, and culture in an effort to make its military strength and its political, economic, educational, and other institutions comparable to those of the West."<sup>44</sup>

In an effort to solidify Japan's cultural identity the *nihonjinron* provided orientation through a prescriptive set of assumptions and beliefs. It became a moral code in compliance with which the "true" Japanese had to behave.

"... *Nihonjinron* is perceived by a wide range of the elite and adjacent classes as an agent of social control. [...] *Nihonjinron* writings are rather explicit and tell the Japanese ... who they *ought* to be and how they *ought* to behave."<sup>45</sup>

The crucial point here is that Japan's assumed uniqueness is repeatedly emphasized, which serves a) to justify the previously isolated country's very existence amidst the influx of new-found "truths" from the West, and b) to give back an unmistakably distinctive face to a nation that did its best to copy the West in every aspect.

I will now take a look at the key concepts of *nihonjinron* in general, before examining some examples from Japanese and American texts that have become a part of the canon on Japanese culture.

### **The "Myth" of Japanese Uniqueness**

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<sup>44</sup> Befu: "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", p.122

<sup>45</sup> Kowner, Rotem: "Deconstructing the Japanese National Discourse". in: Donahue, Ray T. (ed.): Exploring Japaneseness. Westport, CT, 2002, p. 178

As already indicated, *nihonjinron* encompasses a wide range of cultural topics in the broadest sense:

- From the cultural impact, which the Japanese climate and wet rice cultivation allegedly had on the formation of a hierarchical society, and the importance of corporate communities for the strength of the Japanese economy,
- to the "unique" psychological features of the Japanese people, which are said to lack self-awareness and individual identity, a trait which presumably results in social structures of mutual dependence and naturally sought harmony,
- to the Japanese language, which is seen as part and parcel of the country's culture, because it is said to be so unique and interwoven with the country's cultural history that it cannot be mastered or understood in its "true" essence by non-Japanese.

One of the widest known concepts of *nihonjinron* is the assumption of homogeneity and racial purity among the Japanese. The Japanese island is said to have developed into a closed cultural entity during its long history, with a phase of intensive refinement supposed for the period of *sakoku*. Although anthropological data speak of the contrary, *nihonjinron* uses the two hundred years of "complete" isolation from any external influences as the main basis for the projection of homogeneous development and purity of the "Japanese blood". Befu speaks of "perceived homogeneity" as a "cultural construction":

"... racial and ethnic homogeneity in Japan is not an objective fact, but instead a construct of those who are motivated to promote a certain cultural conception of Japan. [...] It assumes that regional origin, class, gender, and other variations within Japan are not important enough to violate the essential sameness throughout Japanese culture and all Japanese."<sup>46</sup>

Pluralism is consciously denied here because such a thing cannot exist for what is regarded as the true Japanese culture in need of preservation. As shown before, *nihonjinron* is not a descriptive but prescriptive model. Yet, the violation of empirical facts is not realized as such but is viewed as a necessary "sacrifice" for the sake of a holistic picture of Japanese culture.

Because homogeneity plays an important role in the construction of *nihonjinron* social reality, the "pure blood"-myth gains just as much weight. According to *nihonjinron* "a Japanese expresses the 'immutable' or 'natural' aspect of

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<sup>46</sup> Befu: "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", p. 114-115

Japanese identity through the imagined concept of 'Japanese blood'.<sup>47</sup> This means that if Japanese blood is the racial distinctive, cultural homogeneity becomes a crucial feature for this line of thought and leads to the second important conjecture of *nihonjinron*. Befu puts in it a simple equation: "Land = People = Culture = Language". The native, "pure-blooded" Japanese is seen as the only legitimate carrier of genuine national culture. The people of Japan are bounded by the same roots (blood), which make the unique Japanese cultural identity something every individual is born with. At the same time this excludes all non-Japanese from a full understanding of Japanese culture and language, with language regarded as one of the most important expressions of national uniqueness. The important point here is that by giving authority to understand and therefore to be able to judge Japanese behaviour to the native citizen only, *nihonjinron* pulls the ground away under everyone trying to criticize any aspect of Japanese custom. It is easy to see how this assumption could serve the goals of an aggressive, militaristic state whenever it finds itself in conflict with foreign nations.

### **Watsuji Tetsuro and the Rule of Climate**

In 1960, the Japanese Ministry of Education and the Japanese National Commission for Unesco encouraged the translation of a classic of the *nihonjinron* genre into English, Watsuji Tetsuro's *Fûdo*<sup>48</sup>. Watsuji, a renowned Japanese philosopher who had repeatedly travelled to Europe, herein collected his thoughts on the impact of climate on the Japanese national character and its distinctive otherness from what he conceived to be the European mentality. By studying the features of different weather zones Watsuji came to the conclusion that a people's history and climate constituted an inseparable unity and were the major determinants of the people's cultural identity.

"Climate, then, is the agent by which human life is objectivised, and it is here that man comprehends himself; there is self-discovery in climate. We discover ourselves in all manner of significances every day; it may be in a pleasant or a sad mood, but such feelings or tempers are to be regarded not merely as mental states but as our way of life. These, moreover, are not feelings that we are free to choose of ourselves, but are imposed on us as pre-determined states."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Yoshino: Cultural Nationalism in Japan, p.24

<sup>48</sup> Watsuji, Tetsuro: Climate and Culture. A Philosophical Study. New York, Greenwood Press, 1961.

<sup>49</sup> Watsuji: Climate and Culture, p.14

In Watsuji's worldview climatic features pre-determine not only individual self-awareness but also the social organization of a culture. He regards the peculiarities of the monsoon climate, or more specifically of the typically Japanese typhoon climate, as the architect of society and its members. Because of Japan's geographical position as an island which experiences both tropical heat in the south and frigid temperatures in the north, Watsuji assumes a dual character of the people living within these zones. Passivity and resistance are therefore the constituents of the paradox national identity, and the popular picture of the bamboo, which in spite of its tropical ancestry has managed to survive the weights of snow, is presented as a metaphor here:

"So in winter Japan is covered in corn and winter grass; in summer, in rice and summer grass. But a single tree variety, incapable of such alternation, displays this dual nature in itself. The picture of the bamboo, a native of the tropics, covered in snow, is often quoted as a scene peculiar to Japan. But, accustomed to bearing this weight of snow, the bamboo has adopted a nature different from that in the tropics and has become a curved and flexible variety distinctive to Japan."<sup>50</sup>

Passivity and resignation in face of the unchangeable and seasonal, respectively situational flexibility and calm resistance as a means to carry on, comprise the "distinctive duality" of the Japanese heart. We often find this image in explanations of Japan's rapid modernization after the Meiji restoration or the unprecedented growth and economic success of the "land of the *kami*<sup>51</sup>". Japan is said to have been able to modernize and develop into an industrialized nation, while it could retain its unique national character at the same time, this character being inevitably circumscribed by its historical and geographical (climatic) roots. It follows that the Japanese are not only paradoxical by nature but easily merge these contradictory tendencies in themselves without difficulty or outward show of conflict. The higher goal of self-abandonment for the "good cause", that is the dedication to the group, is always intuitively recognized by the Japanese, and they naturally switch from resignation to perseverance.

"Just like the changes of the season, the receptivity of the Japanese calls for abrupt switches of rhythm. So the Japanese is full of

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<sup>50</sup> Watsuji, *Climate and Culture*, p.134-135

<sup>51</sup> *kami* = god(s). The saying "the land of the kami" is based on the myth that the Japanese people descend from *Amaterasu Omikami*, the goddess who is said to have sent her son to the earth to be the first Japanese Emperor. Consequently, each succeeding *tennō* is of divine ancestry.

emotional vitality and sensitivity, lacking all continental phlegm. Such vitality and sensitivity lead to exhaustion and an absence of tenacity. But the recovery from this fatigue is not the effect of an unresponsive response; it is rather brought about by constant changes of emotion resulting from abrupt switches of stimulus and mood. But there is no alteration in the nature of emotion at such times of exhaustion and recovery, so that behind the lack of tenacity there lurks a certain dogged continuity. In other words, emotions may change but, inwardly, they persist."<sup>52</sup>

The community of family life to Watsuji is the binding power for the people living in the monsoon climate. In contrast to the "meadow culture" of Europe which resulted in the establishment of townships as the most important social unit, in Japan the significant whole to which the individual completely dedicates itself is the "house", the *ie*. The *ie* is a vertically organized, closed entity, represented by the (male) head of the household. However, in Watsuji's words social interaction is not simply dominated by the patriarch at the top, but it is influenced and supported by all members of the *ie*. A great degree of harmony, consensus and awareness of one's historical responsibility is taken for granted in this concept.

"The 'house' is given a substantial and distinctive character by the fact that its unity is understood in historical terms. The family of the present shoulders the burden of this historical house and undertakes liability for its unity from past down into future."<sup>53</sup>

It is evident that individual self-awareness, as is said to be held precious by "Western" democracy, has no place in this system. The *ie* as the only possible and legitimate means of identification has precedence over the aspirations of the individual. The continuous quest for harmony in this group becomes the highest goal, for any threat to the group's stability endangers the essential self-realization of each participant. If we regard it safe to assume that the quest to find meaning in life is the supreme driving power in every human being, then the unconditioned surrender of the individual personality cannot be questioned in a society that *by nature* is organized in groups as the only meaningful unit. Self-abandonment becomes the natural thing to do, for the higher goal of serving the group is tantamount to fulfilling one's original cause. In Watsuji's terms the securing of the *ie* union is the essential motive of the individual, which lacks individual consciousness, and is the explanation and justification of the sometimes aggressive perseverance of the Japanese to fulfil this goal.

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<sup>52</sup> Watsuji: Climate and Culture, p.135-136.



"So the force that is directed toward unreserved unity within the family, in spite of its outward calm, is essentially very intense. Thus the sacrifice of the self does not stop short at the needs of convenience but is carried through to the extreme limits. Whenever it meets with an obstacle, this quiet affection turns into ardent passion, forceful enough even to overwhelm the individual for the sake of the whole family. [...] The most striking feature of Japanese history is this readiness to stake one's life for the sake of parent or child, or to cast away life for the house."<sup>54</sup>

With the Japanese nation as the first and foremost *ie* and the Emperor as the head of this household, the implication is quite clear. If necessary, every Japanese would without question sacrifice his or her life for their country. Although Watsuji's book was written before World War II and he in essence refers to the moral code of the *samurai*, one does not have to look far to see how this ideal would be used by Japanese military to evoke the "right" spirit among the troops. An extensive discussion of this theme can be found in Benedict's attempt at explaining the *kamikaze* mentality of the Japanese soldier in the Pacific War, which is discussed later in this chapter. Watsuji adds that the *ie* system is the "community of all communities" and therefore the ultimate foundation of the Japanese culture. The continuance of the house is propagated to be the all-prevailing noble cause, which dominates daily conduct and makes any further guiding principles unnecessary.<sup>55</sup>

The last point I want to draw attention to in Watsuji's work is the concept of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside), which has also become an often quoted, supposedly unique feature of Japanese social organization. The term *uchi* refers to the inside of the group, most often the *ie* and is in fact represented by the same *kanji*, which can also be read *ka*. The ideograph seems to encompass the whole concept of the Japanese "group model" with its family structure headed by the male authority of the household and its closed world. This strongly sets the members of one group (those who are inside) apart from the members of other groups (outsiders). External influences bear minor weight in this view, the in-group has complete power over the individual. Once again Watsuji emphasizes that the organization within the *ie* is "democratic" in the sense that the individual completely merges with the group, in voluntary total abandonment of the individual personality for the sake of the feeling of oneness with the collective.

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<sup>53</sup> Watsuji: Climate and Culture, p.141

<sup>54</sup> Watsuji: Climate and Culture, p.143

"... the Japanese understand the house as 'inside' and the world beyond it as 'outside'. Within this 'inside', all distinctions between individuals disappear. To the wife, the husband is 'inside', or 'the man inside' or even 'the house'. (These are the actual terms used of a husband<sup>56</sup>.) To the husband, the wife is 'inside the house'. The family, too, is 'those within' – distinguished clearly from anyone outside, but once within, all distinction disappears. Thus the 'house', or the 'inside' is regarded as the family as a whole, a relationship admitting no discrimination, but very strictly segregated from the 'outside' world."<sup>57</sup>

*Uchi* and *ie* therefore are considered to be synonymous, and it becomes clear where the foundations lie for the assumption that the Japanese put more weight on family ties than on what outsiders might consider to be just and right. It also explains how the image of the Japanese corporation was created, which by presenting itself as a larger family-like entity calls for unconditioned obedience from each of its members. I will come back to this in my discussion of Nakane Chie.

Watsuji concludes his argument with a contrast between Japan and Europe based on a different understanding of the terms inside and outside. To him Europe is determined by individuality and separation, while Japan's distinctive character is expressed in group-consciousness and uniformity. In Europe "the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' ... [is] understood first and foremost as one of the heart of the individual"<sup>58</sup>. Self-awareness and self-realization as an individual responsible only for its own actions appears to be the guiding principle for the European. Watsuji does not argue that the Japanese way is the better but states that it is inevitable for every individual born in Japan. His line of thought points to the naturally different constitution of different cultures such as "the" Japanese and "the" European. In other words, the native Japanese by historical, climatic and ancestral tradition does not bear the seeds of individualism. Furthermore, although the Japanese people were subject to a massive influx from the West and did adopt some of the incoming technological and scientific achievements and some of the social traits, no change in personality could have taken place because of the above mentioned determinism.

"In outward aspects, the Japanese have copied the European way of life; but it would not be unfair to say that they remain almost entirely

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<sup>55</sup> Watsuji: *Climate and Culture*, p.144

<sup>56</sup> Refer to my above explanation of the relevant *kanji*.

<sup>57</sup> Watsuji: *Climate and Culture*, p.144

<sup>58</sup> Watsuji: *Climate and Culture*, p.146

uninfluenced by Europe in the matter of their inability to base their social and public life on individualism."<sup>59</sup>

This statement leads to the denial of an establishment of democracy that goes further than being just a clause in the constitution. If democratic principles are considered the natural ingredients of a homogeneous, harmonic group organization based on perfect consensus of all members, the explicit documentation of these principles becomes tautological. Common features of the Western industrialized nations such as union activity, women's liberation, minority rights are *per definitionem* already satisfactorily regulated by the Japanese system, which grants a proper place to everyone within the naturally pre-determined structure.

The *ie* concept essentially depends on the validity of the assumption that the Japanese national character is determined by the natural environment. As we have seen, Watsuji grounds his theory on Japan's geographical features and diversity in climatic conditions, the mix of which is the basis for the dual character of every Japanese. His theory also relies on racial determinism. To consider the island's climate as one is rather far-fetched to begin with, because the national entity is constituted by political borders which to nature would be quite arbitrary. This presumption also poses the following problem: What if someone from the North never travelled to the South and no one from his family ever did and never married someone from another region – how would the dual national character instill itself in them? The answer to this question in Watsuji's ideology is: through the blood. His worldview is reminiscent of 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosophies of nature and nationhood in general<sup>60</sup>, and of the Nazi "Blut und Boden" ideology in particular. As Mouer/ Sugimoto in their critique on *nihonjinron* ideology say, Watsuji "did not carry out any systematic research to compare the characteristics of the Japanese with those of other nationalities"<sup>61</sup>, but he simply sets "the Japanese" against "the Europeans", providing "proof" or examples from his experience arbitrarily only where it suits his needs. In addition, although climate is *the* point of reference in his study, he does not "seek to compare rigorously the different geographic areas in Japan"<sup>62</sup> to support his views with empirical data.

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<sup>59</sup> Watsuji: *Climate and Culture*, p.147

<sup>60</sup> Ref. to Morris-Suzuki, Tessa: *Re-Inventing Japan*. New York, 1998, p.58

<sup>61</sup> Mouer, Ross/ Sugimoto, Yoshio: *Images of Japanese Society*. A Study in the Structure of Social Reality. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p.42

<sup>62</sup> Mouer/ Sugimoto: *Images of Japanese Society*, p.42

The Japanese government encouraged the translation of books such as *Fûdo*, thereby to make sure that *nihonjinron* thought was accessible in other languages<sup>63</sup>. The convenient implications of such theories for official and corporate interest groups in Japan were already suggested. Watsuji's standing with the political elite and his influence on public opinion is also illustrated by his co-authorship of "one of the few attempts by Japanese officialdom to put together a general statement of late-1930s nationalist ideology"<sup>64</sup>: In 1937, the Japanese Ministry of Education published the "Principles of the National Entity" (Kokutai no hongî) for distribution to schools and colleges. This pamphlet was edited by a committee of scholars of which Watsuji was a member. Morris-Suzuki calls Watsuji's writings "the most influential twentieth-century works"<sup>65</sup> for Japan and states that he "is enjoying something of a vogue in Japan at present"<sup>66</sup>. Her book was published in 1998. However, Kowner in an essay published only four years later summarizes the findings of an empirical survey among contemporary Japanese as:

"... those who show high interest in *Nihonjinron* tenets do not believe in its tenets as much as those with lesser interest, and vice versa. This distinction is of great importance because interest in *Nihonjinron*, especially the widespread availability of books on this topic, has been often taken as an indicator of the strength of Japanese nationalism in general and ultranationalism in particular."<sup>67</sup>

It is important to keep this in mind, because these findings point to three things: First, there are Japanese who do not subscribe to *nihonjinron* ideology. Secondly, this contradicts one of *nihonjinron*'s main assumptions, namely that all Japanese share a common belief. And thirdly, it counters the stereotype that all Japanese are nationalists.

### **Nakane Chie and the Group Model**

Nakane Chie is one of the most widely read Japanese representatives of *nihonjinron*. Her book on the *Japanese Society*<sup>68</sup> was first published in 1970 and since then has gone through 79 reprintings. Nakane's argument evolves from an

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<sup>63</sup> Ref. to Befu: "Nationalism and *Nihonjinron*", p.120, and Mouer/ Sugimoto: Images of Japanese Society, p.177.

<sup>64</sup> Morris-Suzuki: Re-Inventing Japan, p.95

<sup>65</sup> Morris-Suzuki: Re-Inventing Japan, p.56

<sup>66</sup> Morris-Suzuki: Re-Inventing Japan, p.145

<sup>67</sup> Kowner: Deconstructing the Japanese National Discourse, p. 175

understanding of Japanese society as a vertical organization of closed groups determined by two distinctive features, "frame" and "attribute". Frame refers to the membership of a specific group, whereas attribute describes the individual's position within this group. According to Nakane, the Japanese society as a whole is made up by innumerable groups, each calling for their members' unconditioned loyalty, however, some of them being of higher importance because of their hierarchical position. In-bred group consciousness thus is a necessary precondition in every Japanese, which results in a natural readiness for group identification. Nakane's *Group Model* is closely related to the traditional concept of the Japanese *ie* and is based on the same assumptions of paternal benevolence of the head of the household/ group and filial piety of its members.

"The essence of this firmly rooted, latent group consciousness in Japanese society is expressed in the traditional and ubiquitous concept of *ie*, the household, a concept which penetrates every nook and cranny of Japanese society."<sup>69</sup>

Based on the same framework as the *ie* system, the Group Model emphasizes its internal bonds over other existing structures. Being the member of a household therefore is of higher significance than actual family ties. This applies for example to women who marry into an *ie* and leave their own parents and siblings to live with their new family, or to men who are adopted by a family for lack of male successors. Being the member of a corporate entity then carries greater weight than kinship in that the company family overrules and substitutes the private household, while incorporating and looking after its employees' families. In Nakane's words, the corporate household has taken the role of the family institution of *ie* in the modern era when the latter was in danger of being lost.

"Though it is often said that the traditional family (*ie*) institution has disappeared, the concept of the *ie* still persists in modern contexts. A company is conceived as an *ie*, all its employees qualifying as members of the household, with the employer at its head. Again, this 'family' envelops the employee's personal family; it 'engages' him 'totally' (*marugakae* in Japanese). The employer readily takes responsibility for his employee's family, for which, in turn, the primary

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<sup>68</sup> Nakane, Chie: *Japanese Society*. Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1970. The original Japanese version was published in 1967 under the title *Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei*.

<sup>69</sup> Nakane, Chie: "Criteria of Group Formation". Reprinted from *Japanese Society*, 1970, in: Lebra, T.S. and Lebra, W.P.: *Japanese Culture and Behaviour*. Honolulu, Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1986, p.173

concern is the company, rather than relatives who reside elsewhere."<sup>70</sup>

Group identification is said to come naturally and to result from a perceived homogeneity based on a common situational frame. Thereby a feeling of oneness is created which at the same time tightens the bonds to the given group and precludes affiliation with competing groups, for example a different corporate entity or a group with differing interests.

"With group-consciousness so highly developed, there is almost no social life outside the particular group on which an individual's major economic life depends. The individual's every problem must be solved within this frame. Thus, group participation is single and unitary."<sup>71</sup>

This definition provides a convenient philosophy for the Japanese entrepreneur in two ways. First, by emphasizing the membership in the corporate household over family ties absolute commitment is demanded from the employee, including overtime work and weekends spent at his desk instead of in his wife's and children's company. Secondly, union activity as known in Europe and the United States, representing workers' interests versus the management's concern, is unthinkable and unnecessary in the Japanese system. With the Japanese company idealized as its members' true family, which looks after them and provides the basis for their existence, there can be no conflict of interest between the owners' and the workers' needs. Nakane underlines the above theory with the popular image of the so-called "life-time employment system", which postulates that once an employee has become part of the corporate social institution, just like in a family, he stays there for his whole working life. The new employee is received by the company

"as if he were a newly born family member, a newly adopted son-in-law, or a bride come into the husband's household. A number of well-known features peculiar to the Japanese employment system illustrate this characteristic, for example, company housing, hospital benefits, family re-creation groups for employees, monetary gifts from the company on the occasion of marriage, birth or death, and even advice from the company's consultant on family planning."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Nakane, "Group Formation", p.176.

<sup>71</sup> Nakane, "Group Formation", p.178

<sup>72</sup> Nakane, "Group Formation", p.181

The life-time employment "myth" was elaborated on by James Abbeglen in his work on *The Japanese Factory* (1958)<sup>73</sup> and has found large numbers of followers ever since. However, as shown by Jon Woronoff's *Japan as Anything But Number One*<sup>74</sup> and others, we are facing a "true" myth here. Only 1% of Japan's working population are in fact engaged in life-time employment, and in this small group this applies to white collar workers only<sup>75</sup>. Nevertheless, this popular image has been fostered over the past fifty or so years by the Japanese government which encouraged the translation of books supporting this view, by Japanese corporations which call for employees' unconditioned loyalty, and by their Western counterparts which try to establish a new work morale after the "Japanese model".

In summary, these are the basic aspects of the *Group Model* as described by Nakane:

- The Japanese social system is a vertical organization of groups defined by distinctive features. Membership in a given group precludes membership in another group on the same hierarchical level. Membership in a group on a higher level of the vertical axis overrules and substitutes group bonds on lower levels.
- Group identification and group-consciousness are natural pre-conditions inherent in every Japanese. Individual identification is only possible via affiliation with a specific group, and individual concerns always stand back behind the group interest. Homogeneity because of a shared situational frame is assumed and fostered.
- The Group Model has its foundation in the traditional Japanese *ie* system, which naturally includes benevolent guidance and care from the head of the household and absolute acceptance and loyalty from the other *ie* members. The harmony of the group order cannot be disturbed by conflicting expressions of individual opinion, because the opinions of the head of the group are shared unanimously by all members.
- The Japanese society therefore is and has always been based on collective ideals and organization as opposed to relationships between individuals.

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<sup>73</sup> Abbeglen, James C.: *The Japanese Factory*. Aspects of its Social Organization. Glencoe/ Ill., Free Press, 1958 – Lifetime employment and company benefits as described by Abbeglen as typically Japanese were quite common in the coal mining communities in the German Ruhr Valley during the heydays of this industry.

<sup>74</sup> Woronoff, Jon: *Japan as – Anything But – Number One*. Armonk, NY, Sharpe, 1991

<sup>75</sup> Woronoff, p.35

If we follow the above reasoning of the *ie* concept, the Japanese nation has to be regarded as the all-encompassing and most important group in that it "envelops" all Japanese people. At least until World War II<sup>76</sup>, when *tennô* worship was still regarded highly in Japan, the Emperor served as the head of the Japanese household, demanding unconditional loyalty. During the war, this ideal was repeatedly utilized to re-inforce motivation among both soldiers and civilians. Only a few months before the end of World War II the "Draft of Labour Regulations" was published in Japan in an attempt to "keep up the noble spirits" of work morale.

"The factory, by its production, becomes the arena for putting into practice the true aims of Imperial labour. The people who preserve these aims become the unifiers of labour. Superior and inferior should help each other, those who are of the same rank should co-operate and with a fellowship as of one family, we shall combine labour and management."<sup>77</sup>

The crucial point about Nakane's argument is her acknowledgment of the *Group Model* as a social construct, designed to help realize specific goals. The mechanisms by which the Japanese enterprise "moulds" its recruits in order to establish a corporately beneficial strong sense of employee loyalty, thereby increasing motivation and productivity, are readily admitted. The *ie* or group as each member's only means to achieve a sense of identity and social security is the compensation for the surrender of individual interests, which according to Nakane are very limited if at all existent to begin with.

One could now ask the question where (a projected) homogeneity on the one hand and the need for construction of social reality on the other hand meet. Do personal objectives exist after all, and if so, how great is the individual's need for compromise in order to fulfil the higher goal? How much pressure is really being executed from the "family head" to maintain peace and consensus among his troops? The answer seems to lie in each one's very own need to secure his or her feeling of identity and is not necessarily a Japanese problem. I would argue that a sense of belonging is important to the members of all cultural

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<sup>76</sup> When Emperor Hirohito had to renounce his godly ancestry with the declaration of Japan's surrender in 1945, some of the binding power of the "all-Japanese *ie*" was lost. However, as already indicated, these values were re-emphasized later and are still valid. The present Emperor Akihito serves two purposes: he is both the representative of the new democratic Japan and, with his kinship to the late Hirohito, he stands for a continuation of the traditional value system.



communities. For the "Japanese case", the *Group Model* is the ready-made formula, which offers a concise world-view and emotional back-up to those who are willing to make the necessary concessions. In a society where this pattern is about the only accepted way, different modes of individual development ask for a great amount of self-assurance, which according to the *Group Model* cannot be achieved beyond the predetermined framework.

"A cohesive sense of group unity, as demonstrated in the operational mechanism of household and enterprise, is essential as the foundation of the individual's total emotional participation in the group; it helps to build a close world and results in strong group dependence of isolation."<sup>78</sup>

What is true for many *nihonjinron* authors also applies to Nakane: she does not support her theories with empirical data. Although a self-appointed anthropologist she apparently does not feel it to be mandatory to come up with polls, surveys or other material to give her statements greater credibility. She admits that it was simply her aim to put together some well-known fragments of the Japanese culture puzzle, so well-known that in her view they do not need proof. The author believes to have been successful in presenting as comprehensive a glimpse of the structural core of the Japanese society as possible to the non-Japanese spectator. Nakane readily acknowledges the arbitrariness of the examples taken into consideration and that the only requirement was that they fit into the picture. Characterizing her approach she uses the metaphor of an artist applying colours on a canvas with a natural craftsmanship.

"Beim Auftragen dieser Farben habe ich einen entscheidenden Vorteil, denn es sind die Farben, die ich von Geburt an kenne und mit denen ich aufgewachsen bin; ich kenne ihre feinen Abstufungen und Wirkungen."<sup>79</sup>

Here we find a reasoning that threads like a *leitmotif* through *nihonjinron* literature, that is the natural authority of the native Japanese. Because of the assumed in-bred cultural consciousness, every Japanese by birth possesses a full intuitive understanding which consequently makes empirical proof an issue of marginal importance.

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<sup>77</sup> Munitions Public Welfare Ministry, "Draft of Labour Regulations", February 1945, as quoted in: Nakane, "Group Formation", p.184

<sup>78</sup> Nakane: "Group Formation", p.185

## Doi Takeo and Japanese Psychology

Although it cannot be said that all *nihonjinron* spokesmen share exactly the same views and opinions, many if not all agree on the basic principles of the Japanese culture and its impact on the country's supposedly unique development into a modern nation-state. In 1973, Doi Takeo published his work on *amae*, to him the key concept for an understanding of *The Anatomy of Dependence*<sup>80</sup> in every Japanese's psychology. The *amae* concept as described by Doi is designed to provide an explanation of the natural devotion and subordination of the Japanese people within the preset hierarchic structures of their society.

"Die große Bedeutung vertikaler Beziehungen, die die Sozialanthropologin Chie Nakane kürzlich als Charakteristikum der japanischen Sozialstruktur bezeichnete, könnten man auch die Vorherrschaft des *amae* nennen. Es ist vielleicht sogar gerechtfertigt, in der Empfänglichkeit für *amae* den Grund dafür zu sehen, daß vertikale Beziehungen eine solch große Rolle spielen."<sup>81</sup>

In Doi's words *amae* carries the meaning "to depend and presume upon another's benevolence"<sup>82</sup>, indicating a tendency for voluntary dependence among the Japanese people as the natural and necessary condition of the family structure of Japanese social organization. While Doi does not go so far as to state that relationships of dependence are exclusively a Japanese phenomenon, he still claims unique relevance of the psychological impact of *amae* for the Japanese. Based on the presumed non-existence of an equivalent expression in another language, Doi argues that *amae* plays a minor role in the West, where it only appears in its pathological extreme.

"Es [*amae*] entspricht jener zarten Empfindung, die in der frühesten Kindheit entsteht und die Freud als die "primäre kindliche Objektwahl" bezeichnet. Ohne Zweifel beeinflusst diese die darauffolgenden Entwicklungsphasen; Freud selbst betont dies; jedoch aus irgendeinem Grund – besonders nachdem er sein Narzißmuskonzept eingeführt hatte – scheint er dieser Tatsache wenig Bedeutung beigemessen zu haben, und auch die Ansichten späterer Psychoanalytiker folgen ihm in dieser Hinsicht. Mir kam der

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<sup>79</sup> Nakane, Chie: Die Struktur der japanischen Gesellschaft. Frankfurt/ M., Suhrkamp, 1985, p.8

<sup>80</sup> Doi, Takeo: The Anatomy of Dependence. Tokyo, Kodansha, 1973.

<sup>81</sup> Doi, Takeo: Amae. Freiheit in Geborgenheit. Zur Struktur japanischer Psyche. Frankfurt/ M., Suhrkamp, 1982, p.36

<sup>82</sup> Doi, Takeo: "*Amae*: A Key Concept for Understanding Japanese Personality Structure". in: Lebra, T.S. and Lebra, W.P.: Japanese Culture and Behaviour. Honolulu, Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1986, p.121

Gedanke, daß der Grund dafür möglicherweise darin liegt, daß es in den westlichen Sprachen keinen dem *amae*-Konzept entsprechenden Begriff gibt."<sup>83</sup>

If one accepts that a culture automatically creates cohesive expressions for the phenomena that exist in this culture, it can be concluded that non-existence of a term points to non-existence or at least marginal importance of a concept for the respective social structure.

As will be seen in more detail later, Japanese terminology is often translated into a whole phrase or a set of alternative phrases in English (or other Western languages) as opposed to a single word, thereby implying that there are multilayered meanings inherent in many Japanese words. Doi follows this "strategy", which apart from suggesting hidden implications serves to confuse the lay reader with an intricate web of semantic connotations supporting each other. With regards to this, I would like to point out three things:

1. The Japanese, other than the English grammar, works by inclusion of declaration and flexation in the verb, in each case indicated by prefixes or suffixes.<sup>84</sup> Therefore the non-existence of a one-word equivalent does not necessarily imply the uniqueness of the concept described, that is the non-existence in cultures other than the Japanese.
2. Also, it should be noted that just because a Japanese expression appears as one word in *Romaji* (transcription in Roman letters), this expression could still consist of several *Kanji* (ideographs), or of one or more *Kanji* plus *Kana*<sup>85</sup> syllables.
3. Furthermore, although I do not want to argue against the possible semantic connotations of the terms employed by Doi, a counter-check in the dictionary suggests that he is quite generous in adding meanings and contextual implications when translating his *termini technici*.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Doi: Freiheit in Geborgenheit, p.27-28

<sup>84</sup> This is also true for the Latin language, where cases, plurals, tense, imperative, etc. can be deducted from verb endings.

<sup>85</sup> (*Kata*)*kana* is an alphabet based on 46 syllables, which can be used as an alternative to the ideographic expression. Before the Japanese adopted the *kanji* from the Chinese, *katakana* was the only way of writing. Verbs usually consist of a combination of one or more *kanji* and a *kana* ending which for example indicates the tense.

<sup>86</sup> Nelson, Andrew W.: The Modern Reader's Japanese-English Character Dictionary. Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle, 2nd ed., 1990, p.615: *amae* – to presume upon; to take advantage of. I would also like to state that the existence of manifold semantic implications in one word or expression is nothing typically Japanese but can probably be found in any other language.

The uniqueness of the *amae* concept for the Japanese culture leads Doi to restate the basic difference between Japan and the West, namely Japan's emphasis on collective care versus the "cold" individualism of the West. Several examples from Doi's private experience are quoted to support his theory, and again this is a method frequently used in *nihonjinron* literature. Serious anthropology would deny the validity of singular, subjective glimpses without empirical foundation. While private experience can very well serve to introduce a general idea which is then backed up by comprehensive data, these glimpses on their own do not offer more than a very personal construct of reality. Consequently, Yoshino supports what I indicated earlier: that *nihonjinron* is less a descriptive than a prescriptive view of "Japanese-ness".

"It should be stressed that those ideas concerning Japan and the West emphasized in the *nihonjinron* do not necessarily represent empirical reality but rather images created to reinforce Japanese identity."<sup>87</sup>

The idea of *amae* is indeed rather arbitrarily used by Doi to explain all kind of socio-cultural aspects, and he himself admits the haphazardness of his *modus operandi*.

"[Ich fand], daß hierdurch [durch *amae*] ein Licht auf die spezifischen Eigenschaften der japanischen Gesellschaft geworfen wird. Kurz, ich hatte beim Vortragen dieser Arbeit<sup>88</sup> das Gefühl, daß ich auf eine besonders reiche Goldader gestoßen sei, und war berauscht von den vielfältigen Vorstellungsmöglichkeiten, die in dem Wort *amae* enthalten sind."<sup>89</sup>

Closely connected to *amae* is another popular *nihonjinron* concept, that is the assumption of non-verbal communication as being the most effective means of interchange among the Japanese. Because the willingness to entrust one's fate to the good-will of someone else, respectably an acknowledged institution, is inherent in every Japanese by birth, there is no longer the necessity to express oneself explicitly. Impulses in the fellowman are sensed quasi-telepathically and the right mode of action is intuitively grasped. The *nihonjinron* term for this is *haragei*, the "art of the stomach". This idea emphasizes the collective character of a nation with a strong group consciousness and again leaves individualism

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<sup>87</sup> Yoshino: Cultural Nationalism in Japan, p.12

<sup>88</sup> This refers to a speech Doi held in 1957 at the 54<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Japanese Association for Psychiatry and Neurology.

aside as of only marginal importance and impact on the national culture. Every Japanese is thus part of a holistic entity, he shares the same historical experience, the same socialization and the same goals in life with every one of his Japanese brothers and sisters in the one great *ie*, the Japanese nation. This makes him uniquely different from the members of any other people on the world, and this makes the Japanese culture forever unintelligible to other cultural communities. Leaving this closed Japanese world can therefore only mean isolation and alienation for the individual who does not have an individual consciousness but can only realize his identity via recognition of his natural bonds and status in his defined group. The doctrine of non-verbal communication leads to

"'the unity of self and other' (*jita gôitsu*) in interpersonal relationships. Thus the national character (*kokuminsei*) derived from such a mother tongue by its very nature is said to resist individualising consciousness, which sets man against himself, opposed to the world, and alienated from other."<sup>90</sup>

In Doi's words the quest for identity has to remain fruitless for the Japanese unless he succumbs to the ever present *amae* principle that regulates all social activity and gives his being a purpose.

At the beginning of his book Doi recaptures an invitation to the house of an American during his first stay in the United States. He finds himself in an awkward position and feels embarrassed by his hosts behaviour. Other than what he is used to in Japan, here he is asked for his preferences with regards to drink and desert and the phrase "Please help yourself" does not sound polite to him at all.

"Die japanische Höflichkeit verlangt vom Gastgeber, daß er bei der Bewirtung ein Gefühl dafür entwickelt, herauszufinden, was der Gast gerne hätte, und daß er selbst seinen Gästen 'hilft'. Es einem Gast, der dem Haus nicht vertraut ist, zu überlassen, 'sich selbst zu bedienen', wäre eine Form äußerster Rücksichtslosigkeit. Alle diese Erfahrungen trugen dazu bei, daß ich immer mehr das Gefühl bekam, die Amerikaner seien ein Volk, das nicht dieselbe Rücksichtnahme und dasselbe Feingefühl gegenüber anderen zeigt wie das japanische."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Doi: Freiheit in Geborgenheit, p.26

<sup>90</sup> Dale: Myth of Japanese Uniqueness, p.100-101

<sup>91</sup> Doi: Freiheit in Geborgenheit, p.19

It is of course interesting that Doi would expect his non-Japanese hosts to show the same "politeness" which, if one follows Doi's line of thought, is a uniquely Japanese characteristic. Expecting this from an American means to contradict the concept of uniqueness.

The art of silence, which Doi refers to, is an idea stemming from Zen Buddhism. According to Zen, enlightenment is the way of achieving a full sense of being one with the world without conscious effort, which can only be accomplished by non-verbal communication with one's inner self. The celebration of silence is performed in the traditional arts such as tea ceremony, calligraphy, archery, etc. This ideal is transferred to day-to-day intercourse by *nihonjinron*, presupposing a high degree of homogeneity and naturally given sensitivity in the Japanese people. According to *nihonjinron*

"the sensitivity shown in the social interaction of the Japanese is considered to obviate the need for explicit and verbal communication, and the Japanese find aesthetic refinement in a person capable of non-verbal, indirect and subtle communication."<sup>92</sup>

The necessary precondition for the formulation of the *nihonjinron* worldview is the readiness of each representative to draw broad generalizations from single observations and to conclude from the particular to the whole. *Nihonjinron* therefore presents a *pars pro toto* "explanation" of the Japanese culture: Authors like Watsuji consider climate as *the* distinctive momentum in Japanese historical development; authors like Nakane place main emphasis on the traditional *ie* system as the decisive factor; and authors like Doi make an assumed general condition in the Japanese psyche their starting point. Diversity and pluralism have no room in these theories, which are reinforced by their many proponents through constant repetition, which neglects the "reality" of diversity even within small groups. I repeatedly indicated that *nihonjinron* is effectively a prescriptive rather than a descriptive model. This implies that the ready adoption of its dictate is the necessary condition for self-realization of the Japanese people. This aspect of identification through acceptance of a "pre-determined" worldview plays an important role in my next object of examination.

### **Ruth Benedict and the Paradox of the Japanese Character**

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<sup>92</sup> Yoshino, Cultural Nationalism in Japan, p.16

So far this chapter concentrated on Japanese contributions to *nihonjinron*, which shaped the official Japanese view of its own culture. All of the aforementioned authors were translated into English so that their works were and are accessible to readers outside of Japan. However, maybe even more important for the construction of the image of Japan in the Western world in general and in America in particular was Ruth Benedict's work. She is certainly the most distinguished non-Japanese representative of the "discourse on the Japanese" and influenced many other authors.<sup>93</sup>

Ruth Benedict was a pioneer in the so-called area-study approach of anthropological research on Japan. Her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) tried to see Japan as a "cultural entity on a *separate but equal* basis with our own culture" under the assumption that "through a pooling of separate disciplinary insights it would be possible to arrive at a coherent appreciation of the totality of Japanese culture"<sup>94</sup>. By the time she got the assignment to compile a comprehensive picture of Japanese behavioural patterns, Benedict had already made a name for herself as one of the leading American anthropologists. Her employer was the United States Office of War Information, which through Benedict's study hoped to be provided with insight on how to deal with defeated Japan after the country's unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945.<sup>95</sup> The Japanese had posed a riddle impossible to solve to the American military during the war, and the Foreign Morale Analysis Division was at loss how to encounter a culture that seemed so unprecedentedly alien.

"The Japanese were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle. In no other war with a major foe had it been necessary to take into account such exceedingly different habits of acting and thinking. [...] Conventions of war which Western

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<sup>93</sup> Morris-Suzuki states that "many discussions of *Nihonjinron* trace its roots to Ruth Benedict's classic study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*" (p.127). According to Hall, Benedict's work dominated academic training about Japan in the United States in the 1950s (Mouer/ Sugimoto, 1986, p.24), and the book has been excessively used as the major point of reference in succeeding studies. In 1991, the 41<sup>st</sup> printing of the book in English appeared (ref. to Maher, J.C./ Macdonald, G.: *Diversity in Japanese Culture and Language*. London, Kegan Paul Int., 1995, p.311), indicating a continued interest in Benedict's approach. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* was also translated into Japanese in 1948 and was widely read in Japan (ref. to Mouer/ Sugimoto, 1986, p.45). By the year 1988, over one million copies had been sold of the book, which was then in its 78<sup>th</sup> printing (ref. to Aoki, Tamotsu: "Anthropology and Japan. Attempts at Writing Culture." in: *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, vol.XXII, no.3, October 1994, p.4).

<sup>94</sup> Hall as quoted in Mouer/ Sugimoto, 1986, p.24

<sup>95</sup> Although Japan did only sign the capitulation document on September 2, 1945, August 15 is regarded the crucial date, as it marks the day the Japanese Emperor addressed his people and asked them for unconditional surrender to the allied powers.

nations had come to accept as facts of human nature obviously did not exist for the Japanese. It made it [the war] a major problem in the nature of the enemy. We had to understand their behaviour in order to cope with it."<sup>96</sup>

This statement suggests a to the Western observer abnormal quality in the Japanese, which made it a matter of success or failure for the American occupying power to study and come up with an intelligible pattern of the "enemy's" mode of conduct as quickly as possible. Since the Japanese apparently could not be judged and predicted through American eyes, they had to be observed through their own. However, because of the yet unstable situation in Japan, Benedict did not have the chance to actually undertake field studies, which were regarded as the most important tool of the anthropologist<sup>97</sup>. Her account is based on second-hand information throughout, with interviews with Japanese living the United States and prisoners of war her only face-to-face source.

The picture Benedict constructed of Japanese reality is determined by paradox, or, in Watsuji's words, by the dual character of the Japanese. The following statement in the introduction of her book is probably the one that has been quoted most frequently:

"All these contradictions [in the Japanese character] ... are the warp and woof of books on Japan. *They are true*. Both the sword and the chrysanthemum are a part of the picture. The Japanese are, to the highest degree, both aggressive and unaggressive, both militaristic and aesthetic, both insolent and polite, rigid and adaptable, submissive and resentful of being pushed around, loyal and treacherous, brave and timid, conservative and hospitable to new ways. They are terribly concerned about what other people will think of their behaviour, and they are also overcome by guilt when other people know nothing of their misstep. Their soldiers are disciplined to the hilt but also insubordinate."<sup>98</sup> (Italics mine.)

This prepares the reader to accept as the natural ingredients of the presumably uniform Japanese national character what would seem a pathological combination of character traits in any "Westerner". Benedict obviously does not see this "duality" as proof of a diversity in opinion, experience and education among the Japanese people. Although Benedict touches the subject of pluralism

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<sup>96</sup> Benedict, Ruth: The Chrysanthemum and the Sword. Patterns of Japanese Culture. 1946. Reprint: Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1989, p.1

<sup>97</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.5

<sup>98</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.2-3



and learned versus in-bred behaviour on a few occasions, no conclusions are drawn from these suggestions. Of the literature on Japan, which Benedict studied, she admits:

"Of course, they [the Japanese authors] did not present the whole picture. No people does. A Japanese who writes about Japan passes over really crucial things which are as familiar to him and as invisible as the air he breathes."<sup>99</sup>

Three important suppositions which shape Benedict's work are implied here.

1. Benedict recognizes that the addition of individual accounts cannot *per se* lead to the a complete portrayal. Therefore interpolation is necessary, that is deduction from the part to the whole, that is generalization whenever required.
2. This is justified on the basis that for each culture a uniform character is said to exist, with each participant typically sharing the same set of values. Eventually this means that every single person is a sufficient spokesman for his or her home country and has unquestionable authority.<sup>100</sup>
3. The assumption that members of a culture are prone to pass over familiar things when explaining their heritage implies that even those features of the assumed national spirit of Japan which remained unmentioned in the accounts Benedict studied are still part of the respective individual's inherited consciousness.

In my opinion, the crucial point in Benedict's study is the question of how a cultural community establishes meaningful values and behavioral patterns and if and how these norms are accepted by the (majority of the) community. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* relies on very broad generalizations. Calling it an account of the "true" Japanese national character is certainly inappropriate. In view of the sources Benedict used one could expect no more than a representation of certain aspects of Japanese society as perceived by a certain group of people. It is also to be expected that the prisoners of war the author interviewed were strongly influenced by Japanese war propaganda (ultimately the very reason why they had been prepared to sacrifice their lives for their country) and would speak about their country in terms of the officially sanctioned, nationalistic point of view. Another questions that comes up in this respect is:

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<sup>99</sup> Benecit, 1989, p.7

<sup>100</sup> Ref. to Benedict's assumption that the "point where the testimony of great numbers of additional informants provides no further validation". Benedict, 1989, p.16

how did Benedict communicate with these young men? She did not speak Japanese, and it is unlikely that her counterparts were fluent in English. Therefore, she most likely had to rely on a translator, who, depending on his view of “Japaneseness” could have done his or her share in shaping or even changing the statements.<sup>101</sup> But even if the interviewees “truly” believed in, for example, the dual character of their culture, this only points to their willingness to accept established values and meanings as the foundations of their being. It does not support the assumption that every Japanese citizen, young or old, male or female, rich or poor, would naturally do the same. In my view, those in power, that is governments or the leaders of smaller entities, always have a strong interest to create an “ultimate truth” as a behavioral blueprint for the sake of domestic stability, economic prosperity, or other purposes. If non-conformity is penalized, for example by exclusion from peer groups or denial of job-related benefits, this provides a strong motivation to succumb to what is regarded as the norm. But the recurring formation of interest groups contradicting the officially sanctioned view of things in many cultural communities, including the Japanese, serves to prove that the existence of such a view does not necessarily mean that it is innate in every group member, and it does not preclude the existence of conflicting individual opinion. *Nihonjinron*, and this also applies to Benedict’s work, thus substitutes ideology for “reality”.

Benedict does recognize the *construction* of a "design for living" as the prerequisite for the stability of a social structure. What she does not recognize is the potential for disagreement with the rule of conformity.

"A human society must make for itself some design for living. It approves certain ways of meeting situations, certain ways of sizing them up. People in that society regard these solutions as foundations of the universe. They integrate them, *no matter what the difficulties*. Men who have accepted a system of values by which to live cannot without courting inefficiency and chaos keep for long a fenced-off portion of their lives where they think and behave according to a contrary set of values."<sup>102</sup> (Italics mine.)

Apparently an advocate of conformity, Benedict cannot think of a meaningful existence outside the pre-set values of society. Human condition to her asks for conformist behaviour as the only means to prevent chaos and thereby loss of

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<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of the role of translators and their power to influence communication and perception, see: Watzlawick, Paul: Wie wirklich ist die Wirklichkeit? Wahn, Täuschung, Verstehen. München, 1998, p.14 ff.

<sup>102</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.12

identity and purpose in life for the individual. The principles of cultural determination of the national character, which I already described, the omnipotence of the *ie* system for the country's social structure and the alleged willingness of the Japanese to surrender to dependence relationships are merged by Benedict in her panorama of a "shame culture".

The *leitmotif* of Benedict's book is her view of the Japanese culture as an intricate web of obligations, duties and indebtedness, and in her theory shame over non-fulfilment constitutes the driving power for daily conduct. Benedict introduces a concise terminology of expressions for the different forms of the individual's indebtedness to his/ her family, company and country, the latter being represented by the *tennô*. Some of these debts result in a life-time repayment (*on*, *gimu*), while others can be settled completely at one point in time (*giri*)<sup>103</sup>. A person's public reputation and self-esteem depend heavily on recognizing such obligations and on acting accordingly.

"[The] obligations of *gimu* are compulsory and are man's universal lot; indeed Japan's elementary schooling is called 'gimu education' because no other word so adequately renders the meaning of 'required'."<sup>104</sup>

Benedict states that there are no comparable expressions in English, which could offer a correct representation of the whole range of meanings inherent in these principles. We have already seen how Japanese vocabulary is used as an arsenal of *termini technici* to lend further exoticism to aspects of culture. Benedict even supplies a one-page "Schematic Table of Japanese Obligations and their Reciprocals"<sup>105</sup>, supporting her assumption of 1) the multifacetedness of the Japanese system of mutual dependence and indebtedness, and of 2) the need for a calculated balance of the manifold factors of influence in order to secure the fragile design. This design has little room for conventional "Western" views of guilt and justice, but operates on very different values.

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<sup>103</sup> See Benedict, 1989, p.103 and p.115

<sup>104</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.117. – Benedict's interpretation of *gimu* is repayment of the debt to one's parents and the Emperor. According to the dictionary it simply means duty, "gimu education" accordingly is compulsory education, a concept not unknown to Americans. Ref. to: Schinzinger, Robert; Yamamoto, Akira; Nambara, Minoru (eds.): Wörterbuch der deutschen und japanischen Sprache. Japanisch – Deutsch. Toyko, Sansyusya Publishing, 1980, p.237

<sup>105</sup> See Benedict, 1989, p.116

"The rules of *giri* are strictly rules of required repayment; they are not a set of moral rules like the Ten Commandments. When a man is forced with *giri*, it is assumed that he may have to override his sense of justice and they often say, 'I could not do right ... because of *giri*.'"<sup>106</sup>

It is obvious where this leads to. It gives ammunition to the assertion that the Japanese have no guilt-consciousness and therefore cannot sympathize with democratic ideals. It also serves as a convenient excuse for Japanese "misconduct" before the eyes of the non-Japanese.

"The Japanese ... regard a man as bankrupt when he fails in repaying *giri* and every contact in life is likely to incur *giri* in some way or other. This means keeping an account of little words and acts Americans throw lightly about with no thought of incurring obligations. It means walking warily in a complicated world."<sup>107</sup>

Again, here we have the motif of the "intricate web" of duties and obligations. According to this, the Japanese have to plan every move carefully in a fragile world about to tumble if one of the seemingly infinite and sometimes contradictory rules is violated, if the demands of hierarchy are not duly recognized and respected. This also implies a certain arrogance among a people that puts much less emphasis on what the rest of the world appears to hold as just and true than on their very own system of reciprocal debt repayment. Benedict fails to draw a parallel to Western culture. But literature is full of examples, where the protagonist's sense of personal indebtedness "overrides his sense of justice".<sup>108</sup>

The reasoning which, in Benedict's eyes, makes this system work is the promise of an advantage as the result of moral conduct in the Japanese sense. The expectation of this advantage depends on whether Japan's group-oriented social structure is recognized as offering mutual benefit to those at the top and those at the bottom of the food chain. Repaying the debt to one's parents secures the continuation of the ancestral tradition within the *ie*. Repaying one's debt to the emperor acknowledges the benevolent, god-fatherly care of the *tennô* for his subordinates. Repaying the debt to one's employer means ensuring one's

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<sup>106</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.140-141

<sup>107</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.141

<sup>108</sup> The traditional hero of the American Western novel for example shows many resemblances to the image of the Japanese *samurai*; both would kill for revenge and then (allow someone) take their own lives because they did wrong to society.

economical existence while at the same time it means to rely on the company's responsibility to support their employees.

"... the sanction of reciprocity, and the Japanese conviction that self-discipline is to one's own advantage, make many acts seem easy to them [the Japanese] which seem insupportable to Americans."<sup>109</sup>

In short, we may say that recognizing and repaying one's debt is the foundation of the Japanese social organization. It follows that failure to accept one's role within this organization poses a severe threat to the Japanese nation as a whole, which again implies that diversity and insistence on individual rights are inappropriate. This argument also provides an explanation for the assumption that shame plays such a strong role in Japan. Shame to Benedict is the decisive factor for self-respect in Japan. As we have seen, self-realization can only take place by complete integration in the community. The community provides the individual with the foundation for meaningful existence. In return the individual accepts his or her obligations within the group and naturally regards them higher than any personal goals or external expectations. Therefore lack of fulfilment of commonly acknowledged duties must lead to a sense of personal defeat – shame – or to give it a Japanese name, to *haji*.

"The strong identification of circumspection with self-respect includes, therefore, watchfulness of all the cues one observes in other people's acts, and a strong sense that other people are sitting in judgment. 'One cultivates self-respect ...,' they say, 'because of society.' 'If there were no society one would not need to respect oneself ...' [...] [This] points out correctly where the emphasis lies in Japan. It falls on the importance of shame rather than on the importance of guilt."<sup>110</sup>

Benedict contrasts Japan with America, the latter understood as a culture dominated by both guilt-consciousness and shame-consciousness, whereas in Japan the aspect of guilt is said to be lacking. If we take the above quote to the extreme, this means that the Japanese nation, were it deprived of their social structure as the regulating body, would have no moral standards at all. This suggests that the Japanese national character does not include an awareness of good or bad in the occidental sense. There seems to be no pity or even humanity but only a rigid following of etiquette. This takes me back to Benedict's initial statement about "conventions of war" and "facts of human nature", which did not appear to be appreciated by the Japanese. What was still put in relativistic terms

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<sup>109</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.234

there, what looked like a stereotype to be examined and possibly invalidated, is reconfirmed here. The American (understood as the representative of all civilized Western nations) concept of human conduct based on individual sovereignty and equal rights has been found to not be applicable to the Japanese culture. The latter substitutes the quasi-feudal rule of the group for democratic values in the family, the corporate entity and the nation as the greatest social organization. Thus, the right conduct is situational in Japan, i.e. it is not laid down in general rules such as constitutional rights, but varies depending on the context.

As already indicated, Benedict's study has become a major source for the occidental community, both for academic discourse on Japan and for public opinion. There has been strong criticism of the anthropologist's method, expressed by authors such as Mouer/ Sugimoto, Dale, Glazer, and Ian Littlewood, who in his book *The Idea of Japan* states that the contradictions formulated by Benedict in her introduction "have left a more lasting impression than Benedict's attempt to explain them"<sup>111</sup>. Criticism of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword's* contrast of American versus Japanese culture also came from Japan after the book's first publishing in Japanese. In 1950, the journal of the Japanese Society of Ethnology dedicated a special issue to Benedict's approach, and acknowledged authorities like Watsuji Testuro contributed articles which "objected strongly to the attempt to construct a holistic image of the Japanese people from questionable materials and with no consideration for history or regional differences"<sup>112</sup>. It is remarkable that Watsuji rejected Benedict's results on the grounds of too much generalization and too little empirical data for support, since we have seen that these are exactly the points for which he himself has to be criticized. Doi Takeo finds ethnocentrism in Benedict's arguments, which in his view prevents her from recognizing the superiority of Japanese emotions<sup>113</sup>. Of course, these two *nihonjinron* writers were convinced that a *gaijin*<sup>114</sup> could not speak authoritatively about Japanese culture. Dale sees the reason for this (initial) rejection in the timing of the book's publication in Japan.

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<sup>110</sup> Benedict, 1989, p.222

<sup>111</sup> Littlewood, Ian: *The Idea of Japan*. Western Images, Western Myths. London, Secker & Warburg, 1996, p.7

<sup>112</sup> Aoki, Tatsumo: "Anthropology and Japan. Attempts at Writing Culture". in: The Japan Foundation Newsletter, vol.XXII, no.3, October 1994, p.4

<sup>113</sup> Ref. to Dale, 1986, p.178f

<sup>114</sup> *gaijin* = foreigner

"The insistent challenge to Benedict's bona fide perhaps stems from the fact that she was trying to expound Japan's difference precisely at the time when, after the war, that country set about remodelling itself along Western lines."<sup>115</sup>

In 1994, one year before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, Aoki Tamotsu put in a word in favour of Ruth Benedict. He praised Benedict for her cultural relativistic approach, which avoided the one-sided bias that to him so many Westerners have adopted in their statements on Japan. Aoki even goes so far as to argue that quite contrary to judging the unfamiliar object of her research with traditional stereotypes, Benedict actually questioned the grounds of American self-awareness. In his words,

"it must have taken courage to write a monograph that could be constructed as a critical analysis of Western civilization at the time of Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March and Guadalcanal; of the anti-Japanese proganda films, of Japanese-Americans suspected and herded into concentration camps; and of general anti-Japanese hysteria."<sup>116</sup>

Benedict's assignment was clear. The government of the United States seemed to feel that during the war its army had unsuccessfully operated on the basis of "false" stereotypes of Japan. Now it was anthropologist's task to present a more realistic view of Japanese culture through Japanese eyes. She was employed to find an explanation for the Japanese behaviour that on more than one occasion had been anything from unexpected to shocking to Americans. The occupational powers were looking for a manual to help them predict the Japanese response to the measures they were about to implement in a defeated country so that conflict and unwelcome surprises could be avoided. However, I find it questionable whether Benedict's study can be called "courageous" and I do not see that she was successful in deconstructing the popular cliches and stereotypes. As a renowned anthropologist Benedict should have been able to detect the most important flaw in her study, the lack of first-hand information from a representative sample of Japanese society. If she did, this is not explicit in her book. The picture she paints of the Japanese culture is so contradictory that I doubt she would have accepted it as a "true" representation of the national character of any other community. Even without spending time in Japan it should have been obvious to her that there is diversity in every culture. At the same time, she should have been aware that the mechanisms of creating a meaningful

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<sup>115</sup> Dale, 1986, p.185

existence for oneself by trying to compromise is not a typical Japanese trait but is evident in every social entity. But Benedict insists that the inexplicable is what explains her theory. Watzlawick has his own theory about this explanation:

“Sobald einmal das Unbehagen eines Desinformationszustands durch eine wenn auch nur beiläufige Erklärung gemildert ist, führt zusätzliche, aber widersprüchliche Information nicht zu Korrekturen, sondern zu weiteren Ausarbeitungen und Verfeinerungen der Erklärung. Damit aber wird die Erklärung 'selbst-abdichtend', das heißt, sie wird zu einer Annahme, die nicht falsifiziert werden kann.”<sup>117</sup>

Once Benedict has accepted the incompatible contradictions of her assumptions as the guiding principle of the Japanese character, each further paradox serves to support her theory.

A very important characteristic of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is that it seems to serve as a piece of reality construction and identity-building for both sides, the American (1) and the Japanese (2).

1. For the American side, Benedict made the inexplicable explicable. What did not seem to fit familiar categories resulted in a complete picture under the new assumption of a paradox culture. The contradictions of the Japanese that had been challenging the dominant American worldview (as represented by those in power) and thereby had been endangering *American national identity* were made plausible by allowing them to exist side by side in the assumedly unique dual Japanese character. While I agree with Aoki that Benedict did offer a different perspective for looking at the Other, I do not follow his reasoning that the Japanese view was recognized as equal. As I have pointed out in my above discussion, the cultural relativistic approach Benedict seems to adopt in her introductory chapter is betrayed by the value statements made later in the book and by her repetition of the supposedly stark contrast between Japan and America, that is "them" and "us". It seems that Benedict is more interested to find alienness in the Japanese character than similarities to the (superior) American way.

"We prefer what is alien to reinforce our understanding of the world rather than challenge it. As long as differences are kept in opposition,

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<sup>116</sup> Aoki, 1994, p.5

<sup>117</sup> Watzlawick: *Wie wirklich ist die Wirklichkeit*, p.63



they strengthen our identity; when they are allowed alongside, they become alternatives and weaken it."<sup>118</sup>

2. For the Japanese side, it becomes understandable why Aoki recognizes "objectivity" in Benedict's study once we look at *nihonjinron* attempts to create meaning. *Nihonjinron* should be understood as the institutionalized way of Japanese self-perception rather than as representation of social "reality". It is thus an officially sanctioned search for identity, stating that "people in Japan are always aware of the existence of something that gives meaning to their lives and forms an unchanging reference for their patterns of behaviour"<sup>119</sup>. We have seen that expressions of the *nihonjinron* sentiment were strongest in periods of massive external influences on Japan, such as the coming of the West at the time of the *Meiji* Restoration. The patterns *nihonjinron* prescribes are designed to reinforce the individual's sense of belonging, to give a permanent hold in a changing environment. It is regarded "imperative not to lose sight of the 'essence' of Japanese culture. As long as one has 'Japanese spirit', it really does not matter how much appearances are transformed"<sup>120</sup>. *Nihonjinron* sets a standard for a meaningful existence within the community, just as conventions in Western cultures do. According to Aoki, Benedict gave legitimation to this Japanese view by trying to make it intelligible to Americans and by contrasting it with the American outlook on things. With the influences from the West and Japan's high grade of adoption of foreign custom in mind, this contrast becomes particularly important for a nation struggling to retain its national entity and identity.

## Summary

*Nihonjinron* can be seen as a reality construct that serves as a foundation for the Japanese people to define themselves as members of the national community. Therefore, *nihonjinron* is an attempt to answer the question for the meaning of existence by supplying the pieces that in combination create the unique national identity. The aspect of uniqueness is an important feature when looking at the dual purpose of the *nihonjinron* reality-construct: 1) it establishes a national unity by emphasizing common characteristics supposedly shared by the native

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<sup>118</sup> Littlewood, 1996, p.11

<sup>119</sup> Aoki, 1994, p.3

<sup>120</sup> Aoki, 1994, p.3

Japanese only, and 2) at the same time assimilates a great amount of external influence in order to develop the nation's economy by sharply distinguishing the Japanese from any other culture.

The *nihonjinron* "movement" is not driven by selflessly idealistic powers who only have the Japanese people's well-being in mind. It has to be regarded as a case of cultural nationalism. The assumption of free and natural subordination of the individual to a benevolent system of mutual care is used as a means for social and economic control. The notion of national culture "is an ideological construct which, in both Europe and Japan, emerged with the rise of the modern nation-state and helped to serve the demands of the state for social integration"<sup>121</sup>. Failure to fulfil one's predicted role within the national community is equal to conscious exclusion from this community and its promised benefits.

*Nihonjinron* ideology circulates around the assumption that the Japanese are a basically incomparable people because of their unique group-orientation. This supposed group-orientation is essentially opposed to "Western" individualism and has its roots in Japan's unparalleled geographical conditions and historical development (Watsuji). The *ie* stronghold and the social structure deduced from a system of family-like affiliation to the *nihonjinron* are the natural product of Japan's unique cultural homogeneity and racial entity. These did not only survive but remained "virtually unchanged from prehistorical times down to the present day"<sup>122</sup> (Nakane). Within this social construct, homogeneity results in consensus, which is the predominant characteristic of the innate hierarchical organization. Voluntary dependence relationships are the rule (*Doi*), diversity and individual experience are concepts unfamiliar to the *nihonjinron* "Weltanschauung". Shame due to neglect of the individual's predetermined role in the community acts as a regulating force and driving power. The accepted *modus operandi* is situational, depending on context and type of obligation, and guilt-consciousness as understood by democratic societies plays a minor role (Benedict). The combination of the above factors make the Japanese a uniquely different culture, the essence of which can be understood, or rather emotionally experienced (*haragei*), by native Japanese only. Based on the equation of language and culture, with the latter by its very nature not resting on the "Western" concepts of *logos* and *ratio*, members of other national communities have no means to fully

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<sup>121</sup> Morris-Suzuki: Re-Inventing Japan, p.155

<sup>122</sup> Dale, 1986, "Introduction"

recognize the kernel of the Japanese culture. The exclusive authority of members of the Japanese national entity is repeatedly emphasized, and the *nihonjinron* spokesmen regard critical analysis deriving from non-Japanese sources as *per se* invalid.

Japanese *nihonjinron* representatives and their American followers alike share a view that contrasts Japanese culture, which is defined by emphasis of the group over the individual, against American culture, which is guided by emphasis of the individual over the group. Two incongruent ways of self-realization thereby face each other. *Nihonjinron* regards the belief in belongingness as the motive for the "individually unconscious individual's" self-abandonment to the community, which is not in the least understood as sacrifice. The contrasting American way is individual self-awareness as the socio-culturally predicted mode of meaningful existence within the national community, which supposedly is not understood as the predominant point of reference.

However, these two directions are institutionalized ideals. We have seen that the *nihonjinron* worldview is a construct not relying on empirical proof and that it precludes diversity because it poses a threat. But

"... the culture which exists within any country is both dynamic and diverse, it changes over time and is shaped and reshaped by contact with other societies: 'therefore, what is called Japanese culture, or so-and-so culture, divided by some frontier, does not exist'<sup>123</sup>.

American culture seems to depend on a sense of attachment to the community, too. Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who visited the United States in the 1830s and became famous for his observations on the American conduct of life, found a surprising contradiction between ideal and "reality".

"The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety. ... [Yet] I know of no other country in which there is so little independence of mind ... as in America ... It seems at first sight as if all the minds of the Americans were formed upon one model, so accurately do they follow the same route."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Morris-Suzuki: *Re-Inventing Japan*, o.155

<sup>124</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville as quoted in: Mathews, Gordon: *What Makes Life Worth Living?* How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds. Berkeley/ Cal., Univ. of California Press, 1996, p.29.

Still today, conformity assigns every individual a role within the community. The harmony of the group, the functional order of the regulating body that provides the essential means for existence must not be disturbed by "selfish" goals, that is individual opinion. We have seen earlier how the *nihonjinron* reality-construct can be used in the very same way by various interest groups in Japan and consequently in America. Quite obviously, one could also argue that co-existence within a community, be it family, friends, the corporate or national community, necessarily asks for a certain degree of conformity in order to avoid chaos. One could also justly state that "no man is an island" and that absolute individualism would lead to isolation, while man as a human being has an inbred need to associate himself with other members of his environment.

I will not try to solve this "battle" here. My point is that there is no exclusivity in both the Japanese and the American culture with regards to group-orientation versus individual self-reliance. At the same time I agree with Mathews in that "there still seems to be a persistent cultural emphasis in the United States on the individual and in Japan on the group"<sup>125</sup>. But these are tendencies that are more dominant in some members of a group and less dominant in others. We should therefore be talking about gradual differences rather than unique features. We are now going to take a look at how institutionalized views shape perception of the Self and the Other in the next chapter, before we examine how the images resulting from agreement with or refusal of pictures of Japan have found their way into American literature and public opinion.

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Ruth Benedict uses the same author to support her theory that the U.S., other than Japan, does not recognize hierarchal etiquette (ref. to Benedict, 1946, p.45f), while Edith Wharton in her novel The Age of Innocence (New York, D. Appleton, 1920) described just that: 19<sup>th</sup> century's high society's complete surrender to appearances and etiquette.

<sup>125</sup> Mathews, 1996, p.37

*They didn't want to be taught, having already decided what they preferred to believe.*  
*P.D. James, Innocent Blood*

## **Part 1, Chapter 2**

"Reality isn't what it used to be"

Identity, Perception and Prejudice

Before we go into a detailed examination of images of Japan in American literature, we need to take a look at the construction of reality in general. In his essay on postwar American images of Japan, Glazer struggles with the distinction between image and "reality".

"If one deals with the works of experts and semi-experts, to what extent can one distinguish 'image' from 'reality'? But this is a problem in all research of images and there is no easy way of solving it. I have assumed that even experts may have 'images' which may or may not be sufficiently supported by reality. To counter this *lese-majeste* towards experts, I would add that even the images of ordinary people are based to some extent on realities."<sup>126</sup>

This statement presupposes that there is an objectivity, which enables man to see the world "as it really is". In order to get to this objective view of things, however, one has to be an expert, that is one has to be in possession of a certain amount of special knowledge about something. The question now is: How much knowledge does one need in order to be a true expert? Is there an omniscient authority whose role it is to decide who is an expert in a specific area? Are the observations of these commonly acknowledged experts absolutely correct, and those of Glazer's "semi-experts" therefore only "semi-correct"? In this chapter I will argue against the assumption that there is one ultimate truth, one singularly valid view of life as opposed to many subjective and less valid opinions. It will be my hypothesis that there are as many different realities as they are human beings in this world and that each of these multiple realities is perceived as true on the basis of very personal experiences and expectations. Further, it is my belief that one's sense of identity is the strongest determinant in

her perception of the Self and the Other. In this I follow the assumptions of pragmatic pluralism, a view of the world, the origins of which can be found in Ralph Waldo Emerson and which culminates in William James, John Dewey and Richard Rorty.<sup>127</sup>

"From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational for us to believe may not be *true*, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea. It is to say that there is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, or new hypothesis, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along. For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can. Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get."<sup>128</sup>

Pragmatic pluralism provides diverse interest groups, groups defined by ethnical, political or religious characteristics, with a basis for communication and peaceful co-existence. At the same time it allows the individual to enter meaningful social relationships which help her reach a sense of identity. I dare say that pragmatic pluralism is the pre-requisite for democracy, in that democracy acknowledges and accepts pluralism, the existence of different, even contradicting interests. It incessantly calls for compromise and voluntary subordination to majority decisions. Democracy is therefore not so much interested in "truth" but aims at establishing an equilibrium for the sake of social peace. In Rorty's words the pragmatist's view gives up the notion

"that membership in our biological species carries with it 'certain rights', a notion which does not seem to make sense unless the biological similarities entail the possession of something nonbiological, something which links our species to a nonhuman reality and thus gives the species moral dignity."<sup>129</sup>

The basis for any understanding of the world, be it the pragmatist's or the realist's, is the recognition that human beings need to give sense to their lives.

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<sup>126</sup> Glazer, Nathan: "From Ruth Benedict to Herman Kahn. The Postwar Japanese Image in the American Mind". in: Irye, Akira (ed.): Mutual Images. Essays in American-Japanese Relations. Cambridge/Mass., London, 1975, p.148

<sup>127</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882; William James, 1842-1910; John Dewey, 1859-1952, Richard Rorty, 1931-

<sup>128</sup> Rorty, Richard: Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 23

<sup>129</sup> Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, p. 31

This is what gives them identity. Individual identity is the outcome of our "struggle for place", that is our attempt at making sense of our existence in this world and finding our place in it. Who am I and why am I here? are at the core of the individual's quest for the meaning of life. Demarcation in this instance is an important means to create and secure the individual entity against the overwhelming external influences and challenges or event threats that (modern) society brings about. "Demarcation" therefore is the construction of a social reality in which the individual has its place. According to my hypothesis of the "existence" of multiple realities, there are innumerable social reality constructs, and each serves to form a stable environment in which the individual human being can emulate its identity. Social reality constructs give birth to the illusion of permanence in a world constantly changing, of the *us* against *them* dualism in a world of merging borders.

"Our conversation with Nature is not just what it seems ... The senses interfere everywhere, and mix their own structure with all they report of ... The same interference from our organization creates the most of our pleasure and pain ... We live by our imaginations, by our admirations, by our sentiments. The child walks amid heaps of illusions, which he does not like to have disturbed ... The man lives to other objects, but who dare affirm that they are more real?"<sup>130</sup>

We are born into a world that is puzzling to us in its diversity and rapid progress. To make some sense of this sometimes unwelcoming environment becomes a basic human need. In order to be able to have a meaningful existence we must create an understanding of life. Therefore we need an operational framework which serves to categorize and order our perceptions and experiences. This framework is shaped by what our parents and other persons of authority tell us, by our very own experiences, past and present, and by our resulting expectations to the world. Obviously, at the same time the framework influences what we select to perceive and how we perceive it. This strategy answers to a necessary human condition and saves us from going crazy in an environment of indefinite and indefinitely changing systems of belief and meaning. However, the canonized modes of perception that we adopt and remodel for our very own needs can also prevent us from gathering new, differing, possibly contradictory impulses. There seems to be thin line between complete surrender to absolute relativism and stoic conservation of established modes of thinking.

"In this kingdom of illusions we grope eagerly for stays and foundations. There is none but a strict and faithful dealing at home, and a severe barring out of all duplicity or illusion there. Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth."<sup>131</sup>

To be aware of the mechanisms of reality construction is crucial so that we do not fall for interest-oriented projections of the "truth". Ideally, this awareness would lead to tolerance of other value systems and cultures. So while it does not appear to be possible to live without consistently making assumptions on which we ground our perceptions and experiences, it should be always on our minds how these formulations about what is happening around us come into place.

"... one cannot investigate an object (record an instance or note a fact) without first having a concept of that object or a theory about what that object is; and further to this, the concept one has of the object will quite basically influence the methodology one employs in approaching and investigating the object. [...]... a great number of our statements work in much the same way, suggesting that things and states of affairs are merely given, and thus disguising how they have actually been brought about. This is one of the legacies of empiricism; and at times, as we shall see, it can be powerfully interest-serving, and not just harmless fashion."<sup>132</sup>

Thus, reality is not something that exists outside and independent of ourselves, but is something we create *for* ourselves from the impressions we collect in compliance with our comprehensive framework. What then do we see fit to perceive (=accept) from the vast supply of possible impulses? On the assumption that we "use" perceptions to manifest our identity, it becomes clear that we pick those findings that are somehow related to our existence. In the words of William James, "Reality simply means relation to our emotional and active life."<sup>133</sup> Relevance is what supports our concept of being, what provides us with a sense of belonging, what helps to answer the all preceding and ever present question for meaning. We want to be an integral part of this world, we want our place to be secured and accepted by others.

"... the whole system of relevances which governs us within the natural attitude is founded upon the basic experience of each of us: I

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<sup>130</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "Illusions", in: *Essays and Lectures. The Conduct of Life*. Literary Classic of the United States, New York, 1983, p.1116

<sup>131</sup> Emerson, "Illusions", p.1122

<sup>132</sup> Harris, Kevin: *Education and Knowledge. The Structured Misrepresentation of Reality*. London, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p.8; 14

<sup>133</sup> James, William: "The Perception of Reality". in: *The Principles of Psychology*. Cambridge/ Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1981, Vol.II, p.924



know that I shall die and I fear to die. This basic experience we suggest calling the fundamental anxiety. It is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate. From the fundamental anxiety spring the many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, of wants and satisfactions, of chances and risks which incite man within the natural attitude to attempt the mastery of the world, to overcome obstacles, to draft projects, and to realize them."<sup>134</sup>

We find ourselves in a circular process, where our sense of identity determines our expectations and what we find relevant, which then shapes our perspective, which influences perception. Perception finally is what builds our identity, and so forth.

### **The Importance of Relevance**

Conscious awareness of our environment is a continuous process of inclusion and exclusion. Perceptions that bear no relevance to our lives are cast away as unreal, as not part of our reality construct. It follows that perceptions are heavily dependent on our expectations as to how the world should be in relation to our concept of self. If we have a strong sense of ourselves and regard our mode of living as good and right, differing ways are susceptible to being considered as not only alien but wrong or less worthy.

"The sentiment of reality can attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for purpose of definite description, can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all."<sup>135</sup>

We construct our own reality, and this reality is what builds our ego, our identity. Consequently this applies to every individual so that many variations of worldviews, some of them contradicting each other, are being produced all the time. As there is ongoing interaction between the different reality constructs, there is an ongoing struggle to maintain one's position and clear picture of the legitimate *me* against *you*. The existence of diverse systems outside ourselves that seem to work just as well or even better poses a threat to our established image of ourselves. These systems endanger the very grounds of our existence, that is the sets of assumptions and definitions that are the pillars of our identity. If

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<sup>134</sup> Schutz, Alfred: The Problem of Social Reality. in: *Collected Papers*, Vol.I, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1944, p.228

<sup>135</sup> James, William: "The Reality of the Unseen". in: The Varieties of Religious Experience. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 55

we are uncertain of our standpoint this can result in a fierce battle that beats all "logical" and "sensible" understanding for sheer self-preservation.

### **Knowledge and Prejudice**

Stereotypes are often used means in our security system that help us to maintain our identity. Stereotypes seem the natural result of our selective awareness and our continuous while most of the time unconscious classification and categorization of the world. Stereotypes are founded on pre-judice, which gets a less negative connotation if seen in correspondence with the previously stated arguments. Pre-judgment appears as the indispensable pre-condition of seeing and understanding our surroundings. Pre-judgment therefore is what culminates into knowledge, knowledge of the world, knowledge of life, knowledge of us and others.

"... knowledge can be seen to be the product of sensory experience filtered through conceptual schemes. And concepts, and conceptual schemes, have more than just a strong historical-social character about them; the concepts that are available to people are actually determined by the socio-historical milieu in which those people live. This, however, in no way implies that conceptual schemes necessarily describe the world as it is; nor does it imply that conceptual schemes necessarily mirror or reveal our knowledge of the world. But given, as we have repeatedly stressed, that concepts precede investigation, it certainly does imply that our investigations of the world are necessarily socio-historically determined ... Prejudice, in its non-perjorative sense, means pre-judging, and thus it can hardly be distinguished from knowledge, experience and preconceptions, all taken together."<sup>136</sup>

In common usage prejudice and stereotype are disavowed, as if there was another, true picture ready to be discovered if all defenses fell. To me this does not seem very practical, to say the least. As I have tried to make clear, it is much less important if an image is considered accurate by a majority of people. In my view, such an evaluation or judgment is just another reality construct that seems functional to a certain group of people sharing a common goal. I regard it as much more worthwhile to think about where these judgments stem from and why they are in place. Which interest group do they serve? Are they a power tool? Do they try to accomplish more than justifying an individual search for identity?

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<sup>136</sup> Harris, Education and Knowledge, p.24

"On the one hand, prejudice enables us to perceive more than we see. On the other hand, it is instrumental in producing *selective noticing*..."<sup>137</sup>

Where do the features come from that are responsible for our tendency to add further interpretations to or to reduce the importance of what we see? Identity, which we found to be the major aspect here, is usually not formed outside of society or completely independent of other individuals' beliefs. It seems safe to state that "no man is an island", which means that each of us recognizes his place in the world as part of one group or the other. The sense of belonging is also a sense of group identification. In Part 1, Chapter 1 we saw that group orientation is often ascribed to the Japanese culture as a national character trait. But far from being something uniquely Japanese, group orientation is another major influence on identity building for most human beings.

### **The Group as Point of Reference**

In order to define our individual position we need points of reference. Groups do not only provide people who share the same features, beliefs and/or interests with such a point of reference. Further, because more than one person (voluntarily) supports a certain concept, additional credibility is given to the individual who is referring to the group. The group supplies the foundation for the growth of individual identity, and conformity to the group secures justification and legitimation of one's views. Dewey calls it the "defining characteristic of mediocrity in state and church, in political and spiritual life, [...] that truth presents itself to the individual only through the medium of organized authority".<sup>138</sup> However, it seems to be that still today the individual "surrenders" to organized authority out of its own accord. Obviously, our own expectations meet and in some cases collide with group interests, the latter being predominantly directed at maintaining the group harmony, stability and functionality. The crucial point here is: how much are we prepared to subordinate our personal goals to that of the group? If we insist on our own angle of vision, is it worth endangering the group's reality construct and possibly losing the group's protection? Gordon Mathews in his study *What Makes Life Worth Living?* speaks of the Social Ethic as the governing rule in modern American society:

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<sup>137</sup> Harris, Education and Knowledge, p.25

"... 'a major shift in American ideology' was taking place: the Protestant Ethic was being transformed into the Social Ethic, 'the contemporary body of thought which makes morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual' ... The Social Ethic includes the 'belief in 'belongingness` as the ultimate need of the individual' ...; 'the organization man' adheres to this ethos as a justification for his existence, ..., and is molded to it through business-oriented education, corporate norms, and a suburban community life mirroring at home the norms of the corporate workplace."<sup>139</sup>

Society for most of us is the foremost point of reference. It is the society we live in, or rather our perceived cultural community, which can very well exceed national borders and for example be characterized as "the West" as opposed to "the East", "the Japanese", or another "other". Society is supposed to look after us, to give us shelter, provide us with food and work. We formulate our self-awareness in reference to society, or in denial of its structures and rules, if we are unsatisfied with society's care.

"Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs."<sup>140</sup>

Emerson's credo for self-reliance calls for a re-evaluation of institutionalized modes of thinking and behaviour. It calls for a turning away from society, if that society does not fulfil its function to give equal opportunities for self-realization to all of its members. Emerson saw nature as the "true" point of reference, while society for him bore the ever present danger of blinding its members with encrusted customs that only served the purposes of those in power. Consequently, identity should not be built from conformity but by persistently doing away with canonized views and by refreshing the senses for the only "real" awareness of one's being. Emerson was exceptionally well-read and very interested in different and contradicting worldviews, which he used to

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<sup>138</sup> Dewey, John: "The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge". in: *The Essential Writings*. New York, Harper, 1977, p.58

<sup>139</sup> Mathews, Gordon: What Makes Life Worth Living? How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1996, p.30-31

<sup>140</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance", in: *Essays and Lectures*, p.261. "Realities" in this case does not refer to the aforementioned reality constructs. The term should be understood as an expression of Emerson's understanding that in contrast to society's view, the world (=nature) "in reality" is something defined by continuous progress and cannot be institutionalized.

continuously re-evaluate his own thinking.<sup>141</sup> He asked his contemporaries to do the same and not to shy away from unconventional ideas.

Humanity finds it curious and good to go back to the scenes of Auld Lang Syne, to the old mansion house of Asia, the playground of its childhood. ... It brings the mind palpable relief, to withdraw it from the noisy and overgrown world to these peaceful, primeval solitudes.  
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Here, Emerson uses an image of Asia as a storehouse of original wisdom in his criticism of "humanity's" tendency not to question what is regarded as right and true by the ruling class.

### **Japan as Point of Reference**

The Asian continent has become a point of reference for many, ever since the first travellers returned with their accounts of the Orient. We have seen that individual self-awareness is built both by identification and by differentiation, each mode influencing our perception. Identification with a group, be it a peer group, the country one lives in or the cultural community, is likely to emphasize similarities, while differentiation leads to pointing out the distinctive otherness of those outside one's group. In the same respect, Japan serves as a foil against which identity (and here we mostly think of cultural identity) is formulated. We have drawn an "imaginative map of the world", held together by "the grip of established attitudes". To every one of us, Japan has "turned into a place of myth, an image either of our fears or of our fantasies."<sup>143</sup> We tend to project from the picture we have of ourselves and from the resulting expectations towards life to the perceived Other. If we are not satisfied with what for example our cultural community offers us with regards to value systems, religious beliefs and moral conduct, we are apt to look for these things somewhere else. In our search for a better world, all our hopes and fantasies strongly shape our perception and Japan becomes the land of the ancient sages, of Buddhism's anti-materialistic postulate, the land of beautiful landscape and a people which apparently is still in harmony with its cultural roots. If on the other hand we sense ourselves to be in the middle of a trade war between America and Japan, with the former suffering

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<sup>141</sup> Ref. to Richardson, Robert D.: Emerson. The Mind on Fire. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, California Univ. Press, 1995, p.29, 41ff.

<sup>142</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: *Journals*, I (1824). in: Carpenter, Yves F., Emerson and Asia. New York, Haskell House, 1968, p.8

from unfair Japanese trade policies, then Japan becomes a nation of business warriors, of ant-like workers in a pseudo-democratic state of feudal rule. Whatever our bias is, we feel the need to form a coherent picture of the Other. In view of what we have learned to expect we try to put our impressions of Japan into established categories. Harris calls these categories mental sets:

"... when people acquire a set, or a way of thinking, or a theoretical framework, or a mode of operation, they tend to slot their experience, sensory or otherwise, into that set."<sup>144</sup>

But what if new impressions do not fit into the existing slots? What if the Other does not seem explicable to us in otherwise well-proven terms? In trying to fit Japan into our categories we appear to be constantly frustrated by paradox and contradiction. Japan does not follow our concept of a primitive society as opposed to modern Western civilization, but since we commonly understand it as such, we put ourselves in an unsolvable dilemma. Some found the solution to this in declaring the paradox as the symbol of Japan's cultural uniqueness, as was illustrated in the previous chapter. Harris explains our perception of Japan as a paradox with our unwillingness to question our own beliefs.

"There is no inkling that our own angle of vision may account for these contradictions. They arise out of the inherent peculiarity of the culture... The Japanese seem, by their very nature, to be creatures of paradox."<sup>145</sup>

Failure to explain "the Japanese" is a recurring source of frustration, which can be vented into anger at this people's obvious unwillingness to adhere to our supposedly superior rules. Why can they not be like us? Why can they not behave like "normal" people? Again, we are less likely to recognize that different reality constructs might be at work, than to find relief in the assumption that we are right and *they* are wrong. Or, alternatively, our inability to understand Japanese custom according to our nomenclature leads us to mystification. In this case we feel that there is a riddle which we have not yet been able to solve, to which we are magically attracted and which serves as a refuge in comparison to our banal existence. In Emerson's words, "we are impatient of so public a life and

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<sup>143</sup> Littlewood, Ian: The Idea of Japan. Western Images, Western Myths. London, Secker & Warburg, 1996, p.xiii

<sup>144</sup> Harris, Education and Knowledge, p.28-29

<sup>145</sup> Littlewood, The Idea of Japan, p.8

planet, and run hither and thither for nooks and secrets".<sup>146</sup> We want the Other to be different, because without "them" there would be no "us".

### **Drawing Boundaries**

Perception of the Other presupposes Self-awareness. In order to experience something or someone as not coinciding with our circle of vision, we need clearly defined boundaries which separate the Self from the Other. Maintenance of these boundaries is necessary to support the existence of both, with each being its counterpart's legitimation.

"Boundaries are a source of security, we need them in order to define the world. They are, literally, what the business of definition is all about. Without east there is not west, without natives there are no sahibs, without 'them' there is no 'us'. To define what we are, we depend on what is alien."<sup>147</sup>

National communities provide the easiest way to set boundaries as the starting point for demarcation. In this case, the respective societies are likely to be treated as homogeneous units, in which diversity has to make room for the symbolic national characteristics ascribed to each and every member of these societies. Due to the socio-historical development of a given nation a common mental set is assumed for its citizens, such as "*the American mind*" or "*the Japanese character*".

"If there isn't an American mind or series of minds, it is clear that we would have had to invent one just because we seem constitutionally unable to imagine ourselves as a people without assuming that we are unified by common thoughts, aspirations, and feelings. These same books [the so-called classics] are in part an expression of this, and what they commonly reveal is a tendency to conceive of the nation on the analogue of an individual and therefore to view the expression of the nation's self-conscious life, its culture, as a result and manifestation of a single, or at least a uniform, intelligence or will. Hence whether we in fact possess a common mind in America may not be to the point at all; the nub of the matter is that we somehow need to think we do, and this need, rather than any collective form of consciousness of which it is the expression, may be as close as one can come to isolating any uniform patterns in the mental habits or experience of most Americans."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Emerson, "Experience", in: *Essays and Lectures*, p.480

<sup>147</sup> Littlewood, *The Idea of Japan*, p.8

<sup>148</sup> Gunn, Giles: *The Interpretation of Otherness. Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination*. New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1979, p.132

The country which constitutes our nationality is often the strongest image for reference, even though we may have many points of criticism about its system and power structure. In Emerson's words "great numbers dislike" society and "suffer conscientious scruples to allegiance", yet it is for "fear of doing worse" that people cling to it.<sup>149</sup> When confronted with the Other as an "alien" nation, a nation that seems to be comprised of a completely different mental set, we tend to subordinate our individual sentiments for the sake of self-awareness in reference to our national entity. A certain canon of literary classics, historical personalities commonly worshipped<sup>150</sup> and popular images that are apt to evoke the "national sentiment" serve to create and reinforce the analogy of the individual with its home country. Again, the same mechanisms are at work here as in *Nihonjinron* ideology. National entity, cultural homogeneity and unique characteristic features are assumed for the sake of a specific goal. The common denominator is the provision of meaningfulness. The human need to be someone is the ever present basis which lays the grounds for the construction of social realities, for the creation of points of reference, and for the functionality of group pressure.

"To be someone ... – one of the deep urges of the human heart; perhaps, if we knew how to reckon such things with finality, the deepest of all. It is a need that becomes more intensely felt – and also more difficult to satisfy – as the course of history carries us all further away from the old realities that structured our identities and life experiences for us."<sup>151</sup>

In the past it seemed to be easy to believe in the meaningfulness of existence if one only followed the credo of those in power, be it church or state. There was less magnitude of differing opinions on the right conduct of life, and there was less influx of competing information.

### **Sense-Making and Reality-Creation**

Today we find ourselves in the middle of a deafening and blinding stream of impulses from countless directions. Modern mass media has succeeded in

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<sup>149</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic". from *Representative Men*. in: *Essays and Lectures*, p. 694

<sup>150</sup> In spite of the diverse currents of opinion and lifestyle which are at work within a nation, there can hardly be any doubt that personalities like John F. Kennedy in the United States or the late Emperor Hirohito in Japan evoke a national pride that for a period of time overrides contradictory sentiments on a lower level.



supplying us with so many and often contradictory possible points of reference that we are having a hard time not only maintaining our sanity but also keeping our self-awareness intact, our identity stable. There is no longer just one system at work, there are many, and many of them seem to be working perfectly well while they are diametrically opposed at the same time. We have to find our own path in this jungle, we are thrown back to creating our own meaningful reality.

"The one essential given of man's experience ... is his problematic co-existence with a world of his own making, and everything he does he does in response to this fact. Shipwrecked amid circumstances ... and unable to live in a constant state of uncertainty, man must find some tentative solutions to this predicament, must give at least a portion of his life some stability. But as tentative solutions to the problem of reality become more stable ..., they take on the character of ... beliefs about an aspect of reality that carry the authority of absolute certainty."<sup>152</sup>

We become our own gods, the creators of our own world, and with that we fall prey to the illusion that we are infallible. The stereotypes resulting from the boundaries we defined for our social reality become the ultimate measures according to which we perceive our environment. Instead of realizing that by the same token our fellowmen see themselves as their own gods within their own artificial realities, we rather judge everything on the basis of our catalogued understanding, and the more and longer we do so, the more security we seek and gain from this. We establish perceptual control mechanisms which constitute a sorting and selecting process, by which what we see is admitted only if it fits the pattern or is supplemented to make it recognizable. If it seems of no relevance to us, or contradicts what we hold true and right, the perception will be rejected.

Neither are we generally very tentative in seeking foundations for our being – what we (mis-) interpret as "truth", that is the views and values upon which we are able to act and react to our environment –, nor are we particularly eager to give up the comfort of this stability. However, the resulting gap between our yearning for stability and the unavoidable natural progress of all things around us often enough causes us great amazement, as Emerson described it in the introductory poem to his essay "Experience":

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<sup>151</sup> Anderson, Walter T.: Reality Isn't What It Used to Be. San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1993, p.131

"Little man, least of all,  
Among the legs of his guardians tall,  
Walked about with puzzled look: -  
Him by the hand dear nature took;  
Dearest nature, strong and kind,  
Whispered, 'Darling, never mind!  
Tomorrow they will wear another face,  
The founder thou! these are thy race!'"<sup>153</sup>

This world of ever changing values is like a ship on the rocking sea to us. We have created our very personal means to keep the balance. But we constantly confuse the systems of meaning we ourselves have created with an assumed objective reality, we confuse the image with the object. We end up with a circular argument as the grounds for our being: we give legitimation to our reality construct with the natural "facts" it was supposed to find an explanation for. We seem to be trapped by ourselves, immobilized by the basic human need to make sense of the world and to "be someone" in it. In Anderson's words: "We do not know how to live in a world of socially constructed realities, yet we find it increasingly difficult to live in anything else."<sup>154</sup> The mechanisms have been alike at all times, it is the shift in authority, that means who provides the dominant belief system, that matters.

### **The Evolution of Reality Constructs**

In his work on reality constructs, appropriately subtitled *Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World*, Anderson gives an account of the development of belief-giving authority.

"In premodern societies ... the duty of persons in authority was to maintain the official worldview; that of everybody else, to conform to it. ... Premodern societies did not generally entertain the idea of any possible gulf between objective reality and social belief systems, much less the idea that it might be possible for other societies to have much different but equally good worldviews."<sup>155</sup>

The existence of contradictory but still equally valid realities in different societies was unthinkable; diverging worldviews were ascribed to the fact that the other society was not civilized enough to "see the light". What followed was the age of

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<sup>152</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, p.140

<sup>153</sup> Emerson, "Experience", p.467

<sup>154</sup> Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*, p.4

Enlightenment and with it the breakdown of the traditional value system. Stepping into modernity humankind brought about "a kind of unregulated marketplace of realities in which all manner of belief systems are offered for public consumption"<sup>156</sup>. Now we have to make a choice. Still there are people or institutions telling us what to believe, however, suddenly there are so many voices it has become hard to decide who to listen to. And each of these voices is claiming to know the one and only truth about the world, about the meaning of life. We experience "a new polarization, a conflict about the nature of social truth itself"<sup>157</sup>, assuming there was this one objective and all explaining knowledge lying hidden somewhere and just waiting to be discovered.

"Given the freed individual, who feels called upon to create a new heaven and a new earth, and who feels himself gifted with the power to perform the task to which he is called – and the demand for science, for a method of discovering and verifying truth, becomes imperious."<sup>158</sup>

In deciding which "truth" we want to believe in, we create our own universe. However, we fail to acknowledge this process of reality-construction. What Anderson calls "the birth of a global culture" does not really change our attitude here. Even though "all belief systems look around and become aware of all other belief systems"<sup>159</sup>, the tendency to regard one's very own system as superior persists. The interaction of different realities does not automatically result in understanding and acceptance but can lead to opportunistic sufferance as long as this appears politically wise. Returning eruptions of conflict within the "global community" betray the ever present undercurrents of diverging reality constructs.

Going back to the assumption that the definition of otherness is crucial for our identity building, it appears that it is increasingly difficult to maintain one's sense of self within a system aiming at equality of all its members. If that was possible, do we want our fellowmen to identically share our sets of belief? Or do we want to retain something that makes us or the group we refer to unique and sets us apart from others? Do we rather want to cherish the illusion that we, as opposed to the "unenlightened" rest of the world, have found the true way to happiness, fulfilment, or whatever we may call it?

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<sup>155</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.7

<sup>156</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.6

<sup>157</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.6

<sup>158</sup> Dewey, John: "The Significance of the Problem of Knowledge", p.61

<sup>159</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.6

"The collapse of a belief system can be like the end of the world. It can bring down not only the powerful, but whole systems of social roles and the concepts of personal identity that go with them. Even those who are most oppressed by a belief system often fear the loss of it. People can literally cease to know who they are."<sup>160</sup>

The obvious fear must be that not our construct but that of someone else might turn out to be superior. This is not what we intend, if we were to vote for one ultimate angle of vision. And this is not what the ones in power have on their minds. The existence of different, contradicting versions of the "truth" has always been a probate means of social control. Belief in the validity of one's own self-created universe results in opposition against other modes, which might lead to active rejection and rebellion.

### **Ideology and Social Control**

Every group is bonded by shared views of life, of the group's environment and of the supposedly right behavioural mode, that is every group is bonded by an ideology. In common usage ideology is often associated with a negative undertone, while first and foremost it is simply a set of ideals which its proponents have opted to act by.<sup>161</sup> Ideology is what gives justification to a certain *modus operandi*, and ideology is what influences the perception of its followers. While born from the above discussed human need to bring stability and reason into one's existence, ideology is apt to become a power tool.

"... if the ruling group won out [in propagating their view], then an ideological belief would have developed into lived consciousness, whereby people would live in, and come to accept as given and right, a world that encourages, reinforces and protects a belief system, purely ideological, that was perpetrated by the ruling forces whose interests it actually serves."<sup>162</sup>

Ideology serves the interests of an individual or, more commonly, of a group, which then undertakes the necessary means to maintain the realization of its interests. As I have tried to show in Part 1, Chapter 1, the respective group offers its members something in return for adherence to its rules, be it in the positive (as in rewards) or in the negative sense (as in the threat of punishment). The

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<sup>160</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.27

<sup>161</sup> "Ideology = The doctrines, opinions, etc. of an individual, class, etc." In: Webster's New World Dictionary. Warner Books Paperback Ed., 1990, p.292

<sup>162</sup> Harris, Education and Knowledge, p.65

institutionalized structure becomes the point of reference, the source of stability to the majority of the participants in this belief system. Active maintenance then calls for the establishment of means of control, which become the more effective the more people are involved in this. Social control from the very bottom to the top of the ideological hierarchy ensures support on every level. Obviously, this support works to strengthen the system, which executes reinforced influence on individual perception. Again, the interdependence of ideology, identity and perception becomes visible. Each is unthinkable without the other.

Therefore we do not only find ideology in nationalism, ideology is always there when a system of particular interests is at work. This can be conservative upholding of a given *status quo* just as much as revolutionary opposition. This can be fierce speaking in favour of the structures one finds in place in one's society as much as escapist turning away from one's original cultural background. Japonisme, Asian exoticism and Orientalism are forms of ideology which have constructed certain images of the Other and which can serve two purposes. Images of the Orient, generally speaking, can support an understanding of the Occident as superior, or they can work in the opposite direction. As I will illustrate in the following chapters, in literary communities such as the 19th century travelers to Japan or the Beat poets Asia very often stands for a better world still in tune with traditional values, a world that has not yet fallen prey to the materialism the West has surrendered to. But Orientalism operates on an ever broader basis.

"... Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world [...] Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world."<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Said, Edward W.: Orientalism. London, Penguin, 1991, p.12

The images we have created of the Orient and, more specifically, of Japan in fact tell more about us and how we perceive the world around us than about the object of our observation itself. At the same time the above quote makes clear that it is far from easy to disentangle this web of traditional beliefs, canonized education, individual experience, and personal motives. No two minds are the same, no two perceptions are identical, and so each of us nurses mental sets which have incorporated some of the beliefs and values we have found in others but which are not quite like them. Even within one political campaign that cries out for equal trade between the United States and Japan and which makes the latter the scapegoat for economic troubles in America, different individual interests could be detected behind the scenes. The same is true for the group of American intellectuals seeking spiritual fulfilment in Japanese religion. Upon closer examination a magnitude of personal motives might become apparent.

This refers me back to my investigation of expectations as an important determinant of perception. Expectations help to form stereotypes which in return help to sort new impressions into existing patterns of comprehension. Stereotypes are therefore closely linked to our established understanding of the world around us. The resulting expectations "teach us what to look for, and that is what we find ... We are left with a reality selected for us by our stereotypes."<sup>164</sup> Of course, we are not aware of these mechanisms. William James ascribes our reactions to the world around us to our subconsciousness:

"Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of result; and something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it."<sup>165</sup>

Eventually this means that even if there was some ultimate truth, the individual human being might reject it on the basis of its own value system, if its belief in this system was only strong enough.

### **The Point of It All<sup>166</sup>**

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<sup>164</sup> Littlewood, *The Idea of Japan*, p.xiii

<sup>165</sup> James, William: "The Reality of the Unseen". in: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1985, p.73

<sup>166</sup> I borrowed this headline from Hayden White's "The Point of It All", in: *New Literary History II* (Autumn, 1970)

What does this leave *us* with? It was my argument in this chapter that the quest for identity stands behind every act of perception. And an *act* it is in that we do not simply see something prior to making any judgments or prior to trying to fit it into existing patterns. We usually "see" the world before the background of our own experience, education and expectations. Upon these latter we have built our sense of self, that is our identity. Identity is what gives us stability and a sense of belonging in an environment of innumerable possible new impulses per second. At the same time identity is what shapes our views and determines what will be accepted and transformed into knowledge and what will be rejected because it does bear no relevance to our reality construct. Naturally, we do not welcome challenges to our established views, as these constantly endanger our sense of self, the more so if confronted with totally different beliefs and modes of behaviour, which seem to work with the same ease. Our ideology is our religion in the sense that our convictions are based on what we believe. This does not have to a belief in any of the gods which contemporary religions offer, it can also be a belief in a realist's view of life, which is based on the assumption that there is a truth corresponding with nature which we are able to discover only through reason. Religion, according to Gunn,

"typically uses the materials of culture paradigmatically, to preserve or to construct a model of reality that simultaneously serves as a map or template of the way things 'truly are' and suggests a set of interdictions and prescriptions for determining one's conduct in relation to it."<sup>167</sup>

The problem with ideologies, religions, or national identities, is that they compete with each other. Ever since Japan's opening to the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "the West" has time and again found itself confronted with a nation both completely alien to it and yet apparently civilized. This has made it hard to apply traditional categories of good and bad, right and wrong. This means that the non-Japanese observers, with their strong beliefs in the superiority and essential benevolence of their own culture, have had to come to terms with a new phenomenon of Otherness. Thereby the image of Japan as something between a modern-nation state and the wilderness, as a bulwark to the primitive so to say, was established. This view was readily accepted at the very beginning by both sides, that is the one in favour of and the one in opposition to the "Japanese way", and has been constantly reinforced by repetition. By now the myth of Japanese uniqueness has

become common "knowledge", as became evident in the discussion of *nihonjinron*.

Today we have every means to double-check our images by looking in more than one direction. There are many possible sources of information about Japan, from mass media and scholarly works to field studies in Japan. However, as I have shown, personal motives not only come between us and the "real" world but are also a potential hinderance to the acceptance of views different from our own.

"[Our] mind changes only slowly, as both external circumstances and individual interest compel modifications in the organized body of meanings and aptitudes that dispose the self to respond this way rather than in the face of new experience ..."<sup>168</sup>

"Mind" is the organizer of experiences, perceptions and impressions for us, making the world intelligible for us and providing patterns of appropriate behaviour. It thus enables us to react in a "sensible" way to what we see.

"As the ever-present but always changing background of which consciousness is the foreground, mind is to be associated with that continuum of meaningful symbolic activity which enables the self to manage its contacts with the environment. It accomplishes this by translating those contacts into construable signs, signs that simultaneously permit the self 'to synthesize, delay and modify [its] reactions' to 'the gaps and confusions of [its] experience, and by means of these 'signs' to add the experience of other people to [its] own.'"<sup>169</sup>

In a world constantly on the move the mind has to be subject to changes. Otherwise our surroundings would no longer make sense to us. However, individuals react very differently to changes. While one person is eager to adopt, the next one permanently puts up strong resistance to the forces of progress. What changes we accept therefore depends on the condition that our understanding of the world is preserved. This plays an important role in our reaction to change respectively to unfamiliar things and ways. Evidently, this is where the whole issue of conditioned and selective perception becomes problematic, namely

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<sup>167</sup> Gunn: *The Interpretation of Otherness*, p. 6

<sup>168</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, p.136. Referring to: Dewey, John: *Art as Experience*. 1934. New York, Capricorn, 1958

<sup>169</sup> Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, p.138



"at the point where our apprehension of the world outstrips our capacities for comprehending it, or conversely, where canonized modes of comprehension have closed off our capacities for new experience."<sup>170</sup>

Reality constructs based on consciously or unconsciously interest-oriented perceptions are the grounds for our (national and individual) identity; the more fixed they are, the more vulnerable we react when confronted with different reality constructs. Encountering completely different worldviews based on different experiences and value systems, which at the same time in spite of their being different seem to serve their function well enough (or even better), threatens the fragility of our self-created universe. We may therefore tend to view things from an assumed elevated standpoint, take the superiority of our position as granted and consider diverging lifestyles as either wrong or inferior. The existence of equally valid systems of belief next to ours is a concept difficult for us to grasp, particularly if we operate on the presupposition that there is only one "really true truth". However hard we try to accept that there might be different views, different realities and therefore different legitimate opinions for different individuals, we still cling to that deep-rooted conviction that in the end there is only one path leading to absolute knowledge, that means insight into the meaning of life.

The more often something is repeated, the more "true" it appears to be. An assumption thus gets commonly acknowledged and institutionalized and is eventually used to legitimate its very own existence and to "prove" other views wrong. This can be consciously planned and directed from above, and *nihonjinron* is a good example of how something that seems plain irrational reasoning to many is turned into pseudo-scientific based "natural facts" by its proponents.

"... reification is the apprehension of the products of human activity as *if* they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations or divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness."<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> White, "*The Point of It All*", as quoted in Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness*, p.151

<sup>171</sup> Berger, Peter L./ Luckmann, Thomas: *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1967, as quoted in: Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, p.39

Man as the creator of his own universe repeatedly finds himself in situations where he has to make choices. The already mentioned "thin line" seems to be where the individual is still aware of the *fact* that he lives within his reality construct which is not necessarily consistent with the reality construct of his fellow human being, while at the same time maintaining a practicable system of beliefs and consequent actions for himself.

"A philosophical system, a scientific theory, a religion, or even a personal identity does not have to be a precise mirror of ultimate reality as long as it works more or less well in its context. ... we know from our experience with burglars' tools and passkeys that a number of different keys may work."<sup>172</sup>

The key for survival in today's information society, which showers us with an endless flow of information impulses in every second of our lives, then lies in coming to terms with a "new", a multi-faceted reality.

### **The Dilemma**

The dilemma in my foregoing argument becomes apparent: Following the hypothesis that there is no one truth but a multitude of subjective reality constructs and that each of them is just as legitimate on its own grounds one could just as easily deconstruct my assumptions as my very personal illusions about human perception. It is the dilemma of deconstructivism.

"... it is some 2.500 years since the Buddha had his moment of profound insight into the illusory nature of human experience, and began trying (with indifferent success) to tell his followers, in word, the truth about words. The Buddha was the first deconstructionist."<sup>173</sup>

We cannot escape the paradox of comprehension, the paradox underlying every attempt to make the world understandable. Trying to prove the incapability of words to explain "reality" by still using words is a contradiction in itself. If we assume that we are subject to a selective and illusory mode of perception, how can we be sure that this assumption is not an illusion again? Once we have accepted the fact that the world is just too big for us to put into never changing neat little categories, we have manoeuvred ourselves into this very dilemma: We should either never again try to explain anything in words and concepts, or

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<sup>172</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.70-71

<sup>173</sup> Anderson, Reality Isn't What It Used to Be, p.x

we should accept the *fact* that there are no "facts" and make the most of it by finding a system that works for ourselves and at the same time gives due credit to the fact that conditions around us permanently changing and that everyone has her own valid view of things. Tolerance seems to be a key word here. Being able to accept other views of the world while at the same time maintaining one's own position is the basis for communication and co-existence with other cultures.

## Part 2:

### From the Opening of Japan to World War II

I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance.  
Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone.  
Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

## **Part 2, Chapter 1**

### From Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lafcadio Hearn Spiritual Re-Orientation I

One of America's greatest minds, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Japanese Zen Buddhism share the conviction that the world is an illusion created by man, and a different one for each individual who creates it according to its experiences and expectations. This chapter will show that both worldviews offer an understanding of things that does not satisfy itself with stereotyping – the theme of this thesis – and go beyond examining motives for the construction of social realities. It will also illustrate that Emerson and Zen have a common basis, something which might not be expected from two major representatives of "national culture" from two nations that appear as different as the United States and Japan.

Repeatedly, at certain stages in history members of a culture start looking elsewhere for spiritual guidance. I argue that we can assume that this is because there is a felt lack of something in the domestic interpretation of life's ends – a gap between the official outlook on morally correct behaviour and one's individual wants and needs. I also say that there is then a combination of several factors at work which make people search for new horizons, such as political stagnation or unrest, economical success or depression, technological progress or backpeddaling, material affluence or deprivation, moral neglect or rigor.

The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw America changing from a rural society to a rapidly industrializing member of world trade, and the morals of once closed and dependent communities were facing change. Christian values had to compete with a more worldly view of things. For many the credo of a frugal existence in strict adherence to the Divine Law alone no longer seemed to match the necessities of business life rule, the exploding growth in the cities and the omnipresent material promise of economical success. How could religion survive in this turmoil of new values?

"It was in the 1820s that Americans began to awake to a fundamental transformation that was going on around them: a society that had been overwhelmingly rural since its foundation in the seventeenth century was entering a period of explosive urban growth. For many – churchmen, moralists, members of old elites, and even well-to-do and upwardly aspiring city dwellers – this development was profoundly disturbing. Would religion and morality find nurture in the cities? Indeed, would social order itself be able to survive this transformation?"<sup>174</sup>

What posed an intellectual challenge for the well-to-do was, plain and simple, a struggle for survival for the often praised common man. Four major crises shook America between 1837 and 1893, which "wiped out small business and brought cold, hunger and death to working people while the fortunes of the Astors, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Morgans kept growing through war and peace, crisis and recovery"<sup>175</sup>. Ralph Waldo Emerson saw poverty not only in the streets but also in people's hearts:

"There is a certain poor smell in the streets, in Beacon Street and Mount Vernon, as well as in the lawyers's offices, and the wharves, and the same meanness and sterility, and leave-all-hope-behind, as one finds in a boot manufacturer's premises."<sup>176</sup>

Food for thought came from the likes of Father Edward Taylor, one of the new figures in the pulpit who could cheer and uplift his congregation. His sermons were "explosive social texts that fused the mild theology of Boston liberalism with the daring imagery of colloquial revivalism"<sup>177</sup>. There was much someone like Emerson could learn from this outspoken minister of God in his own abandonment of the formalities and rituals of Christianity and his turn towards oriental wisdom.

"Ushering Southern argot and seaman's slang into the center of the Brahmin establishment, Taylor, who called himself 'a Unitarian graft on the Methodist stock', preached extemporaneous, free-flowing sermons filled with racy anecdotes and striking metaphors. In the middle of one typical sermon, tracing the moral descent of a country boy ruined by city vices like gambling and drinking, Taylor lifted his hand and whispered, 'Hush-h-h, he is cursing his mother – shut the

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<sup>174</sup> Boyer, P.: Urban Masses and Moral Order in America: 1820-1920. Cambridge/ Mass., 1978, p.1

<sup>175</sup> Zinn, Howard: A People's History of the United States. New York, Harper Perennial, 1990, p.237

<sup>176</sup> Emerson, as quoted in Zinn, p.215-216

<sup>177</sup> Reynolds, David S.: Beneath the American Renaissance. The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988, p.20

windows of heaven, shut the windows.' He treated divine matters with a new familiarity, as is shown by his homely advice: 'Don't burn the candle down to the end in sin and then give God the snuff.'<sup>178</sup>

This down-to-earthness and natural approach was what Emerson was looking for in his interpretation of religion as the basis for human conduct. Oriental wisdom and what he knew about Buddhism<sup>179</sup> stood for an immediacy with being that in Emerson's eyes had been lost for many Americans. According to Tweed, "Buddhism became increasingly attractive to many of the disillusioned just as Christianity became increasingly problematic."<sup>180</sup> Thus, Emerson was not alone with his petition for a spiritual re-orientation<sup>181</sup>. As the lead figure of the Transcendentalists, he stood for an intellectual movement that grew out of a dissatisfaction with the state of the "American mind". Transcendentalism incorporated both a "back to the roots" sentiment that aimed at re-inventing American culture and at introducing oriental philosophy, religion and art as the very image of mankind's cultural origin.<sup>182</sup> For Emerson and his followers, re-orientation did not mean turning away from their spiritual heritage. Quite on the contrary, it meant digging deep in one's own history for something that used to be part of the "national culture", something that was embedded for all mankind in the Orient as the birthplace of God and human culture.

For the following argument I have chosen Ralph Waldo Emerson as an example for two reasons:

1. Emerson represents the frame of mind of an influential group of American thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who felt that America was ready for new and fresh thought. Transcendentalism, or the American Renaissance, called for a revival of meaningful values in view of a world moving towards industrialization and materialism.

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<sup>178</sup> Reynolds, 1988, p.20

<sup>179</sup> Emerson's encounters with foreign religion originated in his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson's familiarity with Buddhism. His aunt was instrumental in young Emerson's formation. Mary Moody Emerson acted as a mentor and challenged Emerson's views with her own, often controversial, opinions, which were based on a strong belief and an extensive knowledge of philosophical and religious literature. – Ref. to Barish, Evelyn: Emerson. The Roots of Prophecy. Princeton/ N.J., Princeton Univ. Press, 1989, p.47

<sup>180</sup> Tweed, Thomas A.: The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912. Univ. of California Pr., 2000, p.xxxii

<sup>181</sup> Re-orientation here quite literally means a turn toward the Orient as the cradle of mankind and human culture and, appropriately enough, this is mirrored in the term itself.

<sup>182</sup> For a detailed description of the essence of Transcendentalism, refer to Horton, R./ Edwards, H.: Backgrounds of American Literary Thought. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1974, p.127f; and Curti, Merle: The Growth of American Thought. 3. Ed., New York, Harper & Row, 1964, p.296f

2. Secondly, Emerson's *Weltanschauung* came as close to Eastern thought, or more specifically, to the creeds of Zen Buddhism as anything ever has until today and can therefore be taken as proof for a common cultural heritage beyond national borders. Although Emerson was certainly well aware of oriental culture and obviously entertained his own constructs about Asia, its people, religions and arts, he had very little direct contact with the East in his formative years.<sup>183</sup> However, he prepared the grounds for many intellectuals in two ways: he pointed towards Eastern spiritualism as a possible answer for a nation on the lookout for a new value system. But more importantly, he laid out this "new" spiritualism as part of the very American heritage, which made it easily accessible and acceptable.

Thus, the first part of this chapter will outline the formation of Emersonian thought from its turning away from contemporary official Christianity to its striking resemblance to Japanese Zen Buddhism.

### **Emerson versus Traditional Christianity**

In 1832, after only six years in what had been the family tradition, Emerson left the pulpit feeling that the gap between his view of what religion should be and that of the Christian church had become too wide. However, Emerson did not abandon his belief, he was merely looking for a more appropriate way to articulate it, and that could not be found amidst fossilized formalities and rituals.

"When his [Emerson's] former parishioners read his declaration that he did not care to live anywhere longer than he had the liberty to seek and utter truth, they must have taken it to mean that he would never be a regular minister again. He had done all that he could well do in the narrow mahogany pulpit. He needed more elbowroom."<sup>184</sup>

But according to his own conviction, Emerson never ceased to be a minister, who for him did not depend on the concrete and wood of a church building nor on the formal environment of Sunday mass. Quite to the contrary, to him that was what the church had to get rid of: form and tradition. He made this the central theme of his famous *Divinity School Address*, delivered on July 15, 1838, which got him

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<sup>183</sup> Emerson's major works were published between the 1830s and the 1860s, when information on Japan was still scarce. He had to rely on what was available in translations. For Asia in Emerson's works ref. to Carpenter, Frederick Ives: Emerson and Asia. New York, Haskell House, 1968.

<sup>184</sup> Rusk, Ralph L.: The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York, Scriener, 1949, p.166



banned from the school for the next thirty years. The occasion was well chosen to rouse a riot in the halls of conservative Christianity.

"His audience, he [Emerson] realized, would come to more than the seven students who comprised the class and their guests. The little chapel on the second floor of Divinity Hall could seat about a hundred people. Emerson correctly surmised that every seat would be taken and that the faculty of the school would fill the front pews. If he wanted to get a message to those who governed this Unitarian citadel of conservatism, he could hardly contrive a better opportunity."<sup>185</sup>

The stage was set and Emerson was well prepared. He was not the first one to express contradictory views on the role of the church and the state of affairs of contemporary religion, but he was one of the most striking figures in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England<sup>186</sup>. A massive flow of comment and criticism followed in the aftermath of his speech and made it one of the most popular challenges to religious conformity in American intellectual history<sup>187</sup>.

### **The Divinity School Address**

What might have looked like an idle introduction to his speech at second sight turns out to be much more than a picturesque description of a beautiful landscape. In the first paragraph Emerson puts his whole worldview into a few well chosen words, not "only" offering an answer to the eternal quest for the meaning of life but also negating the necessity of the traditional church as a mediator for man in his struggle for enlightenment. I will be going through this sentence by sentence<sup>188</sup>.

"In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life."

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<sup>185</sup> McAleer, John: Ralph Waldo Emerson. Days of Encounter. Boston, Little, Brown & Co, 1984, p.246

<sup>186</sup> Ref. to: McAleer, p.247

<sup>187</sup> For an overview of comments on the address, ref. to McAleer, p.248f.

<sup>188</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Saturday Evening, July 15, 1838". in: Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*. Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1983, pp.75-92

Just to live is described as God's gift to mankind. The world presents itself to man in all its beauty and diversity for no other reason than to be seen and worshipped.

"Man ... seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy."

Nature is refreshing, reviving, bringing back childlike innocence to fallen mankind. Nature provides the human being with all the means to return to that state of oneness with being, empowering man to do whatever he feels in his heart. The world therefore is ours if we find our way back into this original condition.

"The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily. The corn and wine have been freely dealt to all creatures ..."

The "mystery" of nature stands for the ever present question: why are we here, what do we live for? And the answer is always there to be grasped, not only by a selected few but by everyone. In Emerson's very democratic view the mystery of nature is that there is no mystery but everything is laid out in the open book of nature. Being in its essence keeps presenting itself to every one of its creatures through every growing leaf of grass, every bursting bud and every bird in the air. The revelation is always there and always fresh and new. Interpretations of the past do not mean anything any more.

"... the never-broken silence with which the old bounty goes forward, has not yet yielded one word of explanation. One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world, in which our senses converse."

It is a riddle never to be solved. Nature does not need to explain herself, she is completely self-sufficient in her perfection.

"... it is well worth the pith and heart of great men to subdue and enjoy it."

Again, we find a democratic ideal in this. Nature does not discriminate between greater and lesser men, she asks the same obedience from every being.

With the next paragraph Emerson strikes the first blow at the formalities of institutionalized religion.

"But when the mind opens, and reveals the laws which traverse the universe, and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of this mind."<sup>189</sup>

Once interpretation has cut its path through towards the assumed essence of being, the magnificence of human existence is reduced to an image that has no validity beyond the moment of its perception. The "mystery of nature" is not to be put into concepts, the essence of being is not to be explained in rules and formulas. Emerson sees salvation as embedded in man by nature, to be discovered and realized by man himself only. His definition of predestination is the inherent goodness of all beings, "to the good, to the perfect, he [man] is born"<sup>190</sup>. The divine principle is displayed in everything being brings forth, in the sublime as well as in the banale, and this principle shuns conceptualization. Truth in the Emersonian sense refuses to be appropriated but stands for a whole worldview which has to be experienced rather than verbally expressed by man.

"The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. These laws execute themselves. They are out of time, out of space, and not subject to circumstance. Thus; in the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed, is instantly enobled. He who does a mean deed, is by the action itself contracted. He who puts off impurity, thereby puts on purity. If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself, and goes out of acquaintance with his own being. A man in the view of absolute goodness, adores, with total humility. Every step so downward, is a step upward. The man who renounces himself, comes to himself."<sup>191</sup>

According to this view, man can return to that state before his fall into sin. Moral sentiment is within him, enabling him to look into his very soul and to find the right way. If he renounces all artificial demeanor, which in Emerson's words is equal to the evil, by nature he cannot do wrong. He goes even further in stating that "man ... is God", thus formulating an idea that must have been outrageous to the conservative Unitarians he was addressing. No strict moral instruction was needed from the church, the merits of Christian dogma were thrown overboard. If

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<sup>189</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", p.75

<sup>190</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", p.76

<sup>191</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", pp.76-77

the individual wanted to live a meaningful life, to find sense in its existence, to answer the eternal quest for itself, it would automatically receive directional advice from its own heart because the divine spirit rested in itself as much as in its fellow man. Predestination in the sense that man by birth is either good or bad and cannot do anything to change his fate was an outworn concept of the past. Emerson depicted the always present possibility of nature's revelation to man and the resulting transcendence into a state of oneness with being in *this* world. What then was there left to accomplish for institutionalized Christianity if the seed for enlightenment and salvation was already planted in mankind?

For Emerson religion could only serve as inspiration, however, there was nothing institutionalized belief was capable of doing if man was not ready to follow Christ's example. Leaving everything behind, from traditional values to family ties, overcoming conformity was the only necessary precondition to achieve fulfilment in life. An existence of due diligence was not enough, the divine goal could not be accomplished by simply following the herd on someone else's much treaded path. Christian belief in the contemporary community in Emerson's eyes was not alive because it did not acknowledge the flux of nature. The sincere minister, on the other hand, was a man who did not accept "second-hand enlightenment" but who would provoke his congregation to go out into the world and start looking for themselves.

"But with whatever exception, it is still true, that tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus, historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is, where are the resources of astonishment and power."<sup>192</sup>

In one of his sermons as a Unitarian minister, Emerson's credo had been "trust yourself"<sup>193</sup>, in his address to the Divinity School his advice to the young ministers was "obey thyself"<sup>194</sup>. A new way of preaching was necessary if there was any benefit in preaching at all, and its task was not to indoctrinate but to sow hope and confidence.

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<sup>192</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", p.86

<sup>193</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "Trust Yourself", in: McGiffert, Arthur C.: Young Emerson Speaks. Port Washington/ N.Y., Kennikat Press, 1968, p.105f

<sup>194</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", p.81

"What hinders that now, everywhere, in pulpits, in lecture-rooms, in houses, in fields, wherever the invitation of men or our own occasions lead you, you speak the very truth, as your life and conscience teach it, and cheer the waiting, fainting hearts with new hope and new revelation?"<sup>195</sup>

For Emerson, the role of the true minister lay in reinstating man's natural conviction about his own value, and in opening man's eyes to his own divine heritage. In the last consequence, this obviously meant that the church was only of minor importance, if not unnecessary at all. It was not institution with its prescriptions and encrusted behavior codes that paved the way to heaven for man but self-reliant individuals firm in their belief that could revive the spark of faith in their comrades.

### **Art and Religion**

Divine revelation in Emerson's philosophy could very well be obtained independently from traditional religious conduct. He found that a more flexible, creative and immediate form of spiritualism would be more likely to open up the "secret" of existence to the individual's eye. Being meant the original oneness with nature, being meant permanent flux, change, re-creation and new sense-making. And while Emerson consistently emphasized the equalizing aspect of nature, he concluded that there were a few men more apt to give expression to the wonder of being and create meaning in an at first glance chaotic environment.<sup>196</sup> Art itself seemed a means more appropriate than Christian religion as it was commonly understood to point to the essence of existence. Thereby, the artist took on the role of the preacher, his mission was to reveal and constantly re-interpret the world for his fellow man.

In his 1841 lecture *The Poet* Emerson developed his argument from the *Divinity School Address* to the next consequence. In the address Emerson had surprised his audience by his equation of man and God. In *The Poet* he now called the creator of words the new Messiah.

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<sup>195</sup> Emerson, "Divinity School Address", p.91

<sup>196</sup> This does not constitute a contradiction, since at the same time Emerson would be the first to admit that the spark for this great potential was inherent in every being. He found predestination active in the sense that different individuals were meant to express themselves in different ways, some of them through arts, others through a true determination to their daily activities.

"... some men, namely poets, are natural sayers, sent into the world to the end of expression."<sup>197</sup>

The poet is hereby sent into the world like Jesus was sent by God to tell mankind about the Divine Law.

"The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor, he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and causal."<sup>198</sup>

As we have seen in the last chapter, man needs to create some understanding of his environment to survive. This makes the poet's role twofold: first, he is the bringer of news, of the freshest impression of the world. The poet becomes the new evangelist. Secondly, he is the one to remind man that all his interpretations and creations are only momentary glimpses of the truth with no value beyond the short moment of their appearance. This is the impression his art has to convey to be true art in the Emersonian sense.

"But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false."<sup>199</sup>

Poetry then has a double standard to satisfy: it is the image of nature's freshness in every atom of her creation and the perpetual re-evaluation of meaning and symbols. Poetry is not an explanation but rather a *Momentaufnahme* of being. Nature is the symbol of herself and for herself, the world is her appearance and illusion. The flashes of meaning she produces are consequently taken back by her, she comes forth and retreats at the same time.

"Nature offers all her creatures to him [the poet] as a picture-language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value, as the carpenter's stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze."<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", in: Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*. Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1983, p.449

<sup>198</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.450

<sup>199</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.463

<sup>200</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.452

The world is always more beautiful now than it was before, there is no validity in past values. It is for the poet to transcend this truth into his art and make it visible for the rest of mankind. And it is for every human being to follow the poet and become a poet itself.

"... every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature: for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration. I find that the fascination resides in the symbol. Who loves nature? Who does not? Is it only poets, and men of leisure and cultivation, who live with her? No; but also hunters, farmers, grooms, and butchers, though they express their affection in their choice of life, and not in their choice of words."<sup>201</sup>

To Emerson, the true awareness of being, the becoming one with the world, is not reserved for a happy predestined few. The recognition of the beauty of nature is not only open to the poet, just as the divine revelation is not only available to the men of the church. However, Emerson calls for the poet = the true minister to open the eyes of those who have been blinded by the traditions and customs of Christian religion. In his introduction to "The Poet" he voiced his complaint about the shallowness of contemporary conviction:

"It is a proof of the shallowness of the doctrine of beauty, as it lies in the minds of our amateurs, that men seem to have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon soul. [...] Theologians think it a pretty air-castle to talk of the spiritual meaning of a ship or a cloud, of a city or a contract, but they prefer to come again to the solid ground of historical evidence; and even the poets are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living, and to write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience."<sup>202</sup>

Shallowness in the soul, detachment from the real, conformity to institutionalized custom and fancy decoration of simple truths are the points of criticism here. The encrusted rules and regulations the church has established are what keep man from his true pre-destination. This is where the poet assumes his role as the one to repeatedly re-phrase the only valid credo: that there is no permanence in things, that there are no ultimate truths to be learned from someone else, that there is only one way to follow and that this is the way of man's very own soul. It is for the poet to give expression to the infinite variations of nature, always pointing back to its essence.

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<sup>201</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.453

"What little of all we know is said! What drops of all the sea of our science are baled up! and by what accident it is that these are exposed, when so many secrets sleep in nature! Hence the necessity of speech and song; hence there throbs and heartbeatings in the orator, at the door of the assembly, to the end, namely, that thought may be ejaculated as Logos, or Word."<sup>203</sup>

The poet becomes nature's voice as the preacher becomes God's voice, who is guided by his own insight into the secrets of being to lift the veil for his congregation. But the Christian church as experienced by Emerson only promises "hope, but the fruition is postponed"<sup>204</sup>. While the traditional belief system sees its task in preparing man for the time after his worldly existence, enlightenment in the Emerson "theology" can take place anytime in the here and now. Why wait if everything is already there? Why leave your fate in someone else's hands if you can take it in your own and fulfil the divine promise yourself?

How does Zen Buddhism come into play here? The answer is that Emerson's philosophy and Zen share the same basic "concepts" about the world and human existence. The worldly aspect of enlightenment, the abandonment of the past and the understanding of nature as the means towards revelation are the main traits of both Emerson's spiritualism and of Zen Buddhism. I will now take a look at the "essence" of Zen.

### **Zen Buddhism**

The essence of Zen is that there is no essence. This is but one of the many (contradictory) statements one can make about Zen Buddhism. In his introduction to *Zen and Zen Classics* Blyth provides us with a very illustrative summary of Zen's basic understanding.

"The reader of this book will be confused by it, but this is the destiny of man, since many are the roads, but all lead to the same conclusion, confusion."<sup>205</sup>

Hereby Blyth outlines the complete scope of Zen, indicating that it is the long sought for answer to life's challenge for mankind. Man is thrown into confusion by his intellect's failure to explain being in the worn-off terms of tradition. At the

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<sup>202</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.447

<sup>203</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.466

<sup>204</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "The Poet", p.452



same time, Zen itself causes confusion by doing away with traditional value systems and by asking for a totally new and different way of seeing. Confusion, its recognition and awareness of the incapability of conceptualism emerge as man's destiny on his way to fulfil his promise. We have seen it in Emerson and we find it in Zen Buddhism that this promise lies in overcoming confusion by transcending common intelligence and thereby reaching enlightenment. Thus man's promise is his task in life, and there are many roads leading towards enlightenment. There is no single correct way but an infinite diversity of means, just as there is an infinite multitude of natural appearances pointing towards this.

What rang true for Emerson is also the turning point of Zen: man's fate is put into in his own hands.

"[Buddhism] points to man alone as the creator of his present life and sole designer of his destiny."<sup>206</sup>

Man alone is responsible for and capable of his own salvation. If there is an essence to be found in Zen it is that which points to the impermanence of the supposedly permanent and the permanence of the impermanent. Nature is always moving and changing, which means that a meaningful existence can only be realized in the present. Every individual is the creator of its own world, and the only thing it can be sure of is that everything is relative in time. Sense-making is possible only by integration into being as a whole.

"... all things depend on each other, cooperate with each other, and sustain each other. There is no isolated existence in this world; everything, interrelated, makes a single chain in the whole."<sup>207</sup>

Therefore integration of the individual self into being is achieved by becoming one with the world. Man has to let go and break all bonds of conformity and social necessities. He has to cast off traditional values and religious restrictions and has to overcome the dualist way of thinking. Body and soul must be reunited

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<sup>205</sup> Blyth, Reginald Horace: Zen and Zen Classics. Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1960, vol.1, p.9

<sup>206</sup> Reihô, Masunaga: The Soto Approach to Zen. Tokyo, Layman Buddhist Society Press, 1958, p.4

It should be noted that in Japan Zen and Buddhism are used synonymously. In Japan, Zen developed from Chinese Buddhism and is the dominant form of Buddhism today. When speaking of Buddhism in Japan, Zen is meant unless indicated differently. For a detailed history of Zen Buddhism in Japan ref. to Dumoulin, Heinrich: Geschichte des Zen-Buddhismus. Bern, Franke, 1986, vol.II: Japan, p.6f.

<sup>207</sup> Reihô, p.5

in the human being before enlightenment reveals itself. The self in Zen is opposed to the Ego as the socially determined and individually shaped personality of man. Zen's enlightenment experience can be viewed as the indeed very personal revelation of the self<sup>208</sup>, and it solves the eternal quest beyond rational observation. The experience of being in its totality and immediacy is wholly subjective and depends on the dissolution of man's social ties. At the same time, the separation into subject and object itself is revoked, the validity of dualism is denied. Therefore the subjectivity of enlightenment does not constitute the creation of a new category but further emphasizes the individual's power. Enlightenment is the re-gaining of man's original state of perfect harmony of mind and matter, the mystical unity with being.

"Den Buddha-Weg ergründen heißt sich selbst ergründen. Sich selbst ergründen heißt sich selbst vergessen. Sich selbst vergessen heißt eins mit den zehntausend Dingen sein. Eins mit den zehntausend Dingen sein heißt Körper und Geist von uns selbst und Körper und Geist der Welt um uns fallen zu lassen."<sup>209</sup>

Enlightenment is the true, the immediate perception of the self as part of the whole, as part of everything that there is in nature. Simultaneously it is the destruction of man's social foundation. By entering the divine union he loses his former identity, which was determined by other people's views and expectations of himself. From now on the individual can only be true to itself, that is true to its inherent Buddha nature. This is what Emerson meant when he said "obey thyself".

### **The Buddha in Ourselves**

Emerson gave the authority to uncover the hidden truth about existence back to human being. By the same token Zen insists that the divine spark is immanent in man by birth.

"Die Welt zu verlassen bedeutet, jenseits des Denkens zu sein. Wenn ihr diesen Geist zu euren Augäpfeln macht, ist er so konkret wie zwei oder drei Fässer Wasser und ihr spielt tausend und zehntausend Mal mit ihm inmitten eures karmischen Bewußtseins. Wenn ihr die Wahrheit auf diese Weise erlernt, leiht ihr euch

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<sup>208</sup> This experience is very personal in the sense that it is applicable to the one human being undergoing this process only and cannot be handed down to someone else.

<sup>209</sup> Dōgen, Zenji: Shōbōgenzō. Die Schatzkammer der Erkenntnis des wahren Dharma-Auges. Heidelberg, Werner Kristkeitz, 2001, vol.1, p.58

insgeheim den Atem der Buddhas und Patriarchen und laßt ihn verströmen."<sup>210</sup>

What Dôgen describes here as the basic condition of human nature rephrases Emerson's "intuition of the moral sentiment". Men fell from enlightenment when he solely relied on his intellect and tried to freeze the world into categories. Following the Buddha way is equal to returning to the natural state of enlightenment, the state of innocence which in Emerson's writings we often find symbolized in the image of the child.

"A moody child and wildly wise  
Pursued the game with joyful eyes ,  
Which chose, like meteors, their way,  
And rived the dark with private ray ..."<sup>211</sup>

It is the wisdom of the wilderness, the wisdom of the natural world that re-opens man's heart for enlightenment. It is a conscious becoming unconscious of the laws of life. Man has to free himself from every effort, from the cause-effect relations he has been taught in an act of self-cleansing. Dôgen asks the individual to do away with intellectual aspirations.

"Nur diejenigen, die beharrlich an sich arbeiten, sind Buddhas und Patriarchen. Kurz zusammengefasst bedeutet die Aussage, dass der 'Geist nicht erfasst werden kann', dass sich jemand gelassen das Bild eines Reiskuchens kauft und es auf einmal hinunterschluckt."<sup>212</sup>

In dialogue with nature man finds guidance from within himself. Previously chaotic impressions fall into place like a in puzzle and suddenly make perfect sense. Emerson calls for man's "better instincts".

"... if the man is true to his better instincts or sentiments, and refuses the dominion of facts, as one that comes of a higher race, remains fast by the soul and sees the principle, then the facts fall aptly and supple into their places; they know their master, and the meanest of them glorifies him."<sup>213</sup>

In their turning away from society's codes and standards and its scriptural tradition, and in their declaration of independence from materialism and

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<sup>210</sup> Dôgen, Zenji: *Shôbôgenzô. Die Schatzkammer der Erkenntnis des wahren Dharma-Auges*. Heidelberg, Werner Kristkeitz, 2003, vol.2, p.281

<sup>211</sup> Emerson: "The Poet", p.445

<sup>212</sup> Dôgen: *Shôbôgenzô*, vol.2, p.254

<sup>213</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "History". in: Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*. Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1983, p.241

achievement-orientation both Emerson and Zen Buddhism are radically opposed to the founding principles of modern civilization. Living without effort was and is still unthinkable in most cultures. Personal salvation in the sense of realization of one's goal in life is what we all strive for, however, there never seems to be the right time or place. The "teachings" of the great American philosopher and the Eastern sages seem too remote from our daily existence to be applicable to our very private lives. With this I return to the starting point for both worldviews, that is the question: how can man integrate this view of things into his everyday performance?

### **The Illusionary Appearance of the Outer World**

In one of his texts Dôgen states that enlightenment never depends on external circumstances, on time or place or intellectual capacity.<sup>214</sup> In the Divinity School Address Emerson said that truth was always accessible, be it in the pulpit or in the woods. Consequently, man's readiness has to come from within. There will never be a better or more appropriate moment or environment. The very perception that there are factual necessities which are more important than the demands of the soul has to be overcome. Zen and Emerson's view share the belief that the world around us is a mere illusion. The world is what we make of it based on our upbringing and social status, it is our own creation.<sup>215</sup>

"Illusion works impenetrable,  
Weaving webs innumerable,  
Her gay pictures never fail,  
Crowds each on other, veil on veil,  
Charmer who will be believed  
By man who thirsts to be deceived."<sup>216</sup>

It is man who "thirsts to be deceived" himself who is responsible for the illusion he lives in. His is the choice whether to be blind or to see. This might not be convenient or comforting, because his whole world will fall into pieces. Everything that he held true and valid before is just a pale reminiscence of the past. Letting go of the ties of the factual necessities that used to control his life is his new and

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<sup>214</sup> Dôgen: *Shôbôgenzô*, vol.2, p.282

<sup>215</sup> This brings us back to my argument about the social construction of reality. Emerson and Zen are very modern in the sense that they question the ultimate authority of science and the concept of objectivity.

<sup>216</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "Nature. Maia." in: Spiller, R.E. (ed.): *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York, Washington Square Press, 1965, p.58

foremost task. The reasoning of Emerson and Zen argues that these false demands fade away completely if every human being chooses to make the "effortless effort" to find the road to enlightenment. The misleading slavery of society's certainties then dissolves into nothingness and is no longer in the way. When thinking that we do not have the time to be rescued from our daily struggle we should become aware that it is only this thinking which keeps us from changing.

"... die wirkliche strahlende Klarheit ist nichts anderes als die konkreten Dinge dieser Welt. Die stahlende Klarheit der konkreten Dinge ist bereits deren Wurzeln, deren Stämme, deren Zweige, deren Blätter, deren Blumen, deren Früchte, deren Licht und deren Farbe. Sie wird ihnen nicht hinzugefügt oder weggenommen."<sup>217</sup>

Therefore there can be no other place for us than our daily environment to discover the answer to the riddle. "Jeder Mensch besitzt vollständig die strahlende Klarheit. Wenn er sie sucht, ist sie unsichtbar in der tiefsten Dunkelheit."<sup>218</sup>

I tried to show the congeniality of spirit between Emerson and Zen, because I wanted to achieve two things:

1. To present proof that there was "Japan" in American literature even before it was known. This could only be possible because "there is one mind common to all men"<sup>219</sup>. The underlying assumption of this thesis is that there is no ultimately objective truth, that all men are equal in their intellectual disposition and their tendency to construct their own reality. Consequently, mankind derives from the same original source of creation, to which according to Emerson and Zen everyone can retrace their steps.
2. To provide credentials for my view that Eastern thought in general, and Zen in particular, became so popular in American literature because of this common cultural heritage. The already existing affinity not only made it easy but also logical that for example the writers of the Beat generation turned toward Buddhism in the second great phase of spiritual re-orientation in America. This is not always openly stated or even understood, and the turn towards the East did not necessarily mean that one's national legacy was abandoned. The

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<sup>217</sup> Dôgen, Shôbôgenzô, vol.2, p.274

<sup>218</sup> Dôgen, Shôbôgenzô, vol.2, p.275

<sup>219</sup> Emerson, "History", p.237

Beats were driven by a similar back-to-the-roots sentiment that drove the American Renaissance<sup>220</sup>. In a sense Emerson and his contemporaries paved the way, or rather they cut it free from the overgrowing weeds of tradition and conformity, because it was a path that had been there since the beginning of mankind.

We will find indication of both of the above in the first author examined for images of Japan, the multi-talented American artist John La Farge<sup>221</sup>.

### **The Longing for the East**

The East was *en vogue* for the New England intellectual elite of the 1880s. Fifty years after Emerson had given his speech about the "American Zen sentiment", many felt a

"longing for the East [that] was a symptom of the moment, especially marked in New England. Numbers of Boston and Harvard men were going to Japan and China in a spirit that was new and full of meaning".<sup>222</sup>

Percival Lowell went to Tokyo in 1883, and his book *The Soul of the Far East* was to be the starting point for several of his successors traveling to Japan.<sup>223</sup> John La Farge, his friend and comrade in appreciation of Eastern cultures Henry Adams, Ernest Fenollosa, and William Sturgis Bigelow were among those who "were enthralled by Oriental thought; they were seekers of salvation in the Buddhist way".<sup>224</sup> In *Mirror in the Shrine* Rosenstone recounts the pro-longed stays in Japan of William Elliott Griffis, minister and self-proclaimed missionary, Edward S. Morse, natural scientist and seeker of truth, and Lafcadio Hearn, who we will look at in detail later. The need for spiritual re-orientation that had made Emerson raise a storm among the Unitarian establishment was still in the air. There seemed to be a void of inspiration from domestic sources. The religious

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<sup>220</sup> One should keep in mind that "renaissance" literally means "re-birth".

<sup>221</sup> John La Farge, 1835-1910, began his artistic career with still life and landscape paintings. He also provided illustrations for books and magazines and decorated the interiors of private and public buildings, including churches. La Farge married Margaret Perry, the niece of Commodore Matthew Perry, in 1860, 26 years before he embarked to Japan. (Source: National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pbio?17350>, 20-Aug-04)

<sup>222</sup> Brooks, Van Wyck: New England. Indian Summer 1865-1915. Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984, p.358

<sup>223</sup> Ref. to Brooks, p.360-61

<sup>224</sup> Brooks, p.359

traditions had lost their fervor, and the country was struggling to regain its national entity and cultural identity amidst hunger and hardship after the Civil War.<sup>225</sup> Eastward expansion seemed attractive to many at the time.

"... by the 1890s, there had been much experience in overseas probes and interventions. The ideology of expansion was widespread in the upper circles of military men, politicians, businessmen – and even among some of the leaders of farmers' movements who thought foreign markets would help them."<sup>226</sup>

These new markets were attractive not only to entrepreneurs and politicians because they bore the promise of economic expansion and resources yet to be exploited to feed Americans at home. For the *intellegentsia* the Land of the Rising Sun symbolized expansion of the spiritual horizon, new resources in the figurative sense: food for thought. One should not overlook the paradox of this other imperialism: John La Farge and his contemporaries were looking for the still fresh and original in the East, that which had not yet been appropriated by the Occident. At the same time this was just what they did by going to Japan, they reported about their experiences and impressions and made this new "promised land" accessible to others. Already in 1890 Lafcadio Hearn, who we will look at later, said:

"In attempting a book upon a country so well trodden as Japan, I could not hope – nor would I consider it prudent attempting – to discover totally new things ..."<sup>227</sup>

In 1886 John La Farge and Henry Adams were by no means the first to dare an expedition to Japan, but they were certainly among the more prominent travelers of their time.<sup>228</sup> I have chosen La Farge as my first representative because of his many artistic ambitions, his various fields of occupation and his status as a renowned critic. His views on Japan very likely had an impact on "public opinion", even if reduced to the intellectual elite of the East Coast.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.290f.

<sup>226</sup> Zinn, p. 291

<sup>227</sup> Lafcadio Hearn as quoted in: Allen, Louis/ Wilson, Jean (eds.): Lafcadio Hearn. Japan's Great Interpreter. Sandgate, Japan Library, 1992, p.8

<sup>228</sup> Ref. to Brooks, p.358

<sup>229</sup> It would certainly be interesting to see what the "common man" thought of the East, if he thought about it at all. However, this cannot be accomplished in this study mainly for two reasons: first, following my argument about individual reality constructs it would be very difficult to judge on "public opinion"; secondly, if we accepted the media and opinion

## The Wanderings of John La Farge

La Farge's impressions of his tour of Japan are recorded in his book *An Artist's Letters from Japan*, which was published in 1887. His motivation to go to Japan in the first place is explicitly stated.

"... the purpose of our trip was to find Nirvana [...] – that state of the terrestrial being who understands truth by the extinction of passions, but who is yet, indeed, very much tied to the body ..." <sup>230</sup>

Like Emerson La Farge searched for enlightenment in this world, as opposed to the traditional Christian view that salvation only comes after death. La Farge was born into "a wealthy family of French Roman Catholic origin" <sup>231</sup>, but obviously did not share his ancestors view on the way to divine revelation. Judging from his book I would say there was a Buddhist predisposition in his heart, the underlying sentiment in all his descriptions being reminiscent of the (Zen) Buddhist worldview. Brooks in his study asserts that "in Japan, he [La Farge] understood the Buddhists as if he had known their doctrines in the cradle". <sup>232</sup> This is supported by one of La Farge's statement in his letter of July 28, 1886 – two weeks after his arrival.

"I have become as a blank to be filled. I employ my mind as a mirror; it grasps nothing, it refuses nothing; it receives, but it does not keep. And thus I can triumph over things without injury to myself – I am safe in Tao." <sup>233</sup>

This quote provides an idea of La Farge's position in a nutshell. Throughout the book we find a conscious effort to avoid value judgements and comparisons with pre-existing concepts and opinions about Japan. <sup>234</sup> To "become as a blank to be filled" therefore means a process of un-knowing, i.e. to lose all pre-existing knowledge and to be totally open and unbiased towards the new. La Farge's *modus operandi* in his writing constantly reminds us of a painting. He paints pictures with his descriptions, he "receives, but does not keep", he consistently does away with one impression in favour of a fresher one. Thereby he tries to

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polls (if available) as an indicator of the so-called public mind, this would most certainly go beyond the scope of my examination.

<sup>230</sup> La Farge, John: *An Artist's Letters from Japan*. London, Waterstone, 1986, p.121

<sup>231</sup> <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pbio?17350>, 20-Aug-04

<sup>232</sup> Brooks, p.75

<sup>233</sup> La Farge, p.74

<sup>234</sup> There are both evaluations and comparisons at several stages, and I will discuss their importance with the relevant quotes later.



achieve a pureness in himself that does not corrupt his in-born divine wisdom, his "Buddha self" remains intact "without injury". As a being of this world he has chosen to reside in change, that is the permanence of the impermanent, the "tao" (= the way)<sup>235</sup>.

By "Tao" La Farge understands

"... a doctrine that becomes untrue and unprofitable when placed in set forms and bound in by pedantry, but which allows teaching by parables and side glimpses and innuendos as long as they are illuminated by that light which exists in the natural heart of man."<sup>236</sup>

We find a very similar affirmation of the vague and non-verbal in Zen Buddhism:

"In Wahrheit verhält sich Zen sehr ausweichend, wenn man es von außen her betrachtet, wenn man glaubt, einen Schimmer erhascht zu haben, so ist es schon nicht mehr da. Von ferne sieht es so leicht zugänglich aus, aber je näher man kommt, um so weiter weicht es zurück."<sup>237</sup>

Non-appropriation is the "technique" we generally find in the author La Farge's approach to Japan. His language is reduced to simplicity, there are no frills in his descriptions. Repeatedly we find indications that it is this concentration on the "necessary" that makes the East more attractive to La Farge than his native country.

"I have spoken of simplicity. The domestic architecture [of Japan] is as simple as transitory, as if it symbolized the life of man. [...] And this is the same for all, from emperor's palace to little tradesman's cottage. There is nothing, apparently, but what is necessary, and refinement is disposing of that. The result is sometimes cold and bare. There is the set look of insisting upon an idea – the idea of doing with little: a noble one, certainly; as, for instance, when the emperor's palace at Kyoto is adorned merely by the highest care in workmanship and by the names of the artists who painted the screen walls – in solitary contradiction to the splendor and pomp of all absolute rulers, no storehouse for the wasted money of the people, but an example of the economy which should attend the life of the ruler. It is possible that when I return I shall feel more distaste for the

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<sup>235</sup> "Tao" in Japanese also means "the way", therefore La Farge might also be referring to the Buddhist understanding that the way to enlightenment is more important than enlightenment itself.

<sup>236</sup> La Farge, p.74

<sup>237</sup> Suzuki, Daisetz T.: Die große Befreiung. Einführung in den Zen-Buddhismus. Bern, O.W. Barth Verlag, 1995, p.56

barbarous accumulations in our houses, and recall the far more civilized emptiness persisted in by the more esthetic race."<sup>238</sup>

In La Farge's words, Japan, other than America, has found a way to represent the essence of being in its architecture. Meaningful existence as defined by doing away with superfluous "pomp" is symbolized in bareness, which aims at reminding the spectator of the true importance of life. The temples and gardens of Kyoto, Nara and Tokyo repeat the *leitmotif*, the "noble idea of doing with little". Refinement of this motive is brought to perfection and speaks for an intentionally democratic angle of vision. Having seen his artistic ideal realized so consistently in Japan, La Farge obviously dreads the day of his return to the United States, where the "barbarous accumulation in our houses" is the custom. However, he loads himself with what he calls "bric-a-brac". La Farge spends many hours buying pieces of Japanese art<sup>239</sup> which for him signify the above ideal which he wants to preserve and take home with him as a means to remind and console him at the same time that there is a place where art is at home. Art for John La Farge "is an attempt at keeping possession of one's self"<sup>240</sup>, that is at finding one's center, one's inborn sense of the right and true, or to use Zen "terminology"<sup>241</sup> – one's Buddha-nature. Art therefore opens the door to the answer to mankind's eternal quest in creating sense-making representations of nature. It is the key to regain one's unity with being. Art is permanence in transience, but permanent only in the sense that it serves as a perpetual admonition to human being not to cling the supposedly stable material world.

"It [art] is an appeal to peace in time of brutal war, an appeal to courageous war in time of ignorable peace; it is an appeal to the permanent reality in presence of the transient; it is an attempt to rest for a moment in the true way."<sup>242</sup>

One can see that La Farge is very close to Emerson in his convictions, which challenge man's conscious ignorance of what he sees as the ends to existence and man's apparently never-ending persistence in trying to control "truth", or rather a construct of it.

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<sup>238</sup> La Farge, p.83

<sup>239</sup> For example ref. to La Farge, p.88f.

<sup>240</sup> La Farge, p.69

<sup>241</sup> As a *Weltanschauung* that shuns conceptualisation, Zen has no "terminology" in the usual sense. However, the dilemma at the core of Zen lies in the attempt to find adequate verbal expressions at all. In order to stay true to the ideal I try to use as many different terms as possible, intelligibility provided. "Terminology" then simply refers to an idea repeatedly used and expressed in a certain way in Zen, which does not mean that there are not other, potentially better ways to express it.

## A Culture More Refined

Quite obviously, despite his conscious effort to stay "objective" La Farge himself is not free from making his very personal evaluations and judgments, he is not free from constructing his very personal reality. He perceives Japan as a culture more refined, as the symbol for a natural understanding of being and oneness with nature. To him Japan is characterized by people's deep "sensitiveness to the beauties of the outside world"<sup>243</sup>, a relationship of immediacy and meditative poise. La Farge repeatedly contrasts this view with his understanding of the United States, respectively, the Western world in general (this generalization being a construct in itself.)

"... if we, Western lovers of the tree, do not quite like the Japanese refinement of growing the cherry merely for its flowers, yet how delicately upside-down from us, and how charming is the love of nature at the foundation of the custom."<sup>244</sup>

The tree here stands for the solid, the firmly rooted in the foundation of a life determined by cause-effect relations, where things are done to achieve a certain measurable and consumable result. The cherry, grown "merely for its flowers", that is for something beautiful without any obvious practical benefit, symbolizes a culture diametrically opposed ("upside-down") in its basic assumptions. The latter is a culture which delights man's yearning heart ("charming") with its appreciation of nature's pretty outcomes, a culture more bound to the physics of existence and therefore in harmony with the outside world.

We find another example in the chapter headed "Tao: The Way", which points at the potential of this-worldly happiness for man in La Farge's image of Japan.

"When I began to reflect how this wood and plaster<sup>245</sup> had more of the dignity of art and of its accessible beauty than all that we have at home, if melted together, would result in; that these frail materials conveyed to the mind more of the eternal than our granite it seemed to me that something was absolutely wrong with us."<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> La Farge, p.69

<sup>243</sup> La Farge, p.16

<sup>244</sup> La Farge, p.16

<sup>245</sup> Here La Farge refers to the pagodas of the temples of Shiba in Tokyo, the graveyard of the Tokugawa rulers.

<sup>246</sup> La Farge, p.57

It is the "accessible beauty" of art which typifies the promise that every individual can catch a glimpse of the meaning of life. Again, salvation, which according to Christian religion is beyond man's reach, is moved into his mundane existence. The "frail materials" indicate weightlessness, being without burden, as opposed to granite, which is equal to the solidified and institutionalized. La Farge's conclusion here states that the "eternal", the awareness of the divine law, cannot be achieved by the dominant attitude in contemporary America. Japan becomes the promise of enlightenment while America remains stuck in ignorance. La Farge also shows a disposition towards the alien, which Rosenstone in his book *Mirror in the Shrine* missed in many of the American artist's contemporaries, that is an interest in "not what we do to another culture but [...] what it does to us".<sup>247</sup> La Farge was aware of the fear Rosenstone describes, the fear that travelers to Japan might be "destroying something of value by introducing modern ideas and practices".<sup>248</sup> This led to a paradox in the records of many Americans who stayed in Japan: a call for conservatism, a call to leave this picturesque paradise untouched, issued by the very sojourners who were about to "invade" the privacy they wished to stay intact. The beauties and promises which the traveler discovers in the far away country are attractive to him because of their natural pureness and uncorruptedness. But of course, with Japan's opening to the West and the stream of Western influences on the country's traditions this freshness and originality are endangered. For La Farge, the greatest sin consists in the unsuccessful mix of East and West in Japan, which in his opinion does justice to neither heritage<sup>249</sup>. To him "the mark of Japan is more and more endangered by modern views and modern 'openings'".<sup>250</sup> The veil of mystery which seems to make Japanese culture so attractive to travelers from all over the globe is the means to preserve the charm of the unknown. La Farge explicitly defends this demand for mystery.

"Nor do I object to this Oriental secrecy of mystery, as it adds the charm of the veil, which is often needed."<sup>251</sup>

This quotation is in complete accordance with La Farge's credo that appearances should be left what they are – temporary, vague and impossible to fit into categories; the simplicity of the outline, the sketch are the characteristics of

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<sup>247</sup> Rosenstone, Robert: *Mirror in the Shrine*. American Encounters with Meiji Japan. Cambridge, Mass., London, England, Harvard Univ. Press, 1988, p.3

<sup>248</sup> Rosenstone, p.3

<sup>249</sup> Ref. to La Farge, p.5

<sup>250</sup> La Farge, p.181

Japan for him. Watching a Japanese family in their home through the screen windows, with only silhouettes visible, he reinforces his point and calls what he sees "pictures more Japanese than their originals".<sup>252</sup> La Farge consciously accepts the picture instead of its reality (whatever that may be), a reality endangered to be appropriated and thereby changed. Secrecy, the undiscoverable and the perpetual promise of surprise turn out to be important aspects for La Farge. Although he emphasizes his intention to "come as innocently as we could", he shows himself to be well aware of the legacy of perceptions of Japan. Other authors<sup>253</sup> are mentioned in *his Letters from Japan*, and he refers to earliest accounts of "Zipango" by Marco Polo<sup>254</sup>. But despite his preparedness for the expedition La Farge still finds the Land of the Rising Sun<sup>255</sup> a symbol for freshness and originality: "As it is, all this Japan is sudden."<sup>256</sup> Still, he finds himself unprepared for the extent to which his pre-existing (non-) expectations are surpassed by what he encounters.

"I have been told so often of the place [the landscape and temples of Nara], as a ruin among rice fields, that I was unprepared for the beautiful layout of what remains ..."<sup>257</sup>

La Farge's writing serves as an example of how expectations shape perception and image construction. There is no explicit mention that he is indeed aware that multiple realities are not only possible but a necessary trait of human beings outside the realm of artistic occupation. Does he stay true to his ideals as painter or architect in every respect – has he found Nirvana? Or is he still struggling with the discrepancies of theory and practice?

### Looking for Nirvana

As shown before, La Farge does call for a more creative approach towards "truth", as we have seen in his definition of the role of art. Also, he denies the

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<sup>251</sup> La Farge, p.78

<sup>252</sup> La Farge, p.180

<sup>253</sup> Freeman-Mitford, Algernon Bertram: Tales of Old Japan. London, Macmillan, 1871 - ref. to La Farge, p.35; Morse, Edward S.: Japan Day by Day. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1917 - ref. to La Farge, p.58

<sup>254</sup> Ref. to La Farge, p.177

<sup>255</sup> "Land of the Rising Sun" is the literal translation of the Chinese word "Jihpenkuo" which Marco Polo changed to "Chipangu". Ref. to Boxer, C.R.: The Christian Century in Japan 1549-1650. Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1993, p.1.

<sup>256</sup> La Farge, p.9

<sup>257</sup> La Farge, p.177

validity of institutionalized and prescriptive opinions. For him, strict adherence to *the* rules and acknowledged techniques does not result in a work of art.

"You draw well; you can make a sketch, I am sure, which, like many others, would have spots of light on a black surface, or a pretty wash of sky above it, or little patches of shadow, like clever lichens, spread over it, and that would be correct in artificial perspective, and recall something of older design, and have no great blemishes to take hold of. How far would it help you to have made a million such if you seriously wished to do a thing for itself, not for its effects upon a client, nor for a claim upon the public, nor for a salve to your own vanity?"<sup>258</sup>

The acquired knowledge of the contemporary value system does not equal or substitute true genius. The difference is that in the first case the artist acts in accordance with a commonly accepted cause-effect relation, while in the second case he concentrates on the process of creation itself. It is artificial outcome *per expectationem* versus artistic accomplishment *per liberationem*. In the drawing La Farge speaks of in the above quotation, the individual pieces remain separate as in "spots of light", or "little patches of shadow". They represent a technically sound achievement but do not present an indication of the whole picture. We recall that what La Farge admired in Japanese art was refinement of simplicity, the glimpse of the whole in any of its parts.

"The relation of man to nature, so peculiarly made out in the Japanese beliefs, is made significant, symbolized, or typified through the manner in which these buildings are disposed. A temple is not a single unity, as with us, its own beginning and end. A temple is an arrangement of shrines and buildings meaningfully placed, often, as here, in mountains – a word synonymous with temples; each shrine is a statement of some divine attribute, and all these buildings spread with infinite art over large spaces, open, or inclosed by trees and rocks. The buildings are but parts of a whole. They are enveloped by nature, the principle and the adornment of the subtle or mysterious meaning which links them all together."<sup>259</sup>

The Japanese approach to life is therefore portrayed in the country's architecture. It is a *pars pro toto* view of things, which understands that the world and its essential principle are potentially visible in each of its individual products. It is the Zen Buddhist principle of the world in a speck of dust.<sup>260</sup> However, Zen emphasizes the importance of recognizing that man should not confuse the sign

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<sup>258</sup> La Farge, p.64-65

<sup>259</sup> La Farge, p.77

<sup>260</sup> Ref. to Dôgen, p.38f.

with its significance. Enlightenment can only be realized by accepting that the external world is a mere illusion, with its illusionary character hinted at everywhere.<sup>261</sup> Can La Farge, the eager collector of "bric-a-brac" then be ready to find Nirvana yet? He himself denies that his mission was accomplished.

"If only we had found Nirvana – but he was right who warned us that we were late in this season of the world."<sup>262</sup>

This saying questions the whole enterprise of going abroad with the hope to find a different truth from the one to be discovered at home. To be late thus means that there is nothing new to be found somewhere under a stone or behind a screen door in Japan. Everything man needs to know was laid out long before, and there is no escaping from the burdens of a false tradition by fleeing to faraway places. Was La Farge's and Adams' trip a futile attempt with no outcome but a few valuable souvenirs?

While his travelmate Henry Adams entertained "many disappointments with Japan – its nauseating food, its stenches and stinks, its diminutive waterfalls"<sup>263</sup>, La Farge ascertained a common legacy between Japan and "the West", as surprising as this may seem at first glance. Looking at Buddhist paintings he "could not help the recall of what I had once felt at the first sight old Italian art"<sup>264</sup>. Upon his visit to the Horyu-ji Temple in Kyoto<sup>265</sup>, he is reminded of "Greek perfection". Perhaps more significantly, he comes upon likenesses in common places such as an ordinary beach on one of his tours.

"As I went up the beach, following our guide and the boatmen, I thought how like this was to the Homeric haven ..."<sup>266</sup>

The suggestion of a shared heritage is therefore not reduced to the beauties of selected sightseeing spots. Consequently there are no statements about supposedly unique Japanese features in La Farge's book<sup>267</sup>. Although some of

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<sup>261</sup> Ref. to Dôgen, p.69f.

<sup>262</sup> La Farge in the An Artist's Letters from Japan's dedication to Henry Adams

<sup>263</sup> Benfey, p.150

<sup>264</sup> La Farge, p.8

<sup>265</sup> La Farge does not give the temple's name but speaks of the Golden Hall. After comparing his descriptions with the outline of the temple grounds in May, J.: Japan. Vol. 1: Tokyo, Nara, Kyoto. Pforzheim, Goldstadt-Reiseführer, 1980, p.249, I have concluded that Horyu-ji is meant.

<sup>266</sup> La Farge, p.202

<sup>267</sup> La Farge does employ images of "the Japanese dollhouse" in descriptions of the picturesqueness of Japanese *geisha* girls with their "incredibly" small hands (p.183-84), or

his findings are labeled as distinctively Japanese, his own expressed affinity and the various indications of a common legacy stand against the assumption that La Farge regards Japan as a culture completely alien to the "Western mind". Quite on the contrary, the country of refined simplicity is the emblem for an artistic greatness and natural spiritualism that used to be at home in Europe and the United States but has been lost due to an overload of "canting phrases" and "perverted thought"<sup>268</sup>. Japan is the image of a condition that, as Emerson would say is "common to all men"<sup>269</sup> and has to be revisited and regained.

"It seems as if I were really reminded of what I always knew, or ought to have known; and perhaps what I may say about ourselves is as good a way as any other of giving an opinion upon what I see here. For, indeed, what I see here that I admire I feel as though I had always known, had already seen; it is rather most of our own that seems queer, strange, and often unreasonable."<sup>270</sup>

We can determine two things here:

1. La Farge, with the soul of the artist, supports the Emersonian/ Buddhist view that there is something of the primeval knowledge from the time of man's unison with being buried in every individual. The bareness La Farge observes in Japanese art, the lack of "pomp" acts as a reminder of the existence of this knowledge. Simultaneously, he does not regard this ancient wisdom as something accessible to the Japanese race only. His comparisons with pre-modern Europe, which as the main region of emigration to the United States certainly exercised an influence on the American culture, point to the assumption of a common heritage.
2. Secondly, La Farge's referrals to his home country underline the importance of self-awareness for the perception of the Other. His view of the cultural identity of America and of his very own identity within its social system and intellectual scope are the basis for the formation of his image of Japan. Without definition of the first, rational understanding of the second would not be possible.

For La Farge the question arises where he himself stands between these alternatives. Nirvana is what he did not find in America, and yet he could not find

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when speaking of Japan as a "fairyland of refinement". But again, these are impressions enforced by the encounter with something new, and we must not forget that this expedition was La Farge's first trip to Japan, which lasted only three months.

<sup>268</sup> La Farge, p.66

<sup>269</sup> Ref. to Emerson, "History", p.237

<sup>270</sup> La Farge, p.57-58



it in Japan either. He did not chose to live in Japan to keep on searching. He left for home with the certainty that the Land of the Rising Sun was no more the place to "track down" enlightenment than America was. If he found this place in his heart we do not know.

### **Lafcadio Hearn: Japan's Great Interpreter**

Lafcadio Hearn, our next object of examination, is not an American author in the narrow sense. He was born in Greece, raised in Ireland, France and England and only came to the United States at the age of nineteen. In 1890 he emigrated to Japan and lived there until his death in 1904.<sup>271</sup> However, Hearn is listed in various dictionaries and anthologies of American literature, and many of his articles on Japan were published in American literary periodicals.<sup>272</sup> I therefore accepted him as part of the canon of American literature on Japan. When choosing the text samples I took into consideration that his background is European, his formative years were spent in England, so that his education and early socialization are determined by the value system of the Old World. The text passages I selected tell more about his motivation to go to Japan and the images of the national character he conveyed in the sketches that made their way across the Atlantic than about East-West comparisons.

Four years after his first encounter with the "Unfamiliar Japan", Hearn writes about "My First Day in the Orient". The impressions described there can no longer accurately convey his feelings at that time, "something has evaporated from all my recollections ... - something impossible to recall"<sup>273</sup>. Nevertheless, the momentum of surprise and mystery is a recurring theme in Hearn's writings so that this short essay illustrates two important points: 1. It gives an account of the motives and expectations and resulting first glimpses that were strong enough to generate a lasting impression in Hearn. 2. At the same time it is a trip back in time to images of Japan which Hearn still holds true, and we find equivalents in other works by him. The strongest of these images I see in Japan depicted as a "world of strangeness".

"The invisible life referred to by Mr. Mitford is the Unfamiliar Japan of which I have been able to obtain a few glimpses. The reader may,

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<sup>271</sup> For biographical data on Lafcadio Hearn ref. to Allen, p.1-23

<sup>272</sup> Ref. to Allen, p.1, and Hearn, Lafcadio: Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan. Rutland/Vermont, Tuttle, 1991, p.xvi)

<sup>273</sup> Hearn, p.1 ("My First Day in the Orient")

perhaps, be disappointed by their rarity; for a residence of little more than four years among the people – even by one who tries to adopt their habits and customs – scarcely suffices to enable the foreigner to begin to feel at home in this world of strangeness."<sup>274</sup>

Hearn did not travel to Japan unprepared. He had read the contemporary accounts on this strange place on the other side of the Pacific, before he undertook his voyage.<sup>275</sup> There is no indication in his own writings that he tried to un-do the knowledge he had, contrary to what we have seen in La Farge. Yet, the unseen still bore the potential to dazzle Hearn.

"It is with delicious surprise of the first journey through Japanese streets [...] that one first receives the real sensation of being in the Orient, in this Far East so much read of, so long dreamed of, yet, as the eyes bear witness, heretofore all unknown."<sup>276</sup>

In La Farge we found the paradox of the seeker of the undiscovered that he wished to remain undisturbed. We can detect a similar paradox in Hearn. The charm of the unfamiliar was what attracted him to Japan, and he expressed the same "conservatism" as La Farge; at the same time he tried very hard to mingle with the scene, to "feel at home", i.e. to understand enough of this strange culture to become part of it. In his attempt to "adopt their habits and customs" he had to develop a basic understanding while he also tried to preserve the reasons for his affinity to Japan.

"The traveler who enters suddenly into a period of social change – especially change from a feudal past to a democratic present – is likely to regret the decay of things beautiful and the ugliness of things new."<sup>277</sup>

According to Rosenstone, it was Hearn's ambition to write more than a "simple travelbook" on Japan, "but a volume that will describe Japanese life from the inside, as if by someone 'taking part in the daily existence of the common people, and thinking with their thoughts'".<sup>278</sup> But sharing the life with the common people is not what Hearn or other sojourners such as Griffis and Morse did. They were privileged outsiders, who came to Japan at a time when Western influences

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<sup>274</sup> Hearn, p.xi – Hearn refers his foregoing quote of Mitford: "Of the inner life of the Japanese the world at large knows little: their religion, their superstitions, their ways of thought, the hidden springs by which they move, – all these are as yet mysteries."

<sup>275</sup> Ref. to Allen, p.8

<sup>276</sup> Hearn, p.2

<sup>277</sup> Hearn, p.7

<sup>278</sup> Rosenstone, p.31

were regarded highly and who were treated like kings. Also, Hearn idealizes the land of his dreams way too much to be able to think with the common people's thoughts.

As indicated in Part 1, Chapter 1, the change from feudalism to democracy in Japan included an opening towards both Western technology and thought. Those in favour of the "Occidental" emphasis on *logos* and *ratio* expressed decisive indifference to their country's past and to what they felt were outmoded beliefs and superstitions. Hearn on the other hand showed a deep interest in Japanese myth and its relevance for the present<sup>279</sup>, which he saw endangered by "the civilization we have thrust upon"<sup>280</sup> Japan. Other than the new school of thought that arose in Japan after the Meiji Restoration, Hearn denies the necessity for (the educated classes of) the Japanese to "assimilate" Western thought. He has little in common with the "Occidentalized Japanese" who is "inclined to treat with undue contempt all conceptions of the supernatural" and who belongs to a class "ashamed of its older beliefs"<sup>281</sup>.

### **The Spirits of Japan**

Traditional Japan in Hearn's understanding is indeed completely different from other cultures, if not unique, and we do not find the common legacy allusions La Farge employed in his *Letters from Japan*. Hearn does not perceive the attractions of Japan as reminders of what had always been known by mankind but as something it had always dreamed of.

"... the forms before me [...] do not really appear to me as things new, but as things dreamed: the sight of them must have stirred to life forgotten memories of picture-books."<sup>282</sup>

This excerpt speaks of a life-long yearning for something Hearn could not find anywhere else. Referring back to the discussion of the mechanisms of identity-building in Part 1, Chapter 2, it seems evident that "Japan's Great Interpreter" too is searching for an answer to life's question. In his worldview superstitions stand

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<sup>279</sup> For example ref. to "Kitsune", "In the Cave of the Children's Ghost", "Of Ghosts and Goblins", all in: Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan (first published: Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1894), and In Ghostly Japan, Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1899; Kwaidan. Stories and Studies of the Strange, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1904

<sup>280</sup> Hearn, p.453

<sup>281</sup> Hearn, p.xii

<sup>282</sup> Hearn, p.13

for a cultural community's legacy of ancient knowledge and beliefs and lead the way with "its primitive efforts to find solutions for the riddle of the Unseen".<sup>283</sup> Here, "primitive" is not meant in a negative way but points towards the same innocence in the perception of being that Emerson and La Farge called for. It typifies the primeval understanding of the mysteries of life, an understanding that for Hearn used to be common knowledge in old Japan but was now endangered because of undue occupation with Occidental values. In Hearn's sketches, the parables expressed by the knowledge of the ancestors' take on the role of sense-making illuminations, just like art and architecture in La Farge's book.

"... these and a hundred other pretty sights are due to fancies which, though called superstitious, inculcate in simplest form the sublime truth of the Unity of Life."<sup>284</sup>

"Unity of Life", oneness with being, man's unison with nature – they all stand for the human being's quest to uncover the essence of life and create a meaningful existence for itself. It was my argument in Part 1, Chapter 2 that creating a meaningful existence is equal to determining one's identity in relation to one's environment. The more stable the ties to this environment are, the more secure the individual identity is perceived to be. Consequently, when trying to find a new home for one's self in a foreign environment as the chosen alternative *modus vivendi*, the need for integration is very strong. La Farge, who did not attempt to find his home in Japan but in the image it conveyed for him, admitted to repeatedly falling prey to extensive shopping. The pieces he purchased symbolized this image for him and were meant as a reminder of what he had found beautiful and true in Japanese culture. Thus the possession of these souvenirs were meant to tighten the bond between him and his ideal. A similar inclination is described by Hearn.

"The shopkeeper never asks you to buy; but his wares are enchanted, and if you begin buying you are lost. [...] For, although you may not, perhaps, confess the fact to yourself, what you really want to buy is not the contents of a shop; you want the shop and the shopkeeper, and streets of shops with their draperies and their habitants, the whole city and the bay and the mountains begirdling it, and Fujiyama's white witchery overhanging it in the speckless sky, all Japan, in very truth, with its magical trees and luminous atmosphere, with all its cities and towns and temples, and forty millions of the most lovable people in the universe."<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Hearn, p.xiv

<sup>284</sup> Hearn, p.xiv

<sup>285</sup> Hearn, p.9

The recollection of this impression from his "First Day in the Orient" and his comments indicate that Hearn is well aware that what he is looking for cannot be bought. In fact, the critical undertone suggests what I indicated earlier – that this memory is indeed combined with the experience of the four years Hearn had been staying in Japan by the time he wrote this article. That means that even if Hearn during his first encounter with the land long dreamed of made himself believe the essence of Japan could be acquired in what La Farge called "bric-a-brac", he is now the wiser. This is also implied at another point in this essay, in which he describes his many attempts to "look [...] upon the face of Buddha"<sup>286</sup>.

"I am beginning to wonder whether I shall ever be able to discover that which I seek – outside of myself! That is, outside of my own imagination."<sup>287</sup>

Again, this statement seems to be influenced by Hearn's stay in Japan. If Japan symbolized the place for him, where he could find the original "Unity of Life", it seems likely that at the time of his arrival he had not yet fully realized the need to look for this place inside himself. It seems however that Japan was the only country where Hearn could feel comfortable enough to start searching his soul for salvation. His biography suggests that his adolescent years in Europe as well as his stay in America were not the happiest times in his life.<sup>288</sup> Hearn had suffered during his religious education in Ireland, France and England, and in Cincinnati and New Orleans he lived on the verge of poverty. Japan appeared to be the only place where he could make a reasonable living and find the peace of mind he had been searching for.

### **Discipline and Dignity**

In September 1890 Hearn was appointed English teacher in Izumo. This occupation suddenly made him a well respected authority in an environment which Hearn perceived as much more civilized than the schools of the Occident. The discipline applied in Japanese schools is depicted as rigid, yet dignified and natural.

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<sup>286</sup> Hearn, p.26

<sup>287</sup> Hearn, p.24

<sup>288</sup> Ref. to Allen, p.1-8

"The student is required, when speaking, to look his teacher in the face, and to utter his words not only distinctively, but sonorously. Demeanor in class is partly enforced by the class-room fittings themselves. The tiny tables are too narrow to allow of being used as supports for the elbows; the seats have no backs against which to lean, and the student must hold himself rigidly erect as he studies. He must also keep himself faultlessly neat and clean. Whenever and wherever he encounters one of his teachers, he must halt, bring his feet together, draw himself erect, and give the military salute. And this is done with a swift grace difficult to describe."<sup>289</sup>

The militaristic attire of the school does not disturb Hearn. As a matter of fact, he perceives the students' subordination to the unspoken rules as the outward expression of an inherent obedience, to which the Japanese are naturally subject. Even little boys in Japan seem to "unlike European children, never quarrel or fight"<sup>290</sup>. At one point in his "Diary of an English Teacher", Hearn provides the translation for a proclamation by the Japanese Emperor through the Ministry of Public Instruction, which was read at his school. This exercise takes on a dignified quality in Hearn's description and for him recounts the amiable traits peculiar to the Japanese people. Filial piety and unconditioned loyalty to the country are herein enforced in order to "support the Imperial prerogative, which is coexistent with the Heavens and the Earth"<sup>291</sup>. As will be illustrated in the following chapter, these are the very moral guidelines the Japanese military used during World War II to keep up their soldiers' war spirit. The "instructions bequeathed by Our ancestors and to be followed by Our subjects" were the indoctrination the *kamikaze* pilots received before sacrificing themselves for their country. For Hearn, they are

"words that evoke in a Japanese mind ideas which only those who know Japanese life perfectly can appreciate, and which, though variant from our own, are neither less beautiful nor less sacred"<sup>292</sup>.

This is not to say that Hearn was a secret nationalist. In his view, the positive aspects of ancestor worship and conservatism obviously outweighed the potential for abuse. The Japan he had set sails for was under siege by Western influences. Some Japanese intellectuals tried to cut clean from tradition and to adopt Occidental custom completely, therefore the traditional culture was in danger of being substituted by Western "vulgarity"<sup>293</sup>. The credo of the *kokugaku*

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<sup>289</sup> Hearn, p.435 ("From the Diary of an English Teacher")

<sup>290</sup> Hearn, p.438

<sup>291</sup> As quoted in Hearn, p.445

<sup>292</sup> Hearn, Footnotes, p.445-46

<sup>293</sup> Ref. to Hearn, p.344-45 ("In a Japanese Garden")

on the other hand represented Hearn's wish for the preservation of old wisdom and values. In his angle of vision, the "Japanese soul" was far from being prone to evil. "The soul of the race is essentially artistic"<sup>294</sup> was his conviction. In Hearn's words the Orient was superior to the Occident in every respect. Living in Japan and experiencing Japanese art and moral conduct became a most revitalizing image for him, an image of "perfect repose and gentleness". What might seem "passionless composure" to the unacquainted onlooker is the emblem of a pure national spirit to Hearn:

"You will recognize in the memory of that first impression one glimpse of the race-soul, with its impersonal loveliness and its impersonal weaknesses, – one glimpse of the nature of a life in which the Occidental, dwelling alone, feels a psychic comfort comparable only to the nervous relief of suddenly emerging from some stifling atmospheric pressure into thin, clear, free living air."<sup>295</sup>

With this Hearn repudiates what he perceives as the Occident's utter reliance on individuality and propagates the perfect "impersonal" integration of the single being into its cultural community. As already indicated, Hearn himself identified very strongly with traditional Japanese custom and tried to conform to it as completely as possible.

"... he himself began to conform to Japanese custom, wearing yukata and sandals in the evening to relax, eating Japanese food and heating his house by the traditional but inadequate means of the hot charcoal hibachi ..."<sup>296</sup>

In 1891, Hearn followed another traditional custom – that of the arranged marriage. He married a Japanese woman, had children with her and later took on a Japanese name.<sup>297</sup> So eventually, Hearn had found a home for himself and had given himself "heart and soul to a people not his own"<sup>298</sup>. But with time going by, the Japan he had cherished as the most beautiful of all cultures, was changing more and more. His feelings became ambiguous,

"...like the oscillation of a pendulum, one day swinging towards pessimism and the next to optimism. [...] But the pessimistic feeling is generally coincident with some experience of New Japan, and the

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<sup>294</sup> Hearn, p.436

<sup>295</sup> Hearn, p.477

<sup>296</sup> Allen, p.16

<sup>297</sup> Ref. to Allen, p.16, 18

<sup>298</sup> Allen, p.17

optimistic with something of Old Japan [...] The emotional nature of the race is changing. Will it ever become beautiful again?"<sup>299</sup>

Did Lafcadio Hearn accomplish his mission? From the text samples I examined two major aspects can be discerned:

1. Hearn set out for Japan with an image of the country which by the time of his arrival in 1890 was already on the brink of being lost. Its alleged traditional essence had to be revived by conservative Japanese interest groups. We can speak of a reality construct here that is based on accounts of the past combined with Hearn's very personal expectations. The interpretations of Japan he attempted to show to his Occidental audience therefore served a twofold purpose: first, they offered a possible key to traditional Japanese culture to the outside spectator; and secondly, they were an intentional effort to hold in place the beliefs and values these interpretations portrayed.
2. The recognition that the ideal was endangered by Japan's progressing opening to the West made Hearn sympathize with the language of Japanese nationalists. The character traits he pointed out as uniquely and admirably Japanese remind us of the *nihonjinron* image of the country. In that respect, Hearn idealized Japanese culture and custom in the same terms right-wing intellectuals used.

The persistent popularity of Lafcadio Hearn as "Japan's Great Interpreter" is most likely due to the exotic momentum of his pictures of a "World of Elves"<sup>300</sup>. It is the image of the Other, diametrically opposed to the known surroundings of the seeker of new spiritualism, the counter-reality to what is experienced as insufficient to create a meaningful foundation of existence.

### **Counterimages: The Yellow Peril**

One might now be inclined to think that *the* image of Japan in the America of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an essentially positive one. A look at contemporary press tells a different story. By the end of the century some Americans saw the new player Japan as a threat to the established world order. In an article published in 1896 in the *Overland Monthly*, readers were warned of the Japanese aggressor.

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<sup>299</sup> Hearn in a letter to a friend, as quoted in Allen, p.17

<sup>300</sup> Hearn, p.7



"Japan has entered upon a commercial war against the great industrial nations of the world with the same energy, earnestness, determination, and foresight, which characterized the war with China ... The industrial revolution now in progress in Japan is a real menace to some of the most important interests of America, and ... it is indeed time to act."<sup>301</sup>

For the author of this article, Japan did not act according to the rules. In his view, America was the legitimate leader of world industry, and Japan had no right to jeopardize the "most important interests" of a superior nation. These interests obviously consisted in economic expansion to create new markets for American products. In 1897, the Senator of Indiana went so far as to declare imperialism America's predestined role in the global society.

"American factories are making more than the American people can use; American soil is producing more than they can consume. Fate has written our policy for us; the trade of the world must and shall be ours."<sup>302</sup>

The Senator gave words to his view that the United States were the congenital provider of food, technology and ideology, while the target countries naturally took on the role of the consumer. Between 1852 and 1894, the American armed forces had prepared the grounds for international trade in seven nations in Latin America and Asia, with repeated visits to Nicaragua and Japan.<sup>303</sup> A self-reliant Japan was not welcome. The phantom of the "Yellow Peril" was reinforced, with the acute awareness of the numbers of Japanese immigrants to the United States adding to a spreading sense of paranoia. In 1895, the Japanese population in America amounted to some 6.000 inhabitants. By 1899, this figure had increased to 35.000<sup>304</sup>. This brought some Americans to entertain the threatening vision that the Japanese immigrants were disguised soldiers sent by their mother country to rise to arms at a moment's notice.<sup>305</sup> Among the letters President Roosevelt received in response to the influx of foreigners was one stating:

"They [the Japanese] are silent, sly, inquisitive, and toward America inclined to be sullen ... They are undoubtedly under some form of

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<sup>301</sup> *Overland Monthly* 28 (October 1896), p.393-403, as quoted in Iriye, Akira: "Japan as Competitor, 1895-1917", in: Iriye, Akira: *Mutual Images. Essays in American-Japanese Relations*. Cambridge/Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1975, p.75

<sup>302</sup> Senator Albert Beveridge as quoted in Zinn, p.292

<sup>303</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.291

<sup>304</sup> Ref. to Iriye, *Japan as Competitor*, p.76

general organization and control, which seems to be military in its ability to command and dominate them by the hundreds in a body ..."

The sender of this letter concluded that most "of them are spying, and are here with disguised motives".<sup>306</sup> Dishonesty, slyness and determination to an evil cause are the character traits emphasized here, and we will encounter them again in the course of our investigation.

### **A Threat to National Identity**

The national identity as constructed by a certain faction of American society was questioned by a new protagonist on the world stage. So far, the United States had been secure in their position as the leading economic power of the superior Western civilization. Japan had been opened by America only half a century ago and had been "treated" to the merits of Western culture. The former pupil's call for independence was perceived as very inappropriate in some people's eyes. Moreover, the Japanese looking for work in the United States seemed to pose a threat to the domestic workforce. In 1909, A.C. Coolidge noted in his book *The United States as a World Power*;

"Japanese immigrants ... form the vanguard of an army of hundreds of millions, who, far from retreating before the white man, thrive and multiply in competition with him. It is not they, but he, who retires from the field. [...] white men, as a working class, cannot maintain themselves, in the long run against the competition of Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, and perhaps others."<sup>307</sup>

In this scenario, the present Japanese residents are only the beginning of a plague coming on as an apocalypse to the American worker. "Millions" were to follow, their prominent goal apparently the expulsion of "the white man". The quotation also implies that unfair practices were common custom for the Japanese – why else would the Caucasian be unable to defend his position? This assumption was supported by the American Consul General in China, who pictured the Japanese as employing "devious tactics" to gain hegemony in Asia.

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<sup>305</sup> Ref. to Iriye, *Japan as Competitor*, p.78

<sup>306</sup> From a letter to President Roosevelt, dated December 1907, as quoted in Iriye, *Japan as Competitor*, p.78-79

<sup>307</sup> Coolidge, Archibald Cary: *The United States as a World Power*. New York, Macmillan, 1909, as quoted in Iriye, *Japan as Competitor*, p.77

"I really cannot see any evidence ... that the Japanese in this part of the world are willing to play the game fairly, except in those cases where a discovery of their real intentions might be noised abroad and injure their position in the 'eyes of the world'."<sup>308</sup>

To play by the rules obviously meant to accept America's superiority, or to put it more bluntly, American hegemony in world trade. We also find a supposition here which will recur forcefully during the "trade war" between the US and Japan in the 1970s: Japan regarded as the enemy that follows a hidden agenda, which its "soldiers" try to hide from the inquisitive look of the Western world. In the Consul General's eyes these objectives, however, seem to evidently lie in the acquisition of world power. At the same time, the "slyness" of Japan is underlined by the assumption that false appearances are kept up to deceive others. This was the beginning of what would become an – in the course of events understandably – fierce hatred of Japan in the years before and during World War II.

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<sup>308</sup> Consul General in Mukden Willard Straight, as quoted in Iriye, *Japan as Competitor*, p.87

*Never try to reason the prejudice out of a man.  
It was not reasoned into him, and cannot be reasoned out.*  
Sydney Smith

## **Part 2, Chapter 2**

### Why We Fight

#### World War II Propaganda and the Other Side of the Coin

What could serve as a better case study on national interests, individual perception and motivational campaigns than a war? It is here that we can see most clearly how the views and intentions of the relatively small group of those in power are pushed to become institutionalized norms, which serve to manipulate a larger group for the sake of a political goal. Mass media obviously plays an important role in the making of public opinion and the reinforcement of target-oriented motivation. At the same time, individual accounts of warfare can give a picture which is very different from what is officially propagated, thereby showing two things:

1. It becomes evident that there is no *one* common perception but rather a multitude of individual worldviews which is the behavioral driving force of a people. Actually, the mechanisms of reality construction are probably never more apparent than at times of political unrest.
2. The very existence of pluralism and widely differing outlooks emphasizes the need for reality constructs for the sake of goal achievement on a large scale. In war, the national community constitutes one of the largest interest groups, which has to be sustained by the perseverance of certain thought patterns and codes of demeanor.

We have already examined the dependence of personal identity on a group in Part 1, Chapter 2. The felt need for a stable environment as the reference point for a sense of self includes the willingness to accept subordination to rules and sanctions defined by the respective group. In order to secure its position within the community, the individual accepts so-called higher goals, to which potentially dissenting personal motives have to be sacrificed. However, depending on the degree of individual deviation, constant reinforcement of the merits of these higher goals is crucial. To be willing to die for one's country naturally calls for a great amount of motivational support. Bearing this in mind, the extensive

coverage and aggressiveness of wartime propaganda moves into a different light. It is much less actual conviction about the character of the enemy than the need to keep up the most hostile picture of the Other that can possibly be conjured. Generalization and depersonalization are vital to this. We will see the "damage" done once individual personalities are picked out of the enemy masses. It is easy to hate an unknown vague mass, as long as there is no personal relation to our existence. It is much harder to maintain the antagonistic sentiment towards the foreigner if we encounter him as a human being.

As was also indicated in Part 1, Chapter 2, there is a repertoire of common features, which supplies the ingredients to formulate the noble cause. Sense of belonging to the group is the underlying motor to give power to ideals such as national heritage, cultural unity and socio-economic principles. The defense of the latter is intricately connected to the securing of the former. The perceived threat to a nation's democratic values becomes a threat to the individual identity. If the social system that provides home and nurture for our personal existence is endangered, our own being as defined by us with reference to the system is at stake. The next step towards recognition of a "we" against "them" situation is just a small one.

In 1941, the United States entered the war in the Pacific. According to the American government its forces fought "a people's war"<sup>309</sup> to defend the free Western world. In their terms Japan's "surprise attack" on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 was an act of extreme deviousness and planned brutality and served as an illustration what would happen to Western civilization if the latter did not immediately put a halt to further moves by the Imperial Army. Howard Zinn argues that the American involvement sprang from motives far less noble.

"Surely it was not the humane concern for Japan's bombing of civilians that led to Roosevelt's outraged call for war – Japan's attack on China in 1937, her bombing of civilians at Nanking, had not provoked the United States to war. It was the Japanese attack on a link in the Pacific Empire that did it.

So long as Japan remained a well-behaved member of that imperial club of Great Powers who – in keeping with the Open Door Policy – were sharing the exploitation of China, the United States did not object. [...] It was when Japan threatened potential U.S. markets by its attempted takeover of China, but especially as it moved toward the tin, rubber, and oil of Southeast Asia, that the United States became alarmed and took those measures which led to the Japanese attack:

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<sup>309</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.398

a total embargo on scrap iron, a total embargo on oil in the summer of 1941."<sup>310</sup>

Zinn's description indicates economic interest as the "true" motive of the government of the United States. This is hardly surprising, as economic interests have been the motor of aggression in many instances ever since the beginning of mankind. Why is it then so important to claim other, "humane" reasons, when everyone should know from past experience that the true motive lies somewhere else? There is a paradox of Christian values and economic self-interest (if not instinct), which has been installed in man with the birth of consciousness. If man were an animal he would go about his daily business, taking what he could from nature and not minding if this meant taking from others. But the individual is let into the world as a conscious being and over the centuries has developed an understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, and this set of values tells him that it is not right to kill for money and land. In order to overcome this paradox governments, which are among those who reinforce the aforementioned set of values to maintain piece and social stability, have to construct an "excuse" that seems more legitimate.

In the following paragraph Zinn argues that American hegemony in the Pacific was the predominant goal and that war with Japan had not only been expected but had been accepted and justified. To prepare the grounds for this, the public had intentionally been deceived about the actual state of affairs and the dimensions of the American-Japanese conflict. Zinn quotes a historian sympathetic to President Roosevelt's strategy:

"Franklin Roosevelt repeatedly deceived the American people during the period before Pearl Harbor ... He was like the physician who must tell the patient lies for the patient's own good ... because the masses are notoriously shortsighted and generally cannot see danger until it is at their throats ..."<sup>311</sup>

The statement implies the belief in higher truths, which are accessible for a selected elite only. Because of lack of information and insight into the bigger picture, the masses are ignorant of the due course of events. Therefore the small power group has to act on behalf of the masses for their benefit, justifying the deception. However, keeping in mind my above comment about the paradox of

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<sup>310</sup> Zinn, p.401

<sup>311</sup> Bailey, Thomas C. as quoted in Zinn, p.402

animal instinct and human consciousness, this also means that "the masses" need (if not want) to be deceived to be able to maintain their reality construct.

Yet, the call for "enthusiastic patriotism" did not convince everyone. During World War II 10 million men were drafted for armed service. In total, there were at least 350.000 cases of draft evasion, including desertion.<sup>312</sup> Again, this lack of a unanimous pro-war sentiment emphasized the indispensability of a strong propaganda machine. Stereotypes had to be kept intact at home and on the battlefields, it was the good American against the hateful "Jap". In the words of Admiral Halsey "the only good Jap is a Jap who's been dead six months", a phrase that was picked up by *Leatherneck*, the Marine Monthly, as "good Japs are dead Japs".<sup>313</sup> Generalization, depersonalization and dehumanization of "the Japs" was a proven tactic employed by the military and representatives of the American press to nurture the enemy image. Ernest Pyle, an American war correspondent, whose stories according to Dower reached some fourteen million readers, pointed out what he regarded as the main difference between the civilized West and primitive Japan:

"In Europe, we felt that our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people. [...] But out here [in the Pacific] I soon gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive, the way some people feel about cockroaches or mice."<sup>314</sup>

Pyle creates the impression that this view is common sentiment. By crediting the statement to an unspecified group of people, he implies that this is an expression of public opinion, thereby gaining a higher level of credibility. The comparison with animals serves to lower the barrier to accept the killing of the Japanese enemy, while the allusion to parasites adds the aspect of the necessity to their extinction.

Before Pearl Harbor many Americans spoke in belittling terms of Japan. Although the "Japanese economy was fully integrated into the world capitalist system, and the country enjoyed world-power status as the only non-Western

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<sup>312</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.409

<sup>313</sup> Dower, John W.: War Without Mercy. Race and Power in the Pacific War. New York, Pantheon, 1986, p.79

<sup>314</sup> Pyle, Ernest as quoted in Dower, p.78

member of the Council of the League of Nations"<sup>315</sup>, the image that seemed to persist in the United States was that of a funny people so unlike Western cultures that it could not be taken seriously. In 1936 the historian Barbara Tuchman described what sounds like the mental disorder of a whole country:

So completely divorced is the Japanese mental process from the Occidental, so devoid of what Westerners call logic, that the Japanese are able to make statements, knowing they present a false picture, yet sincerely believing them. How this is accomplished it is impossible for a foreigner to understand, much less to explain."<sup>316</sup>

If one follows this "observation" one has to come to the conclusion that the Japanese people consciously and intentionally mislead non-Japanese about their views, motives and actions (a war tactic that would not be unheard of). At the same time they are said to believe in what they say, that is in the lies they knowingly tell, and the apparently irreconcilable paradox of this is supposed to be the underlying feature of the Japanese national character. Joseph Grew, American Ambassador to Japan from 1932 to 1942 supports Tuchman's thesis by declaring that "Japanese sanity cannot be measured by American standards of logic".<sup>317</sup>

Willis Lamott, an American missionary in Japan denied the country any great cultural achievements. "The Japanese have lost much irreparably by not having a great art, a great poetry, a great drama, to introduce to the Western world."<sup>318</sup> This contradicts what La Farge, Hearn and others found in Japan. It fits the copy-cat image of a nation that throughout history had imported technology and art first from China and later from the West rather than inventing anything of its own. William Henry Chamberlin, who in 1942 published a textbook on Japan, put it in a nutshell: "The Japanese are great in small things and small in great things."<sup>319</sup>

According to Dower, "Westerners greatly underestimated Japan's intentions and capabilities".<sup>320</sup> The United States' and the British military invested little energy in taking the Asian country seriously, let alone regard it as a potential threat. It

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<sup>315</sup> Iriye, Akira: Power and Culture. The Japanese-American War 1941-1945. Cambridge/Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1981, p.2

<sup>316</sup> Tuchman, Barbara as quoted in Dower, p.96

<sup>317</sup> Grew, Joseph C.: Ten Years in Japan. A Contemporary Record drawn from the Diaries and Private and Official Papers of Joseph C. Grew. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1944, p.469

<sup>318</sup> Lamott, Willis as quoted in Dower, p.97

<sup>319</sup> Chamberlin, William Henry as quoted in Dower, p.98.

<sup>320</sup> Dower, p.98



therefore comes as no surprise that information about the development of an advanced fighter plane by the Japanese Imperial Army did not stir notable interest among the American military heads. The image of the bow-legged yellow men with thick spectacles and a silly grin on their face obviously rooted too deep to allow looking at things from a different angle. Yet the so-called Zero fighters flew the attack on Pearl Harbor only one year after its first testing.<sup>321</sup> This episode is symbolic for three major elements:

1. An attitude as the one portrayed above predetermines a feeling of superiority if not arrogance. In this case, the Self has a very strong positive sense of itself and regards itself as invincible. The weakness of the Other serves to support this image, and it becomes clear that the Self grows with the downsizing of the Other.
2. The balance in this power relationship results in certain mental sets (ref. to Part 1, Chapter 2), which determine the boundaries of perception. The strong Self is associated with a clearly defined set of positive terms, while the weak Other connotes to prescribed negative features in the same way.
3. In order to plant the sense of Self or identity in firm grounds, the above equation has to remain intact. While slight deviations on either side do not endanger the balance, greater variations which might result in a decrease in positive self-awareness and an increase in positive connotations of the Other are not acceptable. Therefore, information which poses a threat to the established system, again that is the identity, is left out. What must not be cannot be.

To preserve the United States government's sense of security within the global community, the army had to be pictured as a powerful if not unconquerable instrument for the securing of American interests. The armed forces had to represent the reality construct which had been put to work by the highest national interest group. The point to drive home was the inferiority of the Japanese in every respect. What had been the promise of spiritual fulfilment for John La Farge and Lafcadio Hearn now became the most popular joke in the United States. Repetition and re-emphasis were the critical tools to turn the stereotype into common knowledge.

"Prejudice masqueraded ... fact. It rested on innumerable minuscule and presumed empirical observations. Thus, Westerners did not

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<sup>321</sup> Ref. to Dower, p.104. According to Dower, intelligence reports on the aircraft were available but were ignored.

simply dismiss the Japanese out of hand as military incompetent. They 'knew' that the Japanese were not a serious threat because it had been reported over and over again that they could not shoot, sail, nor fly."<sup>322</sup>

History tells us differently, and the overconfidence with which American opinion-makers treated the Japanese people before December 7, 1941 is the key to the fierceness with which the former reacted to Pearl Harbor. If these little people were after all capable to surprise and bomb out an American military base within a couple of hours only – the very same comical figures who were "slow-brained, inefficient, literate but unthinking slave[s] to routine, ... unimaginative copycat[s] who could never adjust to new situations"<sup>323</sup> – there must have been something amiss in the image they presented of themselves. The means by which to argue out of this trap were provided by Tuchman's analysis: the Japanese had apparently willfully led Western spectators to believe they were weaklings while they at the same time possessed superhuman qualities. Because if one started to think that the American perception might have been shaped more by wishful thinking than anything else, the picture they had formed of themselves might just as well be false. It is evident where such "dangerous" thoughts lead to. By questioning the established stereotypes, which constituted only one side of the equation, national and cultural identity could get into rough waters. Consequently, it is not surprising that instead of going into a re-evaluation of accepted modes of seeing and interpreting one's environment, rage against the ones who threatened the fragile value system (and who killed thousands of people within a couple of hours) was the popular response.

"In immeasurable ways, the outrage of Americans over the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor was compounded by this long tradition of belittlement. It was, to begin with, preposterous for these comic-opera people to presume they could take on a white giant, and outrageous they chose to do so in such an insulting way."<sup>324</sup>

There is some dispute if Pearl Harbor was indeed as much a surprise to the American military as official releases wanted to make the public believe.<sup>325</sup> In any case it can be said that the attack took many by surprise because it was an

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<sup>322</sup> Dower, p.102

<sup>323</sup> Prange, Gordon W.: At Dawn We Slept. The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor. New York, Penguin, 1982, p.36

<sup>324</sup> Dower, p.110

<sup>325</sup> For detailed evidence that the US military was warned and was in possession of intelligence reports indicating a possible attack on Pearl Harbor weeks before the incident

unexpected slap in the face of American self-awareness. I will now take a closer look at representations of this self-awareness and the resulting image of Japan in some contemporary accounts and in descriptions of World War II published during and after the war.

### **Joseph Grew: An Attempt at Objectivity**

Joseph C. Grew, the American Ambassador to Japan already mentioned above, kept a detailed record of his stay in Japan from 1932 to 1942. His journals provide a rich resource base on the American-Japanese relationship and incidents during that period, while at the same time they reveal the underlying convictions which shaped the perception of one of President Roosevelt's confidants. It seems obvious that Grew noted his reflections with the intention for publication in the back of his mind. It is his "conviction that the accurate recording of history depends upon frank contemporary comment".<sup>326</sup> Accuracy and the persistent attempt at objectivity are his foremost goals to make historical development explicable. And while he admits to human fallibility he believes in "honest opinions"<sup>327</sup> based on the untiring collection of data and broadening of one's knowledge, which little by little leads the way to an authentic understanding of history and world politics.

"This book aims to present to our people and, I hope, to the people of all the United Nations, a more accurately focused view of Japan than is now widely held, for only through a correct conception of that country and its people can we approach with intelligence the difficult problems which will have to be solved after our military victory is complete."<sup>328</sup>

The use of terms like "accurately focused" and "correct" imply the existence of unaccurate and false conceptions, which Grew made it his mission to set straight. His previous acknowledgement of individual perspective based on personal knowledge is thereby put into a different light. With the above statement Grew expresses his belief in a, if not the ultimate, recognition of the state of affairs that is as close to the truth as possible. Also, the citation reveals the underlying goal of his record, that is to serve as a means to unravel the Japanese riddle. "Know your enemy" was a crucial factor in 1944, when Grew's

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ref. to Wohlstetter, Roberta, Pearl Harbor. Warning and Decision. Stanford Univ. Press, 1962. Also, ref. to Prange, p.31-32.

<sup>326</sup> Grew, p.ix

<sup>327</sup> Grew, p.ix

journal was published and the United States were still stuck in the middle of a war that turned out to be much more trouble than had been expected.

"We have been presented for some years past with cumulative evidence of unmitigated subtleties, trickery, brutality, and cynical faithlessness on the part of the Japanese military caste and machine, and there is presented in my story fresh evidence of the medieval character of the Japanese military mind and temperament. A primary axiom of war is to 'know your enemy'. [...] The present book will not have served one of its purposes, however, if it does not bring home to my readers the fact that there are many Japanese today who did not want war, who realized the stupidity of attacking the United States, Great Britain and other United Nations, and who did everything in their power to restrain the military extremists from their headlong and suicidal aggressions."<sup>329</sup>

Grew did not fall prey to generalizations about the evil character of the Japanese as a people. Throughout his book he is eager to emphasize the difference between the military machine and the "common people", many of whom he encountered and made friends with during his years in Japan. He was aware that in many foreigners' eyes the image of the samurai warrior, the feudalistic ideal, constituted the predominant character feature of every Japanese soldier and even of the whole nation. Grew made it his point to draw a sharp distinction here, repeatedly quoting individual Japanese opinion and behaviour that stood more closely to "the American" view of peace and democracy. Simultaneously, the ambassador perceived Western civilization as superior to the socio-political system of Japan. For him his role as a diplomat is twofold: Firstly, he keeps his government informed of the developments and "public" sentiment versus military interests. Secondly, he acts as a missionary to the Japanese people in that he tries to educate them about American culture and values.

"The Japanese, even most of the highest officials in the Government, are amazingly ill-informed of American public opinion and I am all in favor of anything that will enlighten them."<sup>330</sup>

Consequently, the "good Japanese" in Grew's terminology are those who have eventually acknowledged the supposedly higher benefit of Western ideals and have come to accept the necessity for a global American hegemony in culture, economy and politics. In accordance with this conviction, Grew distributes copies of articles from his country's press to his Japanese go-betweens for translation to

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<sup>328</sup> Grew, p.x

<sup>329</sup> Grew, p.xi

make "the American attitude" known to the higher officials. In 1940, the ambassador regards this as a "thoroughly healthy procedure" to undermine the aggressive propaganda of the Japanese military and help the United States' government to reach a peaceful, if controlled by American interests, solution for Japan.<sup>331</sup>

### **American Interests and Japanese Self-Deception**

To Joseph Grew, it is "Japan, not we, [who] is on the war path"<sup>332</sup>, thus providing legitimation for the American initial policy of non-interference (when the Japanese military bombed Nanking) and the later economic sanctions, which "were widely recognized in Washington as carrying grave risks of war"<sup>333</sup>. Grew maintains his position as a mediator, consistently sending off recommendations to support the attempts at peaceful resolution by several Japanese officials to the President. At the same time, there is of course plenty of evidence that his motivation is to secure American interests. This what he, as the ambassador, is in Japan for, and it is safe to assume that he accepted his call because of a deep-rooted conviction about the good of American culture. His "honest opinion" is therefore based on a perception of this culture as determined by freedom, democracy and the right to chose. Naturally, he considers these ideals as more worthy to defend than his understanding of the feudalistic beliefs and objectives of the Japanese ruling powers. Collective subordination to the Western value system, which calls for the dominance of the American way, for Grew is as natural as the "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" is for the Japanese military<sup>334</sup>. The superiority of Western culture is something Grew firmly believes in and which he for all his sympathy with Japan would not give up.

"[The Japanese officials] cannot understand that we are not to be swayed by mere expediency and that our position is based upon principles deeply embedded in the American creed."<sup>335</sup>

One can assume that the Japanese position, i.e. the officially sanctioned view, is very well based upon principles embedded in what the power caste sees as the

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<sup>330</sup> Grew, p.355

<sup>331</sup> Ref. to Grew, p.355

<sup>332</sup> Grew, p.358

<sup>333</sup> Zinn, p.402

<sup>334</sup> This comparison seems a bit off, as it puts the aggression of the Japanese military on the same level as the views of a clearly benevolent American ambassador. However, both are based on reality constructs, even though one may be "nobler" than the other.

national creed. This is not to justify the aggressive politics of a military government. Rather it is for us to take a moment to think about the evolvement of certain ways of perception and reaction. We have no room here to go into detail about how the Japanese war machinery worked to keep up the spirit among its subordinates. Yet it seems obvious that the impact on the Japanese people, including the armed forces, was just as effective as its counterpart's propaganda was on the American people. In each instance it was critical for those in power to construct the sense of superiority of its peoples' race and culture over the other to justify the course of action and to install a desired behaviour code. But according to Grew, the Japanese are prey to a severe case of self-deception.

"To what extent the intelligent Japanese are guilty of intellectual dishonesty, or to what extent they arrive at honest convictions from the propaganda with which they are fed, is always to me an open question."<sup>336</sup>

This implies the presupposition that there is one true view of the world, which is equivalent to the American view and once again takes us to Tuchman's observation that the Japanese are consciously dishonest people paradoxically believing their own lies. The headline of this journal entry by Grew is "A Brief Case History of Japanese Self-Deception" and the incident in question is a comment by the President of Waseda University on the United States doctrine of non-interference and equal opportunities. Yet from the perspective of someone who is looking for traces of hidden imperialism in American policy, there is a point in the following extract:

"The countries that are most strongly insisting upon the maintenance of the 'Open Door policy' and the principle of 'equal opportunity' in the world today are the least willing to put into practice what they are advocating. Can international justice be established while such inconsistency prevails?"<sup>337</sup>

Hereby we see how the argument can be turned around to question the noble intentions of the American government in order to justify the commentator's own view of the state of affairs.

### **A Threat to Established Views**

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<sup>335</sup> Grew, p.356

<sup>336</sup> Grew, p.375-376

In Grew's journals we can observe the same immanent preconceptions, which presuppose the righteousness of American convictions and the legitimation of American interests. In a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt dated December 14, 1940, the ambassador sums up the inevitable conflict of interest which had to arise from the collision of two nations, which were equally satisfied with the logic of their principles:

"After eight years of effort to build up something permanently constructive in American-Japanese relations, I find that diplomacy has been defeated by trends and forces utterly beyond its control, and that our work has been swept away as if by a typhoon, with little or nothing remaining to show for it. Japan has become openly and unashamedly one of the predatory nations and part of a system which aims to wreck about everything that the United States stands for. Only insuperable obstacles will now prevent the Japanese from digging in permanently in China and from pushing the southward advance, with economic control as a preliminary to political domination in the areas marked down."<sup>338</sup>

Two aspects are of interest here. One is the reference to Japan's attempted economic control over South East Asia. This is obviously where the United States' interests lay, too. China in particular became a target for economic expansion<sup>339</sup>, therefore Japanese attempts at dominance were not welcome. In his response dated January 21, 1944, the President confirmed that "our interests are menaced both in Europe and in the Far East."<sup>340</sup> The second aspect is the threat to American self-awareness and its role in the global community. The quote indicates that for Grew Japan has become particularly dangerous, because it took the lead in a movement which threatens "everything that the United States stands for" – its national identity. His comments on the fundamental otherness of Japanese thinking points to a perception of the American and the Japanese culture as being diametrically opposed. Statements such as "Japan's standards of logic or reason cannot be gauged by any Western measuring rod"<sup>341</sup> speak of an uneasiness in dealing with an opponent who appears to think in patterns completely alien to one's own understanding of the world. Clearly the latter, which is based on one's heritage, personal experiences and expectations, is the "correct" outlook. Consequently, the Other has to be in the wrong. A reality construct determined by polarities, by rights and wrongs, dos

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<sup>337</sup> As quoted in Grew, p.376

<sup>338</sup> Grew, p.359

<sup>339</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.290ff

<sup>340</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. as quoted in Grew, p.361

and don'ts, allows for only one valid image. To give credit to the competing image, to even admit its underlying assumptions could be justified, means that the whole system of the self becomes endangered.

Regardless of the self-reliance Grew expresses in his belief in American culture, he stays true to his profession in repeatedly warning of war with Japan. Very much the diplomat, he is not in favour of pursuing the just cause at any cost. Almost a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor Grew notes rumours about a "surprise mass attack" in his diary and passes this important piece of information on to his government.<sup>342</sup> In November 1941, he remarks:

"What has happened to date ... does not support the view that continuation of trade embargoes and imposition of a blockade (proposed by some) can best avert war in the Far East. [...] If the fiber and temper of the Japanese people are kept in mind, the view that war probably would be averted, though there might be some risk of war, by progressively imposing drastic economic measures is an uncertain and dangerous hypothesis upon which to base considered United States policy and measures."<sup>343</sup>

Again, this statement reveals two basic constituents of Grew's worldview:

1. He is an advocate of inducing "enlightenment" in the Occidental sense by peaceful persistence rather than by military force. In that he regards himself a missionary whose foremost task it is to educate the Japanese people about the convictions of Western civilization. As already indicated, for Grew the latter are synonymous with the American value system.
2. This necessity gains importance with the insight that the "fiber and temper of the Japanese people" are an unknown parameter. It cannot be predicted how these people, who have displayed contradictory behaviour in the past, will react if cornered by a threatening, if righteous, United States. Provocation for Grew could do more and unexpected damage here and achieve less than diplomatic conduct. Accordingly, he warns of the dangers "if we were to disregard or underestimate Japan's preparations of war"<sup>344</sup>.

## The Lessons of History

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<sup>341</sup> Grew, p.470. For further examples on the Otherness of Japan ref. to p.20-21, 375, 469 (this one already quoted)

<sup>342</sup> Ref. to Grew, p.368

<sup>343</sup> Grew, p.468-469

<sup>344</sup> Grew, p.470



Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor the American Embassy in Tokyo was closed, and in the summer of 1942 Joseph Grew and his wife and daughter had to sail back to the United States. What kind of impressions did the "diplomat for the promotion of peace"<sup>345</sup> take back with him? In one of the last entries into his Japanese journal Grew exclaimed:

"For her own good, for the future and welfare of the United States, and for the future security and welfare of world civilization, Japan must be overwhelmingly beaten, for only thus, under present circumstances, can her armed forces, her military machine and system, be wholly discredited and liquidated, and the Japanese nation be turned permanently into paths of peace. However long this process may take, however much it may involve American 'blood, sweat, and tears', there must be no relinquishing of this essential task until it is finally and effectively completed. There is no room in the Pacific area for a peaceful America and a swashbuckling Japan."<sup>346</sup>

Although Grew considered his mission failed, he supported the "essential" importance of American interference in world politics. The roots of evil represented by the Japanese military had to be pulled out by the United States, who acted as a benevolent, if strict, father to the children of the world. Without this help there was no way the Japanese people could find the "paths of peace". Intellectually they did not seem capable of achieving this out of their own cultural strength. This coincides with Grew's earlier statement that "the Japanese are really children and should be treated as children"<sup>347</sup>. It was the enlightened nation's noble task to sacrifice itself to this ultimate goal of moral and physical intervention. Mission not accomplished but the lessons of history learned – this seems to be the theme of Grew's last records. The realization of freedom and equal opportunities for the world therein stands out as the United States' historical responsibility.

"We cannot permit nations to seize and pre-empt by process of conquest areas whose resources should be available to all. [...] In the world of today and tomorrow, no nation can afford simply to 'mind its own business'."<sup>348</sup>

Up to the end of his appointment Grew kept up his three maxims:

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<sup>345</sup> Ref. to Grew, p.9

<sup>346</sup> Grew, p.516 – It seems that Grew was painfully right in his assumption that Japan had to overwhelmingly beaten – as it was after two atomic bombs. The Japanese peninsula has been a peaceful member of the global community ever since.

<sup>347</sup> Grew, p.484

<sup>348</sup> Grew, p.517

1. He perceived the Western culture in general and the American culture in particular as superior to the Japanese value system. Convinced of the benefit of the moral code and behaviour he shared with the official American outlook Grew saw the education of the Japanese as a vital part for maintaining respectively re-establishing peace in the world. The immanent American economic interests which openly stood behind his government's action did not disturb this view but were the natural result of the expansion of Occidental culture. As already indicated, in the intellectual sense this expansion was only beneficial to a people like the Japanese.
2. If necessary, realization of the above goals had to be achieved by forceful intervention. The United States naturally assumed the leading role in the world order and acted out of fatherly concern for its dependants.
3. In spite of American war propaganda and Japanese military aggression Grew always drew a clear line between the military machine and the common people. He did not follow many of this contemporaries in reinforcing the gross image of the "yellow peril" or the beast-like Japanese. Quite on the contrary, he repeatedly stated to "have had many friends in Japan, some of whom I admired, respected, and loved. They are not the people who brought Japan in this war."<sup>349</sup>

According to historical accounts Joseph Grew never learned to master the Japanese language during the ten years of his job. Therefore and because he suffered from partial deafness any conversation in Japanese had to be translated for him. We will look deeper into the potential power of the interpreter later. Still, Grew obviously managed to build a very close and emotional relationship to Japan. In Gordon Prange's words the ambassador himself assumed the role of a father to his foreign friends: "... even when the Japanese most irritated him, his language was that of an affectionate father toward a beloved but exasperating son."<sup>350</sup>

### **Norman Mailer: The American Soldier**

The bombing of Pearl Harbor brought war between the United States and Japan. On the surface two worlds collided, the cultures of which were so fundamentally different that military combat seemed the only way to resolve the situation and to

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<sup>349</sup> Grew, p.535

<sup>350</sup> Prange, p.7

re-establish the equilibrium. As already indicated, in the Western Allies' view this was based on Occidental superiority, or more specifically on American hegemony. For the live of every individual this war meant a confusion of set beliefs that went to the roots of one's identity and place in the world. Joining the chorus of American war proganda while still safe on home grounds was one thing. Actually fighting the unknown enemy on strange territory while being deprived of the comforts of civilized life was something else. In the jungle motivation and morale took on a different note and a firm sense of belonging was crucial for the individual soldier's sanity and survival.

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* accounts for the very personal fears and interests of "the American Soldier" in an all out battle against an enemy he hardly knew nor cared about. Throughout the book the enemy remains a vague concept, the questioning of which appears to be dangerous. The repeated use of the term "Jap" seems monotonous and emphasizes the need to consistently reinforce the picture of the hated menace that has to be wiped out. Never outspokenly defined, "Jap" symbolizes a consensus and an individual perception at the same time. The consensus aspect helps to answer the "why we fight" question and to initiate "appropriate" reaction in combat. In Mailer's story, the image of the Japanese troops is frequently associated with deviousness, "sneaking" is a recurrent expression. Yet the individual aspect only partly incorporates the commonly acknowledged categories and adds personal interpretation.

"Everything was very quiet. The jungle was hushed, ominous, with a commanding silence that stilled his breath. He waited, and abruptly the utter vacuum was broken and he was conscious of all the sounds of the night woods – the crickets and frogs and lizards thrumming in the brush, the sougning of the trees. And then the sounds seem to vanish, or rather his ear could hear only the silence; for several minutes there was a continual alternation between the sounds and the quiet, as if they were distinct and yet related like a drawing of some cubes which perpetually turn inside-out and back again. Roth began to think; there was some heavy thunder and lightning in the distance, but he did not worry about the threat of rain. For a long time he listened to the artillery, which sounded like a great muffled bell in the heavy moist night air. He shivered and crossed his arms. He was remembering what a training sergeant had said about dirty fighting and how the Japs would sneak up behind a sentry in the jungle and knife the man. 'He'd never know at all,' the sergeant had said, 'except maybe for one little second when it was too late.'"<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Mailer, Norman: *The Naked and the Dead*. London, Harper & Collins, 1993, p.121-122. (The book was first published in the United States in 1949.)

This scenario evokes a series of impressions. There is a feeling of being locked in and of loneliness, and the soldier perceives the situation as unreal. The use of the word "vacuum" speaks of a detachment from reality, while the retreating and forthcoming sounds add a sense of hauntedness. The crossing of arms is a protective gesture against the immanent danger of the situation. Roth is on the verge of crossing the border from the illusionary safety of his vacuum to combat reality, brought about by the feared "sneak attack" of the enemy. Implied here is an image of the animal-like Japanese soldier, who with non-human capability is unfairly more suited for fighting in the jungle.

### **Fear and Hatred**

In the following Roth encounters growing fear, which, when becoming unbearable, turns into resentment towards the enemy.

"Roth trembled. He was beginning to feel resentful; for some time he had been convinced that the Japs were watching him. Why don't you come out? he wondered desperately. By now his nerves were so taut that he would have welcomed the attack."<sup>352</sup>

Again, the image of deviousness is evoked. For the soldier it appears as if the Japanese intentionally let him sweat there in uncertainty, prolonging the wait and thereby weakening his defenses. One of the reasons for the fierceness with which the American soldiers in this account later react towards the Japanese lies here. Tension builds because of the deprivation of the most basic standards of civilized existence and the enforced encounter with hostile conditions, with regards to both the natural environment and the constant vulnerability to enemy attacks. For lack of other possibilities this tension is then vented to blind rage and automatic behaviour.

"... the noise, the vibration of his gun, calmed him. He directed it to where he had seen the Japanese gunfire and loosed a volley. The handle pounded against his fist, and he had to steady it with both hands. The hot metallic smell of the barrel eddied back to him, made what he was doing real again."<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Mailer, p.123

<sup>353</sup> Mailer, p.157

Naturally, the weight and power of his gun gives this soldier a feeling of strength. He is calmed by his ability to react, to do something as opposed to being forced to inactively endure an oppressive situation. The soldier is brought back from the vacuum described above into the reality of self-defense. At the same time, in this situation perception is reduced to "me" against "them" and action becomes a reflex. Physical danger is no longer felt, but relief of the accumulated tension and frustration is experienced. The need for relief is so strong that it puts the soldier into a trance-like series of response.

"Croft no longer saw anything clearly, he could not have said at that moment where his hands ended and the machine-gun began; he was lost in a vast moil of noise out of which individual screams and shouts etched in his mind for an instant. He could never have counted the Japanese who charged across the river; he knew only that his finger was rigid on the trigger bar. He could not have loosened it. In those few moments he felt no sense of danger. He just kept firing."<sup>354</sup>

Mailer depicts only a few combat scenes in his book, the emphasis of his narration is on drawing a picture of the struggle and strife each individual soldier goes through in the jungle of the Pacific island. Consequently, the image of the Japanese created here is not so much a picture made of clearly determined ingredients, it is not even closely related to the Japanese as a race or nation. The Japanese enemy in this case is a symbol of the unknown and of the fear the soldiers in Mailer's narration. The image of the "Japs" stands for a general sentiment of uneasiness, and the hatred it helps to project serves as a measure to cope with the conditions.

In the wake of the above action, the soldiers are again left in a conflict only temporarily resolved. They are still high-strung from the action, and when the whole scenario repeats itself before their eyes comprehension about the fatality of their lot sets in.

"He shivered for a moment in the early morning air and realized with a pang of shame that for the first time in his life he had been really afraid. 'The sonofabitch Japs,' he said, 'I hate the bastards,' he said to himself, a terrible rage working through his weary body. 'One of these days I'm gonna really get me a Jap.' he whispered aloud."<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Mailer, p.159

<sup>355</sup> Mailer, p.161

Being afraid is a condition that does not fit the concept of the manly soldier. This explains the relation between fear and hatred here. The more oppressive the conditions are perceived by the American soldiers, the more anxiety is growing in them, and the more they hate their Japanese counterparts for imposing this on them.

### **Expressions of Doubt**

No matter how commanding the hatred which soldiers have to built up as their motivational force, they repeatedly have to deal with the fact that they are killing other human beings. Several of the soldiers in *The Naked and the Dead* have second thoughts about the rightness of their mission.

"What have I got against the goddam Japs? You think I care if they keep this fuggin' jungle? What's it to me if Cummings gets another star?"<sup>356</sup>

This is expressed more specifically in a later discussion on the justification of taking someone's life. The discussion starts off with one of the soldiers (Wyman) tormenting a bug and another one (Ridges) complaining about this act of senseless brutality.

"Ridges had watched this with displeasure, his long dumpty face wrinkled in a scowl. 'That ain't the right way to treat a bug,' he said. Wyman was absorbed in the convulsion of the insect, and the interruption irritated him. He felt a trace of shame. 'What do you mean, Ridges? What the hell's so important about a bug?' 'Shoot,' Ridges sighed, ' 'tain't doin' you no harm. Jus' mindin' its own business.' Wyman turned to Goldstein. 'The preacher's gettin' all excited over a bug.' He laughed sarcastically, and then said, 'Killin' one of Gawd's creatures, huh?' [...] Wyman poured a little dirt over the caterpillar and watched it struggle to free itself. 'I don't see you caring if you kill a Jap or two,' he said. 'They're *heathen*,' Ridges said. 'Excuse me,' Goldstein said, 'but I don't think you're quite right. I was reading an article a few months ago which said there were over a hundred thousand Christians in Japan.' Ridges shook his head. 'Well, Ah wouldn' want to be killing one of them,' he said. 'But you'll have to,' Wyman said."<sup>357</sup>

The above scene intentionally creates an atmosphere of absurdity for the reader. Amidst the atrocities of war a soldier worries about an insect while giving no second thought to killing human beings. War propaganda has been effective for

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<sup>356</sup> Mailer, p.135

those who accept the official view that the “heathen menace“ has to be extinguished. Doubt is generally not welcome, so if it comes to the surface other ways of relief have to be created. The mentioning of the large number of Japanese Christians puts Roth at unease, for he cannot even start to question the grounds for his fighting. The latter would eventually make him incapable of fulfilling his duty as an American soldier, and more importantly for him, would put him at a high risk in combat. If he does not shoot the enemy, who has been drilled with the same kind of propaganda, he will be shot by him. There is no room for hypocrisy, and Wyman puts it in a nutshell by saying that “you’ll have to“, no matter what contradictory feelings he might have deep inside himself.

The scene also illustrates the numbness which more and more encapsulates the soldiers who have to live with the constant threat of death. Torture is performed without thinking, and only the verbal mentioning of the act makes Wyman start to feel shame. The caterpillar in this incident is but one means for him to let out his frustration in a situation of emotional and physical deprivation with no end in sight. His act of brutality momentarily provides him with a sense of power, power that he does not have over the current conditions. Roth’s words throw him back into recognizing the futility of his doing, which results in shame and resentment at the same time. It is almost a vicious circle. Wyman is caught in an unsolvable conflict: he has been told to kill for some abstract higher goal that does not necessarily match his personal convictions. The discrepancy between the two causes a permanent undercurrent of uneasiness which needs to be discharged time and again. Realizing that the discharge promises very short term relief only emphasizes the ludicrousness of the situation and his inability to change it. This causes further frustration that needs to be vented, and touching on the subject adds to the hopelessness of it all.

### **Dehumanization of the Enemy**

Another important aspect here is the dehumanization of the enemy. One could argue that the insect symbolizes the enemy for Wyman, and it is obviously much easier to kill something that is regarded an ugly inferior creature than to end the life of a human individual. Roth apparently sees the insect as a living being while he thinks of the Japanese enemies in abstract terms of heathen = non-human. This leads us to one of the most remarkable incidents described in Mailer’s book. After a deadly chase through the woods, three of the soldiers (Red, Croft, and

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<sup>357</sup> Mailer, p.223

Gallagher) are left with one Japanese who has dropped his gun and has his hands in the air.

“Red looked at the Japanese soldier, and for an instant their eyes met. Both men looked away, as if they had been caught in something shameful. Red realized suddenly how weak he felt.”<sup>358</sup>

Looking into the other one's eyes each soldier recognizes that he is dealing with a human being just like himself. Shame therefore creeps up in two ways: 1. they feel shame for doing something like this to another human being, 2. they experience a sense of betrayal of the higher cause which taught them that the enemy was anything but human.

In the following Croft and Gallagher sit down with the Japanese soldier, give him food and drink, and for a short while a scene of peaceful normality is created. The Japanese soldier, who by now feels safe and who tries to deconstruct the stereotypical enemy image as a means to survive, shows pictures of his family.

"Gallagher looked at the picture, and felt a pang. For an instant he remembered his wife and wondered what his child would look like when it was born. With a shock he realized that his wife might be in labor now. For some reason which he did not understand he said suddenly to the Jap, 'I'm gonna have a kid in a couple of days.'"<sup>359</sup>

Having discovered something a common, Gallagher has suddenly built a relationship with this stranger. The pang he feels results from being reminded of another reality occupied by human beings instead of fighting monsters. The same must have occurred to Croft who experiences excitement and bitterness in short intervals. It takes the reader by surprise that finally Croft kills the Japanese, however, the logic soon becomes clear. The reality of the other human being confuses Croft. When he gives him a piece of chocolate and a cigarette this has the quality of an experiment with an animal. Croft speaks very little during this incident, but rather sits back and watches in amazement while going through the above mentioned emotional sequence. Having decided that this is a human being he deals with his terminal act becomes the only practicable consequence. He cannot allow his target to be like him, because then killing others would mean killing (someone like) himself and make the threat of being killed unbearably real. With shooting the Japanese Croft re-establishes the artificial equilibrium he and his fellow soldiers need to go on and effectively calms himself.

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<sup>358</sup> Mailer, p.197

<sup>359</sup> Mailer, p.200



"Croft stared for almost a minute at the Jap. His pulse was slowing down and he felt the tension ease in his throat and mouth. He realized suddenly that a part of his mind, every deeply buried, had known he was going to kill the prisoner from the moment he had sent Red on ahead. He felt quite blank now."<sup>360</sup>

Croft's mission has been accomplished – with just a short detour into thinking that he might be dealing with human beings. The American soldier quickly erases all reminders of this from his mind and feels "quite blank" again.

We have to understand the mechanisms at work which make us look the other way. Reality constructs are behind everything, and *The Naked and the Dead* is an excellent example of how they are employed to achieve certain goals. In that Mailer's book is very much an anti-war book. He vividly brings to the reader's attention how each individual soldier has his private struggle with the official view and how much constant work is necessary to secure the reality construct.

### **Deconstructing Stereotypes**

In like manner Mailer toys with some of the stereotypes about the Japanese which were in circulation at that time. An American Japanese acting as a translator for the American troops is introduced as Lieutenant Wakara. Wakara in Japanese means "to understand", and it is probably safe to suppose that Mailer chose the name because of this connotation. Later the reader learns that although fitted with such a name Wakara is not in the least sure of himself or the meaning of the things around him.

"'Wakara, what does *umareru* mean?' Dove asked. Lieutenant Wakara extended his slim legs, and wiggled his toes thoughtfully. 'Why, it means, 'to be born', I think.' Dove squinted along the beach and watched Hearn swimming for a moment. 'Oh, sure, *umareru* – to be born. *Umashi masu, umasho*. Those are the basic verb forms, aren't they? I remember that.' He turned to Conn and said, 'I don't know what I'd do without Wakara. It takes a Jap to figure out the damn language.' And he clapped Wakara on the back, and added, 'Hey, Tom, am I right?'" Wakara nodded slowly. He was a short thin man with a quiet sensitive face, rather dull eyes, and a thin mustache. 'Good old Wakara,' Dove said. Wakara continued to look at his legs. About a week before, he had overheard Dove saying to some officer, 'You know our Jap translators are overrated. I do all the

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<sup>360</sup> Mailer, p.201

work in our unit, of course I'm in charge, but Wakara isn't much help at all, I'm always having to correct his translations."<sup>361</sup>

This quote implies two quite contradictory opinions. In this instance Dove uses Wakara's presence to underline the common notion that the Japanese are a unique and illogical race which for a Westerner is impossible to comprehend. The occasion remembered by Wakara, however, indicates a feeling of superiority in Dove who claims to understand the Japanese better than they do themselves. This seemingly irreconcilable conflict shows that Dove makes use of one stereotype or the other as it suits his situational need and therefore invalidates both constructs.

Ignorance of the "true" nature of the Japanese or at least a more sympathetic understanding is expressed in the following excerpt:

"The Japs are weird, Wakara.' 'They're dopes,' Wakara said shortly. Conn lumbered into the conversation. 'I have to go along with you there, Wakara. You know I was in Japan, back in 'thirty-three, and the people are illiterate. You can't teach them a damn thing.' 'Gee, I didn't know you were there, Colonel,' Dove said. 'Do you know any of the language?' 'I never bothered to pick it up. I didn't like the people and I wanted no truck with them. I knew we were going to go to war."<sup>362</sup>

Here again, we see a rather arrogant way of dealing with the Other. Most likely, the people Conn had to do with in Japan were not illiterate but simply did not speak English. It does not occur to Conn to regard himself illiterate because he does not master the language of the country he finds himself in. We also see that Conn obviously finds it necessary to teach the Japanese something, and this something probably lies in his conviction that the American way of doing things is the only right one. Thirdly, we can detect an utter unwillingness in Conn to widen his horizon by looking at the foreign in an open-minded way. Having decided that this people was not worthwhile spending time with he went no further, which potentially would have challenged his existing views.

### **Torn Identity**

Lieutenant Wakara who, as it turns out, is a former relocation camp inhabitant, acts as a link between the two colliding cultures here. Being of Japanese

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<sup>361</sup> Mailer, p.249

ancestry but born and raised in the United States he does not fit either racial pattern and himself struggles for his place between the poles. Wakara feels treated as a "freak"<sup>363</sup> and is quite unsure of himself. "... it was impossible for him to understand Americans like Dove, just as it was impossible for him to understand Japanese. In limbo."<sup>364</sup> In his outward appearance obviously different from most Americans (or rather from the image of the all-American boy), Wakara has not yet developed a meaningful relationship to his roots. To him all Japanese are dumb<sup>365</sup> and their artistic culture is mere artificialness devoid of any sense.

"When he had been in Japan as a child of twelve, it had seemed the most wonderful and beautiful country he had ever seen. Everything was so small; it was a country built for the size of a twelve-year-old. [...] All the land had been manicured for a thousand years. [...] It was all like that. No matter where you went, Japan was always beautiful, with an unreal finite beauty, like a miniature landscaped panorama constructed for a showroom or a fair. [...] Behind the beauty it was all bare, with nothing in their lives but toil and abnegation. They were abstract people, who had elaborated an abstract art, and thought in abstractions and spoke in them, devised involuted ceremonies for saying nothing at all, and lived in the most intense fear of their superiors that any people had ever had."<sup>366</sup>

There can be several reasons for Wakara's denial of his Japanese heritage. One is that he does not want to be part of the culture that brought about war to the country he now calls his home. He blames Japan for his own struggle for place in a society that has been suspicious of him from the very beginning and has become even more so ever since Pearl Harbor. What fragile rapport he had been able to build in the past, was now "all shattered by the war".<sup>367</sup> Wakara also blames Japan for the situation he currently finds himself in. Just as his American fellow-soldiers suffer from the frustration of being deprived of the comforts of home in the hostile environment of the jungle, Wakara's sense of uneasiness and non-belongingness is deepened. "In limbo" for him both means not knowing if the troops' fate will meet a happy ending and it stands for his torn identity. The beauty of Japan which Wakara describes appears false to him. He perceives the Japanese as a people who fool themselves by putting up quasi-meaningful facades to mask the aimlessness of their monotonous doings. For him it is art for show, an "unreal finite beauty" not going beyond its restrictions to create a true

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<sup>362</sup> Mailer, p.250

<sup>363</sup> Ref. to Mailer, p.250

<sup>364</sup> Mailer, p.251

<sup>365</sup> Ref. to Mailer, p.251

<sup>366</sup> Mailer, p.252-53

<sup>367</sup> Mailer, p.251

purpose. The coldness with which Wakara makes his judgments about Japan can be understood as a mirror of the frustration he experiences in his struggle for identity. He himself does not feel connected to the Japanese, while because of his facial features his American fellowmen see him as part of the other culture. Proving himself to be just as American as they are, Wakara has to invest comparatively more effort in creating his sense of self. He needs to put a distinctive distance between him and a people "with nothing in their lives but toil and abnegation" to secure his own standing. The Japanese culture as he perceives it fails to provide his being with meaning. The very denial of it already constitutes a building block of his identity. However, from Wakara's demeanor we can detect that he has not been successful in achieving and maintaining a solid foundation that would give him satisfactory self-assurance.

Towards the end of Wakara's inner monologue we find an interesting attempt at explaining the hatred between the United States and Japan. It refers to Conn's above quoted saying.

"Oh, he understood, Wakara thought, why the Americans who had been in Japan hated the Japanese worst of all. Before the war they had been so wistful, so charming; the Americans had picked them up like pets, and were feeling the fury now of having a pet bite them."<sup>368</sup>

There seems to be a feeling of betrayal behind the hatred. This is especially true if we remember how the Japanese were the constant target of belittlement. The comic people who were said to have bad eyesight, lack of coordination in their motoric action, and insufficient intellectual capacities during war proved to be not only far better equipped than expected. They also showed little appreciation and gratefulness towards the American nation who praised itself to have brought all the wonders of modernity to a country still stuck in feudal custom.

### **Dos Passos: Coping with the Incredible**

In Mailer we have seen aggression to be a means to cope with the cruelties of war. I am now going to take a brief look at John Dos Passos' *Tour of Duty* where sarcasm plays a major role in coming to terms with the incredible. The first part of the book takes the reader to one of the atoll islands, where American soldiers have set up camp after a battle against the Japanese. Upon his arrival the main

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<sup>368</sup> Mailer, p.253

character, a journalist sent to the islands to report from the front, meets with a soldier (Louis) who operates a bulldozer.

"... the bulldozers are making land by pushing out over the dumped fibrous roots of coconut palms and twisted bits of Jap guns and tanks, and tin cans, and crumpled planes, and broken concrete from Jap pillboxes, and waterlogged cartons, and splintered packing-cases. 'Cleaning up after the ballgame,' said Louis; 'it's quite a problem. Even now we can't even dig a new latrine without turning up a dead Jap or two.'"<sup>369</sup>

Comparing combat to a ballgame is a coping strategy in the face of a war that brought death to many. In the same manner this soldier speaks of bodies as being merely an obstruction to his task. Also, the "problem" of dead Japanese turning up everywhere is a variation of the menace theme, which compares the enemy to insects which have to be extinguished. The term "cleaning up" evokes the impression of restoring an order that had been temporarily disturbed. Yet, at the same time "making land" is reminiscent of American expansion to new frontiers.

A similar impression is created at a later point by the statement of another member of the American forces:

"'Housecleaning after the party,' he said with a dry little laugh." He had damn little transportation left, but he guessed he could show us around. We piled into his jeep and set off down the edge of the airstrip. 'Built it in fifteen days,' he said, puffing out his chest as if he'd done it all himself."<sup>370</sup>

Again, "party" points to harmless play instead of fear and death, and from the way this is said by the soldier we see that his self-protecting sarcasm is intentional. The "house" in "housecleaning" then refers to a sense of feeling at home or having established a place for oneself. This explains why this soldier seems to feel pride when he talks about the army's achievements. He has found something he can relate to and which serves as the sense-making foundation for him amidst the senselessness of war.

Even more than in *The Naked and the Dead*, in *Tour of Duty* the Japanese enemy appears as something that is always present in the background but not

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<sup>369</sup> Dos Passos, John: *Tour of Duty*. Westport, Conn., Greenwood, 1974, p.13. First published in 1946.

dominant in the characters' awareness. Frequent referrals to the "Japs" illustrate their presence, yet they are dealt with matter-of-factly. This may be partly due to the complete lack of combat scenes in Dos Passos' account. At the same time, this creates and reinforces an unreality of the situation that is similar to Mailer's book. The atmosphere on the island is almost a happy, carefree one and therefore in harsh contrast to the descriptions of bodies being dug up.

"Soon far to the left another atoll appeared. That was Mille, the navigator said. Still Japs there. Machinegun fire. We gave it a wide berth. For a while there was nothing in sight but the ocean steaming with white and lilac-shaped clouds."<sup>371</sup>

The language is staccato-style: "still Japs there, machinegun fire". This can be interpreted in two ways. First, it could show that the author/protagonist thinks that this was nothing new so he does not waste any more time on the incident. Secondly, it could stand for a perception which denies or refuses the horrifying. By putting it in short and simple terms without any emotional involvement, awe and fear are held back and the circumstances appear in a quasi-objective light.

### **The Harmless Enemy**

We find only two more elaborate depictions of the Japanese. One picks up the image of the comic, inferior people who react in unpredictable and to the Western mind ridiculous ways. The following statement is put into the mouth of a member of the British army who is on duty on one of the islands.

"The Japs had only a small force. Your planes bombed them a bit and then we landed. They had some machineguns here. But in the end the beggars turned out rather considerate. They pulled off their shoes and shot themselves under the chin with their rifles ... pulled the trigger with their toes ... about fifteen of them right there in this trench, so all we had to do was to pile the earth back on top of them."<sup>372</sup>

This is reminiscent of the picture of the suicidal Japanese, who from birth onward carries an urge to kill himself in his illogically functioning mind. Simultaneously, the description recalls the popular allusion to monkey men, who are able to work a trigger with their feet. And finally, "beggars" is another expression of the

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<sup>370</sup> Dos Passos, p.21

<sup>371</sup> Dos Passos, p.20

<sup>372</sup> Dos Passos, p.27

belittlement with which the Japanese were met by many during World War II, reinforcing the stereotype of the second-rate race who begs the supposedly natural Western leaders for mercy.

The second more explicit statement about the Japanese comes from an Australian Catholic sister from a missionary station.

"How had it been when the Japs were here?' we were asking. 'Horrid,' she said. 'They were horrid little people ... They never came in by the path. They'd always pop out of the bushes somewhere and frighten you to death.'"<sup>373</sup>

This occurrence has a humorous if not absurd quality. In the middle of war, with death and killing everywhere, this nun complains about the bad manners of the Japanese. Again, this has several implications. The condemnation of Japanese ignorance to Western rules of politeness emphasizes the inferior status of Japanese civilization. This then relates to the "little people", which points to an attitude of not taking the Japanese seriously. The Japanese appear as children, who make fun of the grown-ups by hiding somewhere in order to take them by surprise. Thirdly, the impression of the devious Japanese character is evoked. The juxtaposition of the nun's seriousness about her complaint and the atrocities of war indicate that the author does not share the above perception but created this scene as a point of criticism.

### **Establishing the New Frontier**

Judging from the extracts I selected one might get the impression that there was a more authentic American perception than the British and Australian opinions quoted. But Dos Passos casts a suspicious eye on the American attitude as well. The following passage once more is full of sarcasm:

"We got to talking about the process by which a palmfringed island occupied by a few brown natives and some Jap battalions with plenty of ammunition dug into pillboxes of reinforced concrete became in a few days or weeks a farflung scrap of America. First we sprayed them with explosives and metal from the ships and the planes. Then we landed the tanks and the bulldozers and started pushing the Japs and their débris off the end of the island. The trees went, the undergrowth went, the bulldozers dug the dead Japs under and

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<sup>373</sup> Dos Passos, p.28

leveled the coral off on top of them. The levelers and the sheepfoot scrapers and the rollers came and we began to have an airstrip."<sup>374</sup>

What at first glance seems to be a list of achievements, is undercut by a bitter tone. The comparison of a *few* natives and *some* Japanese battalions puts a question mark behind the vehemence of the American backlash. The image of turning the island into an outpost of the United States reminds the reader of the aggressive westward expansion of the past, which went along with the extinction of part of the population. At another point in the narration we explicitly find the word "conquest"<sup>375</sup>. The term "sprayed" refers to the already mentioned insect image and shows the contempt towards the Japanese. The description of bulldozers, which not only do away with bodies but with whole landscapes for the sake of a military airstrip illustrates the merciless advance of the American troops. By describing this from the "we" perspective the author accepts responsibility.

Throughout the story a scenario of reassuring activity is kept up, with the representatives of the Western culture – be they of British, Australian or American descent – keen to (re-)establish a supposedly shattered order. The Japanese enemy is depicted as a major disturbance, a menace that has to be fought off if not extinguished. However, the Japanese are not perceived as a serious threat to the Occidental system but are characterized in well-known belittling terms. The various allusions to the expansionist theme make the enemy appear as a mere hindrance on the way to a new frontier. The occupation of the islands the main character finds himself on provides examples for the successful accomplishment of this objective. As indicated before, the subtle criticism and ironic descriptions are evidence that the author nurtures a different opinion.

### **Some Comparative Remarks**

In Mailer's book, I find the most prominent feature to be the feeling of encapsulation which is consistently created. We see each individual soldier struggling hard to maintain his sense of himself and his reason for going on. In many situations the soldiers react like a fenced-in animal, restlessly dashing around and desperately looking for ways to vent their frustration. The Japanese enemy is mostly perceived as the source for this frustration, however, this image

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<sup>374</sup> Dos Passos, p.19

<sup>375</sup> Ref. to Dos Passos, p.35



has to be permanently reinforced to serve as a motivational basis. Consequently, the few encounters with real-life Japanese soldiers prove to be the most disturbing incidents for the characters. De-individualization and dehumanization play an important role. As the narration proceeds, various facets of self-interest and individual identity-creation are added for each character. In some cases these are contradictory to what war propaganda told the troops to believe, and the resolution of this conflict is not an easy task for the soldier. It becomes even more difficult in the sequence of events. This reveals the extent to which the enemy image is indeed a construction and has to be maintained to fulfil its purpose.

With Dos Passos the emphasis lies elsewhere. Whereas Mailer questions war from the individual standpoint, Dos Passos creates his argument from the very source of activity, that is the expansionist tendencies. Mailer takes us into combat itself, while Dos Passos throws a light on what remains after the battle is fought. *Tour of Duty* evolves around three major questions: 1. Why did we do it? 2. Was it worth it? 3. How do we cope with the results? The emphasis seems to be on the third, and the sarcasm and journalistic quasi-objectiveness refer back to the first two. Both books are positive samples of dealing with American-Japanese relations during the Pacific War. They are positive in that they scrutinize contemporary perceptions and motivations without aggressively driving their point home. This quality makes them stand in stark contrast to the wartime propaganda we looked at earlier.

### **Wakatsuki Houston: Struggling for Identity**

The aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour saw the indiscriminate deportation of every Japanese-American to "relocation camps". Some 110.000 men, women and children of Japanese descent, the majority of them born in the United States, were herded into these camps where they had to stay until the end of the war. Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt in February 1942, was the basis for this mass arrest, which caused grief, sorrow and confusion among many Japanese-American families who up to then had lived quietly and inconspicuously.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.407

In her book *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston recalls her memories of life in the barracks of the Manzanar relocation camp. A seven-year-old girl at the time of the deportation Wakatsuki Houston speaks of a series of events which were incredible to her and her family. The camp left its marks on her so that "it had taken me twenty-five years to reach the point where I could talk openly about Manzanar".<sup>377</sup> The narration is presented to us as "a true story" and the author gives credit to other sources besides her own recollections of events 30 years ago. In this context, "true" seems to mean opposed to what the American government tried to play down as an unfortunate occurrence, a "wartime mistake"<sup>378</sup>, in the heat of World War II events. The term "true" is used to support an account of a dark past many Americans might not want to believe in unless confronted with the "hard facts".<sup>379</sup> At the same time, *Farewell to Manzanar* quite obviously is a very personal and subjective book relying heavily on the author's view of things which tries to work against a common feeling of numbness towards the atrocities of the war. And of course, Wakatsuki Houston feels her perspective to be the only legitimate and therefore true perspective as she herself underwent the incidents she talks about. We will see what her perceptions were (or what she remembers them to have been), how they are influenced by contemporary stereotypes and how she reacted to or against them.

### **The Cultural Connection**

In her book Wakatsuki Houston appears permanently torn between two very dissimilar points of reference in her struggle for identity. On the one hand she wants to regard herself as no different from her American peers. Having never been to Japan she does not feel a strong connection to its culture and is taken by surprise to find that other people naturally assume this connection.

"[I] began to read. I made no mistakes. When I finished, a pretty blond girl in front of me said, quite innocently, 'Gee, I didn't know you could speak.' She was genuinely amazed. I was stunned. How could this have been in doubt?"<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, Jeanne: *Farewell to Manzanar*. New York, Bantam, 1973, p.ix

<sup>378</sup> Zinn, p.408

<sup>379</sup> 50 years later the United States officially acknowledged the meaning of Manzanar by opening an "interpretative center" on the former camp site, which serves as a museum and memorial. Ref. to: Hyman, Steve: "Finally Sharing Manzanar's Bitter Tale", The Los Angeles Times, April 25, 2004, p.1ff

<sup>380</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.113

At this point, Jeanne Wakatsuki is eleven years old and has not developed a sense of otherness despite the internment experience. She does not draw a line of distinction between her family's heritage and her classmate's sense of an American identity. Yet, at the time of their relocation, the girl accepts several common features which create a feeling of belonging among the camp inhabitants. Pride and politeness in spite of other people's ignorance is one of these features and is illustrated by an episode in chapter 2. The Wakatsuki family joins the crowd in the tents put up for serving food and is served, among other things, steamed rice with canned apricots for dessert.

"The Caucasian servers were thinking that the fruit poured over rice would make a good dessert. Among the Japanese, of course, rice is never eaten with sweet foods, only with salty or savory foods. Few of us could eat such a mixture. But at this point no one dared protest. It would have been impolite. [We dabbed] courteously at what was, for almost everyone there, an inedible concoction."<sup>381</sup>

We see how a sentiment of "us" = the Japanese against "them" = the Caucasians is created here. The point here is not so much the supposed inedibility of a certain combination of foods but the felt disrespect towards Japanese custom. Yet, because of their inbred politeness none of the Japanese internees speaks up and everyone joins the unifying experience of proud non-resistance. Another incident describing the creation of a community spirit which helps the camp inhabitants to come to terms with their situation is the call for service among the internees.

"Mama had gone to work again soon after we arrived. The call went out for people with any kind of skill to offer their services. Thousands were responding, with great surges of community spirit, sometimes with outright patriotism, wanting 'to do their part.'"<sup>382</sup>

This has a twofold implication. First, by responding to the call individuals express a need to be useful. This serves to distract them from their present conditions and provides them with a purpose for their existence. Violently cast out of their accustomed environment, separated from friends and very often from members of their family, the internees are trying to establish some kind of normality by a consciously generated and nurtured community spirit. Secondly, this reflects a demonstration of loyalty towards America. This was important to many Japanese-Americans during the war years in order to avoid imprisonment and to

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<sup>381</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.15

provide for a continuation of their existence in the United States. The United States' government drafted a large number of young Japanese-American men to fight against Japan as a final display that any ties to the old homeland were cut. Lieutenant Wakara in Mailer's book is an example, and we find another one in Wakatsuki Houston's narration later on.

From the picture of community spirit Wakatsuki Houston picks up some of the popular Japanese stereotypes, again using them as reference points for identification. She speaks of the natural subordination of one's own desires to the higher ideals of family or community as a national character trait.<sup>383</sup>

"Almost everyone at Manzanar had inherited this ... from the generations before them who had learned to live in a small, crowded country like Japan."<sup>384</sup>

This quote is reminiscent of the image of group identification, the ideal of group harmony and cultural homogeneity. Other images called up are the fear of losing face, filial piety and the natural tendency of the Japanese towards resignation rather than rebellion.<sup>385</sup>

### **Looking for Acceptance**

In spite of the many occasions where Jeanne Wakatsuki succumbs to her construct of Japaneseness, the reader discovers various passages which rather speak of a strong desire to be accepted as a member of the American culture. While Jeanne's mother does community work, the girl has various choices to pass the time after school. She takes up baton twirling, the only camp activity she stays with and picks up again after her "re-entry" into the normality of American life after the war. What starts out as a recreation promising more excitement than needlework soon becomes a means for Jeanne to underline her non-Japaneseness and achieve acceptance among her American contemporaries.

"... baton twirling was one trick I could perform that was thoroughly, unmistakably American – putting on the boots and dress crisscrossed

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<sup>382</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.28

<sup>383</sup> Ref. to Wakatsuki Houston, p.23

<sup>384</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.24

<sup>385</sup> For "losing face" ref. to Wakatsuki Houston, p.39, "filial piety": p.60, "resignation": p.71.

with braid, spinning the silver stick and tossing it high to the tune of a John Philip Sousa march."<sup>386</sup>

As we learn later in the book, this occupation comes close to an addiction for Wakatsuki Houston and in her view sets her apart from her parents who for her represent traditional Japanese values. Mastering baton twirling to perfection is crucial for Jeanne in that it has to compensate for something she cannot shake off, that is her Oriental looks. She therefore feels she has to adopt something "unmistakably American" and to be better at it than American girls. Dressing up in her uniform she creates the illusion of becoming indistinctly part of the group she wants to be associated with. Consequently, Jeanne does not carry on with lessons in traditional Japanese dance offered at the camp by an old geisha. Not being fluent in Japanese and with little knowledge of her ancestors' customs she cannot make any sense out of what is presented to her as an integral part of the *other* (Japanese) culture.

"I sat across from her [the geisha] for an hour trying to follow what was going on. It was all a mystery. I had never learned the language. And this woman was so old, even her dialect was foreign to me. She seemed an occult figure, more spirit than human. When she bowed to me from her knees at the end of the hour, I rushed out of there, back to more familiar surroundings."<sup>387</sup>

With everything Jeanne says we have to consider that she reflects the worldview of a very young girl (the story is told in retrospective by a grown-up woman). It therefore comes as no surprise that she finds the appearance of an old woman in exotic attire rather frightening. The above excerpt seems to be a good illustration of Jeanne's efforts to do away with any ties that hinder her integration into the American community. The latter more and more becomes her major reference for her identity construct.

For Jeanne, the Manzanar years constitute an episode where her place in society is at stake. Her socialization process is interrupted, and the extreme situation of internment creates the need for improvisation in the middle of her struggle for identity. For a period of time Jeanne experiences a strong urge to establish bonds to the Japanese camp community. From our previous investigation we conclude that this stems from a natural desire to be a member of a group which provides a meaningful frame for individual existence. In the

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<sup>386</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.79

<sup>387</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.80

short period described after the internment we detect a more forceful urge in Jeanne to completely cut these bonds and start out new with her American identity. At the end of the book this conflict has obviously not yet been resolved but still plays a decisive role in Wakatsuki Houston's ongoing daily struggle to come to terms with herself.

### **Displays of Loyalty**

Jeanne Wakatsuki is not the only one in Manzanar who is torn between two poles. We see another inner battle take place in her father Ko Wakatsuki, who in 1942 is 53 years old. Born in Japan but having lived in America for 38 years, he is still prevented by law to take on American citizenship. This was one of the paradoxes of the treatment of Japanese-Americans at that time; while they could not achieve full legal status in the country where they had spent most of their lives, they were nevertheless required to demonstrate loyalty to their not-quite-homeland. Camp inhabitants were interrogated by the American government about their feelings toward Japan, as

"every man, woman, and child of Japanese origin on the western coast of the Americas was categorically identified by the highest quarters as a potential menace simply because of his or her ethnicity".<sup>388</sup>

Wakatsuki Houston recreates one of these interrogations her father had to undergo. Upon being asked if he approved of his son joining the armed forces of the United States, the father responds that he would not want his son serve any military as their sole aim was to wage useless war.

*Interrogator:* 'Who do you think will win this one [war]?'  
*Father:* 'America, of course. It is richer, has more resources, more weapons, more people. The Japanese are courageous fighters, and they will fight well. But their leaders are stupid. I weep every night for my country.'  
*Interrogator:* 'You say Japan is still your country?'  
*Father:* 'I was born there. I have relatives living there. In many ways, yes, it is still my country.'  
*Interrogator:* 'Do you feel any loyalty to Japan or to its Emperor?'  
Silence.  
*Interrogator:* 'I said, do you feel any loyalty ...'  
*Father:* 'How old are you?'  
*Interrogator:* 'Twenty-nine.'  
*Father:* 'When were your born?'

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<sup>388</sup> Dower, p.80

*Interrogator:* 'I am the interrogator here, Mr. Wakatsuki, not you.'  
*Father:* 'I am interested to know when you were born.'  
*Interrogator:* 'Nineteen thirteen.'  
*Father:* 'I have been living in this country nine years longer than you have. Do you realize that? Yet I am prevented by law from becoming a citizen. I am prevented by law from owning land. I am now separated from my family without cause ...'<sup>389</sup>

The frustration Jeanne's father feels about his situation is tangible here. He is not allowed the official authorization of his acquired loyalty. How can he establish firm ties to a country that does not want him as a legal member? Not surprisingly, Japan remains an important factor in his self-awareness construct. Even more so than for Jeanne, Ko Wakatsuki is caught in a conflict hard to resolve. Japan does not constitute a great attraction for him, and at the beginning of the book the reader learns that he had built a living for himself and his family, consisting of himself, his wife and ten children who were all born in the United States. Yet, this achievement turns out to be of a very fragile nature, as everything is taken from him after the outbreak of the Pacific war. Similar to Mailer's Lieutenant Wakara, Ko Wakatsuki is "in limbo". Japan represents his past for him, something he intentionally left behind. America used to stand for his presence and future, it used to be the grounds of his existence. At the point of his interrogation he has lost all that he worked hard for, including a firm sense of his belonging.

We find out that he tried to prove his loyalty to the American government by helping the Department of Justice with their interrogations of other "issei"<sup>390</sup>, something his fellow-internees in Manzanar will later hold against him. They call him "inu", which means both "dog" and "informer", and throughout his stay at Manzanar Ko Wakatsuki feels isolated because of this.

"Spoken Japanese is full of disrespectful insult words that can be much more cutting than mere vulgarity. They have to do with bad manners, or worse, breaches of faith and loyalty. Years later I learned that *inu* also meant collaborator or informer. Members of the Japanese American Citizen League were being called *inu* for having helped the army arrange a peaceful and orderly evacuation. Men who cooperated with camp authorities in any way could be labeled *inu*, as

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<sup>389</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.45

<sup>390</sup> Ref. to Wakatsuki Houston, p.42 and her introduction, p.xii: "Issei" is the Japanese term (adopted in American English) for people who were born in Japan and immigrated to the US. Their children, born in the United States, are "nisei" = the second generation. The children of the "nisei" are referred to as "sansei", most of which were born during World War II.

well as those genuine informers inside the camp who relayed information to the War Department and to the FBI."<sup>391</sup>

"Loyalty" is the crucial term here. Ko Wakatsuki is divided between his feelings for his adopted home country and a still existent vague sense of responsibility towards Japanese custom. The above quote calls up another common stereotype, that is the awareness of a code of honour inherent in every Japanese. "Breaches" of this code are what is widely regarded as the reason for suicide, which supposedly is so typical of the Japanese people, and indeed we see Ko Wakatsuki undergo a slow suicide with his heavy drinking and self-enforced solitude. It is not clear if Jeanne Wakatsuki acutally believes that her father is a collaborator, although we get the impression she thinks he has been falsely accused by her use of the words "cooperation" versus "genuine informers". However, more important in this respect is not the factual "reality" but the "charge of disloyalty" itself.

"Papa never said more than three or four sentences about his nine months at Fort Lincoln. Few men who spent time there will talk about it more than that. Not because of the physical hardships: he had been through worse times on fishing trips down the coast of Mexico. It was the charge of disloyalty. For a man raised in Japan, there was no greater disgrace."<sup>392</sup>

Obviously, Jeanne feels that her father's years in Japan constitute a major influence on his thinking and picture of himself. Considering that his education and socialization well into his early twenties took place there, it appears only natural that Ko Wakatsuki should have a hard time shaking off this influence while at the same time experiencing guilt about this.

### **Terminal Affirmation**

Woodrow "Woody" Wakatsuki, Jeanne's brother, is another one who has to make a difficult decision for himself. As already mentioned, the American army drafted all able young Japanese American men of the second generation for its forces. The men had to fill in a questionnaire, the two crucial questions of which referred to their willingness to serve and to their unconditional loyalty to America. The answer to both had to be "yes", otherwise deportation to Japan threatened to be their fate. Most of these young men had never been to Japan and did not

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<sup>391</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.48

<sup>392</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.52



speak the language. After they had been sent off to the relocation camps, herded together under inhumane conditions like cattle, they were forced to

"swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and [to] forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor"<sup>393</sup>.

Woody decides to preempt the threat of the oath, which every *nisei* had to sign, and to volunteer for the armed forces. This leads to a heated dispute between him and his father, the latter fiercely disagreeing with his son who to him is planning to risk his life for a government that had driven them into their present situation.

*Woody:* 'I am an American citizen. America is at war.'  
*Father:* 'But look where they have put us.'  
*Woody:* 'The more of us who go into the army, the sooner the war will be over, the sooner you and Mama will be out of here.'  
*Father:* 'Do you think I would risk losing a son for that?'  
*Woody:* 'You want me to answer NO NO, Papa?'  
*Father:* 'Do you think that is what I'm telling you? Of course you cannot answer NO NO. If you say NO NO, you will be shipped back to Japan with all those other *bakatare*<sup>394</sup>!'  
*Woody:* 'But if I answer YES YES I will be drafted anyway, no matter how I feel about it. That is why they are giving us the oath to sign.'<sup>395</sup>

Woodrow Wakatsuki's last answer in this quotation contradicts his initial self-reliance. Starting out by stating that as an American citizen he sees it as his duty to fight for his country, the later statement shows that he does not feel that he has a choice anyway. By voluntarily signing for the army he at least avoids a situation where he has to react to the inevitable. "No matter how I feel about it" indicates a degree of uncertainty in Woody. However, he reaches out for the ultimate, the literally terminal affirmation of his being American. He is willing to die for the country he lives in, regardless of its treatment of him. And thirdly, he fulfils his filial duty by a) sacrificing himself so that his family has the prospect of a better life, and by b) listening to his father's argument patiently, thereby giving him the opportunity to save his face, although already firm in his decision. "His duty as a son was to sit and listen to Papa ..."<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.58

<sup>394</sup> *bakatare* = idiots

<sup>395</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.60

<sup>396</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.60

## Re-creating Identities

There are more examples in *Farewell to Manzanar* of people struggling to keep their sense of self intact under extreme conditions. Wakatsuki Houston tells a story of several individuals who are trying to find something to relate to when the grounds of their existence have suddenly become uncertain. Japan and the United States for each of them are the two points of reference. The main conflict is that it is not simply an "either or" decision for them. It is not a matter of either feeling strong emotional ties to their Japanese heritage or perfectly subordinating to the American way. Because of their superficial but obvious otherness, that is their looks, they have a hard time establishing their identities within their environments. Before their internment, Jeanne, Woody and their father seem to have rested more or less content in the world they had created for themselves. This is dramatically put in jeopardy after their arrival in Manzanar. For many re-orientation towards older, supposedly traditional Japanese values provides the only meaningful frame for their "in limbo" existence in the camp. We see a process of going back and forth between these two poles in the three characters described above. Jeanne's struggle for place ends with her complete denial of her Japanese roots for a long period of time. At the end of the book the adult Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston appears to have come to terms with the different constituents of her being.

"As I came to understand what Manzanar had meant, it gradually filled me with shame for being a person guilty of something enormous enough to deserve that kind of treatment. In order to please my accusers, I tried, for the first few years after our release, to become someone acceptable. I both succeeded and failed. By the age of seventeen I knew that making it, in the terms I had tried to adopt, was not only unlikely, but false and empty, no more authentic for me than trying to emulate my Great-aunt Toyo. I needed some grounding of my own, such as Woody had found when he went to communicate with her and with our ancestors in Ka-ke. It took me another twenty years to accumulate the confidence to deal with what the equivalent experience would have to be for me."<sup>397</sup>

Japan for the author is something she knows from hearsay only. It stands for a certain set of values and customs, most of which remain a mystery to her, and which she does not regard as valid building blocks for her identity. At the same time, she experiences a hard time distinguishing between simple imitation of

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<sup>397</sup> Wakatsuki Houston, p.133

what she perceives as typically American and a self-reliant creation of a meaningful foundation for her life, something that does not fill herself with guilt but makes her existence worthwhile.

### **John Hersey: The Horrors of the Atomic Bomb**

The last book I want to discuss in this chapter is a short reflection on how the atomic bomb on Hiroshima shaped and changed the lives of six different people. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* was first published in *The New Yorker* on August 31, 1946, almost exactly a year after the dropping of the bomb on Japan. It is a very matter-of-fact account of "history's least imaginable event"<sup>398</sup>. A war reporter who got an assignment to China and Japan in 1945, Hersey intentionally distances himself from his story, leaving out any emotional statements, and aims at the best possible "objective" perspective. As a journalist he apparently wants to let the incidents depicted speak for themselves, and he proved to be successful in his attempt. Such was the impact of his narration that after its appearance in *The New Yorker*, thousands of copies were requested by people like Albert Einstein. The book edition followed in October 1946, with reprints in 1958, 1966, 1972 and 1985, then with several additions, again succeeded by reprints. *Hiroshima* was also broadcasted throughout the United States over the national radio network.<sup>399</sup>

Hersey's intention with this remarkable report seems clear: by the juxtaposition of his glimpses into the lives of six random survivors of the Hiroshima bombing to the anonymous figure of over a hundred thousand casualties he counters the de-humanizing and de-individualizing tendencies of war. After introducing the characters he selected, he states:

"A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors. They still wonder why they lived when so many others died. Each of them counts many small items of chance or volition – a step taken in time, a decision to go indoors, catching one streetcar instead of the next – that spared him."<sup>400</sup>

By offering his readers a reflection of the limited personal horizon of the six protagonists, Hersey for the first time brought a credible portrait of the unbelievable to the American public. For the reader it is easier to relate to the

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<sup>398</sup> Sanders, David: *John Hersey*. New Haven/ Conn., College & Univ. Press, 1967, p.39

<sup>399</sup> For the demand for copies of the *New Yorker* ref. to Sanders, p.49; for reprint details ref. to the 1986 Penguin edition of *Hiroshima*.

<sup>400</sup> Hersey, John: *Hiroshima*. London, Penguin, 1986, p.4

fate of individuals than to that of an impersonal mass. The author points to the seemingly small, to seemingly separate occurrences that eventually construct the broader picture. Laying out the events in unsparing detail and devoid of emotional qualifiers, he is able to create an atmosphere that appears to be tangible, and reinforces the overall feeling of stupor and bewilderment the victims find themselves in. Concurrently, amidst the destruction, pain and loss the reader learns about, Hersey seamlessly inserts observations of individual behaviour, which at various points enhance the grotesqueness of the situation. Often these observations relate to "typical" Japanese custom, and this is what I want to examine in the following.

### **Resignation and the Confinements of Politeness**

Resignation and submission to fate are recurring themes in Hersey's book. The recollection of incidents where the Japanese people react with a demeanor of quiet suffering is certainly designed to strike the reader as remarkable if not odd. The following excerpt describes a scene shortly after the bombing in a park, where many have gathered to recover from their shock and wounds and where many eventually die.

"To Father Kleinsorge, an Occidental, the silence in the grove by the river, where hundreds of gruesomely wounded suffered together, was one of the most dreadful and awesome phenomena of his whole experience. The hurt ones were quiet; no one wept, much less screamed in pain; no one complained; none of the many who died did so noisily; not even the children cried; very few people spoke. And when Father Kleinsorge gave water to some whose faces had been almost blotted out by flash burns, they took their share and then raised themselves a little and bowed to him, in thanks."<sup>401</sup>

The impression of a culture of silent endurance is created here, the strangeness of which is emphasized by observing it through the eyes of a non-Japanese onlooker. It is as if these victims regarded it undignified to draw attention to themselves by voicing their plight. Especially the inclusion of children in this picture makes the Western spectator wonder about this "phenomenon" of self-control. Adding to the grotesqueness of the atmosphere is the polite behaviour described. Would one not expect outbursts of desperation, even anger, cries of pain and suffering from those whose limbs and faces have melted into horrible distortions from the heat of the bomb? Would one not anticipate impatient

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<sup>401</sup> Hersey, p.49

demand for help, arms reaching out for water, fighting over what little could be offered? The least one would look for is the complete resignation and almost surprised thankfulness the victims in this scene express. (The reader later learns that the German Jesuit priest Father Kleinsorge himself was badly affected by the bomb, he never regains his strength throughout the book and finally withers away miserably. Yet he is never seen complaining, but for a man who devoted his life to God who sent his son to suffer for mankind this seems to come natural.)

A second impression which is repeatedly created throughout the book is evoked here. It is the stupor and bewilderment that seems to have overwhelmed the population of Hiroshima. As if they could not believe what just happened to them they appear dumbfounded and immobilized. When on his way to the park Father Kleinsorge encounters people crying for help, this is presented to the reader in a rather unusual way.

"The street was cluttered with parts of houses that had slid into it, and with fallen telephone poles and wires. From every second or third house came the voices of people buried and abandoned, who invariably screamed, with formal politeness, 'Tasukete kure! Help, if you please!'"<sup>402</sup>

The combination, or rather opposition, of "screaming" and "formal politeness" again seems odd. In circumstances of such horror and despair which the bomb left in its wake it would surely seem more logical to forget about the rules of etiquette and formal language. Again, this enhances the sheer incredulity of the scenario. The unthinkable has happened, people are in greater misery than ever before, and they have no suitable means of coping because there appears to be no appropriate reaction to such an act of inhumanity. Therefore the Japanese victims brought to our awareness try to respond in the traditional ways they have been taught to follow. We see the implicit opposition of East and West here, the culture of silence versus the history of rebellion, a popular stereotype from the days of the first contacts with Japan up to the present.

**"Shikata ga nai"**

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<sup>402</sup> Hersey, p.38

We came across the phrase "shikata ga nai"<sup>403</sup> in Wakatsuki Houston's book, and we see it used repeatedly in Hersey's account. *Shikata ga nai* probably has an equivalent in every language, however, it is often cited to illustrate the supposedly resignatory nature of the Japanese people. Hersey notes this saying twice for Mrs. Nakamura, widow and mother of three who lost the foundation of her existence through the bomb and has to struggle with her never quite improving health for the rest of her life. The first occurrence is when Mrs. Nakamura explains what she knows about the atomic bomb and its effects.

"A surprising number of the people of Hiroshima remained more or less indifferent about the ethics of using the bomb. Possibly they were too terrified by it to want to think about it at all. Not many of them even bothered to find out much about what it was like. Mrs. Nakamura's conception of it – and awe of it – was typical. 'The atom bomb,' she would say when asked about it, 'is the size of a matchbox. The heat of it is six thousand times that of the sun. It exploded in the air. There is some radium in it. I don't know just how it works, but when the radium is put together, it explodes.' As for the use of the bomb, she would say, 'It was war and we had to expect it.' And she would add 'Shikata ga nai,' a Japanese expression as common as, and corresponding to, the Russian word 'nichevo': 'It can't be helped. Oh, well, too bad.'<sup>404</sup>

It is remarkable that Hersey does not simply offer the English translation for this expression but rather compares it to a Russian phrase. This gives the impression that it stands for a concept known to the Japanese and Russian culture but foreign to the American or Western mind. And although he quotes the German equivalent in the next sentence, it comes out of the mouth of a Japanese. Further, Hersey uses Mrs. Nakamura as a symbol for a general sentiment he perceives to be common among the Japanese. For him, she puts into words what a "surprising number" of victims feel, that is a very matter-of-factly, almost cool, passive suffering devoid of extreme emotions.

It is clearly not the author's intention to make it easy for the reader to come to any conclusions about the incidents that took place in August 1945. Despite its small size *Hiroshima* is not a book that can be read in a rush. While the horror of the bombing unfolds immediately, an understanding of what this meant for people's lives takes more time to develop. By including short musings such as "possibly they were too terrified by it to think about it at all" in his otherwise

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<sup>403</sup> *shikata ga nai* = it can't be helped – in the sense of: let it pass, nothing can be done about it

<sup>404</sup> Hersey, p.116-117

detached report, Hersey makes the reader halt and think. This is enhanced by the description of passivity and resignation. Why would the people of Hiroshima react in such a way to the most horrible thing that happened to them? Why would they not cry out and look for someone to put the blame on for their plight? Several explanations come to mind:

- Those who did not die at the bombing might have felt guilty towards the dead. This is backed up by an earlier expression, which refers to Japanese Reverend Tanimoto: "... as a Japanese he was being overwhelmed by the shame of being unhurt ..." <sup>405</sup>.
- "History's least imaginable event" <sup>406</sup> might have been too much for them to cope with so they chose forgetfulness.
- Because Japan started the war with the U.S. some might have even felt that the Japanese got what they "had to expect", as Mrs. Nakamura puts it.

Although I find it evident that Hersey intentionally plays with the images he calls up to hint at these explanations, I also see reason to believe that he regarded them as credible enough to allow judgments about the Japanese culture. Another passage about Mrs. Nakamura serves to support this.

"As Nakamura-san struggled to get from day to day, she had no time for attitudinizing about the bomb or anything else. She was sustained, curiously, by a kind of passivity, summed up in phrase she herself sometimes used – '*Shikata ga nai*,' meaning, loosely, 'It can't be helped.' She was not religious, but she lived in a culture long colored by the Buddhist belief that resignation might lead to clear vision ..." <sup>407</sup>

Two things strike us as notable here: 1.) Again, the Japanese phrase is not simply translated into English. A "loose" meaning for it is provided instead, which implies that the three words represent a value system unfamiliar to American custom. 2.) Mrs. Nakamura is said not to be religious yet inevitably entangled in a cultural web and therefore, if unconsciously, influenced by its religion, including its thinking patterns and behavioural guidelines. <sup>408</sup> The idea of cultural determinism is reminiscent of Tetsuro Watsuji and his theory of the "climatic" definition of the Japanese national character. Hersey underlines this with the last sentence of the paragraph: "The bombing almost seemed a natural disaster – one that it had simply been her bad luck, her fate (which must be accepted), to

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<sup>405</sup> Hersey, p.40

<sup>406</sup> Sanders, p.39

<sup>407</sup> Hersey, p.121-122

<sup>408</sup> Of course, this could be said about members of the Judaeo-Christian community, too.

suffer."<sup>409</sup> Watsuji spoke of the extremes of the Japanese climate from the subtropical to the arctic and the Japanese people's natural adaption though non-resistance. Hersey compares the bombing to a natural disaster, one more climatic extreme the people of Japan have to live with, and shows that quiet suffering is the customary response.

### **Typical Japanese**

I have already noted that Hersey at the same time utilizes and supports a range of stereotypes about the Japanese, some of which are by now familiar to us. One of them is the concept of "losing face", a feature that played an important role in Wakatsuki Houston's descriptions of her father. Hersey supplies another rather curious incident to convey the same image. It refers to the poor conditions under which Japanese hospitals had to manage after the explosion of the bomb. The Red Cross Hospital in Tokyo was among those where medical equipment and other essentials "came in a trickle of charity". Hersey adds:

"In Japan, face is important even to institutions, and long before the Red Cross Hospital was back to par on basic medical equipment, its directors put up a new yellow brick veneer facade, so the hospital became the handsomest building in Hiroshima – from the street."<sup>410</sup>

It seems very unusual that the hospital directors should bother with painting the building's facade when there was no money for the most basic utensils because of "face". The use of the colour yellow could very well be intended to contribute to the morale of both the doctors who spent most of their waking hours caring for the wounded and the population. And indeed, Hersey does not come up with any further evidence that "face" is the motivating power here instead of a possibly more mundane explanation. Excessive preoccupation with the dead is a further trait Hersey attributes to the Japanese. When referring to the situation in the hospitals, the author notes a tendency among the staff to spend more time on the dead than on the living. "Disposal of the dead, by decent cremation and enshrinement, is a greater moral responsibility to the Japanese than adequate care of the living."<sup>411</sup> To me it appears quite normal that the hospital's attendants dedicate some effort to the removal of the bodies literally littering the aisles for reasons of hygiene. It also should be appropriate to create some kind of system

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<sup>409</sup> Hersey, p.122

<sup>410</sup> Hersey, p.113

<sup>411</sup> Hersey, p.83



to identify the deceased for the sake of their families. Yet, Hersey's elaborate depiction of this scene has an ironic quality, which puts a question mark behind the whole process of cremating the bodies, saving the ashes, and "neatly and respectfully"<sup>412</sup> recording and storing of the remnants. Along the same lines goes a passage later in the book, where Hersey remarks on the "etymology" of the term *hibakusha*<sup>413</sup>. According to him, "the Japanese tended to shy away from the term 'survivors', because in its focus on being alive it might suggest some slight to the sacred dead"<sup>414</sup>. I would think it to be just as if not more plausible that the word was coined as an expression for something yet unprecedented. Calling them "survivors" would surely "suggest some slight" to *their* fate, because survival for many of them meant lifelong pain and hardship.

### **The Japanese Emperor**

The third image I want to draw attention to is that of the Japanese *tenno*. In Hersey's book, more than in the ones examined before, we find allusions to the image of emperor worship. The Japanese emperor appeared as the key motivational figure for Nippon's soldiers in many Western publications during and after the war. General MacArthur made it an important point that Hirohito had to be kept in place and utilized for the Allied Powers efforts to democratize and rebuild postwar Japan<sup>415</sup>. Part of his strategy was the public announcement by the emperor broadcast to the Japanese population on August 15, 1945 that Japan was to surrender unconditionally to the Allied Forces. Up to that point the *tenno*, the religious symbol of Japan who was regarded as being of divine ancestry, had never addressed the public. The Japanese people were used to his wisdom being brought to them through the emperor's official mediators. By lowering himself so much as to personally speak to his subordinates, Hirohito is said to have denounced his divine status, making it clear for everyone in Japan that an era had come to an end. For the United States this obviously included the ending of Japanese militaristic ambition. In Hersey's book this is reflected in a paragraph describing Mrs. Nakamura's feelings when learning that the high priest of her country had gone public.

"Have you heard the news?' her sister asked. 'What news?' 'The war is over.' 'Don't say such a foolish thing, sister.' 'But I heard it over the

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<sup>412</sup> Hersey, p.84

<sup>413</sup> *hibakusha* = victims of the bomb, people exposed to the bomb

<sup>414</sup> Hersey, p.120

<sup>415</sup> ref. to Dower, John: Japan in War and Peace, London, Fontana, 1996, p.3

radio myself.' And then, in a whisper, 'It was the Emperor's voice.' 'Oh,' Mrs. Nakamura said (she needed nothing more to make her give up thinking, in spite of the atomic bomb, that Japan still had a chance to win the war), 'in that case ...'<sup>416</sup>

The importance of the *tenno* for Mrs. Nakamura is emphasized by the assumed paradox of her still believing in the impossible, i.e. the Japanese victory. Only the authority of his unprecedented act makes her accept defeat. Concurrently, she does not question the prudence of his decision in any way. No supplementary evidence is needed for her to give up one track of thinking for another. If the emperor says it is over then it is over – no matter how many or few casualties the Japanese troops had, no matter how many or few battles they lost, how much or little ground they gained against the enemy. Mrs. Nakamura credits the *tenno* with the same infallibility the Pope assumes in the Roman Catholic Church.

The concept of duty to the religious leader as the noble cause for which Japanese soldiers fought during World War II is most famously represented in stories about the *kamikaze*<sup>417</sup> pilots. Flying with the "heavenly winds" these pilots were ready to die for their country and are reported to have deliberately dived into the most dangerous situations if this helped weaken the enemy and strengthen their own cause. Hersey attributes the same spirit to the people of Hiroshima, who "died in silence, with no grudge, setting their teeth to bear it. All for the country!"<sup>418</sup>. He further quotes a Japanese doctor, who in spite of an apparently futile situation gives voice to his worship for the *tenno*. Upon being eventually saved he exclaims: "What a fortunate that we are Japanese! It was my first time I ever tasted such a beautiful spirit when I decided to die for our Emperor."<sup>419</sup> Loyalty and dedication to a commonly acknowledged higher goal stand out here. The mentioning of "tasting a beautiful spirit" has the quality of a revelation, of spiritual enlightenment, which again underlines the significance of the Godfather-like symbol of the *tenno*.

### **Criticism Towards the American Attitude**

Although Hersey's book is decisively aimed at putting the spotlight on one of history's most regrettable tragedies, one could also argue that there are traces of

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<sup>416</sup> Hersey, p.85

<sup>417</sup> *kamikaze* = wind(s) of the god(s) (there is no indication of singular or plural in Japanese nouns)

<sup>418</sup> Hersey, p.115

<sup>419</sup> Hersey, p.115-116

anti-Japanese sentiment in his writing. Born in China, raised in the United States and having returned to China after the Japanese invasion to report for *Time* magazine, Hersey is said to have born an "antipathy toward the Japanese" and to have been "aroused first by the Japanese actions rather than by those of the Nazis"<sup>420</sup>. As I have pointed out earlier, some of Hersey's pairings of circumstances and behaviour seem rather odd, and many of the Japanese reactions he describes carry an undertone which makes them stand out as diametrically opposed to Western custom. Nevertheless, the author maintains his critical position towards the atomic bomb and the American government's attitude in the years after. Hersey sarcastically calls the victims of Hiroshima

"the objects of the first great experience in the use of atomic power, which ... no country except the United States, with its industrial know-how, its willingness to throw two billion gold dollars into an important wartime gamble, could possibly have developed."<sup>421</sup>

After Hersey's account of the horrors that resulted from the bombing, the reader must find it unbearable to accept that the citizens of Hiroshima were mere guinea pigs in "an important wartime gamble". The amount of money obviously spent for this "adventure" adds to the sense of futility of what is later named the "heinous acts of the victorious United States"<sup>422</sup>. However, Hersey's criticism becomes most strikingly evident through a series of inserts which appear later in the book. Under the heading "The Aftermath" he gives details of the consequences of the bombing for the six protagonists he selected. Descriptions of young Miss Sasaki's plight who stays crippled for her life or Mrs. Nakamura's efforts to sustain herself and her children in spite of her recurring fits of radiation sickness are followed by statements such as:

"On July 1, 1946, before the first anniversary of the bombing, the United States had tested an atomic bomb at the Bikini Atoll. On May 17, 1948, the Americans announced the successful completion of another test."<sup>423</sup>

In the same matter-of-fact style Hersey supplies more information in the same manner on the following pages. He notes the Soviet Union's announcement of the development of an atomic bomb, the same declaration by Great Britain, the testing of the first hydrogen bomb by the Americans and the Soviets. He reports

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<sup>420</sup> Sanders, p.22

<sup>421</sup> Hersey, p.66

<sup>422</sup> Hersey, p.120

<sup>423</sup> Hersey, p.175

radioactive fallout at the Bikini Atolls, hydrogen bomb tests by the British and India's first nuclear testing.<sup>424</sup> All these quotations are designed to make the reader wonder why so little has been learned from history. Even through (or because of) Hersey's detached prose the terrible effects of the Hiroshima bombing become obvious. The same must have been true for the people of Nagasaki. How could the world go on as if nothing had happened and repeat such acts where the collateral damage by no means seemed to justify the purpose? This is the question the author leaves us with. Hersey might have been "biased" in his perception of the Japanese character, but we found that to be the natural course of each individual's becoming aware of his environment. As we would expect, he makes an arbitrary selection of the people he wants to throw light on in his book, and obviously he picked quotations that supported his view of the events. It seems that Hersey used his means the best way he could to serve his goal. He found an incident so unbelievable that he wanted the world to see. Therefore he chose a style of detachment to stay as "objective" as possible. He even utilized the very stereotypes he apparently at least partly believed in and played with them to create an atmosphere of bewilderment and shock, quite similar to the state the bomb victims in his account find themselves in.

## Conclusion

This chapter provided insight into five very different pieces of literature dealing with the Pacific War. Grew's journals allow a glimpse into the experience of an American living in Japan until the outbreak of the war between the United States and the land of his temporary residence. Mailer, Dos Passos and Hersey published their narrations shortly after the war. Wakatsuki Houston's recollections were not published until 40 years later. We can detect a number of recurring features. What do these books have in common, what are the major differences?

Right at the beginning of his records Grew points out his indebtedness to "objectivity". To him this is the basis of a *true* and *accurate* understanding of historical *facts*. I put these terms in italics in accordance with what I tried to demonstrate in Part 1, Chapter 2, i.e. these concepts are merely based on consensus as opposed to an all-preceding, ultimately valid worldview. Consequently, throughout Grew's journal we are able to uncover several of the

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<sup>424</sup> Refer to Hersey, p.179, 183, 185, 192, 193, 195

assumptions which shaped his perception through education, experience and expectation. A similar attempt at objectivity is evident in Hersey's short novel. Whereas Grew repeatedly makes a point of observing his environment and the incidents of his time from more than one angle, Hersey restrains his prose by leaving out any qualifying statements or personal comments. The latter's style is distinctively matter-of-fact and through the author's intentional detachedness from the scene the events and people he describes are put under the spotlight. Grew calls for lessons to be learned from history, and he does so by meticulously recording the developments and the web of occurrences that lead to certain historical events. This is important to him, as at the time he writes his diary he cannot know what will happen. Apparently, Hersey also wants to draw attention to the lessons of history. This is indicated by the inserts he added to his original manuscript in later editions. To him it must seem fatal that in spite of his and others' accounts of the horrors of Hiroshima little seems to have changed in the attitudes of national governments.

In Grew we find evidence of an identification with the official outlook of the United States government. This comes as no surprise to us, since Grew acts as the American Ambassador in Japan and naturally sees his role as a mediator between his and his governments' view and the Japanese counterpart. Although he does not agree with contemporary American policy on all aspects (the reader learns that Grew feels more could have been done to prevent war), he readily accepts the position of a fatherly benevolent teacher to the Japanese. There are traces of belittlement for the other culture in his writings, and we can frequently see that he reinforces and underlines the general American position. We cannot discover any such tendencies in Hersey. While he appears likely to nurture a range of (unfavourable) images about the Japanese, we cannot be sure if these are influenced by his upbringing in the United States or his stay in China before he went to Japan. Hersey's way of writing about Hiroshima points more towards a subtle criticism of the bombing itself and the American attitude in general. Mailer, Dos Passos and Wakatsuki Houston are all explicitly critical of the war and the United States' role in it. With Mailer the emphasis is on creating a counterimage to the dehumanization of the enemy and the depersonalization of the American soldier. Out of the masses of those who fought and died for a cause he extracts the stories of several individuals. The way in which he puts the spotlight on these individuals' personal histories and interests we see many contradictions to the supposedly unanimous official creed of American war

propaganda. By consistently keeping the Japanese enemy as a vague threat in the background he emphasizes the shallowness of the propaganda constructs. At the same time he strengthens the permanent need to find an answer to the *Why We Fight* question. How the individuals cope with a situation of uncertainty, both with regards to the answer to this question and to the fate of each soldier, is a *leitmotif* in Mailer's book. How people cope with incredible and unprecedented circumstances is also an important theme in Dos Passos' story. Pictures of death and decay again bring to the reader's mind the question of *Why*. Not as strong as in Mailer but still notably we detect traces of criticism of the United States in Dos Passos. The image of the *New Frontier* is evoked repeatedly, with the number of dead bodies in its wake bringing the imperialist view behind the whole scenario up for discussion.

Wakatsuki Houston joins the chorus of those questioning American behaviour and attitude during the Pacific War. Her book stands out because it is sort of a representation of the *other* view, but then not quite. American by birth but influenced by Japanese culture through her upbringing she provides a critical look at both sides of the coin. The images and familiar stereotypes of Japan are most vivid in Wakatsuki Houston's narration. This results from the theme of her book, her struggle for identity between two cultures. Concepts of the national Japanese character including loyalty, the resignatory nature of the Japanese, among others, are consciously called forth and are scrutinized for their usefulness in the author's quest. Similar pictures are used by Hersey for a different purpose. While Wakatsuki Houston tries to emulate herself against the images she describes, Hersey plays with them by emphasizing or contradicting them in his narration.

The use of images of Japan by these authors can be divided into two groups:

1. Grew and Wakatsuki Houston clearly employ their understanding of Japan to set themselves apart as individuals. The American Ambassador sees himself as an integral part of his cultural community and strengthens his identity through his function, which again is determined by a set of commonly acknowledged cultural assets. The aspect of identity construction *against* the Japanese foil is much stronger in Wakatsuki Houston. She lines up various "typically" Japanese characteristics which she then discards to emphasize her non-otherness. For her being Japanese is counterproductive to her goal of being accepted by the American community.

2. Mailer, Dos Passos and Hersey utilize images of Japan to achieve similar goals. The common denominator is their criticism of the American attitude. It is not so much a denial of the reasons for which the United States entered the war with Japan but rather a questioning of the means with which the final victory was pursued. Each of them condemns the brutality of war. While Mailer puts the weight on the plight of the American soldier, Hersey focuses on the victims on the other side of the combat line. Dos Passos sheds light on the devastation and emptiness the war leaves behind, and we see a critical attitude towards racist thinking in his book, although not as strong as in Mailer.

The selection of texts for this chapter is based on the authors' different angles of vision. There are certainly more books which would be worthwhile examining, such as James Jones' *The Thin Red Line*<sup>425</sup>, James Bradley's *Flyboys*<sup>426</sup>, both set during the Pacific War, John Okada's *No-No Boy*<sup>427</sup> and Michi Weglyn's *Years of Infamy*<sup>428</sup>, both of which deal with the internment of Japanese in the United States, and many more, but this would go beyond what this study can achieve.

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<sup>425</sup> Jones, James: The Thin Red Line. (first published in 1963) London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1998

<sup>426</sup> Bradley, James: Flyboys. A True Story of Courage. New York, Little, Brown and Co., 2003

<sup>427</sup> Okada, John: No-No Boy. (first published in 1957) Seattle, Univ. of Washington Press, 2001

## Part 3

### The Postwar Years

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<sup>428</sup> Weglyn, Michi: Years of Infamy. The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps. New York, William Morrow & Company, 1976



*I've never let consistency interfere with my prejudices.*  
*Elizabeth Wilson, Poisoned Hearts*

## Part 3, Chapter 1

"Where are the victors?"  
The Occupation of Japan

The Postwar Years left American public opinion with the remains of wartime hostilities and the overwhelming memory, if not guilt, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the war seemed to have given "at least a surface unity to almost every aspect of intellectual life"<sup>429</sup>, national identity was now facing a new challenge. The tensions of World War II were gone, its legitimations seemed less convincing now. Many Americans found themselves "on the road again", searching for points of reference in combat's "dull aftermath in the armies of occupation, an aftermath marked by loneliness, thirst for sex and adventure, and indulgence in black-marketeering"<sup>430</sup>. The people of the United States had to realize that "the roseate expectations that somehow, with the defeat of the enemy, democratic and humane ideas would become actualities"<sup>431</sup> fell far from the truth. The following chapter gives several examples of how different American authors responded to a felt need to re-establish their and their country's position within the global community and to differentiate themselves from the former enemy. As a self-appointed missionary of peace and democracy Elizabeth Gray Vining made it her cause to educate the Japanese so that war would never happen again. Donald Richie asks who the real victors and the defeated were after all and provides the reader with interpretations of the democratic ideal which do not go by the book. James A. Michener in his story, which was later turned into a motion picture, about the tragic love between an American major and a Japanese actress shows how a member of the American army loses the trust in his convictions through a personal encounter with the Other. John Patrick's ironical view of the occupation made for a successful Broadway play and movie. And finally, the representatives of the Beat Generation selected for this study stand for the growing intellectual criticism of American

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<sup>429</sup> Curti, p.731

<sup>430</sup> Curti, p.734

<sup>431</sup> Curti, p.743

domestic and foreign policy in the postwar years. What they all have in common is the felt desire to re-create for themselves and their environment a meaningful foundation, some of the authors by re-affirming traditional values, some by deciding "that all of Western thinking was at fault"<sup>432</sup> and therefore turning to the Orient for alternatives. I am going to present these authors in chronological order, as each of them is influenced *by* and because of that a good example *for* the political and intellectual situation of their time. Again, I want to point out that each voice is but one possible rendition of the Self and the Other within the scope of American-Japanese relations. There are of course many other opinions which could be quoted. But there is neither room here, nor would the compilation ever be able to satisfy the demand for completeness, no matter how many examples were presented. With every addition a new twist in outlook can be expected, be it ever so slight. What I am trying to achieve with this investigation is not the construction of a consistent picture but an examination of created realities and their hidden motivation. The emphasis lies on the common aspect of the need of human beings to find a home for themselves in the world. The choice is as arbitrary as human perception is.

### **Elizabeth Gray Vining: The Unofficial Ambassador of Peace and Democracy**

In 1946, Elizabeth Gray Vining, an American Quaker and school teacher, was invited to Japan to become the tutor of the Crown Prince. Her objective was, as one of the imperial advisors put it, "to open windows on to a wider world"<sup>433</sup> for Prince Akihito. Mrs. Vining after a while not only gave lessons to the Emperor's eldest son but also to his brothers and sister, to the Empress, and made teaching at a Japanese school part of her busy schedule. She kept a diary of the four years she spent as the first Westerner who established an intimate relationship with the Imperial Household. Her book *Windows for the Crown Prince* is a record of the events and developments in the course of her extraordinary assignment. Published in the United States in 1952 it stayed on the bestseller list for six months, and excerpts were printed in Reader's Digest.<sup>434</sup> Johnson calls Vining's prose "both fatuous and presumptuous"<sup>435</sup>, centering

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<sup>432</sup> *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York, 1985, Second Edition, Vol.2, p.1709

<sup>433</sup> Gray Vining, Elizabeth: Windows for the Crown Prince. London, Michael Joseph Ltd., 1952, p.72

<sup>434</sup> Ref. to Johnson, Sheila K.: The Japanese Through American Eyes. Stanford/ Cal., Stanford Univ. Press, 1988, p.17, 95

<sup>435</sup> Johnson, p.59

around Vining's self-assumed mission to teach the Japanese Crown Prince the ideals of democracy and freedom. This criticism seems too harsh to me. Vining sees herself as an American missionary, similar to Ambassador Grew. So indeed, Vining at various stages of her records suggests a feeling of superiority in her comparisons of her culture and the Japanese. On her journey to Japan she muses about "what I might be able to do for those young Japanese"<sup>436</sup>. As a Quaker she believed it to be her calling to work for "furthering the cause of peace through the healing of tensions and misunderstandings"<sup>437</sup>. As Prince Akihito's tutor she wanted to "bring before the Emperor's son in his formative years the ideals of liberty and justice and good will upon which peace must be based if it is to endure".<sup>438</sup> The latter statement speaks not only of the highest ambitions but also of the assumption that these ideals are foreign to the Imperial Family. Vining further states that "the Japanese were turning towards democracy, were trying to understand and practise it"<sup>439</sup>, implying that the concept of democracy is not embedded in the Japanese cultural heritage at large. But one cannot say that the American tutor acted with of the arrogance of the victor or was ignorant of the cultural heritage of the Japanese. Quite on the contrary she displays a sympathetic view of the Japanese people and an appreciation of their achievements. In the Crown Prince she admires his sportsmanlike fairness.

"He was often defeated [in sports] and when we won he won fairly. He took both defeat and victory in good part, though like any other boy he preferred victory."<sup>440</sup>

One of the fascinating qualities of Vining's book is how she pays due respect to her pupil and at the same time tries to treat him like "any other boy". This attitude seems an integral part of her mission, and we will look at this in more detail later.

Vining's sympathy for the Japanese people results in a couple of remarks which are strikingly different from the musings of other members of the Occupation (ref. to my below discussion of Richie). Speaking of the atrocities the Japanese Army inflicted on their enemy during the war Vining states:

"There is no doubt that these things were done, and all who have come to love and respect the Japanese people must accept the fact

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<sup>436</sup> Vining, p.11

<sup>437</sup> Vining, p.13

<sup>438</sup> Vining, p.14

<sup>439</sup> Vining, p.14

<sup>440</sup> Vining, p.30

which they find difficult to explain: that people so self-controlled, courteous, and kindly in their daily dealings with others could be in warfare so arrogant and so cruel. The explanation lies in the words *in warfare*. War makes beasts of us all. The American people are still in happy ignorance of atrocities committed by our own men in the Pacific."<sup>441</sup>

With this comment, Vining counters the de-individualization of war propaganda and popular stereotyping. By the same token that Americans do not assume themselves to be a nation of monsters because of the atrocities committed by a few of their fellowmen, Vining proclaims that the Japanese people are not *a priori* inhuman beings. Also, she points to environment and circumstance as two determinant factors of human behaviour. At the same time, Mrs. Vining expresses the highest esteem for the friendliness with which in her eyes the defeated Japanese welcome the former enemy, and especially praises her pupils.

"Could I at their age, I often wondered, have received a foreign teacher from an enemy country with one half the co-operation and the sweetness of spirit with which they had received me? I doubted it."<sup>442</sup>

Mrs. Vining's account finds few points of criticism for the Japanese people. Indeed, it sometimes reads like a fairy tale.

### **Picture-book Japan**

When the American tutor arrived in Japan, Prince Akihito was twelve years old, in her own words "a chubby small boy", who was to "develop into a poised young man"<sup>443</sup> under her guidance. Vining describes the first tentative and rather formal contacts between herself and the Imperial Household and puts emphasis on events that in her opinion show a democratic element. She organizes parties for her pupil, inviting schoolmates selected from both Japanese and Western families, and makes sure that all children are treated equally and learn to behave in a democratic way. As the teacher of Prince Akihito's class at junior high school she even gives American names to the boys to re-create the atmosphere of an

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<sup>441</sup> Vining, p.163

<sup>442</sup> Vining, p.311

<sup>443</sup> Vining, p.316

American classroom<sup>444</sup>. At various stages the author notes the progress of her students.

"The boys played Contract Rummy, and after refreshments they discussed what to do in the time that was left. The Crown Prince wanted another game of Rummy, the others a Japanese game. One boy suggested settling it by vote, and they proceeded to vote the Crown Prince down. He accepted the majority decision as a matter of course and joined cheerfully in the game."<sup>445</sup>

In Vining's definition this is a major success. Not only did the boy suggest a democratic vote, but the successor of the formerly divine Emperor without question subordinates his wishes to the majority decision. Nevertheless, it becomes clear in the course of the narration that Vining sees the principles of democracy as unfamiliar to Japanese thinking. About her assignment she writes:

"I had been asked simply to teach the Crown Prince English. But early in my stay in Japan, Grand Steward Matsudaira said to me, 'We want you to open windows on to a wider world for our Crown Prince.' It seemed to me then that through the medium of English I could present to him the ideals of the western world and help him to understand the essential spirit of that democracy which Japan was embracing with a hasty and bewildered sort of zeal in reaction from her great disillusionment with military dictatorship."<sup>446</sup>

This citation points to several assumptions. First, it states that democracy is something yet to be learned by the Japanese people, something that the country welcomes as a new way of behaviour rather than a true conviction. The "essential spirit" of democracy is therefore not inherent in the cultural heritage of Japan. Consequently, it is further implied that the English language, more than the Japanese, is the medium to teach "the ideals of the western world". This refers to the perception that language is part and parcel of cultural determination. Accordingly, a profound understanding of a culture, its philosophical foundation and value system requires knowledge of its language. At the same time, the language from a different cultural community cannot accurately convey the meaning of the other, and without knowledge of the language the principles of its cultural background cannot be grasped.<sup>447</sup> Thirdly, Vining gives the impression that this new direction is "embraced" in a quite superficial way, as if it was

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<sup>444</sup> Ref. to page 46-47

<sup>445</sup> Vining, p.289

<sup>446</sup> Vining, p.72

something worth giving a try after militarism had failed. This is re-inforced by other comments suggesting a lack in the ability to internalize democratic behaviour on the side of the Japanese. During a lecture tour on Japan in the United States, Mrs. Vining speaks of the slow process of implementing democracy in a country with a feudal history.

"For the question of democracy, I said, the Japanese loved and trusted General MacArthur; they were trying to understand and to practise democracy. We could not expect that the ultimate result would be a carbon copy of the American brand of democracy; it could live only if it were a Japanese product, expressing the deepest needs and aspirations of the Japanese people."<sup>448</sup>

Again, a number of implications have to be noted here. The mentioning of MacArthur, the fatherly figure of the Occupation period, indicates a dependency of the Japanese people on a (male) person of authority. The subordination to his rule is not different from the image of unconditional emperor worship before and during World War II. Secondly, when Vining demands that expectations have to be kept low she implies a feeling of "second best only". Democracy in Japan cannot be the "real thing", that is an exact copy of the "brand" originating in America, because it is "only" Japan we are dealing with. The use of a conditional sentence in the last part of the extract shows that democracy does not coincide with the existing "deepest needs and aspirations of the Japanese people", but that the latter have to be molded into democratic beings after the American model.

### **Different Goals in Life**

In Vining's view there is a distinctive difference between the needs and aspirations of the American and the Japanese people. In her descriptions of the living arrangements of the Imperial family, the author repeatedly expresses amazement as to why the siblings are not allowed to share the same quarters. Vining recounts several occasions where she tries to convince the Crown Prince's advisors of the healthier because in her eyes more natural state of having at least the two brothers Akihito and Masahito live together.

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<sup>447</sup> Vining applies the same theory to Japanese language and culture. Her resulting "ignorance" of the Japanese culture, however, does not keep her from being convinced that the "Western way" is the path to follow for the Japanese people.

<sup>448</sup> Vining, p.115

"It seemed to me obvious that he [Prince Masahito] ought to move into the Crown Prince's house on the school grounds, so that the two brothers, who were very congenial and very fond of each other, could at last be together. I was bitterly disappointed when I heard that Prince Masahito's chamberlains were looking for another house, a separate house, for him in the neighbourhood of Koganei, and I carried my protests down every avenue that was open to me. Though the chamberlains were unfailingly courteous to me, I was aware that my popularity with them had reached its lowest ebb. [...] I was sure both boys would be happier together than living alone, each with his retinue of grown-ups. But the pursuit of happiness is an American rather than a Japanese concept."<sup>449</sup>

We see that the American tutor genuinely cares for her pupil even to the extent that she risks her standing with his chamberlains. This may seem a bit shortsighted, considering the influence these men have in the Imperial Household. A serious fall-out with them would obviously have had a negative impact on her further dealings with the Crown Prince's environment. Simultaneously, this speaks of the strong determination with which Vining fulfils her assumed role as a mediator of democracy and peace. Unimpeachably convinced of her worldview, she cannot help but try to bring to Akihito's life what she perceives to be the natural goal of every human being.<sup>450</sup> With this, Mrs. Vining should find herself in a paradoxical situation: she is trying to teach something that according to her conviction is an integral part of man's aspiration. Clearly she cannot force her pupil to internalize the principles of democracy and freedom, yet she has to exert some kind of influence to direct his perception in the desired way. Consequently, the reader in the course of the narration follows Vining's very subtle attempts at creating an environment that calls for the desired reactions. However, one can argue whether it is possible at all to teach something, even in a very tentative, subtle way, that should be a natural human trait. The American teacher applauds every instance when her pupils master a "democratic task"<sup>451</sup>, yet there is another occurrence recalled towards the end of the book, pointing towards the above mentioned paradox. Bidding farewell to her students before her departure from Japan, Vining speaks of the "great words by great men" she asked them to memorize in the past and her intention to sow these words as the seeds of inspiration for her pupils.

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<sup>449</sup> Vining, p.122-123

<sup>450</sup> One should also note that the author makes a general statement about the Japanese people on the basis of the conditions in the Imperial Household, which legitimately can be regarded as special and quite likely very different from "common life" in Japan. To support Vining's cause, one could argue that the Imperial family serves as a model to the Japanese people, a lifestyle that every Japanese tries to follow in its refinement. However, no evidence for this is supplied here.

"These were great thoughts of great men, but I want also to give you something from myself.' (They sat very still and attentive and there was an electric quality in the silence. They were very different from American students, who begin to squirm and think of something else whenever there is any threat of preaching. The Japanese, on the other hand, like homilies from their teachers; they even ask for them.) 'I want you to try always to think for yourselves. Don't believe everything you hear, no matter who says it. Don't believe all you read in the newspapers. Don't take other people's opinions without examining them. Try to find out the truth for yourselves.'"<sup>452</sup>

The last sentence obviously refers to Vining's Quaker heritage. As Curti puts it in *The Growth of American Thought*, the Quaker worldview was determined by the "idea that the individual could determine religious truth on the compulsion of his own subjective intuitions rather than on the authority of a clergy or the traditions of a church"<sup>453</sup>. This view is similar to the Emersonian call for self-reliance and also to the Zen understanding of the enlightened Buddha nature of every human being. It states that the knowledge of good and right is in each individual's soul. The individual has to reach it instinctively, this knowledge cannot be imposed by an external power. As we have seen, this perception coincides with Vining's method of teaching by inspiration and examples. At the same time, her comparison of the active American pupil and the devout Japanese student contradicts the assumption that "truth" can be achieved solely from within. Apparently, the truth living in the Japanese soul is different from the American conception of it. Therefore, some form of external influence has to be exerted, which brings us back to the aforementioned paradox of teaching something that should pre-exist in its essence and could only be developed to its perfection independently. If they followed Vining's advice and did not believe everything they heard, the Japanese students could just as well discard their teacher's words, while they would follow her advice at the same time. The request is impossible to fulfil. Of course, the underlying idea of thinking for oneself seems self-evident to the Occidental reader as the core of the value system of democracy. But still this does not answer the question whether these values are something acquired by birth, or if they have to be instilled by education and environment, that is if they are merely learned behaviour. How can one examine opinions without a pre-existing set of tools for examinations? And if these are necessary, which are the right ones and who says so? Going even further, one

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<sup>451</sup> E.g. ref. to Vining, p.137

<sup>452</sup> Vining, p.298



could argue that adherence to democratic principles is not the natural state of man, because they obviously have to be taught to some extent both in the Japanese and the American cultural community.<sup>454</sup> From Vining's description we see that she is trying to teach the "American ideal", something which appears to be symbolized by a class of students too restless to listen to advice from outsiders, to the "dependent mind" of Japanese children who patiently await instruction. Again, if democratic behaviour is something that has to be developed by itself and from within, the teacher's efforts can only be futile.

### **Feudal Japan versus Modern America**

The author refers to the fundamental differences between the Japanese and the American character at various points in her recollection. The "essence of the American character" Vining rather vaguely describes as a natural desire to overcome "racial strains and varying experiences" to become "strong and good" as opposed to "great and famous".<sup>455</sup> This most likely refers to the individual's pursuit of freedom and happiness, which is equal to self-fulfilment within the framework of Christian ideals. The very fact that the American teacher does not use so many words to make the meaning of "the American mind" explicit indicates that this concept is prevalent in her thinking as an assumption that cannot to be questioned.

In a later discussion with the Crown Prince about the respective benefits of Japanese, American and European schools, Mrs. Vining expresses her perception of the superiority of the American system and sets the New World apart from the Old World in a *them vs. us* comparison.

"There are many fine things about Japanese schools, but I think the American way is better. If people are going to be free when they grow up, they must learn how when they are young.'  
He [the Crown Prince] nodded thoughtfully, then asked me about English and French schools. I told him that I had never visited English or French schools and had only read about them, but that I thought they studied more Latin, more mathematics, and so forth, but did not have much practice in doing things as American schools did."<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Curti, Merle: The Growth of American Thought. New York, Harper & Row, 1964, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p.8

<sup>454</sup> Vining repeatedly quotes the respective learning material used in the United States, ref. to p.156, 183-184

<sup>455</sup> Vining, p.120-121

Again, Vining remains vague in her statement. She does not provide any examples for what she regards as the "many fine things about Japanese schools", nor does she supply any evidence for how American children are taught to become free. I have already suggested two reasons for her demeanor. The first is that the concept is so natural and self-evident to Vining that she feels no need to put it in more words. The second results from this perception and the assumption that the self-evident principles of freedom and democracy cannot be taught but have to be felt by the heart and only then can be really understood. Consequently, the American tutor contrasts the method of learning in European schools to American schools as old-fashioned in the sense that traditional subjects have emphasis over "practice in doing things". This refers to the belief that the United States has put into practice the ideals of individualism and freedom, while the Old World is still caught in intellectual discourse. Vining admits that she does not have first-hand knowledge about European schools but that she developed her theory from hearsay. This weakens her point to some extent, while at the same time it underlines her strong conviction of the superiority of her own cultural community.

Another essential difference between Japanese and American children is pointed out by the author with an example from classroom behaviour.

"There was one aspect of the Japanese schools that never ceased to trouble me. In all American schools that I had ever known, the students could be depended on, if a teacher was called from the room, to carry on quietly by themselves. If they did not work, they at least played without disturbing other people. In a Japanese school, on the contrary, if a teacher is called out, pandemonium promptly ensues, and neighbouring classes can scarcely hear themselves think. As long as the teacher is present, however, rigid decorum prevails, and it is a rare student who speaks without being called upon or who asks a question or volunteers an opinion of his own."<sup>457</sup>

This paragraph highlights a couple of important aspects, which are characteristic for Mrs. Vining's view. Her notion that discipline in Japan is something artificial and maintained only for the sake of appearance is predominant here. This implies that the Japanese (student) lacks the ability to grasp the importance of any task entrusted to him and to judge for himself the necessity of working on his individual development. It is further implied that the Japanese student depends on a figure of authority (the teacher) in whose presence, however, he

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<sup>456</sup> Vining, p.138-139

concentrates on "rigid decorum". He simply memorizes what he hears rather than independently trying to formulate a deeper going understanding, for example by asking questions or offering personal comment. Mrs. Vining's reasoning stands on shaky grounds. There seems to be little logic in assuming a substantial difference in the behaviour of Japanese, American, or European children in classroom when unobserved. Their demeanor is most likely conditioned by the situation, the age of the students, the degree of acceptance of the teacher, the subject studied, and the consequences (or rewards) to be expected. Therefore, I find it rather questionable to construct a cultural contrast between Japan and the United States based on this "observation".<sup>458</sup>

### **The "Japanese" and the Quaker View**

A later entry emphasizes Vining's opinion that the value systems of the Japanese and the American culture are diametrically opposed. In a meeting with the Crown Prince's advisory council for his education the "question of freedom and discipline" in school and "the maintenance of respect for the teacher" are discussed:

"The point was made that outward forms of respect when carefully engaged in, produce corresponding inward attitudes, a Confucian doctrine that may have a sound psychological basis. My own theory, of course, was precisely the opposite, that the inward attitude comes first; the spirit determines the outward expression and the ultimate form; that really significant and lasting changes of behaviour must start from within. It was a discussion repeated many times over while I was in Japan, with the Japanese invariably supporting the outward forms approach and I the inner spirit."<sup>459</sup>

This approach of contrasting the outward and the inner spirit once again points to Mrs. Vining's Quaker background. Her traditional belief holds that

"... direct personal communication with God enabled man to test, supplement, and revise what he learned by the outward and more obvious processes of knowledge and what he received through others, no matter how authoritatively they might speak, whether on secular or on spiritual matters".<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Vining, p.139

<sup>458</sup> In the literal sense, one cannot speak of an observation but of hearsay. If Vining made the experience herself, she was able to judge the student's behaviour from outside the classroom only. With no one present, there is a lot of room for speculation as to what the students are actually doing behind closed doors, if not screaming at each other.

<sup>459</sup> Vining, p.145

<sup>460</sup> Curti, p.9

Three aspects are important here:

1. Vining uses the incident to exemplify the fundamental opposition of the Japanese and the American way of seeing the world. Contrasting the Confucian ideal of rigid training with the Quaker conviction of revelation from within oneself she has created a pair of apparently irreconcilable concepts: artificial superposition without lasting effect versus natural perception of the "truth" by individual effort.
2. The pairing is arbitrary, as Vining includes only one aspect of the Japanese cultural character in her equation. Had she taken into consideration the already mentioned Zen view of self-enlightenment as the only path to salvation, her contrast would not have worked. Instead she would have found a striking similarity between "the Japanese" and "the American" mind.
3. The American tutor closes her recollection on a very telling note: "But perhaps in the end we might agree that both are necessary".<sup>461</sup> At first glance this looks like a weak compromise aiming at avoiding a deterioration of the already tense atmosphere between herself and the Crown Prince's advisors. Yet it speaks of two further remarkable features:
  - Vining puts both approaches on the same level without giving superiority to any of them. This goes along with her repeated appreciative descriptions of the Japanese people. Her outlook is explicitly devoid of racism or signs of the Occupiers' arrogance which we will see in a later literary example. Even though she quite obviously feels her conviction to be representing a truly meaningful existence she never talks disrespectfully of differing views, as long as she can determine a good intention in them.
  - Even more importantly, Vining with this sentence admits that there is a necessary interdependence of the outward (Japanese) and the inner spirit (American) way. This refers to her understanding that man has inherited the divine spark but nevertheless after his fall has to be steered into the right direction. For her, the conditions necessary to initiate such re-orientation are represented by a free (American) environment rather than by an atmosphere of restriction (Japanese). In any case she admits to outward motivation as a vital part for the individual's process of self-fulfilment. As a matter of fact, this is again comparable to the teaching

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<sup>461</sup> Vining, p.145

method in many Zen monasteries, where a strict training and working schedule alternates with extensive liberties outside of the lessons.<sup>462</sup>

As can be seen throughout Vining's account, despite her natural affinity to her own belief the American tutor finds legitimation for both *the American* and *the Japanese* worldview. At the same time she appears reluctant to immerse herself fully into the foreign culture and thereby to gain a more thorough understanding of the country she found herself in for an extended period of her life.

### **The Endangered Occidental Identity**

Elizabeth Gray Vining lived in Japan from 1946 to 1950. However, during the four years of her stay she does not display a great eagerness to get more than a superficial feeling for the Japanese culture, let alone acquire any knowledge of the Japanese language. Although she repeatedly makes it a point that she does not reduce her field of vision to the diplomatic world<sup>463</sup>, her moves are restricted by her assumed mission. To Vining it seems much more important to teach than to learn herself. This points to the conclusion that she regards her own culture as superior after all, which also explains her never-ending effort to create a "democratic" environment for the Crown Prince and to tip the scales in favour of the American way. In her discussions with the Prince's advisors about his education she recollects to have "rejoiced again and again when some bit of freedom won for the Prince through his western contacts was extended to his Japanese life"<sup>464</sup>.

At one stage it even seems as if Mrs. Vining was a little afraid of the pull of Japan. Before the last renewal of her contract she struggles hard with herself, debating whether or not to accept.

"There comes a point when anyone who has spent any considerable time in the Orient must decide which he is going to do: yield to its charms and become faintly yet indelibly imbued with its point of view and subtly yet unmistakably cut off from the currents of thought and feeling in occidental countries, or break away and go home before it is too late."<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Ref. for example to Jan Willem van de Wetering's account of life in a Japanese Zen monastery: Der Leere Spiegel. Erfahrungen in einem japanischen Zen-Kloster. Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1977

<sup>463</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.65, 309

<sup>464</sup> Vining, p.203

<sup>465</sup> Vining, p.202

There is hardly an incident in the book which betrays serious doubt in Vining's firm belief and in her place in the world, yet both are inseparably linked with her homeland. As time goes by in a foreign cultural community that seems to have been able to establish a functioning value system independent of the Occident, her American identity becomes endangered. The wording "before it is too late" tells us that Vining senses an actual threat of being sucked up by an unfamiliar power. It is obvious that her view of things is based on thinking in dichotomies: either/or, right or wrong, us or them. The author frequently speaks of the "Japanese mind" as opposed to the "American mind" and at times gives the impression of being dumbfounded by the riddle of Japanese culture. Vining brings up several of the popular images we have already examined: the climatic determination of the Japanese people<sup>466</sup>, their paradoxical character<sup>467</sup>, their resignative inclination<sup>468</sup>, their mythical language which cannot be understood by outsiders<sup>469</sup>, the exceptional freedom of the (male) Japanese child<sup>470</sup>, the image of the aesthetic race<sup>471</sup>, and the image of the devout Japanese female<sup>472</sup>, to name but a few. All of Vining's related observations rest on rather shaky foundations, most have no supporting evidence, some are based on hearsay or singular incidents or observations.<sup>473</sup> The picture the American tutor creates of Japan matches her self-awareness and her objective. Even though she does not outspokenly demote Japanese culture (or rather her perception of it), she clearly favours the value system of her own cultural community. The mysterious and complicated Japan of her descriptions, dominated by etiquette and artificiality and devoid of a "true" understanding of democracy and its benefits, seems a suitable target for her missionary ambitions. Hence the felt threat to Mrs. Vining's identity: by prolonging her stay in Japan she risks that her foundation is undermined. What if the Japanese riddle unraveled itself and there did not remain much significant difference between the Orient and the Occident? How could one be sure which system was the right one then?

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<sup>466</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.150

<sup>467</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.168

<sup>468</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.149, 255

<sup>469</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.203, 267

<sup>470</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.255. This stereotype is extensively discussed in Benedict.

<sup>471</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.267

<sup>472</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.274, 278

<sup>473</sup> Vining quotes Edwin O. Reischauer, Ambassador to Japan and influential figure in formulating images about Japan. For a discussion of Reischauer's views ref. to Glazer, for Ruth Benedict to Herman Kahn (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Vining's fear was also nurtured by things she sensed wrong with the Occupation. Her criticism of the doings of the Occupational Forces is tentative but unmistakable.<sup>474</sup> I will now take a look at an author who made the criticism of the American Occupation in Japan and the question of identity the theme of his narration.

### **Donald Richie: Occupiers, Victors**

On August 28, 1945, the first American occupational forces landed in Japan.<sup>475</sup> During the six years of the Occupation, the United States assumed the dominant role, which was most visible in the figure of General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. In his book *Where Are the Victors?* Donald Richie offers a comical view of the collision of two cultures, the culture of the Occupier and the culture of the Defeated, and the manifold misunderstandings on each side about what was supposed to be the thinking of the Other. When the book was published for the first time in 1956, the original title was changed, most likely because

"back then it was perhaps felt that *Where Are the Victors?* was too provocative a title, since it seemed to suggest that the losers were not entirely vanquished. Also there was the implication that the winner of a war is also in some measure the loser."<sup>476</sup>

After a war that had cost the lives of millions of people one had to be sure who the winner was. Someone had to be punished for what had happened, and someone had to be the judge. Questioning the re-establishment of the equilibrium of power was dangerous: if the victors were not truly and infallably the victors, if the defeated had won something for themselves even though they were considered the "bad guys", the whole enterprise of bringing peace and democracy to the world was at stake.

Richie does exactly this in his book, he questions the black and white perspective of the Occupation and the omnipotent authority of the Allied Forces on all aspects of democracy in Japan. Changing the title therefore did nothing to take away the explosive content of his narration. The author starts with a description

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<sup>474</sup> Ref. to Vining, p.130, 149, 150, 168, 252, 256, 303

<sup>475</sup> Ref. to Finn, Richard B.: Winners in Peace. MacArthur, Yoshida, and Postwar Japan. Berkeley/ Cal., Univ. of California Press, 1992, p.7.

<sup>476</sup> Richie, Donald: Where Are the Victors? Rutland/ Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle, 1986, p.5

of an occupational pastoral: the city of Tokyo awaking to another day of reconstruction under the cheerful guidance of the American peace corps. In the middle of this scene the reader gets to know the first protagonist, a Japanese girl named Sonoko, who is on her way to work for an American member of the Military Government. Sonoko's employer is a woman of questionable character, Gloria Wilson, yet the American is an idol for Sonoko, everything she herself desires to be. The more the reader knows about Miss Wilson, the more absurd the Japanese girl's worship appears.

"If only she [Sonoko] could speak English well enough, she felt sure that she could tell the American lady anything, everything, and that the lady, like a wiser older sister, would understand, would console. Then Sonoko, too, might have become Miss Wilson's secret confidante, holding the doubtless many secrets of the American lady's life and guarding them with her own."<sup>477</sup>

As we will see later, Miss Wilson is none the wiser than Sonoko, but is herself struggling to find her place in world. The Japanese girl finds herself torn between her traditional upbringing and the excitements of a modern life which she sees personified in Gloria Wilson. Democracy for Sonoko means being free of obligations, free to do whatever one wants to without looking at the consequences, it also stands for everything she regards as modern and chic. Her use of the word is quite arbitrary and at no point remotely corresponding with for example Vining's perception. Sonoko plans a party for Miss Wilson which in her eyes has to be "something intimate, comfortable, democratic"<sup>478</sup>. Her relationship with her employer she finds "truly democratic"<sup>479</sup>, which brings her to the conclusion that "democracy was wonderful"<sup>480</sup>. In the Japanese girl's understanding her country is associated with complicated customs and the drag of responsibilities, whereas the American way is natural and easy-going. Sonoko feels entangled in this web of responsibilities, which are symbolized for her by the difficult arrangements for a successful party with which she wants to impress her employer. "Miss Wilson was still as lovably democratic as ever, but Sonoko felt herself becoming hopelessly feudal."<sup>481</sup> Richie deliberately plays with the word "democracy". He thereby not so much questions the very concept behind it but the different and often hazy interpretations of the term. His intention is obvious yet subtly presented. What appears as the funny musings of an adolescent from

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<sup>477</sup> Richie, p.17

<sup>478</sup> Richie, p.12

<sup>479</sup> Richie, p.17

<sup>480</sup> Richie, p.17



a strange culture soon turns into a red thread winding through the narration: How often do people use the word democracy thoughtlessly? How many of them, of us, have more than the officially sanctioned phrases to offer? Do we all support democracy because this is what is expected of us, or because we truly believe in its merits as opposed to other systems of social organization? The description of Sonoko is just the starting point, there is more to come which repeatedly makes the reader stop and think.

### **The Mysterious Ways of Democracy**

Richie does not spare his fellowmen from ridicule. This puts them in stark contrast to such self-assured representatives of the democratic community as Ambassador Grew and Elizabeth Grey Vining. In the same manner that Richie makes fun of the Japanese who struggle hard to adopt the new fashion of the American way he also sheds an ironic light on the undemocratic structure of the Occupation. The description of the Japanese girl's below mentioned train ride tells us that there are cars for Japanese passengers which are crammed with people, and cars for the Allied Forces, which are more comfortable and most of the time remain empty.

"Sonoko did not question this fact any more than did the rest of the passengers or, for that matter, the rest of Japan. It was well and fitting that the Allied car should remain empty if there were no Allied soldiers or civilians to ride in it. The Japanese, after all, should not expect to ride in the Allied car – except the girls with the Allied soldiers, but then they really didn't count. Just as it was perfectly natural that the sidewalk snack-bar of the PX in the Hattori Building at Tokyo's busiest crossing should sell Coca-Cola and popcorn and hot dogs to the soldiers and that the little street children clustering round should get none. This was as it was and as it should be."<sup>482</sup>

What Sonoko unquestioningly accepts is an apartheid-style society of two classes, with strict borders, which only those who "really didn't count" dare to cross. The girls she speaks of are most likely prostitutes with no status in the community, outlaws, so that misbehaviour on their side cannot endanger the equilibrium. In Sonoko's "feudal" mind it seems just and right that those propagating democracy do not feel obliged to adhere to their own rules. Richie's juxtaposition of her innocent outlook and the undemocratic facts of life under the Occupation creates a funny atmosphere while it emphasizes his point of

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<sup>481</sup> Richie, p.17

criticism. How can the Allied Powers "convert" the Japanese people to democracy if they themselves do not live up to their high expectations? The example they are giving is no less feudal, if not bigot, than Sonoko's reaction.

Most of the American characters in Richie's book assume that democratic behaviour is an inbred part of their personality. They so much take their benevolence for granted that they think themselves to be above and beyond the rules, no matter how corrupt and selfish they turn out to be. One example we find in Gloria Wilson, who indulges in her awareness of being the object of Sonoko's unconditional worship.

"... she [Gloria] remembered she'd forgotten to put out the candy bars she usually gave Sonoko to take home to the countless brothers and sisters she doubtlessly had. Oh, well, she gave the girl enough of a treat just being around. She suspected Sonoko had a crush on her, and this made her feel quite good."<sup>483</sup>

Absurd as it seems, Gloria Wilson regards herself as a missionary in Japan who brings the best of American culture to the defeated people, with "the best" not explicitly described but obviously symbolized in herself. In her eyes, the latter are so hungry for exposure to the American way that a little attention from one of its representatives makes for a gift to them already. Towards the end of the narration Miss Wilson's self-assumed call comes to an amusing climax, when she tries to bring salvation to a Japanese male by unsuccessfully trying to seduce him.<sup>484</sup> Happily deluding herself to be America's gift to Japan, Gloria Wilson targets her first act of goodness at a Japanese driver of the Allied Forces car pool. To the reader Tadashi-san seems to be an easy victim; he has already violated the rules twice. But he fears expulsion should he misbehave again. Being reported by an American to his superiors would surely end his career in the Occupation. Miss Wilson is completely ignorant of these circumstances but is as sure of herself as ever.

"After all, she'd been limiting herself rather severely, rather artificially, in entertaining only the Occupation personnel. There was the entire Japanese nation at her feet, as it were. A whole new world existed just pleading to be taken advantage of. And there was no liaison between Japanese and Americans, no channel for rumours, at least

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<sup>482</sup> Richie, p.19

<sup>483</sup> Richie, p.32

<sup>484</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.294-304

not on the level at which she intended working. Little Miss Ambassador – that's what she'd be."<sup>485</sup>

An ambassador in the most mundane sense, bringing carnal pleasure to the deprived Japanese nation – this is how Gloria Wilson "glorifies" herself<sup>486</sup>. Although not explicitly mentioned, this relates to an understanding of the Japanese female as devout but shy, in contrast to the image of the independent and outgoing American woman. Wilson particularly takes the outgoing part to its extreme, offering herself while being demanding at the same time, giving her body but staying in control like a true Occupier. We see more aggressive racism in Richie's book, but Ms. Wilson's assumption of a nation "pleading to be taken advantage of" drives home the same point. It therefore adds to the reader's amusement when the American woman is left alone in the dark of a bombed out suburb of Tokyo after trying to get out of her fur coat, while her object of desire drives off in panic. Thus Richie gives a sarcastic answer to the question whether every Japanese male secretly begs to be taken by an American female.

### **Open Racism and the Occupiers' Arrogance**

There are open expressions of racism on other occasions in Richie's book. The author provides us with a glimpse of the Allied car of the train Sonoko travels with every day on her way to work. Among a group of soldiers there is one trying to pass his day off by going to one of the amusement districts. Like Gloria Wilson this rather uncomely man reasons that it is his call to bring good to the defeated nation.

"I always say that any gook girl'll spread her legs if you ask her the right way – and get her away from mama.' He laughed heartily and blew his raspberry nose before continuing: 'Hell, man, why I don't know when I had so much fun as with some of these little gook girls.'"<sup>487</sup>

This quotation evokes two stereotypes: 1) The American perceives himself as the liberating force, freeing the Japanese from the ties of tradition, i.e. the family, here represented by "mama". The fact that he is only satisfying his own instincts does not weaken his cause in his view. 2) He actually brags about the pleasure he gets out of his supposedly missionary behaviour, which points to the other

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<sup>485</sup> Richie, p.296

<sup>486</sup> We can assume that Richie picked the first name for the character of Gloria Wilson intentionally as a pun on her aspirations.

image of the Japanese female. The image called up here is not of the devoted housewife but of the seductive geisha girl who is eager to respond to whatever a man wants. This paradoxical picture can be found in many publications on Japan from fiction and non-fiction. It is a two-sided image which can be turned around depending on the occasion. At the same time it is presented as an example of the contradictory nature of the Japanese people – strict adherence to traditional rules on the one hand, sinful indulgence in primitive instincts on the other.

The soldier depicted above uses racist talk to buttress his self-importance and to feed his view of himself as a man who has achieved something. Richie contradicts this with the description of a bored individual who "was what armies were for apparently, to provide homes for otherwise homeless men like this one"<sup>488</sup>. The soldier speaks loudly to catch the attention of his fellow-travelers and to hide his own insecurity. Offended by a younger soldier's open lack of interest in his story he tries to re-instate his authority:

"Hell, man, I was one of the first GI's on Jap soil. I came in with the Bataan boys. Why, we used to have the run of this place. Nothing chicken like now.' He smiled in reminiscence. 'Sure, subway and all. Boy, used to get right in among 'em. And the smell! Damned if I see how the gooks stand it. I never could."<sup>489</sup>

The soldier repeatedly employs degrading terms like "gooks" and "Jap" to underline his superiority. Referring to the "Bataan boys" he puts himself on the same level as General MacArthur<sup>490</sup> and the first troops to come to Japan after the war to "open" the country to civilization. The soldier's role can hardly have been very influential, and his place within the military hierarchy is obviously not very high, otherwise he would be enjoying the privilege of his own driver instead of traveling by train. Yet he pretends to have been among those who "used to have the run of this place", if only in the "good old times". The soldier's glorified role in the past serves as means to divert from his current rather lowly status. Simultaneously, by speaking of the smell in the subway which the Japanese endure without complaint while he himself could not stand it, he refers to the animal image. We are led to think of cattle or apes, who are oblivious of their body odour. Of course, if his recollections are correct, the most likely explanation would be lack of access to clean water and sanitary facilities for most of the

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<sup>487</sup> Richie, p.64

<sup>488</sup> Richie, p.65

<sup>489</sup> Richie, p.74

<sup>490</sup> Ref. to Finn's description of the arrival of American troops, p.7f.

bombed-out Japanese population. But this is not important for the soldier's argument, which serves the one purpose of contrasting him as a member of the clean and civilized Occidental community to the primitive sages. The animal image is one more time called up by the soldier a few pages later, this time in reference to the supposedly unpredictable nature of the Japanese people.

"You got to understand these folks, got to understand their psychology. And, course, they ain't got good sense and that makes things more difficult. Now just look at them, like a bunch of animals."<sup>491</sup>

People who do not behave according to this soldier's pattern are discarded as not having "good sense", their behaviour is irrational like that of animals. With one stroke the soldier degrades a whole nation to a primitive people which cannot be taken seriously and is in need for guidance from a superior culture, here: the United States.

### **Building Identities by Discrediting the Other**

Many examples of what I call the Occupier's arrogance are presented by Richie throughout the book. They in fact constitute the core of his narration as the foundation of identity-building for most of his American protagonists. With respect to this, the already mentioned Gloria Wilson is the first to illustrate the Occupation's attraction for herself and her countrymen. After an unpleasant encounter which brought back some even more unpleasant memories of home, Miss Wilson finds herself walking through the Tokyo morning air and "for no reason" feeling better.

"It was being in Japan that did it, she guessed. Here she seemed to weigh less, her body had a suppleness and dexterity that surprised her. The sun shone directly into her face, and she felt tall, beautiful, and altogether different from what she knew herself to be.

Often she had seen other Americans here smile for no apparent reason as they walked in the sunlight. Was it because they were conquerors? She doubted it. It was because they were free. Free from their families, their homes, their culture – free even from themselves. They had left one way of living behind them and did not find it necessary to learn another. Nothing they'd ever been taught could be used in understanding the Japanese, and most of them didn't want to anyway. It was too much fun being away from home, in a country famed for exoticism, in a city where every day was an

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<sup>491</sup> Richie, p.71

adventure and you never knew what was going to happen tomorrow."<sup>492</sup>

Like many other members of the Occupation Gloria Wilson has tried to re-create herself in Japan. Being a conqueror clearly does play a decisive role in this process, although this is not consciously recognized by her. It puts her and her countrymen on a higher level than the occupied population, it creates enough distance between themselves and their selves and obligations. The liberating process is initiated by leaving behind family and cultural ties. The elevated status of the Occupier frees Gloria Wilson from all responsibilities both to her homeland (such as keeping up her reputation) and to the foreign country she has chosen. The less she allows herself to become involved in the latter's affairs, the more she is able to maintain her independence. "Understanding the Japanese" is therefore nothing to be desired. The whole enterprise of her stay in Japan has the quality of a holiday, an "adventure", where "you never knew what was going to happen". In this she feels a similar attraction as her real-life predecessors in the 19th century, who seemed to be more interested in an idolized image of Japan than in its "reality". And like La Farge, Hearn, Griffith and Morse, Wilson enjoys a privileged position, which makes her stay in the foreign country convenient and carefree.

The above mentioned adventurous part of the Occupation breaks the neck of several other characters in Richie's book. While Wilson stumbles home in her high heels and fur coat like a fallen angel after her nightly excursion, a major is arrested for black-marketeering, and his superior has to resign because he looked the other way for too long. The course of events indicates that there is no escaping from one's role and responsibilities, while at the same time the reader learns about the strong surge of escapist illusions. For the soldier on the train, being in Japan is like one big party. "We never had it so good."<sup>493</sup> he says to conclude his argument. This observation is reconfirmed by Gloria Wilson, who sitting in an Allies' bar asks herself when she could "have enjoyed the benefit of servants, of an inflated social position, of tax-free liquor and unobstructed use of the Sears Roebuck catalog?"<sup>494</sup>, were it not for the Occupation. For once, even the most ordinary American could indulge in "an inflated social status", enjoying material benefits he or she would never be able to afford at home and doing

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<sup>492</sup> Richie, p.43

<sup>493</sup> Richie, p.71

<sup>494</sup> Richie, p.158

things they would never dare to think of in the United States. The atmosphere is one of complete carelessness. As Miss Wilson puts it, it is "as though the end of the world were just around the corner and they'd rediscovered the calf of gold"<sup>495</sup>.

### **Building Identities on Assumed Expertise**

The same bar in which Gloria Wilson muses about her personal liberation in Japan accommodates a group of Americans who have made Japan the topic of their cocktail hour conversation. Mr. and Mrs. Swenson are "old Japan hands" who, by having stayed in the country for some time, assume unquestioned expertise. Their companions Dave and Dorothy Ainsley were unwillingly drawn into this foursome and the ensuing discussion. Swenson praises himself to be *the* authority on the national character of "his" Japanese<sup>496</sup> and tries to develop his favourite argument, which is repeatedly interrupted by, in Mr. Swenson's view unqualified, comments of his not very devoted audience. Several well-used stereotypes are brought up by all four of them, the order of their occurrence not really matching the designed course of Swenson's theory but rather suddenly popping up from personal reflections.

Swenson starts by stating that the "differences between the two races, theirs and ours, are almost as profound as the similarities are startling"<sup>497</sup>. At first glance this might lead the reader to suppose that he finally came across a neutral and less biased observer. But it soon becomes evident that in spite of the ascertained similarities, which do not become apparent, the comparison 1) always ends up to the disadvantage of the Japanese, and 2) is always designed to underline Swenson's role as the omniscient judge. Consequently, he frequently corrects his companions' lay observations, swiftly moving from his view of the Japanese "debt to the past" as opposed to Chinese ancestor worship, to the familiar image of a culture of shame, and to the supposedly culturally embedded lack of moral consciousness among the Japanese people.<sup>498</sup> The last characteristic in particular seems to be appealing to Swenson, as the reader finds him engaged in homosexual reminiscence.<sup>499</sup> As already indicated, personal motivation is the driving power not only behind Swenson's statements but also for the contributions of the remaining three. While his wife appears eager to find her

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<sup>495</sup> Richie, p.158

<sup>496</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.169: "His [Mr. Swenson's] Japanese".

<sup>497</sup> Richie, p.165

<sup>498</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.165-166

husband's approval and to "bask [...] in the rays of [his] wisdom", Dave Ainsley is trying not to lose too much ground to the Great Authority. Dorothy Ainsley appears completely oblivious of the glory of someone other than herself, so that her comments are cheerfully self-centered and completely beside the point. Her remark about the Japanese being "just as ego-centered as anything – like children"<sup>500</sup> therefore comes close to being hilarious. However, whereas according to her journalist husband "the Swensons hadn't read a word on Japan – except their own articles – since they'd come out, twenty years ago", Mrs. Ainsley at least, if incorrectly, recalls the title of one of the canonized publications on Japan.<sup>501</sup>

The opposition of these very different characters and their individually shaped perceptions pulls the plug out of the whole conversation, turning contributions intended to be serious into ludicrous small talk. This is as apparent in Swenson's assumed fatherly authority over his hobby horse (the Japanese people) as in Dorothy (Dottie) Ainsley's interruptory exclamations.

"He [Swenson] was interrupted by Dottie, who, ever since 'ego-centered' had been engaged in thoughts of her own. 'And bullheaded!' she said, dimpling. 'They'll just never once admit they're wrong. Never. So, so – real mad at you too if you tell them they're wrong – which they are.' She turned brightly to her husband for approval."<sup>502</sup>

Mrs. Ainsley's observation is discredited even before she opens her mouth by Richie's introductory remark about her ego-centeredness. Rather than providing the reader with a sober view of the Japanese culture, her words betray her view of herself. Being on the victor's side becomes equivalent to naturally being right and gives superiority even to a "little silly"<sup>503</sup> like Dorothy Ainsley. Again employing the child image to support her position she looks for approval like a child herself, thereby adding to the paradox of her constructed sense of self and her outward appearance. Swenson displays a similar perception of his elevation, which finds a climax when he corrects the Japanese grammar of a native speaker.<sup>504</sup> Although he shows off his sympathy with the Japanese and assumes

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<sup>499</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.167

<sup>500</sup> Richie, p.169

<sup>501</sup> Richie, p.168. With the "The Rose and the Sword" Dorothy Ainsley quite obviously refers to Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

<sup>502</sup> Richie, p.171

<sup>503</sup> Richie, p.171

<sup>504</sup> Richie, p.172



an "objective" stance, he does not give up his detached viewpoint which leads him to believe that he knows more about the Japanese than they know about themselves.

### **Building Identities on Cultivated Ignorance**

None of the characters lined up in Richie's book has more than a superficial relationship to Japan, in the sense that none of them immersed him-/herself into the culture and developed an intimate understanding of its different layers and its people. However, it becomes evident that each of them nevertheless has quite strong ties to this culture, which remains foreign to them. As we have already seen, each of the characters, be it Gloria Wilson, the Swensons, the Ainsleys or the unnamed soldier, is on a crusade to buttress his/her identity. Not surprisingly, this is done rather by elaborate ignorance than by factual knowledge. Richie's protagonists are not really interested in learning something about Japanese life and custom, their main goal lies in confirming the picture they have already created of themselves in contrast with the Other. It is therefore not important to them if their perceptions are accurate; what counts is whether they fit the pre-established pattern. This is true for both the advocates and the critics of the American way.

One of the most outspoken critics is Private Michael Richardson, member of the Occupation, colleague of Gloria Wilson and in love with a Japanese girl. Richardson travels on the train with the unnamed soldier and listens to his ravings about Japan.

"No one ever felt lukewarm about Japan – you either loved it or hated it. It brought out a strong emotion in any case. The only difficulty was that either way it changed your opinion of your own country. It made men like this [unnamed soldier] think America was best because it was richest. And it made men like himself critical of America, just because it was the richest, most powerful, and because it could create sons of bitches like this one."<sup>505</sup>

The *them vs. us* equation works both ways, in favour or in disfavour of the Japanese, but it does not seem to allow for any nuances. It is either/or, right or wrong, America or Japan again. Private Richardson has opted for what he understands to be the Japanese way of subtle modesty and style. The Japanese

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<sup>505</sup> Richie, p.72

girl he has chosen to marry represents the desirable essence of her culture to him.

"In Haruko he had found personified what he liked about Japan. He watched her cut a camellia and put it near a rock, and the rock became beautiful. It was like those farm houses he had seen which were built around a tree or a boulder. The farmers, unwilling to sacrifice the natural surroundings, had fitted the houses to the landscape."<sup>506</sup>

The American man's knowledge of Haruko and her living conditions is reduced to this "personification" of beauty. As an *ikebana*<sup>507</sup> teacher Haruko stands for the creation of beauty from simple things. Whereas Private Richardson is described as not being able to arrange the most exquisite flowers into something even unified, the Japanese girl with natural grace and ease brings beauty by the mere touch of her hand. Richardson deduces from this example that the natural goal of the Japanese is the pursuit of artistic perfection, to create something which touches the soul, as opposed to the American pursuit of the mundane, of material wealth. Of course, what he takes for a natural gift might simply be the result of year-long training in *ikebana*, an art form which is a well-recognized profession in Japan and on which innumerable instruction manuals exist. By the same token, what Richardson perceives as the artistic arrangement of the Japanese landscape might result from the fact that only 25% of Japan is habitable, which causes its population to work and build around the manifestations of nature. But as I have shown, the "truth" behind the American's perception is of marginal significance. His reality construct is just that: a construct using pieces of information selected to fit the pre-designed picture.

Richardson's outlook is comparable to that of Lafcadio Hearn, in that he believes to have rediscovered in Japan something lost to the American culture, something which elevates his soul and gives meaning to his existence. As for Hearn and also for John La Farge, beauty is the key word here. Seeing beauty becomes equivalent to getting a glimpse of the purpose of being. Richardson's view of Haruko who "lived naturally with beauty [...] and used it daily as other women use the mirror"<sup>508</sup> supports this assumed opposition: Japan is natural beauty, that is the embodiment of meaningful existence, whereas America stands for enforced superficial goal-orientedness. While the Japanese woman is beautiful without

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<sup>506</sup> Richie, p.63

<sup>507</sup> *ikebana* = the art of flower arrangement

being aware of it, her American counterpart has to prove herself by looking into the mirror, which in return has become a culturally inbred gesture.

Towards the end of the narration, Michael Richardson sees his would-be wife succumb to her traditional obligation of marrying a Japanese man selected by her parents. Recovering from the humiliation of rejection he recognizes the reason for his enchantment with Japan:

"For the first time he [Michael] realized that he never would be able to understand what he loved, and that that might well be the reason he loved it so. His earlier disillusion fell from him. Again he loved Haruko, and he loved her because he would never understand her  
...<sup>509</sup>

A *leitmotif* in Richie's book is the construction of images which the characters create with very limited factual data as a foil against which they can emulate their sense of self. The sparseness of data on which these images are based is actually a pre-requisite for the process. The data is selected and reorganized to meet the requirement of supporting pre-conceived stereotypes about oneself and the Other. Contradictory impressions are not accepted and are therefore either completely rejected or reinterpreted to fit the existing categories. Consequently, it is not desirable to burden oneself with too much new information, as this always bears the potential to endanger the constructed balance and with it the identity the individual has established for itself with reference to a set of assumptions.

### **Ambiguous Intentions**

The content of the images utilized for identity building is of minor importance, as long as they create a curious enough picture against which the individual can differentiate itself. For figures like Gloria Wilson, Dorothy Ainsley, the Swensons, and the unnamed soldier, the stereotype first and foremost underlines their assumed superiority. This includes the animal image<sup>510</sup>, the view of the illogical Orient<sup>511</sup>, the picture of the artificially disciplined culture<sup>512</sup>, the child image<sup>513</sup>, the

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<sup>508</sup> Richie, p.63

<sup>509</sup> Richie, p.275

<sup>510</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.41, 71 (already quoted)

<sup>511</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.95

<sup>512</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.102

<sup>513</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.247

rigid toilet training stereotype<sup>514</sup>, and the assumption of insufficiencies of the Japanese anatomy<sup>515</sup>, among others. On the pro-Japanese side, Michael Richardson reduces his observations to the positive view of the foreign culture, to a vague promise of a spiritual refinedness he believes to be lost for his homeland. Again, the content of the image is of little significance, and the exoticism behind his perception is no less apt to shape, or rather cloud, his understanding than the not always so subtle racism behind the Occupiers' outlook. Yet, the intentions on both sides are rather ambiguous. For although each party needs the contrast to solidify their reality construct, at the same time they express a desire to nullify this contrast as the last consequence of their superiority. We find this illustrated by a remark from Major Calloway, a black-marketeer cashing in on his Japanese contacts, who shows himself to be offended by a Japanese appearing in traditional attire at a social event.

- Calloway:* What do you suppose he went and did that for? He seemed like a regular guy to me.
- Wilson:* Went and did what?
- Calloway:* Get himself up all in Jap like that. I don't think that's very friendly. Sort of rubbing our noses in it, don't you think, Miss Wilson?
- Wilson:* Rubbing our noses?
- Calloway:* Yeah, I mean he comes in with a suit just like everybody else when he comes to see us. Shoes and all. Civilized, you know. And now, at a formal shindig like this he runs home and puts on a costume. I don't know what that's called in your books, Miss Wilson, but –
- Wilson:* Sort of like Pearl Harbour, huh?  
[...]
- Calloway:* No, not like Pearl Harbor [...] But you know what I mean. Here we are, trying to give these folks a decent way of life and all. Teach them to wear proper clothes and act like white people. Then a man like O'Hara does something like this. I don't know. It sort of hurts, after you've worried about them and cared for them. It seems like they just don't understand the way we do things in the States. And if they do, they're just bound and determined they're going to be different.<sup>516</sup>

First of all, it is obviously the "missionary's" pride that has been hurt. Calloway appears firmly rooted in his belief that the American way is superior. He acts like a father who has shown a great amount of patience with a rather dull child and

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<sup>514</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.247 – In the so-called anthropological studies on Japan, including Benedict's work, this image is often used to explain the supposedly aggressive character of the Japanese behind a facade of smiling politeness as resulting from a childhood trauma.

<sup>515</sup> Ref. to Richie, p.250

<sup>516</sup> Richie, p.251-252

finds his efforts rewarded by ungrateful stubbornness. Secondly, his insistence that the Japanese purposely tried to maintain his difference is equivalent to a threat to the validity of Calloway's worldview. He does not consider the possibility that Mr. O'Hara wears what is probably his best dress out of respect for his host, he assumes it to be an insult to his worldview. If the other position is not only well-grounded but also a legitimate alternative, where does this leave him with his supposition of supremacy? The incident makes it evident for the major that his Japanese business associate has put up the facade of adopting American culture for calculated material reasons only. By wearing the costume of his ancestors Ohara demonstrates a nevertheless unbroken affiliation with traditional Japanese culture and mocks all American attempts to "civilize" him. The difference between himself and the Japanese was what gave Calloway an advantage in the first place, however, the resistance of the other side to give up its Otherness clearly threatens this position. A third component adds to the ambiguity, that is the assumed inability of the Japanese to assimilate American culture. The latter, as we have seen, is perceived to be the irrefutable set of values and custom. It is therefore the natural responsibility of its representatives to bring any dissidents onto the right track. At the same time, the imminent inferiority of the different *modus operandi* implies the lack of a capacity to fully understand and integrate into the finer system, thereby reconfirming its preponderance. As the self-appointed expert on Japan Mr. Swenson puts it,

"no matter how exquisite the effect in their [the Japanese's] own milieu, whenever they attempt ours the effect is often as tragic, and, I'm the first to admit, as comic as the spectacle tonight"<sup>517</sup>.

The tragedy in the futile Japanese attempt to deliver more than a copy-cat imitation of the Occidental way is both what continuously emphasizes Western superiority *and* what makes their very effort to teach the Japanese futile.

*Where Are the Victors?* gives a very sardonic view of the Occupation and puts a big question mark behind the whole enterprise of democratic missions to presumably pre-modern civilizations. The book sheds a revealing light on the gap between personal motives and officially sanctioned behaviour and serves as a case study on how identities are (re-)created by differentiation from or

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<sup>517</sup> Richie, p.284. The spectacle Swenson refers to is a stage performance of *Madame Butterfly* by a Japanese ensemble. While Swenson obviously finds nothing to be desired in any Westerners interpretation of the Japanese characters in the play, the vice versa attempt of the Japanese actors strikes him a ludicrous.

association with the Other. Richie throws so many varying opinions into the arena, each thoroughly convinced of its legitimacy, that in the end the question about the true victors becomes virtually impossible to answer.

What Swenson referred to as a comic spectacle was a Japanese performance of *Madame Butterfly*, Puccini's renowned opera about about the tragic love of a Japanese woman for an American man. The story and its stereotypes have played an important part, if not the determinant role, in formulating the image of the Japanese female. We find references to it throughout literature, some picking up the thread and reconfirming the picture, some ridiculing and arguing against it. A little of both is incorporated in one of America's most famous bestsellers about Japan, James Michener's *Sayonara*.

### **James Michener: Madame Butterfly Revisited**

First published in 1953, *Sayonara* went right onto the bestseller list, staying there for 21 weeks.<sup>518</sup> The book tells the story of the transformation of a major of the American army from an arrogant Japan-basher to an admirer of its culture and people, personified in a beautiful Japanese woman. The title *Sayonara*<sup>519</sup> already hints at the unhappy ending and not only in that it is reminiscent of the *Madame Butterfly* theme.

In 1887, French naval officer Julien Viaud, better known under his pen-name Pierre Loti, published his novel *Madam Chrysanthemum*.<sup>520</sup> Apparently based on first-hand experience, Loti writes about a cross-cultural "love" affair where the relationship is determined by Western dominance and Japanese obedience (and most likely reduced to the physical). Loti, who was "credited with creating the 'colonial novel'<sup>521</sup>, stays true to a well-worn pattern in his most popular book:

"The formula was usually the same. A young naval officer for one reason or another has to spend a few weeks or a few months on shore. To while away the time and to 'penetrate the soul' of the strange culture, he has what might be called an '*aventure de plage*'. The girl is usually a teenager and so infatuated with him that when he leaves, she pines away."<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Ref. to Sheila Johnson, p.15

<sup>519</sup> *sayonara* = good bye

<sup>520</sup> Julien Viaud (1850-1923). Ref. to Wilkinson, *Endymion: Japan Versus the West. Image and Reality*. London, Penguin, 1991, p.113.

<sup>521</sup> Wilkinson, p.115

<sup>522</sup> Wilkinson, p.114

Wilkinson calls Loti's style "undemanding" and finds his female characters to be "curiously stereotyped, treated like pets and discarded as easily on leaving"<sup>523</sup>. Loti's view of Japan was just as patronizing, and he "made no secret of his dislike"<sup>524</sup> of his female protagonist and the Japanese people in general. Wilkinson explains this antipathy with Loti's own deficiencies, assuming that the author "in writing of the Japanese ... projected on to them all those qualities he disliked most in himself"<sup>525</sup>. The popularity and influence of his novel might therefore strike us as a bit unusual. Yet we must not ignore 1) when the book was written, and 2) what purpose it served and has been serving ever since, that is to create a classical tragedy enriched by the touch of the exotic, confirming our favourite stereotypes about the beauty and at the same time the inferiority of the Orient.

*Madam Chrysanthemum* went through various hands before becoming Puccini's masterpiece which was performed on stage in 1904.<sup>526</sup> By now, the French officer had become Lieutenant Pinkerton of the United States Navy, and one popular image of Japan, the Chrysanthemum, was substituted by another one, the Butterfly. Through a marriage broker the American lieutenant finds his 15-year-old bride Cho-Cho-san, known as Madame Butterfly because of her feminine beauty and fragility. Discarding all warnings of a fatal ending to this contractual arrangement which makes it easy for the American to end the relationship at his convenience, Butterfly lets Pinkerton take her for his companion for the "wedding game".<sup>527</sup> Having forsaken her tradition Cho-Cho-san is now regarded an outcast, her entire family breaks all ties with her. However, the naval officer soon gets tired of his Oriental playmate and returns to the United States to marry an American woman. Cho-Cho-san is left behind with Pinkerton's child, clinging to the hope of his return and their happy reunion. When the American does return with his new wife and it becomes obvious she has deluded herself, the butterfly crumbles. Trusting the child to her ex-husband's care, the Japanese woman stabs herself to death with the same dagger her father used to end his life. Pinkerton's remorse comes too late. Upon rushing into the house he finds her lifeless body.

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<sup>523</sup> Wilkinson, p.115

<sup>524</sup> Wilkinson, p.115

<sup>525</sup> Wilkinson, p.115

<sup>526</sup> Ref. to Wilkinson, p.117

<sup>527</sup> From "A Synopsis of Madame Butterfly", <http://www.azopera.com/95season/bflysyn.htm>

The dominant image of the Japanese female in Western literature is two-sided, and both aspects are used in Loti's novel. On the one hand, Japanese women are "compliant, doll-like objects of fantasy, as epitomized in the 'geisha' image"; on the other they personify the "idea of a subservient, self-sacrificing ... wife".<sup>528</sup> For the Western male this image creates the illusion that it was possible to have it all: a sexually available mistress catering to man's primal needs without binding him with further obligations, and a devoted wife and mother to his children who sacrifices herself unconditionally to his well-being. Descriptions of this dream woman border on heroine worship, as can be observed in Michener's narration.

### **The Fear of the Endangered American Identity**

Michener's first person narrator Major Lloyd "Ace" Gruver starts off on a very hostile note in his account of the Japanese. His attitude is that of the arrogant victor who re-emphasizes his assumed superiority by repeated depreciation of a culture he hardly knows. "I'd been through the place and it never impressed me much. Dirty streets, little paper houses, squat men and fat round women."<sup>529</sup> Gruver's ignorance does not stem from lack of opportunity to encounter the foreign culture, but from his unwillingness to take it seriously. His Japan is the Japan of World War II propaganda, uncivilized and ugly: he contrasts the dirty streets and paper houses of Japan to the supposedly well-kept streets and solidly built houses of America; the presumably pre-modern Japanese style of squatting to the refined American way of sitting; the primitive unattractiveness of Japanese women to the elegance of the American female.

Learning that a soldier from his outfit (Private Joe Kelly) is planning to marry a Japanese girl, Gruver displays self-righteous disgust.

(Kelly:) "'I'm stupid enough to be in love. It happens that I love this girl. And if I have to give up my American citizenship to marry her, that's O.K. with me.'

He was trembling mad and put his girl's picture back in his desk. I was outraged to think that any American man would dare to talk like that. Give up his citizenship! I wanted to grab the young idiot and knock some sense into him, tell him that anyone who even thought of surrendering his American citizenship for a Japanese girl ought ...

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<sup>528</sup> Ma, Karen: The Modern Madame Butterfly. Fantasy and Reality in Japanese Cross-Cultural Relationships. Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland/ Vermont, 1996, p.17-18

<sup>529</sup> Michener, James A.: Sayonara. London, Mandarin, 1993, p.7. The book was first published in the United States in 1953



He turned his back on me and started on some paper work, as if to dismiss me.

I don't take that from anyone. I got sore. I reached out, grabbed him by the shirt and spun him around. 'Who in the hell do you think you are?' I cried."<sup>530</sup>

The main reason for Gruver's outrage becomes evident in this extract. By having to face a member of his cultural community who consciously defies its value system and who is ready to discard the security of American citizenship, the major senses a serious threat not only to his sense of self, but to the foundation of his view of the world. The use of the term "surrendering" indicates that in Gruver's understanding the roles are unjustly reversed here, in that the victor becomes the defeated by accepting the terms of the former enemy. Therefore, the naturalness with which Private Kelly defends his opinion makes the major "sore". On the one hand he feels that he is not met with the proper respect by someone who is much lower in the military hierarchy, but more importantly he is snubbed not by a minor fresh remark but by a behaviour that puts his very own identity into question.

Lloyd Gruver and many of his fellowmen and women in the book hold American citizenship high like a sacrament, the idea of supremacy always implied. Fighting the Japanese during the war and helping them to rebuild their economy are responsibilities unquestioningly accepted by the victors' nation. However, its disregard for the Japanese has to remain as a necessary pre-requisite to maintain the already mentioned balance between the Self and the Other. Michener's book very clearly illustrates the fear in Americans<sup>531</sup> that there could be something to the others' outlook, and since this is incompatible with one's own reality construct it is rejected even before serious examination. This unwillingness to take a closer look at the Other is demonstrated when Major Gruver acts as a witness at the wedding ceremony between Joe Kelly and his wife-to-be Katsumi and is asked to kiss the bride.

"... it had never occurred to me that anyone would actually want to kiss a yellow-skinned Japanese girl. You fought the Japs on Guadalcanal. You organized their country for them in Kobe. You defended them in Korea. But it had never crossed my mind that you kissed them."<sup>532</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Michener, p.19

<sup>531</sup> Of course, this refers to the Americans in Michener's book and the other authors' works discussed here only. I do not want to go so far as to state that this would be a general condition of the American or any other Western nation.

<sup>532</sup> Michener, p.56

Showing affection or even appreciation for the people who have been entrusted to America's care is obviously not included in Gruver's concept of living up to his responsibilities. Although no longer the enemy, for him they are still the "yellow people", the "Japs", again it is "them" versus "us". Before the major came to Japan on his assignment he seemingly never spent any time looking at the Japanese people as something other than a de-individualized, stereotyped mass. They were to be protected but to be held at arm's length at the same time. Fraternizing with them was not desirable, kissing a member of their community unthinkable and "repugnant"<sup>533</sup>.

### **National versus Personal Beliefs**

Gruver's initial racist thinking is not the only one represented in Michener's story. Another member of the victors' nation expresses her feelings along the same lines. The very dominant wife of a general and Lloyd Gruver's supposed future mother-in-law, Mrs. Webster, puts it more subtly but appears just as convinced about her natural preeminence:

"It's not that I dislike Japanese. Goodness, they're wonderful people. So clever and all that. Even in the short time I've been here they've shown me unusual courtesies. But a conquering army must retain its dignity."<sup>534</sup>

Her presumed "sympathy" with the Japanese does not keep the general's wife from banning any Japanese other than the waiters from the Kobe Officer's Club. In her view the rules are quite clear and to be observed by both sides, with the "conquering army" consequently assuming extraterritorial rights on Japanese grounds and the latter's inhabitants just as naturally succumbing to their assigned role and status, which includes being expelled from their home turf.

When Mrs. Webster finds out that Major Gruver attended the wedding between an American and a Japanese, her anger reveals similar motives as Gruver's reaction to Kelly's announcement. After having installed law and order in the dining room, she senses that her convictions are ridiculed by someone who should be firmly at her side.

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<sup>533</sup> Ref. to Michener, p.56

(Mrs. Webster:) "... your very presence [at the wedding] signified approval. In this dining-room right now half of the officers are laughing at me.'

(Narrator/ Gruver:) So that was it. She wasn't really concerned about the welfare of the service nor the standing of her husband. She was angry that something which she had started – non-fraternization – should have backfired and brought ridicule upon her."<sup>535</sup>

Lloyd Gruver is wrong in assuming that Mrs. Webster was not concerned about anything more important than her own reputation. Not long ago he himself saw his pride hurt and his identity thereby endangered when Joe Kelly discredited American citizenship. The general's wife outburst reveals the same association of personal pride and cultural consensus. The demand for non-fraternization does not only stem from her private faith. It is so closely connected to the process of building her self-awareness *in reference to* certain ingrained "national" beliefs that there can hardly be a distinction. As was the case in the accounts already examined, the elevated sense of self is also supported by stereotypes such as the image of the illogical Japanese character<sup>536</sup>, which calls for a depersonalization of the enemy<sup>537</sup>. When the woman Lloyd Gruver can truly love happens to be Japanese he consequently feels "my whole world crumbling under me".<sup>538</sup> He finds himself in a state where "my promotion in service and my early ideas about the Japanese enemy were swirling in confusion"<sup>539</sup>. What brought about such abrupt change in a man who seemed so firm in his outlook?

### **From Hostility to Heroine Worship**

It soon becomes evident that Major Gruver is really not as firm in his beliefs as he thought himself to be. The unforeseen encounter with his fiancée Eileen Webster and her family's expectation that he should propose to her and follow his long planned career path lay the grounds for Gruver's escape into the attractions of the mysterious Orient. It does therefore not come as a surprise that the image he begins to create of Japanese women in general and "his" Hanaogisan in particular is overly romantic. Forgotten is his initial disrespect for the "fat women". He now visualizes the Japanese female as the ultimate remedy for modern civilization's illnesses, in Gruver's image they "take a wounded man and

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<sup>534</sup> Michener, p.37

<sup>535</sup> Michener, p.59

<sup>536</sup> Ref. to Michener, p.40

<sup>537</sup> Ref. to Michener, p.151

<sup>538</sup> Michener, p.78

<sup>539</sup> Michener, p.119

make him whole"<sup>540</sup>. The "wounded man" stands for man separated from his true being, that is from meaningful existence, his original call. It is the ultimate answer the American major is looking for, and he cannot seem to find it in his own cultural community, which suddenly appears devoid of purpose. The disappointing realization comes to him when he looks into the "hurried, bereft faces" of his countrywomen: "They were efficient faces, faces well made up, faces showing determination, faces filled with great unhappiness."<sup>541</sup> Contrasting this vast reservoir of unhappiness Gruver senses the promise of fulfilment in the beauty<sup>542</sup> of Japanese women.

"... I felt as if I had been brushed across the eyes by some terrible essence of beauty, something of whose existence I had never before been aware."<sup>543</sup>

Although Lloyd Gruver does not belong to the group of American men who intentionally came to Japan to search for spiritual nourishment he finds himself on the same quest. Like his real-life predecessors John La Farge and Lafcadio Hearn, the major senses that a yet-to-be-revealed truth is hidden in Japanese culture. The word "terrible" hints at the unexpected recognition that there might be a valid alternative to the American's familiar system of norms and belief, an alternative closer to the "truth" than his acquired knowledge has ever been able to take him. For Gruver all this is incarnated in the Japanese female, with beautiful Hanaogi-san the most shining example.

### **The Perfect Woman**

From Gruver's statements we gather that the Japanese female must be the perfect woman for every man: attentive to all his needs, totally devoted to his well-being, modest in her own behaviour and demands. The Japanese female, we learn, does not suffocate her man with expectations.

"They [Japanese women] weren't going to make him a four-star general or they weren't going to humiliate him over some trivial affair

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<sup>540</sup> Michener, p.117

<sup>541</sup> Michener, p.133

<sup>542</sup> The reader learns that the concept of beauty becomes relative for Lloyd Gruver and is no longer associated with attractive outward appearance but with an "inner loveliness", which incorporates all the positive characteristics he comes to associate with Japanese women.

<sup>543</sup> Michener, p.69

for which he had already apologized. They just got hold of a man and they loved him."<sup>544</sup>

Following the major's tale we find out that the Japanese female is even considerate enough not to press him to marry her just because they have a sexual relationship. It is not difficult to see why this posed an enticing "fantasy for the Western male that promised freedom from the sexual prohibitions placed upon him by his own culture"<sup>545</sup>, especially during the rather prudish 1950s. In view of the existential struggle and strife women in postwar Japan had to undergo it is also not difficult to see why Japanese women made themselves attractive and available for American GIs.<sup>546</sup> Loving a man for what he was could therefore be also interpreted as loving him for what he represented: the economic wealth of the United States.

Gruver's references to the ideal woman as represented by the Japanese female substitute his initial rejection and become the red thread running throughout the book until its last page. This changed outlook also accounts for his new appreciation of the Japanese people, their history and culture. Through his love for Hanaogi Major Gruver feels that he has discovered "the fundamental secret of her country: too many people"<sup>547</sup>. The hardship the Japanese have been forced into because of the scarcity of land and resources for Gruver accounts for the heroic quality of Japanese women. Hanaogi-san is effectively visualized as the keeper of the secret and the most refined representation of the best in the Japanese character.

"... I had come to look upon her as the radiant symbol of all that was best in the Japanese woman: the patient acceptor, the tender companion, the rich lover, but when Hana-ogi displayed her iron will I reflected that throughout the generations of Japanese women there had also been endlessly upon them this necessity to be firm, not to cry, not to show pain. They had to do a man's work, they had to bear cruel privations, yet they remained the most feminine women in the world."<sup>548</sup>

The American indulges in the idea that one of "the most feminine women in the world" should make him the reason for her sacrificing her career without so much

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<sup>544</sup> Michener, p.61

<sup>545</sup> Ma, p.20

<sup>546</sup> Ref. to Ma, p.23: An estimated figure of 20.000 Japanese woman were married to American soldiers at the peak of the Occupation.

<sup>547</sup> Michener, p.112

<sup>548</sup> Michener, p.141-42

as a complaint. It is evident that Gruver much prefers this devoted version of a female companion to the less compromising Eileen Webster. Whereas the latter confronted him with the necessity to make up his mind about the course of his life and his resulting responsibilities, no such demands are put to him by Hanaogi. Apparently the Japanese woman does not even expect him to marry her because of their sexual relationship, a situation quite unthinkable in the America of the 1950s. Accordingly, the reader learns about the rather tentative if not distanced physical relationship between Lloyd Gruver and Eileen Webster, in stark contrast to the all-encompassing love affair between the American major and Hanaogi. At the same time, Gruver sees his Japanese friend as the perfect fusion of what I already mentioned: the American male's fantasy of a devoted partner and a passionate lover.

Gruver's veneration of the Japanese woman is not reduced to his praise of Hanaogi. Private Joe Kelly's wife Katsumi, although physically less attractive than Hanaogi, serves as another example of the ideal companion.

"Now she seemed to me one of the most perfect women I had ever known, for she had obviously studied her man and had worked out every item of the day's work so that the end result would be a happy husband and a peaceful home."<sup>549</sup>

The Hanaogis and Katsumis in Michener's book carry the promise of giving man back his pride and purpose for living, the promise of an almost Nirvana-like state of mind as Joe Kelly puts it:

"One night I told you that bein' married to that Buddha-head was livin'. It ain't. It's something much finer than livin'. It's like you was dead and all the stress and strain was over and all that was left was the very best – and it's the best because it's all wrapped up in her. It ain't livin', Ace. I used to live in Chicago. This is way beyond that."<sup>550</sup>

What used to be a teasing expression, "Buddha-head", turns into the metaphor for Kelly's, Gruver's and every male's spiritual longing to find someone to help him bridge the gap between his own being and the meaning of existence. It is equivalent to leaving behind the strife and conflict of their old lives, including their struggle for place in a society that sours their lives with demands both perceive as undue. Former social outcast Joe Kelly no longer has to fight for acceptance,

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<sup>549</sup> Michener, p.160

<sup>550</sup> Michener, p.168

while well-bred Lloyd Gruver feels relieved from the burden of his family's and his comrades' expectations to follow his supposedly predestined path. Thus, meeting Hanaogi-san is a revelation for the American major, in the sense that he uncovers desires he has unconsciously been hiding. His story is both "an updated version of *Madame Butterfly*" in that it "reinforced the myth of Japanese women's moral charm"<sup>551</sup>, and it simultaneously serves as a parody of chauvinistic American aspirations.

### **The Mock Madame Butterfly**

The beautiful "girl" (she is actually one year older than the American) Lloyd Gruver elects to be his dream-come-true is the lead actress of the famous all-female Japanese *Takarazuka* ensemble. Most of the women in this ensemble, we learn, are from poor social conditions, the theater offers them the only chance to achieve prosperity in life. However, the rules are strict, practice is hard, and the women are not allowed to entertain relationships with the other sex, let alone with an American. One of the plays the Takarazuka girls put on stage is a mock version of *Madame Butterfly* ("Swing Butterfly"), where one *geisha* "fight[s] off whole shipload American sailors"<sup>552</sup>, as one of the girls explains. The plays are described as mass events, going on for many hours, each of them a melange of traditional Japanese performance and a Japanese mock version of modern America. "Swing Butterfly" also does not simply center on the famous story, but is a juxtaposition of the refinement of Japanese culture and the absurdity of American behaviour. Remarkably Hanaogi-san is to play the role of Lieutenant Pinkerton and of an "old-style samurai"<sup>553</sup>. While for Major Gruver she is going to become the incarnation of femininity, on stage she acts as a fierce spokes*man* of her culture. "She was all Japanese women making fun of all American men."<sup>554</sup> Aghast at the scene of "people making cheap fun of men in uniform", and even more taken aback by the fact that "the people doing the burlesque were Japanese"<sup>555</sup>, the American major is ready to leave the theater. Seeing the point of reference for his identity being ridiculed is quite clearly not his idea of an entertaining evening, the more so since both his sense of self and his image of the respectful and modest Japanese female are endangered. But Hanaogi with her ensuing captivating performance of her own legacy is able to reconcile this

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<sup>551</sup> Ma, p.23

<sup>552</sup> Michener, p.73

<sup>553</sup> Ref. to Michener, p.93.

<sup>554</sup> Michener, p.93

conflict. Interestingly enough, it is only the American parts in the play that are the source for caricature and foolery, which only enhances the beauty of the Japanese components. It is therefore safe to assume that despite his initial rejection, Lloyed Gruver is attracted by this other side of existence, this alternative proposed to him.

### **Self-Renewal on Unfamiliar Grounds**

Fully aware of the potential for tragedy in this relationship, Gruver nevertheless throws himself into the love affair with Hanaogi with all his zest, accepting the fact that "finally some external force, say Takarazuka or General Webster, intervened to make the climatic decision for us"<sup>556</sup>. Indeed, through the romantic course of events we realize that Gruver's motives are quite egoistic. The "secret" of their relationship is the aspect of non-communication, as he does not speak Japanese and Hanaogi only knows a few words in English. This becomes transparent in the description of the struggle the lovers go through to make themselves understood by the other. The result is that each of them goes back to their mother tongues and simply lets go the stream of suppressed feelings in words incomprehensible to the partner.

"From that night on Hana-ogi and I talked with each other a great deal and we discovered that in love what is said is far less important to the person spoken to than to the one who speaks. If I wanted to tell her that the days were growing longer and that I first noticed this during the year when I was a young boy on an Army base in Montana, I said just that, and it was marvellous for me, for then I remembered how I felt as a boy – the great cleanness of life and the bigness – and I had a larger heart with which to love."<sup>557</sup>

There are two essential realizations in this statement, which elucidate the attraction of the affair for the American and the reason why this relationship of two diametrically opposed cultural backgrounds at first sight has less potential for conflict:

1. The first is Gruver's recognition that expressing himself in terms he can understand is much more important to him than to his counterpart. This is actually a very lonely view of things, in that it states that there is only minimal ground for real mutual understanding even within the same cultural

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<sup>555</sup> Michener, p.93

<sup>556</sup> Michener, p.108

<sup>557</sup> Michener, p.127



community and the same language. Yet it goes along with my remarks in Part 1, Chapter 2 about the ultimately subjective and personalized individual perception of reality. This means that if the chance to make the other one see the world with the same eyes as I do is drastically limited if not impossible, the still felt necessity to express myself calls for nothing more than a sympathetic listener. Our own capacity to listen and our ability to comprehend what any speaker is saying is consequently reduced by our experiences and expectations. Hanaogi-san therefore is the perfect companion for Lloyd Gruver, who among his countrymen and woman so far has obviously not been able to define himself. The Japanese woman seems to expect nothing from her American lover, quite on the contrary she appears to see her role in comforting him. This gives Gruver the opportunity to re-create himself in a neutral environment where his former responsibilities and the demands of his environment play no role.

2. Secondly, the situation the major finds himself in is associated with the recollection of the good times he experienced as a boy. Freed from the factual necessities of his daily army routine and the demands of society (including his still pending marriage with Eileen Webster) he can allow himself to ponder his existence and relive the memories of the brighter times in his life. Gruver's relationship with the Japanese woman is inextricably linked to such "childhood" memories and bears the promise of bringing back "the great clearness of life and the bigness". This takes us back to the above mentioned possibility for individual renewal, which creates an attractive occasion to do away with one's past affiliations and to start again on a blank page.<sup>558</sup> Similar to Richie's Gloria Wilson, Major Lloyd Gruver reaches out for a second chance to find happiness and fulfilment beyond the prohibitions and restrictions of his heritage.

### **Trying to Americanize the Japanese Dream**

While Michener's book most certainly did a lot to manifest the myth of the devoted Japanese female (as the homely wife *and* the luscious lover), it also includes an element of parody. Evidence for this can be found in the scene where the performance of *Swing Butterfly* is recounted, in the repeated mocking

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<sup>558</sup> Also ref. to Ma, p.31f.

referrals to the popular image of *Madame Butterfly*<sup>559</sup>, and in the resistance Hanaogi, quite unlike her literary predecessor, eventually puts up against Lloyd Gruver's attempts to propose marriage to her. I already discussed that the American merely "uses" the affair as an escape from the temporary confusion in his search for identity, and his half-heartedness becomes visible in his easy acceptance of "the remorseless pressures of society ... on the lovers". The ironic intention can also be guessed from the very tragic ending of Private Joe Kelly's and his wife Katsumi's suicide death. The original *Madame Butterfly* theme is therefore broken up into two stories, with the romantic and passionate but at the same time insincere part acted out by Gruver and Hanaogi; and the sincere, less glamorous part which is condemned to tragedy represented by Kelly and Katsumi. Thirdly, there is irony in Major Gruver's efforts to Americanize his Japanese dream. Although showing himself rather amused at Hanaogi's and Katsumi's futile attempt at imitating American culture by preparing an inedible pumpkin pie<sup>560</sup>, at the back of his mind Gruver has the intention to turn his mistress into something less Japanese. It seems as if he still feels a little ashamed by her otherness and uncomfortable with the thought that he should have selected her as his mate.

"I was imagining her in New York, so I rose and showed her how she could pull the wanton hair that crept upon her cheeks up into place. She did so and studied herself in a mirror. 'Now you look like an American girl,' I said. She pulled the hair back down and said, 'Japanese way more better.' But I convinced her that if she wanted to she could look almost American, so she tucked her hair in and the Japanese sideburns were gone. This sounds strange, but I believe that on a New York street few would recognize that she was from Japan."<sup>561</sup>

Gruver's attitude is similar to the attitude of several characters in Richie's book. There is an unmistakable tendency to assimilate the Orient to the Occident, even if the former is seen favourably for a period of time. We could also see this in Lafcadio Hearn: the inability of the individual to stop measuring the Other with its own set of values and judgments. The capacity and willingness to look at

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<sup>559</sup> Michener describes an argument between Lloyd Gruver and his father General Gruver, where the general speaks of "you and Madame Butterfly" (p. 152). He asks his son if he has "thought about marrying Madame Butterfly" (p. 154), and eventually recommends that Gruver junior "talk this over with your Madame Butterfly" (p. 157) – either not knowing that the lovers do not have a common language or counting on the impossibility of this.

<sup>560</sup> Ref. to Michener, p.161: This incident illustrates the Japanese girls' completely innocent ignorance of American custom, thereby underlining the existing gap between the two cultures. The pumpkin pie here is obviously meant as one of *the* irrefutable symbols of America.

something from a different perspective goes only so far as one's idea of oneself admits. This is still "true" if the individual rejects the conventions of its homeland, because there always seem to remain ingrained parts of that culture, which are not consciously recognized but nonetheless effective in shaping the perception. No man is an island – this most vividly applies when the human being leaves its familiar surroundings, be it in the attempt to re-invent itself or to strengthen its homegrown identity. In Gruver's case we learn that he prefers what he regards as the Japanese style of a successful relationship between man and woman. But this does not affect his conviction that despite its misgivings the American way is superior to Japanese standards. Consequently, he is having a hard time to understand why Hanaogi insists not only on her Japaneseness (after the above scene she later pulls down her hair again) but shows no desire to leave her country.

"It was incomprehensible to me that any Japanese girl, living in that cramped little land with no conveniences and no future, would refuse America."<sup>562</sup>

Despite the fact that the American major feels his national pride rejected by this refusal, it does not occur to him that his Japanese friend might entertain the same feelings for her country. In the end he puts it to fate and "the wall of Asia"<sup>563</sup> why he and Hanaogi cannot live together happily everafter.

Of course, it is with hindsight that one is able to state that Michener was an early critic of stereotypes of Japan. If anything, his book displays sympathy with a people that until then was known for little more than their "yellow" skin and war atrocities. It consciously works against the racist thinking of the military by uncovering the absurdities of its conduct and customs on foreign territory. Michener himself casts a twinkling eye on his homage to the supposedly "quiet, submissive, and subservient" Japanese wife, revealing that "it took me several years to discover that none of those adjectives applies, and I am still looking for that clown who wrote the novel about how the Japanese wife allows her husband to be king when he comes home from work"<sup>564</sup>.

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<sup>561</sup> Michener, p.191

<sup>562</sup> Michener, p.174

<sup>563</sup> Michener, p.233

<sup>564</sup> Johnson, p.80 (Ref. to footnotes). Michener was married to a second generation Japanese woman, who saw Japan for the first time when he took her to visit it.

## John Patrick: What is Democracy?

John Patrick's comic play *The Teahouse of the August Moon*<sup>565</sup> had its world premiere on stage in the fall of 1953. Based on a novel by Vern Sneider it won the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award. Both authors spent time in Japan during the war. Sneider served the Army and Navy during World War II and was sent to Okinawa with the invasion forces, where he was in charge of Tobaru Village<sup>566</sup>, a native refugee camp. Patrick enlisted in the American Field Service, a corps of volunteer medical aides. The film version of *Teahouse* was released in 1956, starring Marlon Brando and Glenn Ford. The play is set in Okinawa during the American Occupation. The protagonist, Captain Fisby, is commanded by Colonel Purdy to a rural village to "teach these natives the meaning of Democracy"<sup>567</sup>. While the Colonel is depicted as a noisy, boasting individual firm in his conviction that the occupation is going to bring only good to the Japanese, Fisby is introduced as a less self-confident member of the troops who has already been transferred to different outfits of the army, obviously for lack of diligence. The futility of the whole enterprise is hinted at when Purdy recalls what he did before the war:

"I was the Purdy Paper Box Company of Potawatamie. What did I know about foreigners? But my job is to teach these natives the meaning of Democracy and they're going to learn Democracy if I have to shoot every one of them."<sup>568</sup>

Vining experienced the paradox of having to teach something that she as an American felt to be inbred in her race. Patrick's Col. Purdy struggles with the same dilemma. Democracy seems to be something hard to convey in words, therefore both Purdy and Fisby find themselves at loss on several occasions when confronted with the natives' rather arbitrary interpretations of the term. The quotation also includes a criticism of the ways of the American Occupation, which becomes the main theme of the play. Even though men like Purdy obviously lack any kind of training for the role he now has to fill, authority is naturally assumed for them simply because 1.) the United States won the war, 2.) military superiority seems to imply cultural superiority, and 3.) American

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<sup>565</sup> Patrick, John: *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. Dramatists Play Service, New York, 1980. (first published 1952)

<sup>566</sup> The real-life *Tobaru* village and the story's *Tobiki* village sound so similar that we can probably assume that the author put some of his personal experience into his descriptions.

<sup>567</sup> Patrick, p.13

citizens are by birth qualified to be missionaries for democracy. In an article for the New York Times, Sneider talks about his intentions when writing the book and admits:

I remember back in those days of 1944 when the United States Army began to find itself in the Military government business, many of us, assigned to such work, were at a complete loss.<sup>569</sup>

The story's criticism is intended to question the wisdom of the occupational policy but at the same time tries to evoke sympathy for the soldier overwhelmed by his task. To bring democracy to a country with more than a thousand years of feudal history seems an impossible mission. Sneider states:

... what works in Pottawattamie, Iowa, often will not work in Tobiki Village, Okinawa; that Plan "See" is much better than Plan B. That the culture and way of life of an occupied country is often very old and, strangely enough, ideally suited to that country. And that there is more to be learned in this old world than will ever be taught in a pentagon-shaped schoolhouse.<sup>570</sup>

American perceptions are questioned at the same time. Could there be more to Japan than a country to be relieved from the fatal burdens of (feudal) history? Could there be something to be learned for Americans, too, on this far-off island? *Teahouse* raises the question if people are not the same everywhere, which eventually means that concepts like democracy are a matter of definition, and that the underlying principles of human beings living together are also the same all over the globe. This view is first expressed in the play when Sakini, the native interpreter who is going to accompany Capt. Fisby on his journey, introduces himself and makes a point about definitions:

In Okinawa ... no locks on doors.  
Bad manners not to trust neighbors.  
In America ... lock and key big industry.  
Conclusion?  
Bad manners good business.  
In Okinawa ... wash self in public bath with nude lady quite proper.  
Picture of nude lady in private home ... quite improper.  
In America ... statue of nude lady in park win prize.  
But nude lady in flesh in park win penalty.  
Conclusion?  
Pornography question of geography.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>568</sup> Patrick, p.13

<sup>569</sup> Sneider, Vern: "Below the Teahouse", article for the New York Times, as quoted on: <http://www.teahouseoftheaugustmoon.com/>, 31.10.2004

<sup>570</sup> Sneider, "Below the Teahouse"

<sup>571</sup> Patrick p.6

This implies that democracy, something acquired by birth-right, in the United States not necessarily means peaceful co-existence of Americans, whereas good manners, that is something achieved by training, in Japan provide for this. It also means that these culturally-determined definitions are quite arbitrary.

### **The Role of the Interpreter**

Definitions are Sakini's mission, and he adapts them to his environment as deemed appropriate. On the surface, in his role as an interpreter he offers background and explanation to the audience. But more importantly, he acts as a mediator between the two cultures, the American and the Japanese. The play includes original Japanese sayings by the natives which are literally translated in brackets. Sakini's translations always vary from the literal, sometimes he elaborates on what has been said, sometimes he reduces it to a few words. His intention always seems to be to make sure that the other side hears what it wants to hear. This can be most vividly observed in the scene when Fisby meets the villagers he is meant to "teach Democracy" to. The villagers bring gifts and Sakini moderates the process of giving and receiving between them and the captain.

MR. SEIKO: Dozo korewo chakini. (*Please wear these!*)

SAKINI: This Mr. Seiko. He bring you "geta".

Fisby: Geta?

SAKINI: Wooden sandals. Very comfortable for tired feet. He say – may you walk in prosperity.

FISBY: Tell him I shall walk in the – the cool – meadow – of – of pleasant memories. Is that all right?

SAKINI: Oh – that's very pretty, boss. (*He turns to Mr. Seiko*) Ya, arigato, Seiko-san. (Thanks, Mr. Seiko.)

[...]

SAKINI: ... Oh – this Miss Higa Jiga – unmarried lady. She bring you three eggs.

FISBY: Tell her I shall eat them for breakfast. (He bows to her.)

SAKINI: Captain-san, daisuki desu. (It's Captain favorite food.)

The citation also tells us something about the importance of what is being said. In the first instance Sakini feels it necessary to add something to what Mr. Seiko said to convey the message to Fisby that the villagers mean him good. Yet he does not place any importance on the captain's elaboration on the subject, although to him he says he finds it pretty. In the second instance he changes the meaning of what Fisby says into what Sakini believes the gift-bringer wants to

hear, thereby trying to convey to the villagers that the American appreciates their efforts. Communication between cultures (and people) seems to be the key for understanding and peace. However, different perceptions and expectations often make it difficult for two parties to see the same side of things, even more so if they do not speak the same language. The interpreter thus finds himself both in a dilemma and in a power position. If he literally translates what is said, this may or may not meet the addressee's expectations and may lead to disappointment or even hostility. If he elaborates and changes the meaning of what he is told he assumes that he knows what the best is for each side. (There is also the possibility that he purposely "translates" something in a way that puts the speaker in a negative light, but this does not seem to apply to Sakini.) One could also argue from this scene that meaning cannot be expressed by literal translation, or even that a culture's essence is so tightly interwoven with its language that it can only be explained to non-native speakers by supplying further details. The image of the uniqueness of Japanese language was repeatedly discussed in this study and is one of the major arguments of *nihonjinron*. However, if one accepts that cultural heritage lives on in a language, this must be true for all cultures, for the American as much as for the Japanese.

### **The Gift of Democracy**

I already mentioned the difficulty the characters have with the definition of democracy, not only in Patrick's play but also in the other texts I discussed. In the scene with the gifts Capt. Fisby has his first encounter with this:

SAKINI: They [the villagers] bring you gifts – they like to give them to you first.

FISBY: But I'm here to bring gifts from my government to them.

SAKINI: Oh, they know, boss – that is why they bring you gifts. Very rude to make people feel poor, boss.

FISBY: I don't want to make anyone feel poor but –

SAKINI: You make them lose face if you refuse, boss. Then they not accept Democracy from you.<sup>572</sup>

Sakini explains Japanese custom to the American captain, something which he apparently did not expect. Fisby was instructed to bring democracy to the people of Japan, not to accept something from them, let alone learn something. The scene is funny because it plays on the notion that Americans brought the "gift" of democracy to an, in their eyes, uncivilized country. According to Japanese

custom, the villagers can only accept this gift if they also offer something. Democracy is put on the same level as a cricket cage or a pair of chopsticks, meaning that the natives do not take the concept seriously or regard it as something of great importance to them.

When Fisby is asked by Sakini to explain what democracy means, the American realizes that this is more of a challenge than he expected.

SAKINI: They say – explain what is Democracy. [...]

FISBY: Oh. (*He scratches his head.*) Well – it's a system of self-determination. It's – it's the right to make the wrong choice.

SAKINI: Machigattamo iindayo. (Well, you can make mistakes.) (*They look up blankly – silently.*)

FISBY: I don't think we're getting the point over. Explain that if I don't like the way Uncle Sam treats me – I can write the President himself and tell him so.

SAKINI: Daitoryo ni tegami kaitemo iinosa. (You can write to the President.) (The villagers all laugh heartily.)

MISS HIGA JIGA: Masaka Soonakoto! (Ah, that's ridiculous.)

SAKINI: They say – but do you *send* the letters?

FISBY: Let's get on with the lecture. (He turns back to the citizens and reads from Plan "B".) Tell them hereafter all men will be free and equal ...<sup>573</sup>

Fisby is right in assuming that he is not "getting the point over". The villagers come to think that democracy is another word for disobedience, as is illustrated a little later in the play when instead of the schoolhouse the Occupational Army sent building materials for the villagers who want to construct a teahouse. Fisby says: "But I can't build them a teahouse ... I have no authority to do that." To which Sakini replies: But you tell them ... will of majority is law. You going to break the law?"<sup>574</sup> Even though he is an American citizen Capt. Fisby appears unable to explain what supposedly comes natural to any member of his cultural community. This inability is ridiculed by the Japanese villagers clever utilization of the term. When the women of Tobiki complain to Fisby about the privileged treatment of the beautiful Lotus Blossom, a *geisha* girl who was given to the captain as another "gift", one of them emphasizes her point by saying: "If you don't do something I'll write the President."<sup>575</sup> The author hereby repeatedly raises the question "what is Democracy"? Simultaneously he compares the United States Army and the Japanese village in terms of democratic behaviour:

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<sup>572</sup> Patrick, p.21-22

<sup>573</sup> Patrick, p.26-27

<sup>574</sup> Patrick, p.44

<sup>575</sup> Patrick, p.38



Is everyone treated equally regardless of their race, gender and social status? Are decisions made by majority vote? The answer seems to be that there is similarly undemocratic behaviour in both communities. The military *per definitionem* is a system which rests on unquestioned authority, and *Teahouse* is just another example of how absurd orders can be at times. This is mirrored in the villagers eagerness to get a "helmet" to symbolize a superior position.<sup>576</sup> A helmet indicating each person's position is granted to the "Chief of Agriculture", the "Chief of Police", and the President of the "Ladies' League for Democratic Action", and all are proudly displayed by their wearer. At first sight this seems ridiculous, but it is actually quite similar to the insignia of the military. In his *New York Times* article Sneider stated that "people, the world over, are basically the same in their wants and desires, but that often we are confused by the externals."<sup>577</sup> The play proves his point, and its ongoing public success suggests that the audience could and still can relate to this.<sup>578</sup>

### **Ideal Japan, ideal America**

Upon telling the villagers that they can build the teahouse instead of the pentagon-shaped school, Fisby is cheered by his audience "Fisby-san, Banzai, Uncle Sam Banzai!"<sup>579</sup> and tears up "Plan B", the detailed but impractical guidelines given to him by his employer. Fisby's posture changes from that of a bureaucrat following orders no matter if they make sense to that of a human being who finally simply enjoys his surroundings and surrenders to the attractions of the foreign culture<sup>580</sup>. He later tells another captain: "I've never been happier. I feel reckless and free. And it all happened the moment I decided not to build that dammed pentagon-shaped school."<sup>581</sup> This is an element we find in many other benevolent observers' accounts of Japan: Once the American lets go of the burdens and responsibilities of his own heritage he feels relieved and rejuvenated.

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<sup>576</sup> Ref. to Patrick, p.28-29

<sup>577</sup> Sneider, "Below the Teahouse"

<sup>578</sup> The *Teahouse of the August Moon* is still performed on stage. According to <http://www.teahouseoftheaugustmoon.com>, as of August 31, 2003 the play closed its second successful run in the Secret Rose Theatre in North Hollywood, California.

<sup>579</sup> Patrick, p.45

<sup>580</sup> Fisby's stay in Japan is obviously pleasant for him because he is treated as a privileged foreigner, this is similar to Hearn's experience and that of others in the 19th century before the revival of Japanese nationalism

<sup>581</sup> Patrick, p.50 – The pentagon-shaped school reminds us of the Pentagon in Washington, DC, the seat of the United States Government, and is most likely meant as a symbol of American power. By deciding not to build this school, Fisby rejects American authority.

Anything is possible for him in this land far away from home. He is able to re-invent himself and is even applauded by his audience for doing so.

Consequently, when Lotus Blossom towards the end of the play tells Fisby that she wants to marry him because she wants to go to America, the captain discourages her. Similar to Major Gruver in Michener's *Sayonara* he realizes that this would spoil the fantasy he has temporarily created for himself. He becomes aware that what he experiences in the Japanese village is in danger of being destroyed by Western/American influences. Taking the geisha girl with him to the United States would mean to subject her to these influences and to risk that she changes from the personification of beauty, as he sees her now, to something less perfect.

FISBY: ... I should hate to see her wearing sweaters and sport shoes and looking like an American looking like an Oriental.

SAKINI: But she wants to be American, boss. She never see an American she not like, boss.

FISBY: Some of them wouldn't like her, Sakini. In the small town where I live – there'd be some who would make her unhappy.

SAKINI: Why, boss?

FISBY: She'd be different.

SAKINI: Dame dayo. (No, it can't be done.)

LOTUS BLOSSOM: (*Takes Fisby's hand.*) Sonna koto naiwa datte. America minshu shugi jandino? (Why not, U.S. is a Democracy.)

SAKINI: She say not believe that. In America everybody love everybody. Everybody help everybody – that's democracy.

FISBY: No. That's faith. Explain to her that democracy is only a method – an ideal system for people to get together. But that unfortunately – the people who get together – are not always ideal.<sup>582</sup>

Fisby foresees the discrimination a Japanese woman would have to endure after Pearl Harbor and the ugly events of the Pacific War in small town America. Even though a democracy, the United States he has come to know differs from the ideal. With this, the American has also reached a definition of democracy as one possible option for mankind, but one that does not come naturally but has to be achieved by conscious effort of the people.

The captain's initial mission was to build a schoolhouse in Tobiki, in which democracy is taught to the Japanese, and to raise an industry which makes the village economically self-sufficient. While he falls short on the first task, he is certainly successful with the second, even though in a way he did not anticipate.

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<sup>582</sup> Patrick, p.71-72

After a failed effort to sell cricket cages and wooden sandals handcrafted by the villagers, Tobiki ends up with a flourishing potato brandy business. Funnily enough, after an inspection by Col. Purdy and some temporary turmoil about the morals of Tobiki, the village is officially declared "an example of American 'Get-up-and-go' in the recovery program. The Pentagon is boasting, Congress is crowing."<sup>583</sup> One the hand this again proves Sneider's point that human beings are essentially the same everywhere in the world, which means that the "Get-up-and-go" spirit is not a typical American trait but results from a cleverness some human beings in all cultures have. One the other hand Washington's glorification of this success is absurd because it praises an industry that not so long ago was prohibited in the United States, and one which in the case of Tobiki village is not at all sustainable as it depends on Occupation dollars. This can be seen as further criticism of the Military Government by the author, which, without any real knowledge of the local circumstances, tries to superimpose its own system on the Japanese, whether this makes sense or bears the potential for long-term success or not.

## Summary

All books discussed in this chapter are about Americans who spent a significant amount of time in Japan during the occupation years. Vining's journal-like narration is the only non-fictional account, while Richie, Michener and Sneider/Patrick use the form of fiction to make their point. All are benevolent descriptions of Japan, with criticism about (traditional) Japanese custom really explicit only in Vining (visible for example in her struggle to convince Prince Akihito's counselors to let him live with his brother). What they all have in common is the narrator's respectively the protagonist's missionary intentions to bring the good of America to Japan, to "teach democracy" to the Japanese people. Richie's book and the *Teahouse* play are very comical and question the whole enterprise of "converting" the Japanese by shedding an ironic light on the perceptions and often far from ideal actions of their American characters. Michener's narration can be regarded as a strong criticism of the victor's arrogance, and by playing with the *Madam Butterfly* theme he questions American perceptions of the Japanese woman. *Where are the Victors?* and *The Teahouse of the August Moon* also toy around with the term democracy, repeatedly questioning its definition and criticizing its arbitrary and thoughtless

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<sup>583</sup> Patrick, p.75

use. Most strikingly present in Vining's records is her fear of the pull of the Japanese culture. This can also be seen in the other books, but because the American teacher tells her story from real-life experience, this "threat" becomes even more tangible. Also because she seems so firm in her religious and social beliefs, Vining's admission that she is afraid that the Other may overwhelm her is probably the most impressive. With this she recognizes that there is more than one legitimate view of the world and that the two cultures share more common traits than at first meets the eye. Although Vining appears patronizing at some stages, she is, even if not intentionally, critical of her own culture on a number of occasions. With Richie, Michener and Sneider/Patrick the intention to question the American view seems clear enough. However, it is not a matter of substituting one (false) view with another (the right view), or even saying that the Japanese were better than the Americans. All describe the intriguing attractions of the island country, its promise for re-inventing the Self, but they also make sure the reader understands that this attraction not only results from a dissatisfaction with life in the United States (or rather what the characters individually experienced it to be) but also from an idealization of Japan that is often unreal and impractical (such as Major Gruver's way of "communicating" with his Hanaogi). What they share, and they share this with Vining, is that they make the reader stop and think about perceptions and the purpose of images in general. Richie, on another occasion, puts it into words: "There are so many more resemblances between the Japanese and everybody else than there are differences – all this harpening on difference really becomes irritating."<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Silva, Arturo (ed.): The Donald Richie Reader. 50 Years of Writing on Japan. Berkeley, Calif., Stone Bridge Press, 2001, p.xi

*When the mind is exhausted of images, it invents its own.*  
Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold*

## Part 3, Chapter 2

### The Beat Generation Spiritual Re-Orientation II

The aftermath of World War II saw a "prolonged period of cold war [which] fixed ideological opinion in a mind-set" that placed "American society and American experience [...] well in advance of the experience of most others in the world".<sup>585</sup> With this came a certain arrogance on behalf of a large group of the American society paired with a yearning for stability and conformity<sup>586</sup>, some literary examples of which were described in the last chapter. At the same time there was rebellion from what was to be branded the "Beat Generation". Kenneth Rexroth, the assumed father figure of this movement, claimed:

"The youngest generation is in a state of revolt so absolute that its elders cannot even recognize it. The disaffiliation, alienation, and rejection of the young has, as far as their elders are concerned, moved out of the visible spectrum altogether."<sup>587</sup>

The sudden awareness of the nuclear threat, and the beginning of the Cold War divided the people of the United States. Officially, the American picture-book family sat around their dinner tables, thanking Uncle Sam for the new material wealth of the postwar industrial boom. But many intellectuals began to feel that with materialism, military expansion and ideological anxiety on one side and new ways of communication and the multiplication of styles on the other, there was an "accelerating confusion of levels of reality", and that this was an era "in which reality came increasingly to resemble unreality."<sup>588</sup> To counter threats to the public morale, the Un-American Activities Committee was closing in on what it deemed to be unwanted subjects. American culture "was permeated with anti-Communism", with magazines running articles titled "Communists Are After Your

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<sup>585</sup> Ruland, Richard/Bradbury, Malcom: From Puritanism to Postmodernism. A History of American Literature. New York, Penguin, 1992, p.370

<sup>586</sup> Ref. to Curti, p.764-65

<sup>587</sup> Kenneth Rexroth as quoted in Kodama, Sanahide: American Poetry and Japanese Culture. Hamden, Ct., Archon, 1984, p.132

Child", and the New York Times declared that they would not employ members of the Communist party because their "objectivity" and "honesty" could not be trusted.<sup>589</sup> The poets of the 1950s and 1960s counterculture perceived a "conservative, Communist-chasing, Cold Warring, imperial United States" which to them seemed "morally visionless and constrictive".<sup>590</sup>

What conservatives and the rebellious intellectuals had in common, however, was their longing to find some level of security through the identification with certain sets of values.

"In the later 1940s and throughout the 1950s the age-old quest for absolutes was pursued with fresh zest. Men perennially have longed for absolute answers and assurances, but several unsettling developments in the postwar years prompted intellectuals to intensify their search and expand their scope."<sup>591</sup>

The majority of Americans seemed to be content with the "absolute answers and assurances" the establishment provided them with. Adherence to them was a well-proven way out of the individual's dilemma to find points of reference in an ever changing and increasingly hostile environment. Material success, economic achievements, TV sets, king size refrigerators and brandnew cars became the insignia of personal progress. Yet apparently there remained a feeling that something was missing in the victors' nation. The assurance that by power of military triumph the United States were *per se* morally superior was not a feeling shared by the whole of the national community. As Wallace Stevens put it: "To see the gods dispelling in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences ..."<sup>592</sup>

The group best remembered for their questioning of the official outlook were the artists and writers of the "Beat Generation".<sup>593</sup> This movement constituted an

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<sup>588</sup> Ruland/Bradbury, p.371

<sup>589</sup> Ref. to Zinn, p.427

<sup>590</sup> Perkins, David: A History of Modern Poetry. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, vol.2: Modernism and After, p.541

<sup>591</sup> Curti, p.767

<sup>592</sup> Wallace Stevens, as quoted in Ruland/Bradbury, p.371

<sup>593</sup> The term "Beat Generation" is slightly misleading, as in a society as large and diverse as the United States there can hardly be a homogeneous single-minded generation. The movement, which led to the hippie movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, rather started from a more exclusive intellectual circle of personalities such as Jack Kerouac, Neil Cassady (who was famous for his appearance in his friends' books rather than for his own literary aspirations), Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, to name just a few. I will therefore refer to "the Beats" or "the Beat (literary) movement" rather than to a whole generation.

"attack on such cherished institutions as capitalism, consumerism, the military-industrial complex, racism and ecological destruction".<sup>594</sup> Rejecting the official concept of Americanhood, "the Beats' search for an identity outside of conventional society made many of them feel at home in a 'community of outlaws'".<sup>595</sup> Similar to their predecessors, the Transcendentalists, the members of the Beat movement found themselves on a spiritual quest for a new, or rather re-evaluated cultural identity. In this yearning they intentionally set themselves apart from accepted modes of conduct, not only accepting but consciously looking for the role of the outcast. Jack Kerouac<sup>596</sup>, one of the Beats' most famous speakers, said:

"... we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there's no use flaunting on that level, the level of the 'public', a kind of beatness – I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all *really* know where we are – and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world".<sup>597</sup>

As "furtives" the Beat poets tried to escape from the post-nuclear trauma of American society, a society that in spite of the horrors or war destruction seemed to steer into a vicious circle of materialistic contempt for the individual. Allen Ginsberg<sup>598</sup> called it "the disease of the age"<sup>599</sup>, the cure for which, as he and his comrades felt, lay in new modes of expression and drugs that bore the promise of alternative ways of perception.

Perception uncorrupted by traditional value systems and established beliefs was the focal point of the Beat literary movement. This purified mode of seeing and experiencing the world made way for a different understanding of identity. As John Clellon Holmes put it in his New York Times Magazine article "This is the Beat Generation":

"The absence of personal and social values is to them [the Beat Generation] not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. *How* to live seems to them much more crucial than *why*."<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> Charters, Ann (ed.): The Penguin Book of the Beats. London, Penguin, 1993, p.xxx

<sup>595</sup> Charters, p.4

<sup>596</sup> Jack Kerouac (1922-1969)

<sup>597</sup> Jack Kerouac, as quoted in Charters, p.xix

<sup>598</sup> Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)

<sup>599</sup> Charters, p.3

For the Beats individual identity could not be found through subordination to contemporary conventions but had to be developed out of the individual itself. Holmes called it "being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself"<sup>601</sup>. In order to create a meaningful identity for itself the individual had to strip naked from externally imposed forms, from expectations of accepted behaviour and materialistic goals, and had to regain its original bond to the natural environment. Like Henry David Thoreau, whose spiritual quest took him to the woods, many of the Beat writers sought nature to discover a true feeling of being alive, i.e. a true feeling of meaning, the essence of their existence. Although "for a long time, the Beats suffered a ... reputation as anti-religious enemies of god and country"<sup>602</sup>, their quest was spiritual in the most literal sense. Webster's New World Dictionary indicates "the life principle" as the first meaning for "spirit", and "real meaning" as another interpretation further down the list.<sup>603</sup> An answer to the perpetual question of *why*, a revelation of life's guiding principle was what the Beats were after. Holmes wrote: "What the hipster is looking for in his 'coolness' (withdrawal) or 'flipness' (ecstasy) is, after all, a feeling of somewhereness, not just another diversion."<sup>604</sup> Kerouac's reply to what he was seeking was: "I want God to show me his face."<sup>605</sup> In this, the Beats were very close to the Transcendentalists who almost exactly one hundred years earlier had tried to solve the same mystery.

"... first, the Beats, like the Transcendentalists, were rebels against entrenched religious orthodoxies, and second, the Beats and the Transcendentalists looked to the East for spiritual inspiration."<sup>606</sup>

What had been a tentative approach by a small elite of intellectuals in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England, now became a mass movement of Beat artists from East to West coast advocating Oriental wisdom. One could therefore regard the "Beat Generation" as a natural successor of the Transcendentalist movement, in that they were both driven by a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the state of the nation and the canon of beliefs, and in their response of sketching blueprints for

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<sup>600</sup> Holmes, John Clellon: "This is the Beat Generation", New York Times Magazine, Nov 16, 1952, as represented on [www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html](http://www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html), 04-Nov-2004

<sup>601</sup> [www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html](http://www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html)

<sup>602</sup> Tonkinson, Carole (ed.): *Big Sky Mind*. Buddhism and the Beat Generation. London, Thorsons, 1995, p.6

<sup>603</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary*. New York, Warner Books, 1990, p.569

<sup>604</sup> [www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html](http://www.litkicks.com/texts/thisisbeatgen.html)

<sup>605</sup> Tonkinson, p.6

<sup>606</sup> Tonkinson, p.7



alternative existences. In William Burroughs' words the Beats articulated what many people felt at the time:

"The Beat literary movement came at exactly the right time and said something that millions of people of all nationalities all over the world were waiting to hear. You can't tell anybody anything he doesn't know already. The alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction were already there waiting when Kerouac pointed out the road."<sup>607</sup>

Alienation meant two things at the same time: 1.) the feeling of not being wanted by the American society, which is expressed in Kerouac's image of fugitives; and 2.) the loss of identity in an environment devoid of meaning to those who did not succumb to the ideals of worldly achievements.

The Beats were a group of "disaffiliated young people coming of age into a Cold War world without spiritual values they could honor. Instead of obeying authority and conformity to traditional middle-class materialistic aspirations, these young people dealt as best as they could with ... their 'will to believe', even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms".<sup>608</sup>

In their search for a value system they could honor the Beats turned to what had formerly been regarded inferior civilizations, to the philosophies of India, China and Japan. They thus broke with all sanctioned political, social and religious conventions of their time.

"Not only did the Beats adapt the wisdom teachings of the East to a new, peculiarly American terrain, they also articulated this teaching in the vernacular, jazzy rhythms of the street, opening up what had been the domain of stuffy academics and stiff translations to a mainstream audience."<sup>609</sup>

In this respect, Kenneth Rexroth served as the "synthesizer of cultures"<sup>610</sup>. He believed that "the disintegration of Western civilization was being hastened by the so-called technological revolution" and as a result "turned increasingly to traditional Asian culture"<sup>611</sup>.

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<sup>607</sup> William Burroughs (1914-1997), as quoted in Charters, p.xxxi

<sup>608</sup> Charters, p.xx

<sup>609</sup> Tonkinson, p.viii

<sup>610</sup> Kodama, p.122

<sup>611</sup> Gibson, Morgan: Revolutionary Rexroth. Post of East-West Wisdom. Hamden, Ct., Archon, 1986, p.23

## Kenneth Rexroth: Seeker of Wisdom

Kenneth Rexroth is described by Tonkinson as the Founding Father of the Beats, who opened the doors for many of them but later denounced them publicly. "Although he maintained a warm friendship with a few of the writers on an individual basis, he tried to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Beat Generation."<sup>612</sup> Long before Kerouac and Snyder started to make a name for themselves, Rexroth who was more than twenty years their senior, wrote "The Phoenix and the Tortoise", published in 1944. The poem presents a rather dismal view of America past, present and future, and describes the author's struggle to find an answer to the question "what survives and what perishes"<sup>613</sup>. The despair which seems tangible in this lyrical piece, according to Gibson, can be attributed to Rexroth's loss of his parents and wife Andréé, to the rise of facism and the depression at the outset of World War II.<sup>614</sup> "Webs of misery spread in the brain" starts Rexroth the poem, a contrast to the Buddhist god Indra's net in the *Flower Wreath Sutra*, which brightly mirrors the essence of being.<sup>615</sup>

"... It is storming  
Somewhere far out in the ocean.  
All night vast rollers exploded  
Offshore; now the sea has subsided  
To a massive, uneasy torpor."<sup>616</sup>

American culture is threatened by powers from afar, here represented by the forces of the ocean. A fossilized society of, in Rexroth's view, false values is challenged by the constantly renewing work of nature, which leaves man puzzled and in a "massive, uneasy torpor". He evokes a picture of death and decay in the last three lines of the poem's first paragraph:

"And everywhere, swarming like ants,  
Innumerable hermit crabs,  
Hungry and efficient as maggots."

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<sup>612</sup> Tonkinson, p.322

<sup>613</sup> Rexroth, Kenneth: "The Phoenix and the Tortoise", in: Morrow, Bradford (ed.), The Selected Poems of Kenneth Rexroth, New York, New Directions, 1984, p.16

<sup>614</sup> Gibson, p.70

<sup>615</sup> Ref. to Gibson, p.70f.

<sup>616</sup> All of the following citations from Rexroth's poem "The Phoenix and the Tortoise" are taken from Morrow, p.15-25

Like maggots eat the flesh of the dead, the natural powers seem to consume the remains of a culture which is "on the crumbling edge of ruined polity". What is the meaning of life, Rexroth asks himself, "on the edge of death", which also comes in the form of a Japanese sailor whose body has been washed ashore.

... out of his drained grey flesh, he  
Watches me with open hard eyes  
Like small indestructible animals –  
Me – who stands here on the edge of death,  
Seeking the continuity,  
The germ plasm, of history,  
The epic's lyric absolute.

The Japanese sailor symbolizes a culture far away and very different from the American way of life. He is also an early indicator of Rexroth's lifelong fascination with Japan. Even in death the sailor brings with him the reminder that there is something to be found beyond the shores of the United States.<sup>617</sup> His blind eye is both threatening and full of warning for the beholder, who is looking for a continuity different from what his home culture has to offer.

### **The gulf between essence and existence**

Towards the end of the first part of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* Rexroth acknowledges that man is living in reality constructs, "acting in an imaginary order of being". To overcome the resulting "gulf between essence and existence" the author propagates the "pure act", which was known to the ancient sages but in the author's view is lost to America. In part II he laments the alienation of men who have become "isolate[d] from each other and the turning earth" and foresees the disintegration of the individual.

"The State is the organization  
Of the evil instincts of mankind.  
History is the penalty  
We pay for original sin.  
In the conflict of appetite  
And desire, the person finally  
Loses; either the technology  
Of the choice of the lesser evil  
Overwhelms him; or a universe  
Where the stars in their courses move  
To ends that justify their means

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<sup>617</sup> Ever since the opening of Japan in 1853, ships had been traveling to and from the United States, and it was not an uncommon incident that Japanese fishermen lost their ship "in the wide expanses of the Pacific". Ref. to Benfey, p.xi f.

Dissolves him in its elements."

The state thus provides the grounds for what Gibson describes as "the alienating, destructive pressures of modern secular thought and history, in which each person is reduced to an atomic individual in perpetual conflict with other individuals".<sup>618</sup> These lines are the literary expression of Rexroth's "leftist, anarchist beliefs",<sup>619</sup> voicing his rejection of institutional values, according to which the individual only has "the choice of the lesser evil", which does not seem to be a real choice. They also put into words a conviction that the world should not follow a course of necessity but that man should strive to uncover a simpler, primeval truth. Similar to his Transcendentalist predecessors Rexroth is yearning for what Emerson called the "world-soul", the essence of being which is buried in every man. That it is buried in him is hinted at by Rexroth in a description of himself in part IV of the poem: "Dark within dark I cling to sleep,/ The heart's capsule closed in the fist/ Of circumstance ..."

In the course of the poem the author peels off society's falsely protective layers ("nude, my feet in the cold shallows") and turns his back to the mainland of tradition ("swim seaward down the narrow inlet"). Leaving behind the bonds of what the establishment holds high as the official American culture, Rexroth finds the "prime reality".

"This is the prime reality –  
Bird and man, the individual  
Discriminate, the self evaluated  
Actual, the operation  
Of infinite, ordered potential."

This proclaimed (re)union of man with nature is reminiscent of the Transcendentalist's "back to the roots" credo, and Japan becomes the place where Rexroth keeps searching for this elevated feeling.

### **The promise of ancient Japan**

In 1955 Kenneth Rexroth first published his book *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*, the majority of which is translated from traditional Japanese collections. Similar to Lafcadio Hearn and his contemporaries, Rexroth's interest

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<sup>618</sup> Gibson, p.71

<sup>619</sup> Perkins, p.539

lay in the culture of ancient Japan. He too was turning towards the east to find something lost to American culture there. In the introduction to *One Hundred Poems* Rexroth states that despite the common emphasis on the otherness of Japanese poetry there is a primary similarity between English (Western) and Japanese verse: "Japanese poetry does what poetry does everywhere; it intensifies and exalts experience. It is true that it concentrates practically exclusively on this function."<sup>620</sup> Throughout the introduction Rexroth repeatedly underlines this basic sameness of Oriental and Occidental poetry. The literatures he compares the Japanese to, however, are those of the past, such as ancient Greek poetry and the works of Emily Dickinson. The common element in these writings he sees in their purity of expression, their ignorance of literary comment. But to him "Japanese poetry is purer, more essentially poetic. Certainly it is less distracted by non-poetic considerations"<sup>621</sup>, which makes this poetry the purest and thus most original form of expression.

In Kenneth Rexroth we again come across a longing for purity, a longing for a "refinement" of culture in the sense that anything that hinders the individual from an immediate experience of being is rejected. It is not difficult to see why Rexroth would also be attracted to Zen Buddhism with its call for doing away with intellectual concepts. In Japanese poetry Rexroth sees the most efficient encapsulation of truth. Nothing is explained, the representation of a natural observation stands on its own feet and simply for itself. There is no commentary, only concentration on the essential, and therefore no "platitude"<sup>622</sup>. Rexroth's aspirations as a translator are in accordance with this view. His desire is "to interfere as little as possible with the simplicity of the Japanese text"<sup>623</sup>. Simultaneously, he understands himself not as a conveyor of a different culture but rather as a creator of meaningful equivalents in his own tongue. His translations are therefore not merely literal transcriptions but original works of art in themselves. This goes hand in hand with his view that Japanese poems "do not deal with experiences special to the Japanese"<sup>624</sup>.

"I should like the poems in this collection to stand as poetry in English, and even, in a sense, as poetry by a contemporary American

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<sup>620</sup> Rexroth, Kenneth: *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*. New York, New Directions Books, 1964 (20<sup>th</sup> printing), p.ix

<sup>621</sup> Rexroth, p.ix

<sup>622</sup> Rexroth, p.ix

<sup>623</sup> Rexroth, p.x

<sup>624</sup> Rexroth, p.x

poet, because I have chosen only those poems with which I felt considerable identification."<sup>625</sup>

According to Kodama Rexroth was "a confessed practitioner of honkadori"<sup>626</sup>, the art of alluding to or borrowing passages from well-known classical poems which is employed in Japanese poetry to enrich the meaning of the poem. Allusions to and passages from many of the poems Rexroth included in *One Hundred Poems* can be found in his own later poetry such as the "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart". He felt such a strong affinity to this era of Japanese literary expression that he even regarded the poems of the aforementioned collection as (partly) his own creations. They seemd to put into words what he had always wanted to say.

The perceived purity, simplicity and immediacy in Japanese poetry are major points of identification for Rexroth. Again, it is remarkable that the poems he chose for his collection are mostly from ancient Japan (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>627</sup>), especially since he describes his relationship to these poems as a personal one<sup>628</sup>. Obviously, the values he is interested in are from the origins of culture, when things were still "clear, strong and fresh".<sup>629</sup> Rexroth's (re-)orientation is a move "back to the roots", a re-evaluation of primeval views, strongly reminiscent of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

### **Striving for Maximum Compression of Meaning**

In an interview for a Buddhist magazine Rexroth expresses his contempt for the intellectual gloss Western criticism tends to cover the simple "truths" of existence with.

"It's considered bad manners in Japan to talk profoundly. This greatly puzzles westerners who go over to Buddhist conferences and no great mysteries of life are discussed."<sup>630</sup>

Japan in this quotation stands for an unbiased percepetion of the "mysteries of life", which, if really understood, are less spectacular than Western academics

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<sup>625</sup> Rexroth, p.x-xi

<sup>626</sup> Kodama, p.150

<sup>627</sup> Ref. to Rexroth, p.xviii

<sup>628</sup> Ref. to Rexroth, p.xix

<sup>629</sup> Rexroth, p.xvii

<sup>630</sup> Fields, Rick/ Lerner, Eric: "The Jewel Net of Indra", an interview with Kenneth Rexroth in 1980 for the Buddhist magazine *Zero*, in: Tonkinson, p.335-347, this quote: p.339

make them out to be. It is as if the Japanese Buddhists in Rexroth's statement have moved beyond the need to talk about spiritualism because they have recognized the futility of intellectual discourse. In the same manner the translator defies the tendency to "explain away"<sup>631</sup> the meaning of poems, himself striving "for maximum compression"<sup>632</sup>. Quite provocatively, Rexroth tells his interviewers: "There is really nothing profound in the Buddha Word."<sup>633</sup> Further on he states:

"Illumination doesn't come out of bottles and it doesn't come out of gymnastics, and it doesn't come out of prana and it doesn't come out of strange breathing. All you do is hyperventilate yourself."<sup>634</sup>

Therefore, even though Japan obviously played an important role in Rexroth's own spiritual development, he does not understand it as the only bearer of revelation. If one were to visit a Zen Buddhist convention in Japan expecting to be presented with all the answer's to the universe's riddle, one would be disappointed. If one were to seek illumination through adoption of exotic practices one would only exhaust oneself to no avail. Rexroth articulates a perception of the way to self-fulfilment that is close to Snyder's "Great Subculture" (see below), or in his own words "a global community of contemplators".

"I believe that there is a community in the world, a community of love. It is a community of contemplators. And the only reality is a perspective, but the perspectives are infinite because the contemplators are infinite."<sup>635</sup>

It is Emerson's "one mind common to all men", the world soul depicted in his poem "Each and All"<sup>636</sup>, a common *Urerfahrung* that Rexroth refers to. We can conclude that for another American poet Japan is in itself not equal to truth. Rather does the country of Zen Buddhism and short poetry constitute a possible source of inspiration to the seeker Rexroth. Religious illumination is no more present in Japan than in any other culture if one's senses are alerted to looking for it. With its history less dominated by the influences of Judeo-Christianity and Western science, Japan appears more apt to provide one with a fresh

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<sup>631</sup> Rexroth, p.ix

<sup>632</sup> Rexroth, p.x

<sup>633</sup> Tonkinson, p.340

<sup>634</sup> Tonkinson, p.341

<sup>635</sup> Tonkinson, p.342

perspective, a perspective not yet corrupted by the pitfalls of modern civilization, industrialism and capitalism. At the same time, Rexroth admits that Japan, even though it developed before the background of Buddhism, is not immune to unappealing mutations.

"I think that in the Buddhist mission if you have enough honest and illuminated teachers to go around the civilization can be greatly influenced. I don't notice, however, that Buddhism ever stopped centuries of civil war for sport in Japan. They didn't have anything to fight about. They did it for fun. It's true! From the fall of the Heian empire to the founding of the Shogunate what were they really fighting about? For giggles.<sup>637</sup>

This is an expression of Rexroth's disappointment with the "reality" of Japan, he was frustrated by the general oblivion to Zen Buddhism and what he saw as the essence of culture among the Japanese.

Most Japanese are totally ignorant of the very existence of philosophical Buddhism or have ever read the Lotus, or ever heard of the Lankavatra or the Avatamsaka – or know the difference between a Buddha and a Bodhisattva.<sup>638</sup>

This frustration reminds us of Hearn's bitterness when he sensed that (in his case due to the rising militarism in Japan) traditional Japanese culture was on the brink of being lost to a more secular modernism.

### **Images of Finitude and Infinitude**

As repeatedly mentioned, the poems Rexroth chose for *One Hundred Poems* are from a time long before the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Americans made their way across the Japanese seas. These were not perfectly peaceful times, but the years until the end of the *Heian*<sup>639</sup> period can be seen as culturally pure in the sense that the only external influence came from another Asian culture, China. Buddhism arrived in Japan as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when Korean monks were received at the Japanese court. First evidence for a wider interest in Zen stems from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, the new religion was not established in Japan

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<sup>636</sup> Ref. to Spiller, R.E. (ed.): Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York, Pocket Books, 1965, p.28-29

<sup>637</sup> Tonkinson, p.345

<sup>638</sup> Rexroth as quoted in Gibson, p.28

<sup>639</sup> Heian period: 794-1185



before the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>640</sup> We thus see that Rexroth chose a period in Japanese literary history which can be understood as a beginning of a more serious religious contemplation but can still be characterized as pre-modern, namely "clear, strong and fresh" (see above). Many of the poems refer to the autumn season, a popular metaphor for both the finitude and near-end of human existence. Yet, it is less the image of decay often found in European literature, but more a picture of a peaceful fading away accompanied by an insight into the "true" mechanisms of existence. The following extracts of Rexroth's Japanese poems illustrate his fascination with the image of transitoriness.

"Autumn has come invisibly.  
Only the wind's voice is ominous."<sup>641</sup>

There is no telling what nature will look like in the next moment, change comes gradually but is perceived by the human eye in sudden recognitions. The "ominous" voice of the wind brings the message that there is a creative power behind the works of the external world, which constantly reminds men of the temporariness of all impressions. This coincides with an observation Rexroth expressed in the interview: "You approach illumination as though an invisible mist was coming up behind you and enveloping you. And unless that happens you are nowhere near illumination."<sup>642</sup> In other words, spiritual truth cannot be intentionally sought and found, rather it "happens" to the patient individual. This brings us to the next poem, which uses the image of the "unconscious" animal (in the sense that it has no consciousness) which because of its no-mindness is a *priori* enlightened.

"The deer on pine mountain,  
Where there are no falling leaves,  
Knows the coming of autumn  
Only by the sound of his own voice."<sup>643</sup>

The animal has no expectations and does not wait for fulfilment of such. It feels the change in season by the change in its own constitution. The reference to knowledge can be interpreted as a pun: The deer who has no intellect can obviously not tell itself that autumn has come, but at the same time there is no need for it to do so. It lives by its instincts and "knows" when its time has come

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<sup>640</sup> Ref. to Dumoulin, H.: Geschichte des Zen-Buddhismus. Bern, 1986, vol.II: Japan, pp.6

<sup>641</sup> Rexroth, p.83

<sup>642</sup> Tonkinson, p.341

<sup>643</sup> Rexroth, p.102

"by the sound of his own voice", i.e. when it cries out for the last time in its earthly existence.

The next poem does not explicitly mention the autumn season. Nevertheless the connotation is close with the wind blowing away the flower petals and the spectator experiencing the sensation of falling away.

"The flowers whirl away  
In the wind like snow.  
The thing that falls away  
Is myself."<sup>644</sup>

The poem points to the revelation that life is a perpetual circle of coming and going, with human existence playing a minor role in it. The flower whirled by the wind will renew itself from the pollen and the leaves falling to the ground. Man in his physical form cannot cherish any such hope unless his enlightened immortal soul mingles with the universe of being.

### **The End of the Journey**

Rexroth was looking for truth and enlightenment in Japan, like many of his predecessors did. He was an important influence on many of his contemporaries and on the generations to follow.

"[His] lifelong absorption and interpretation of Asian culture advanced the East-West tradition of Whitman, Pound, Yeats, and Waley. Rexroth's poetry of visionary love, at once erotic and spiritual, earthy and transcendent, revealing nirvana in this world, has changed many minds and many lives."<sup>645</sup>

If Rexroth ever found what he was so intensely seeking is left to the reader's interpretation. In "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart", a poem published in 1967, we find him "at the end of a journey/ around the earth", asking himself "where am I?"<sup>646</sup> His quest for truth has taken him to the other side of the globe, to Japan, but he seems no wiser than before.

"The water speaks to me the same language.  
It should have told me something

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<sup>644</sup> Rexroth, p.42

<sup>645</sup> Gibson, p.1

<sup>646</sup> Rexroth, Kenneth: "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart" in: Morrow, Bradford (ed.), The Selected Poems of Kenneth Rexroth, New York, New Directions, 1984, p.110

All these years, all these places,  
Always saying the same thing."<sup>647</sup>

Truth, in Rexroth words, can be found everywhere, it is no different in Kyoto than it is in San Francisco. As the saying goes, "home is where the heart is", which means that the individual can only find a place for itself in the world if it uncovers the Buddha in its own heart. Geography then is just circumstantial. Yet, it is in a Japanese "village of stone carvers and woodcutters" that Rexroth comes to this conclusion.

"All the way down to Kyoto,  
And high above me on all  
The ridges are temples full of  
Buddhas. This village of stone  
Carvers and woodcutters is  
Its own illimitable Buddha world."

This is a paradox which many American artists who turned to Japan for spiritual guidance came across. They turned their backs to the United States, but what they found is that the way to nirvana is not something uniquely Japanese but a promise to all men regardless of where they are. The experience of leaving all worldly affiliations (America) behind and starting afresh on new grounds (Japan) is of course the crucial part in their search for enlightenment, yet if what they discover has any value, the same should be possible vice versa, that is leaving Japan or any other country and finding truth in America. Eventually, this is the Founding Fathers' promise of the New World revisited. The new frontier now lies in the Orient.

### **Jack Kerouac: Seeker on the Road**

Spiritual guidance was what the Beat writers were looking for, too. Street poet Jack Kerouac who could find no inspiration in the "tedious intellectualness"<sup>648</sup> of his university friends was particularly interested in enlightenment for the common man. In 1957, his most famous book *On the Road* was published and was immediately "greeted with tremendous media attention – both positive and negative".<sup>649</sup> *On the Road* was Kerouac's homage to his friend and idol Neal Cassidy, who despite his own literary aspirations never published anything in his

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<sup>647</sup> All of the following citations from Rexroth's poem "The Heart's Garden, the Garden's Heart" are taken from in Morrow, p.110-116

<sup>648</sup> Charters, p.8

<sup>649</sup> Tonkinson, p.26

lifetime. In the book the two hit the road to find truth without purposely looking for it. They want to simply let things happen to them out of nature's own inexplicable course. Kerouac described Cassady as:

"A western kinsman of the sun, Dean [Cassady]. Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds – what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me."<sup>650</sup>

The pearl that, as Kerouac believed, was eventually to be handed to him was the pearl of wisdom, the essence of being, the ultimate understanding of life's principle. Kerouac was seeking enlightenment. Exhilarated by having read Thoreau's *Walden*, Kerouac had begun a "serious, self-taught program of Buddhist study, and his affinity for the teachings was immediate".<sup>651</sup> His frequent referrals to the history of Buddhism and to the sayings of various Zen masters showed Kerouac's literacy in this field. Yet, "his taste for Buddhism in a formal setting was limited, and he envisioned instead a new American Buddhism".<sup>652</sup> According to Eric Mottram, who wrote the introduction to the 1970 edition of Kerouac's *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, Jack Kerouac was not in it for mystic or psychedelic kicks but confident in "his oneness with the universe" and was looking for "a recognition in philosophy of his early sense that his body participated in the universal forms of energy with a quality of exuberance".<sup>653</sup> He had come to believe that "all things are different appearances of the same emptiness".<sup>654</sup> Therefore, Buddhism provided an answer to the quest Kerouac had been on all his life.

This is vividly expressed in the book which followed *On the Road – The Dharma Bums* – which was published only two months later. Again, his work was received both enthusiastically and with harsh criticism. While the American Buddhist Society praised *Dharma Bums* as a model for the American youth in that it gave "an answer to the literature of disillusion, petulant sensualism and indignation

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<sup>650</sup> Kerouac, Jack: *On the Road*. London, Penguin, 1972, p.10-11

<sup>651</sup> Tonkinson, p.24

<sup>652</sup> Tonkinson, p.24

<sup>653</sup> Kerouac, Jack: *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*. New York, Totem/Corinth, 1970, p.vii-viii

<sup>654</sup> Charters/Kerouac, Letters, p.547

against dry-heart bourgeois hypocrisy<sup>655</sup>, other critics were less enchanted by the book. One *New York Times* critic called *Dharma Bums* "a sort of juvenile, machine-age parody on the great American migrations in the nineteenth century", while another in a later issue expressed his disgust with the "world of drugs, drunkenness and aimless wandering, spiked by frequent orgies of sex in the raw" which he found described by Kerouac.<sup>656</sup>

### Escaping Middle-Class Non-Identity

In *Dharma Bums* the author's attention is focused on another of his heroes, Gary Snyder, who in the book is called Japhy Ryder<sup>657</sup>. He shared Kerouac's fascination with *Walden* and rucksack traveling. "Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955"<sup>658</sup>, protagonist Ray Smith (Jack Kerouac) gets on his way to become "a perfect Dharma Bum". Even before he meets his soulmate, Smith feels his Buddhist soul come alive.

"... I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku<sup>659</sup> in modern clothes wandering the world [...] in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise."<sup>660</sup>

The search for "True Meaning" as opposed to the empty formulas of modern society is Smith's motivation and motor on his trip across the country, which finds him sleeping on freight trains and in the company of sympathetic strangers who give him a ride. Upon eventually being introduced to Ryder, Smith is convinced that he has found an ally in his escape from the strains of having to meet the middle-class expectations of 1950s' America.

"Japhy and I were kind of outlandish-looking on the campus in our old clothes, in fact Japhy was considered an eccentric around the campus, which is the usual thing for campuses and college people to think whenever a real man appears on the scene – colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middle-class non-identity which

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<sup>655</sup> Tonkinson, p.25

<sup>656</sup> Nicosia, Gerald: *Memory Babe*. A critical biography of Jack Kerouac. New York, Viking Penguin, 1983, p.576

<sup>657</sup> Gary Snyder (1930- )

<sup>658</sup> Kerouac, Jack: *The Dharma Bums*. London, Paladin, 1992, p.7

<sup>659</sup> *bhikku* = Wandering Buddhist monk, who has no worldly possessions but the clothes he wears and his beggar's mug and who travels the country in search for enlightenment. The *bhikku* lives off his fellowmen's generosity.

<sup>660</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.8

usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization."<sup>661</sup>

This quotation points to a number of the recurring motives in Kerouac's book. First of all there is the image of society's outcasts again, a role which Smith and Ryder purposely seek and cultivate. Secondly, we come across the notion of the "real man", in accordance with Emerson's credo "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."<sup>662</sup> The real man is contrasted to the weak mass of individuals, who give up their identity in favour of becoming an accepted member of the materialistic community. Thirdly, the inseparable connection of the real man with nature is established. While uncritical consumerism in Ray's words goes hand in hand with a narrow-mindedness that channels all thinking into the same prescribed direction, to follow the cry of the wilderness promises an insight into "the dark mysterious secret" of being. And lastly, the inexpressability of life's secret is hinted at by the "facelessness" of the origin or meaning of existence. The floating facelessness here is distinctively set apart from the physical expressions of social status, such as the aforementioned television sets.

### **A Vague Image of the Counterculture**

There are only a few direct references to Japan as the representation of the purified way of living, which Smith, Ryder and their contemporaries are aiming at in *Dharma Bums*. However, Oriental culture is the dominant counterimage to the American way throughout the narration, and allusions to Japan are hidden everywhere. Ryder's Japanese-style surroundings are described in great detail. To Smith these are vivid illustrations of the simple life Ryder is leading, a life concentrated on the essentials of being.<sup>663</sup> Japanese accessories can be found at various points, such as wooden sandals (*geta*), straw mats (*tatami*), tea pots, and other things. In each case these items emphasize both the otherness of the scene (other than America) and its peacefulness and guilelessness (bare of unnecessary decorum). While the author explicitly attributes a Japanese background to Ryder, who later in the story leaves for the "promised land" to join

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<sup>661</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.35

<sup>662</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo: "Self-Reliance". in: Essays and Lectures. New York, The Library of America, 1983, p.261

a Zen monastery, the impression of the alternative culture as possibly Japanese is created on a subtler level.

Ray Smith's concept of the Orient, Japan, and (Zen) Buddhism remains vague for two reasons. For once, Zen Buddhism itself is vague, or as Kenneth Rexroth put it, there is "nothing profound" in the Buddha Word. Further, as we have already seen above, Kerouac did not believe in formal Buddhism or any formalities, as his writings show. Quite obviously, he did not want to narrow himself to clearly defined concepts of Indian versus Chinese versus Japanese. In a letter to Gary Snyder dated May 1956 (shortly before he left for his job as fire-lookout) Kerouac wrote disparagingly about the Berkley intellectuals, "Academic poseurs" in his view, who tried to talk the essence out of Buddhism. "The less said the better about Zen" he concludes<sup>664</sup>. If there was one dichotomy (something which Zen rejects), however, which governed his own prose and poetry, it was the image of the meaningless American capitalist system in contrast to the meaningful spirituality of the East. But Kerouac does not condemn the whole of contemporary American culture. This can be seen in the description of the many companions Smith meets on his way and who share his ideas: truck drivers, hobos, or the farmers in his home town. To Kerouac they are "Bodhisattvas in disguise"<sup>665</sup>. It becomes evident that the narrator is somewhat ambiguous in his perception of the American culture. Similar to Emerson and Thoreau a century earlier, he sees the potential for spiritual rejuvenation, for the turn back to the happy innocence and security of childhood days, everywhere. At the same time he voices his conviction that this opportunity had been lost to Americans as a side effect of economic prosperity and the rule of materialism.

"You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values but ... when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins in that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom."<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Ref. to Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.19, 138-139

<sup>664</sup> Charters, Ann: *Praise for Jack Kerouac*. Selected Letters 1940-1956. New York, Penguin, 1996, p.584

<sup>665</sup> Charters/Kerouac, *Letters*, p.584

<sup>666</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.29

Here we encounter the childhood image, which I will discuss in more detail later. Only the wandering *bhikku*, the Dharma Bums or "Zen Lunatics" appear to be able to recreate this state of innocence and carry the hope for a change in perspective with them. That change in perspective appears much more important to the narrator than an actual change of scene, even though he complains that there was no freedom in America. Ray Smith himself discovers the possibility for happiness in the mountains of his native land, an experience which Kerouac compares with "Hui Neng on Vulture Peak"<sup>667</sup>. This insight is certainly modeled after Snyder's remark in the introduction to his translation of Han-Shan's poems, in which he says about Han-Shan and his aide Shih-te that "you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America" – Ryder and Smith can therefore be regarded as the American successors of Han-Shan and Shih-te.<sup>668</sup>

The counterculture Smith is looking for is therefore not defined in a simple America versus Japan opposition. The image he constructs of the desirable state of affairs is rather a melange of ingredients from several Asian cultures, and Zen Buddhism appears as the common link. These ingredients are presented by Smith as indeed fundamentally different from his American environment, but this goes only so far as the official system and the much condemned middle-class are concerned. It also becomes evident that Smith believes a primeval understanding of Eastern spirituality is inherent in himself and his fellow seekers, something that sets them apart from the stupid mass and simultaneously makes them suspicious to those in power.

### **A Suspicion of Insanity**

As I have shown, the Beats cultivated their image of outcasts. In Kerouac's book this thread is repeatedly taken up, for example when Smith talks about the Zen

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<sup>667</sup> Charters/Kerouac, Letters, p.567

Hui Neng (638-713 BC) was the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, who according to the legend was an uneducated man from a rural area who became instantly enlightened when he heard a verse from the Diamond Sutra. There are many accounts of Hui Neng's life and doings, both in print and online. For example ref. to the Northwest Branch of The Theosophical Society's description on [www.theosophy-nw.org/world/asia/as-elo5.htm](http://www.theosophy-nw.org/world/asia/as-elo5.htm)

Vulture Peak is a small mountain outside the ancient city of Rajgir, India, where Buddha is said to have spoken to his followers after his own enlightenment. For details ref. to [www.manjushri.com/tech/czen.htm](http://www.manjushri.com/tech/czen.htm)

<sup>668</sup> Ref. to Snyder, Gary: *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Washington, DC, Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004 (first published in 1958), p.35 – Kerouac read Snyder's translations of Han-



Lunatics. He describes an occasion where he and Ryder spent a "mad night" with friends, drinking and discussing the meaning of life and closes his narration with: "Everything was fine with the Zen Lunatics, the nut wagon was too far away to hear us."<sup>669</sup> Lunacy, insanity, as understood by the orthodox American is an attribute Smith readily accepts, because it underlines the distinction between himself and the establishment. Also, his ready acceptance can be understood as an ironic hit at society and brings up the question whether it is him and his *bikkhu* friends or the conformists who act insane. This is underlined by the presentation of his conduct as a natural result of his religion to the reader. Accordingly, Smith does not regard subordination to the rules of the American cultural community as a valid alternative to his wanderings.

"The only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights, and doing what I wanted, I saw in a vision would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse, where we could be 'supervised'."<sup>670</sup>

Not surprisingly, this attitude made writers like Kerouac peculiar and untrustworthy to their critics, who dismissed any spiritual sincerity in the Beats' attempts.

"Just as the Transcendentalists' forays into Asian religious texts did little to persuade critics of Transcendentalism that religious concerns were integral to their movement, the Beats' efforts to incorporate Asian meditation techniques into their lives and Eastern religious teachings into their writing only reinforced the widespread conviction that the Beats were ... 'spiritually underprivileged and ... crippled of the soul'."<sup>671</sup>

The refusal "to subscribe to the general demand ... [to] consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming"<sup>672</sup> earned the Beats the reputation of being un-American. The Beat movement dared to defy the newly established standard of happiness, which was measured in worldly possessions. The official view was that the pursuit of material wealth was the purpose of human existence, the more wealth the more meaning. Now these beatniks with their long hair and no steady income questioned what the government was ready to send its troops to war for. In *Dharma Bums* Japhy Ryder does not waste a

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Shan's poems before they were published and before the *The Dharma Bums* went into print and repeatedly refers to the Chinese hermit, ref. to Letters, p.538f.

<sup>669</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.88

<sup>670</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.103

<sup>671</sup> Tonkinson, p.8

thought on "all that crap they didn't really want anyway", which in his views leads to imprisonment "in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume".<sup>673</sup>

### Rejuvenation in the Mountains

While in the Beat artists' eyes the majority of Americans allowed themselves to be steered into imprisonment, Smith and Ryder got ready to get onto the pure way, the way to enlightenment. Interestingly enough, Smith always makes sure he is well equipped for his trips into the simpler life<sup>674</sup>. His ventures into nature, be they on his own or in the company of his friend, appear to be mixture of sincere spiritual seeking and joyous boyhood adventure. The childhood image plays an important role in this. In this study we have seen how the image of childhood is employed when spiritual re-orientation is associated with regaining a juvenile innocence that experiences the world without preconceived judgments. It is also associated with the freshness of Eastern philosophies. This was a strong theme in Emerson's writing and appeared in Michener's *Major Gruver*. Childhood innocence was something Jack Kerouac regretfully missed. In a letter to Neal Cassady dated 1951 he describes an afternoon from his infancy, "an afternoon doing absolutely nothing, flat on my back in the bedroom crib, noticing with faint blurs of knowledge a few of the outside tassels of the world" and goes on:

"... I remembered this afternoon with longing. I had nothing to do but bask in the world of time then; there were no fears whatever, only the glee of a growing sense that I had nothing but time, time, time to set in; absolutely no demands on any part of my will and conscience."<sup>675</sup>

The childhood stands for a period in the individual's life when it is not yet expected to meet society's demands, a time when "just being" is an acceptable way of living. Reminiscences of childhood are repeatedly evoked in *Dharma Bums*. The following quotation is from a chapter detailing a three-day-hiking trip Smith undertakes with Ryder and another companion.

"When I woke up again and the sunlight was a pristine orange pouring through the crags to the east and down through our fragrant

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<sup>672</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.83

<sup>673</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.83

<sup>674</sup> Ref. to Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.90-92: "... a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back."

<sup>675</sup> *Charters/Kerouac, Letters*, p.267-68

pine boughs, I felt like I did when I was a boy and it was time to get up and go play all day Saturday, in overalls."<sup>676</sup>

The memory of Smith's boyhood days goes hand in hand with the image of waking up to a new beginning and to the energy of the sun. The narrator feels a refreshment of his senses and at the same time indulges in the prospect of being able to do just as he likes. Shortly before Smith had "promised myself that I would begin a new life".<sup>677</sup> Again, with Ryder being with him at the time, Japan becomes an integral part of this process of finding a new identity through purification for Smith. Consequently, a couple of pages later he experiences *satori*<sup>678</sup>, enlightenment. The fact that it is named by its Japanese term, rather than by an English equivalent, emphasizes that rejuvenation – that is the re-capturing of meaningful being, the oneness with the world – is something that is brought to the United States from outside, in this case with the help of Japanese culture.

### **Peacefulness and Purity**

The dominant characteristics of Japan in Kerouac's account are those of peacefulness and purity. I mentioned the perfection of Japhy Ryder's surroundings. At another instance, Ryder talks about Japan as the land of ancient wisdom.

"And then I'm going to Japan and walk all over that hilly country finding ancient little temples hidden and forgotten in the mountains and old sages a hundred and nine years old praying to Kwannon in huts and meditating so much that when they come out of meditation they laugh at everything that moves."<sup>679</sup>

This quote conveys both the idea that some forgotten truth is hidden in "that hilly country", and provides an ironic view of the fast moving societies of the West (the image of laughing "at everything that moves"). It also implies a hint that the impenetrable and impossible (certainly there are not many "sages a hundred and nine years old") can be found in Japan, one almost stumbles upon it by simply walking around with nothing on one's mind. And it is an image of simplicity and purity. The seeker uses his feet instead of traveling by more comfortable means, the sages are living in huts in the mountains rather than in impressive, richly

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<sup>676</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.67

<sup>677</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.66

<sup>678</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.75

decorated temples. The peacefulness of the scene is expressed by the process of meditation; and because laughter is the result of this process, the otherness of the spiritual experience compared to the earnestness of Christian rituals becomes apparent.

In an earlier chapter Japan was associated with "hope"<sup>680</sup>, the hope to find meaning in existence. Consequently, the much condemned American middle-class stands for the poisoning of what is good and right in other cultures. Talking about his planned journey to the land of the rising sun, Japhy Ryder complains about the shallowness of his countrymen and their inability to take things for what they are, which turns their existence into something foul.

"... the people who are sending me out there and finance things ... spend their good money fixing elegant scenes of gardens and books and Japanese architecture and all that crap which nobody will like or be able to use anyway but rich American divorcees on Japanese cruises and all they really should do is just build or buy an old Jap house and vegetable garden and have a place there for cats to hang out in and be Buddhists, I mean have a real flower or something and not just the usual American middleclass fuggup with appearances."<sup>681</sup>

With this statement, Ryder is biting the hand that feeds him and either ignorant of this or does not care. He makes himself the instrument of those who take on Japan as a hobby-horse, ruining it with their questionable intentions and their money. At the same time, this constructed image of the "enemy" is obviously necessary to create the possibility of a different outlook in the first place. If there was not the perverted approach of the "usual American middleclass fuggup", there could be no purified way to the hidden truth. Curiously enough, Smith and Ryder reject the system they depend on to live their lives as outcasts of society.

### **Kerouac's Yearning for Affirmation**

As one critic put it in the 1985 edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*: "Kerouac's major quality and limitation as a writer is his yearning for affirmative moments ... in which 'everything' arrives."<sup>682</sup> And affirmation, as is obvious throughout *The Dharma Bums* and *On The Road* indeed comes across

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<sup>679</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.40

<sup>680</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.85

<sup>681</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.171

<sup>682</sup> Anon., "Jack Kerouac", in: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York, Norton, 1985 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), p.2053

as Kerouac's main objective. Detailed descriptions of incidents, in which the first-person narrator celebrates the wholeness of and his own oneness with being, are abundant. Himself of Roman Catholic upbringing, Kerouac maintains a strong curiosity for different religions and their answer to the perpetual question of *why*. In *Dharma Bums* he recaptures a dialogue between Smith and Ryder about God and the reason for being.

- Smith: "Japhy, do you think God made the world to amuse himself because he was bored? Because if so he would have to be mean.
- Ryder: "Ho, who would you mean by God?"
- Smith: "Just Tathagata, if you will."
- Ryder: "Well it says in the sutra that God, or Tathagata, doesn't himself emanate a world from his womb but it just appears due to the ignorance of sentient beings."
- Smith: "But he emanated the sentient beings and their ignorance too. It's all too pitiful. I ain't gonna rest till I found out *why*, Japhy, *why*."
- Ryder: "Ah, don't trouble your mind essence. Remember that in pure Tathagata mind essence there is no asking of the question why and not even significance attached to it."<sup>683</sup>

Spontaneous affirmation therefore replaces an intellectual answer to Smith's question. This indicates that in spite of his friend's conviction and his own efforts to achieve enlightenment, Smith is still dependent on some kind of validation of his new beliefs. In a letter to Philip Whalen in Februar 1956 he tries to structure what he has learned about enlightenment and therewith follows the example of many, who in spite of Zen Buddhism's call for non-intellectual understanding tried to explain the unexplicable.

"And the knowing of this, that all things are different appearances of the same emptiness, this is bhikkuhood ... the continual striving to know it continually, and the consequent earnest teaching of it, this is bodhisattvahood ... and the perfect success is perfect and continual knowing of this so that it is no longer 'knowing' but the Emptiness-hood itself, this is Buddhahood. The Path is knowing and struggling to know this."<sup>684</sup>

In *Dharma Bums* it seems that the narrator does not succeed in moving beyond mere glimpses of what he was searching for. These glimpses were gone as quickly as they appeared and in the course of Kerouac's own quest had to be reinforced by excessive indulgence in alcohol and other drugs. Smith's forays

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<sup>683</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, p.168

into nature are involuntarily followed by his return to a civilization of fast food diners and liquor stores. Also, Smith's very notion that he has "figured it all out"<sup>685</sup>, his assurance that he is awakened, in Zen Buddhist terms makes him as unenlightened as the middle-class conformists he ridiculed. Kenneth Rexroth, who initially promoted Kerouac but eventually broke with him, said of the Beat poet "his Buddha is a dime-store incense burner, glowing and glowering sinisterly in the dark corner of a beatnik pad and just thrilling the wits out of bad little girls".<sup>686</sup> From Kerouac's writing one could gather that his wanderings were less an attempt at breaking free from empty conventions than a means to evade responsibility. This could be supported by the frequent recollections of the childhood image, and at one point Kerouac's literary alias Ray Smith says: "I was a little scared, too, of all the responsibility."<sup>687</sup> However, it seems short-sighted to assume that simply because he lacked achievement in the "public eye" Kerouac was not sincere in his efforts to find the answers which he and many of his contemporaries were seeking. To his readers he revealed a new world of beliefs beyond the mainstream, indiscriminately incorporating ideas from Japan and other Asian cultures.

There is no mention of (war) propaganda-style Japanese images in this book. The picture of the land of the sages, vague as it remains, is positive throughout. Bits and pieces of it are sprinkled over the story, creating an ever present allusion to Japanese culture as a possible antidote of freedom and spiritual revelation. The only referral to a popular representation of Japanese aggression, that of the *samurai*, is introduced in an ironic light, thereby making fun of the stereotype.<sup>688</sup> Maybe Jack Kerouac was not the most explicit spokesman for Japan, but as one of the best-known figures of the Beat movement, he surely did his share to open the channels for cross-cultural communication and understanding.

### **Gary Snyder: Surface Simplicity With Unsettling Depths**

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<sup>684</sup> Charters/Kerouac, Letters, p.547-48

<sup>685</sup> Kerouac, Dharma Bums, p.122

<sup>686</sup> Kenneth Rexroth as quoted Tonkinson, p.322

<sup>687</sup> Kerouac, Dharma Bums, p.125

<sup>688</sup> Ref. to Kerouac, Dharma Bums, p.24: "... a Japanese Samurai warrior – the yelling roar, the leap, the position, and his expression of comic wrath his eyes bulging and making a big funny face at me."

In 1956 Gary Snyder went to Japan for the first time on a scholarship from the First Zen Institute of America and worked as an assistant for an ambitious translation project which Ruth Fuller Sasaki had initiated.<sup>689</sup> He had spent the three previous summers as a mountain lookout like the one Kerouac described in *Dharma Bums*, as a lumber camp worker, and as a trail crew member in Yosemite National Park.<sup>690</sup> In his afterword to the 2004 edition of *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Snyder talks about "poems that surprised me", during which "my language relaxed into itself".<sup>691</sup> *Riprap* is a collection of poems which describe the relief hard manual work and careful attention to the immediate task at hand gives to the individual from the restrictions of the body-mind dualism. Snyder explains it in a 1965 interview as: "... there is a body-mind dualism if I am sweeping the floor and thinking about Hegel. But if I am sweeping the floor and thinking about sweeping the floor, I am all one."<sup>692</sup> This desire to become one, the unmediated awareness of being is illustrated in "Tôji", a poem in the *Riprap* collection about the Singon Temple in Kyoto.<sup>693</sup>

"Men asleep in their underwear  
Newspapers under their heads  
Under the eaves of Tôji,  
Kobo Daishi solid iron and ten feet tall  
Strides through, a pigeon on his hat."<sup>694</sup>

In the temple men take off their clothes and all became alike, there are no visible social differences represented by uniforms or other attire. The newspapers stand for knowledge and awareness of political and economical developments and the resulting worries of and demands on the individual. However, they are not read but used to support the sleeper's head and therewith the state of non-consciousness he is in. The "eaves of Tôji" provide the shelter in which the individual has the freedom to prefer ignorance to knowledge. Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, symbolizes an attitude which regards class distinction as no hinderance to Enlightenment. Snyder certainly chose this specific temple with its connection to the Buddhist monk, who "avoided to a large

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<sup>689</sup> Ref. to Fields, p.208-209

<sup>690</sup> Ref. to Dean, Tim: Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious. Inhabiting the Ground. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991, p.xiv

<sup>691</sup> Snyder, *Riprap*, p.65

<sup>692</sup> McLean, Wm. Scott (ed.): Gary Snyder. The Real Work. Interviews & Talks 1964-1979. New York, NY, New Directions, 1980, p.7

<sup>693</sup> *Tôji* means "east temple". The temple was dedicated to Kobo Daishi in 823, the founder of Shingon Zen, which is an early branch of Zen Buddhism propagating that all beings are destined for Enlightenment.

<sup>694</sup> This and the following two paragraphs from "Tôji" are quoted from *Riprap*, p.20

extent the political embroilments<sup>695</sup> (of the then new capital Kyoto), because this attitude appealed to him. The poem goes on:

"Peering through chickenwire grates  
At dusty gold-leaf statues  
A cynical curving round-belly  
Cool Bodhisattva – maybe Avalokita –  
Bisexual and tried it all, weight on  
One leg, haloed in snake-hood gold  
Shines through the shadow  
An ancient hip smile  
Tingling of India and Tibet."

The gold-leaf statues are minor gods, to which temple-goers can apply thin strips of gold-leaf for good luck<sup>696</sup>. They are not locked away from the public but are protected by something as plain and practical as chickenwire only. Yet, the "cynical" Bodhisattva laughs at them, as they stand for a secular attachment to symbols. Avalokita<sup>697</sup> is the name for Buddha in his Bodhisattva body (the pre-Buddha state), "the supreme SELF within, whose absorption of the individual consciousness is Buddhahood".<sup>698</sup> Avalokita is considered to be male in China (Kwan shai-yin) and to be female in Japan (Kwannon)<sup>699</sup>, its bisexuality in this poem hints at a marriage of the two cultures and their religions in one being. Its smile "tingling of India and Tibet" further includes the two other major cultures which were important for Buddhism<sup>700</sup> and, because China, Japan, India and Tibet constituted the world for ancient Asia, the Bodhisattva here is one with universal existence. This also reflects the belief that truth lives within oneself rather than outside the human being. In that Avalokita "shines through the shadow", it brings enlightenment to a world dominated by shadows, that is reflections of illusionary reality. Its coolness and its "hip smile" associate the "hipster" of the Beat Generation with the Bodhisattva and with a poise "the hipster is looking for in his 'coolness' (withdrawal)", as John Clellon Holmes called it.<sup>701</sup> Avalokita is not an omnipotent god in the Christian sense who is above human beings but symbolizes the this-worldly-ness of revelation. The third and last paragraph of "Tôji" is even more explicit about this.

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<sup>695</sup> Humphreys, Christmas: Buddhism. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p.173

<sup>696</sup> The gold-leaf is sold at the temple entrance and helps to support it financially.

<sup>697</sup> Avalokita is also often also referred to as Avalokiteshvara.

<sup>698</sup> Humphreys, p.156

<sup>699</sup> Ref. to Humphreys, p.156

<sup>700</sup> For a description of the different influences from these countries on the development of Buddhism in general and Zen in particular ref. to Humphreys and Blyth.

<sup>701</sup> Holmes, Beat Generation



"Loose-breasted young mother  
With her kids in the shade here  
Of old Temple tree  
Nobody bothers you in Tôji;  
The streetcar clanks by outside."

The young mother nursing her child is an image for the temple's connection to everyday life and for the nurturing environment it offers. The kids are another representation of the childhood/youth image as the promise of rejuvenation, while the old tree can be seen as an emblem for the past. The spirit of the future and the faith of ancient times thus co-exist in the same place, in which "nobody bothers you", that is nobody has any expectations and demands to the individual. The picture of the streetcar again emphasizes the this-worldly-ness and the explicit possibility of attaining enlightenment in the here and now. Religion and the everyday world are not two separate entities but part of each other in this picture.

We can assume that Snyder chose a Japanese setting to describe the potential revelation of every living being in this world rather than an Occidental scenery because he believes that the seeker is more likely to find enlightenment in Japan. In an interview for the *Road Apple* magazine in 1969/1970 he expresses why he feels that the Orient has an advantage over the West:

"The Orient has a more enormous teaching tradition intact. There are several great wisdom traditions with teachers and schools. They also have them in North America, but unless you are born a member of a certain Pueblo and have the right to enter a certain kiva, you can't get into these schools."<sup>702</sup>

What Snyder says is that the Orient is much more democratic than the Occident, which praises itself for its democratic tradition, in allowing members of different social and ethnic groups to have access to wisdom. In view of this, *Tôji* is praise for Japan as much as it is criticism of America. The phrase "nobody bothers you in Tôji" can be understood as a challenge to the way the American culture corrupts its members with its demands and stereotypes such as "Lost Generation" or "Beat Generation". It is a rephrasal of Holmes' "Why don't you people leave us alone?".<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>702</sup> McLean, *Real Work*, p.17

<sup>703</sup> Holmes, *Beat Generation*

## Turning Away from America

Perkins attributes Snyder's absorption with the East in general and with Japan in particular to his "disaffection with the West, that is, with the society he observed all around him and of which he was part"<sup>704</sup> and that the cause of his alienation was the love of nature he had been experiencing ever since he was a child. The "capitalist-industrial civilization" of America was about to destroy this nature, in which Snyder saw the only chance for man to become one with universal being. In Japan Snyder seemed to find a "serious attention to the ordinary and everyday", an attention which to him was "related to a universal value".<sup>705</sup> The immediacy with nature/being is typical of many of Snyder's poems. Another example from *Riprap* is "A Stone Garden", from which I am quoting the first paragraph.

"Japan a great stone garden in the sea.  
Echoes of hoes and weeding,  
Centuries of leading hill-creeks down  
To ditch and pool in fragile knee-deep fields.  
Stone-cutter's chisel and a whanging saw,  
Leafy sunshine rustling on man  
Chipping a foot-square rough hinoki beam;  
I thought I heard an axe chop in the woods  
It broke the dream; and woke up dreaming on a train.  
It must have been a thousand years ago  
In some old mountain sawmill of Japan.  
A horde of excess poets and unwed girls  
And I that night prowled Tokyo like a bear  
Tracking the human future  
Of intelligence and despair."<sup>706</sup>

The poem starts with an image of picturesqueness, the stone garden representing a perfect piece of art. The "echoes of hoes and weeding" speak of constant care and refinement. But what may seem artificial to the onlooker at first becomes an ideal of living in and with nature. Snyder describes the age-old way of cultivating rice and displays a Zen concentration on the immediate tasks at hand. The field and wood workers in this poem appear to be the true Bodhisattvas of everyday life, to whom the "leafy sunshine" brings enlightenment, that is the assurance that what they are doing is right and in tune with nature. Then the poet wakes up from his dream of the long-sought for harmony with the

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<sup>704</sup> Perkins, David: *A History of Modern Poetry*, vol.2: Modernism and After. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1987, p.583

<sup>705</sup> Perkins, p.586-587

<sup>706</sup> Snyder, "A Stone Garden", from *Riprap*, p.23

world and does not find himself in his bed but on a train, which hints at movement and transition. It is the author still on the way to this re-unification with being, a re-unification with the ancient truth about life ("a thousand years ago"). The excess poets and unwed girls stand for outcasts from society, for those not wanted by a system determined by power politics and the destruction of nature.<sup>707</sup> What the poet then describes as the "human future of intelligence and despair" means man's entanglement with knowledge and desire, his futile attempt at rationalizing about the meaning of existence and his inability to overcome material aspirations. It seems evident that Snyder is contrasting the promise of revelation offered by the Japanese culture with the corrupt state of the American society. However, Snyder did not glorify the Japanese as a whole, nor did he condemn all about his home country. As he himself put it: "The Japanese people as a whole are not particularly interested."<sup>708</sup> After several extended stays in Japan Snyder moved back to the United States in 1968 to live in the country which to him is "the revolutionary territory"<sup>709</sup>. This confirms his belief that a meaningful existence is possible everywhere, as long as man is willing to retreat into nature and to move beyond the "unnatural" desires of modern society.

### **The Image of Just Being with the World**

In 1969 Gary Snyder published a booklet under the title *Earth House Hold*, which is a collection of several prose and free verse pieces. The first one is called "Lookout's Journal" and reflects on Snyder's experience as a fire mountain lookout in the Mount Baker National Forest. His job was to sit on one of the mountains reporting weather conditions and watching for sources of fire. Living in a very simple wood cabin, his days were mainly filled with exploring nature, reading and musing about the meaning of life. Snyder's "Lookout's Journal" is a seemingly arbitrary assortment of thoughts in a mixture of prose and poetry, infiltrated with allusions to Japan. The land of the rising sun is again associated with a spiritual alternative, a symbol of a purer and more refined existence. Snyder recalls "arts of the Japanese: moon-watching insect-hearing"<sup>710</sup>, thereby

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<sup>707</sup> Snyder himself spent time in an island community of Japanese who had broken out of "that nation-state bag", people who to him seemed even more serious in their turning away from society, because "they don't have any backing from the society, from parents, from welfare, from anywhere". – ref. to McLean, *The Real Work*, p.10-11

<sup>708</sup> McLean, *The Real Work*, p.10

<sup>709</sup> McLean, *The Real Work*, p.14

<sup>710</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", in: *Earth House Hold*, p.2

indicating that pure awareness of being, the act of watching without intellectual judgment is a typically Japanese form of perception. He defies the need for scholarly education in order to find answers about life. Instead he asks for "mindful carelessness", that is for ignorance of the expectations society puts to the individual. The truth about being for Snyder can only be found if one is "alive to what is about"<sup>711</sup>. At the same time this truth is something which shuns appropriation behind a mystical veil. He refers to "the blank white light of shoji", Japanese screen doors, which offer "no visibility" to the outsider and keep safe from exposure what is inside.<sup>712</sup> These are the screen doors that La Farge had found so enchanting a hundred years earlier. Here, another supposedly Japanese characteristic is evoked. As shown before, the Japanese culture was understood as impenetrable and inexplicable by many of its observers. Snyder uses this image as a metaphor for the non-graspable essence of being.

The picture of just being with nature is the *leitmotif* in the "Lookout's Journal". Snyder's style is minimalistic. In the afterword to *Riprap* Snyder had written that his plain poems "run the risk of invisibility"<sup>713</sup>. In the following poem his observations seem to be attempts at liberating himself from prejudice; attempts at momentary glimpses of truth from what he sees displayed before him by a miraculous power. Some of Snyder's descriptions are reminiscent of *haiku*<sup>714</sup>, accordingly he tries to achieve "surface simplicity with unsettling depths"<sup>715</sup>.

"two butterflies  
a chilly clump of mountain  
flowers.  
"zazen"<sup>716</sup>      non-life.      An art:      mountain-watching"<sup>717</sup>

In *Dharma Bums* Kerouac mentioned that Ryder/Snyder writes *haiku*, which according to William J. Higginson was the beginning of a *haiku* boom in the United States.<sup>718</sup> *Haiku* describes what "we often see or sense ... that gives us a

<sup>711</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.2

<sup>712</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.4

<sup>713</sup> Snyder, *Riprap*, p.67

<sup>714</sup> *haiku* = Japanese poem, which follows a fixed pattern of syllables and describes one aspect of being in one simple picture. *Haiku* is often employed in Zen-Buddhism to provide a symbol-free representation of the essence of being.

<sup>715</sup> Snyder, *Riprap*, p.67

<sup>716</sup> *zazen* = Sitting Zen-Buddhist meditation.

<sup>717</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.7

<sup>718</sup> Ref. to Higginson, William J.: The Haiku Handbook. New York, Kodansha International, 1985, p.64

bit of a lift, or a moment's pure sadness".<sup>719</sup> *Haiku* is about sharing an experience hard to describe in words, or as Blyth put it "an escape from this world to another; and a return to it"<sup>720</sup>. With the limited number of Japanese syllables or English words it employs, the *haiku* poem tries to provide a glimpse of the hidden truth that lies in everyday observations, most commonly observations made in nature. Not only does the three-line image remind us of *haiku* in Snyder's short journal, the whole piece is crafted according to the same pattern. True to the *haiku* idea, Snyder repeatedly tackles the problem of telling his readers about experiences which are so unique in themselves that there are no appropriate means/words to describe these momentary sensations.

One more time Snyder uses a Japanese term to circumscribe his proposed ideal of "just being". *Zazen* stands for "non-life" in the sense of non-activity, immobility, of not disturbing the natural equilibrium. It means becoming part of the world by silent non-intellectual contemplation, that is by "watching". Consequently, what Snyder is most interested in is "experience! that drug"<sup>721</sup>. For him this means not to subscribe to a certain view of the world, not to seek appropriation of what he sees and feels around him by formulating so-called truths. Quite on the contrary, the author cultivates his "knack for non-attachment"<sup>722</sup>. His goal is to achieve the Zen Buddhist paragon of "*no identity*"<sup>723</sup>, of becoming a "Bodhisattva", someone who has overcome "the thought of an ego, a person, a being, or a soul"<sup>724</sup>. It is through the perception of his surroundings by other means than the established (American) mental sets, such as through Japanese "art", that Snyder tries to accomplish this. Japan is thus always present for the author, even if not explicitly, as an antidote to conventional thinking and behaviour. This understanding is so familiar to him that the combination of a Japanese concept with a regular activity becomes a natural symbiosis, as in "zazen and eating lunch"<sup>725</sup>.

We encounter Snyder's attempts at *haiku* at various stages in *Earth House Hold*, some of them rather strange to the reader, such as:

"This morning:  
floating face down in the water bucket

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<sup>719</sup> Higginson, p.3

<sup>720</sup> Blyth, Reginald Horace: *Haiku*. Japan, Hokuseido, 1965, vol.1, p.i

<sup>721</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.9

<sup>722</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.9

<sup>723</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.10

<sup>724</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.10

<sup>725</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.24

a drowned mouse."<sup>726</sup>

Each experience expressed in *haiku* is a delineation of life's riddle and the answer to it at the same time. The poem tells us that this is what it is, this is reality, there is nothing else, no need for interpretation or intellectual complication. Because of the syllable pattern, *haiku* is something that in the strictest sense only works in the Japanese language. The art of *haiku* is therefore justly regarded as originally Japanese, and its underlying principle can be seen as a representation of Japanese culture.

### **The Great Subculture**

Similar to Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, Snyder's image of Japan in *Earth House Hold* is not specifically laid out but appears through allusions. The picture creates itself on a more subtle level by bits and pieces which inarbitrarily seem to fit. Moreover, Snyder's idea of an antidote to American culture is not exclusively determined by Japanese spirituality. In "Why Tribe" he calls it "the Great Subculture", "an ecstatically positive vision of spiritual and physical love; ... [which] is opposed for very fundamental reasons to the Civilization Establishment"<sup>727</sup>. To him this vision is something that can be found in any society, he mentions Europe, Bengal, England, Japan, or China. Interestingly enough, he does not include America in his enumeration. However, he refers to social groups rather than to the national community in itself as one homogeneous group. The guiding assumption behind this is reminiscent of Emerson's creed "There is one mind common to all individual men".<sup>728</sup> Snyder does not propagate a simplistic East versus West dichotomy but a more general and democratic view of possible ways to achieve religious revelation and personal fulfilment, a mode of "behavior and custom long banned by the Judaeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West".<sup>729</sup>

"The traditional cultures are in any case doomed, and rather than cling to their good aspects hopelessly it should be remembered that whatever is or ever was in any other culture can be reconstructed from the unconscious, through meditation."<sup>730</sup>

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<sup>726</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.4

<sup>727</sup> Snyder, "Why Tribe", in: *Earth House Hold*, p.115

<sup>728</sup> Emerson, "History", in: *Essays and Lectures* p.237

<sup>729</sup> Snyder, "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution", in: *Earth House Hold*, p.92

<sup>730</sup> Snyder, "Buddhism and ...", p.92-93

It is thus of no significance *where* the seeker chooses to look. Nevertheless, the East in general and more specifically Japan do stand for the liberation from fossilized value systems and for a re-orientation, in the literal sense, towards the cradle of civilization. There is further support for this theory in Snyder's recollection of another expedition into the mountains with wife Justine and friend Allen Ginsberg.

"Going along the trail traveling HIGH. Step, step, flying paces like Tibetans – strangely familiar massive vistas – the trail is *Right*. All the different figures one becomes – old Japanese woodcutter; exiled traveler in a Chinese scroll ..."<sup>731</sup>

Again similar to Emerson, Snyder finds consolation in nature, which liberates him to the extent that he feels like flying, that is disengaging himself from the ground he stands on, the social foundation his identity is supposed to be built upon. His description of becoming a Japanese woodcutter, and exiled Chinese traveler points to his belief in a *Urerfahrung* common to all men which he in this poem relives. The "strangely familiar massive vistas" are to Snyder what the woods of New England were to Emerson when he exclaimed:

"... if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual sense of the sublime."<sup>732</sup>

Intentionally regardless of nationality, time and place, both Emerson and Snyder in their writings voice their conviction that truth cannot be found in a fixed system but in ever changing nature, the perpetual circle of which lets the Beat poet feel as if re-living "different figures" from another age.

### **Picturesqueness, Simplicity, and Rightness**

The most important image of Japan in Snyder's writing appears to be that of the immediate experience of being as promised by (ancient) Japanese culture. Japanese attempts at re-establishing this oneness with the world seem more serious to him. In one interview he states: "Japanese society is much tougher than American society. If you drop out for a couple of years [...] you can't get

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<sup>731</sup> Snyder, "Glacier Peak Wilderness Area", in: Earth House Hold, p.96

<sup>732</sup> Emerson, "Nature", in: Essays and Lectures, p.9

back into that society and have a job."<sup>733</sup> There is no safety net for those who turned away from conventional conformity, therefore these seekers should be shining examples for Americans looking for a different way of life. There are three other important images of Snyder's perception of Japan, which are connected to the assumption that the Japanese are better at giving their full attention to the immediate world: picturesqueness, simplicity, and a sensation of rightness.

- Picturesqueness

The image of picturesqueness is by now familiar to us, we have seen a variety of descriptions of the delicate, fairy-tale landscape. Snyder calls Japan the "land of rice paddy and green hills and rains where still deep-hatted Dharma-hobos try to roam".<sup>734</sup> In his interpretation of the image he slightly differs from his predecessors, in that he creates a scenery of very common qualities, including the train hopping hobos. His landscape is less that of a doll-house, as for example in Hearn or Michener, and more an assortment of the "lowlife" ingredients celebrated by the Beat movement. The Dharma-hobos in Snyder's book remind us of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and are the symbol of a simple matter-of-factly down-to-earth wisdom of Japan.

- Simplicity

We read about the joys of simplicity, exemplified in Japhy Ryder's surroundings in Kerouac's account. Snyder subsumes this ideal under the heading "Japanese lesson":

"Rinko-in  
Barefoot down cold halls.

Maple red now glows, the high limbs first. Venus in the morning star – at daybreak and evening, sparrows hurtle in thousands. Five men in jikatabi work-shoes slouching across the baseball diamond by the Kamo river. A woman under the bridge nursing her baby at noon hour, shovel and rake parked by. Faint windy mists in the hills north – smoke and charcoal and straw – at night hot soup 'kasujiru' made of saké squeezings. Little girls in long tan cotton stockings, red garters, still the skimpy skirts. College boys cynically amble around in their worn-flat geta clogs and shiny black uniforms looking raw, cold and helpless. Big man on a motorcycle with a load of noodles.

'It is unspeakably wonderful to see a large volume of water falling with a thunderous noise.'

'Sparrows entertained me singing and dancing, I've never had such a good time as today.'

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<sup>733</sup> McLean, *The Real Work*, p.11

<sup>734</sup> Snyder, "Japan First Time Round", in: *Earth House Hold*, p.38



The impression created here is one of peacefulness and joy. Both result from a very basic connectedness with being. "Barefoot" indicates the sensation of feeling the ground one walks on, emphasized by the attribute of coldness. The succession of daybreak and end of day in one sentence points to the natural cycle of beginning and ending, yet causing no remorse about the finitude of human existence in the reader. The breath of life is again represented by the act of nursing a baby, like in the poem *Tôji*. The hot soup at night appears as a reward for a hard day's work, which can be taken as a metaphor for man's strife throughout his existence. Work and play, grown-ups and children are included in the picture. Only the representatives of scholarly aspirations, the cynical college boys, seem a bit out of place in this sketch. The lesson which Snyder has put into this description is the worship of the natural, the non-artificial, simple features of life, and it is a lesson to be learned in Japan. A few pages earlier the author had quoted D.H. Lawrence who demanded to "be more like the Japanese":

"Quiet, aloof little devils. They don't bother about being loved. They keep themselves taut in their own selves – there, at the bottom of the spine, the devil's own power they've got there."<sup>736</sup>

Since Snyder calls Lawrence's judgment "fantastic, accurate, [and] lopsided"<sup>737</sup>, we can assume that he shares his praise of the self-sufficiency of the Japanese. It is the same quality of not being affected by middle-class expectations and modern society's rules of conduct that Gary Snyder holds high. It is the not caring about material aspirations or acceptance by the ruling class, which distributes affection according to its standards and which demotes its dissidents as "devils". The term underlines the difference between the official orthodoxy of the god-fearing good people and the pagan, who by denouncing traditional religion automatically becomes satan's devotee. The Japanese with their non-Christian background obviously defy the Occidental perception of the way of man's salvation, the more so since according to Lawrence, Snyder and many others the other culture appears to be serious competition to the dominance of the church(es) of the West.

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<sup>735</sup> Snyder, "Japan First ...", p.40

<sup>736</sup> Snyder, "Japan First ...", p.32

<sup>737</sup> Snyder, "Japan First ...", p.32

- Rightness

Consequently, sensing rightness in this other belief system gives shelter to the outcasts of Western society. "Shelter – inside like a primitive Japanese farmhouse."<sup>738</sup> Whenever something feels right, the allusion to Japan is created. This explains why Snyder employs Japanese terms in the descriptions of his happy forays into nature. He does not provide explanations for these terms but regards them as *a priori* fitting the picture, and most of the time their meaning evolves from the context. However, more important than the actual semantics is the link established in each instance. It is the link between the individual yearning for meaning and the potential answer found in a system fundamentally different from the American canon. Snyder's message may be seen in the statement that this other system carries its meaningful order both on the surface – in day-to-day activities –, and inside – in spiritual exercise. Whereas day-to-day America is determined by material superficiality.

The juxtaposition of unhealthy middle-class American heresy versus wholesome Japanese spirituality is a little "lopsided" in itself and contradicts Snyder's above mentioned view about the "Great Subculture". In order to set the record straight again, one has to be careful in distinguishing which side of the United States and the culture in comparison the author talks about in each instance. American society is the image of senseless *entropy*<sup>739</sup>, while the American mountains bear the promise of salvation from man's earthly struggle. Also, Snyder joins Kerouac in his praise for the outlaw and "working class hero", the one who creates significance either by turning away from the established *modus operandi* and/or by his own hands' work. Japan, on the other hand, almost exclusively stands for the pure, simple and right, for a system of meaning without artificialness. Yet, we do find hints at another side of the coin, too. In "Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji" Snyder quotes the Japanese participating in a Zen meditation session saying: "Are there really some Americans interested in Zen?' they ask with astonishment – for their own countrymen pay them scant attention."<sup>740</sup>

It therefore becomes obvious that Snyder sees benefit in both cultures, to be combined to create a truly inspiring foundation for human being on its way to self-fulfilment.

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<sup>738</sup> Snyder, "Glacier Peak ...", p.102

<sup>739</sup> *Entropy* = a term borrowed from physical science, which was employed by postmodern writers for a system that fails to use its inherent energy for meaningful output but uses itself up by accelerated repetition, eventually ending in a complete stillstand.

"The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom ..., meditation ..., and morality ..."<sup>741</sup>

In his writing Gary Snyder created an "odd extension" of the Transcendentalists' views, "the American bum" and "added some Buddhism to it".<sup>742</sup> His re-orientation in a phase of spiritual dissatisfaction in the United States was a melange of earlier American thought revisited and Asian ideals re-discovered. With the Transcendentalists he shared the conviction that there was something good and meaningful buried under the middle-class materialism of contemporary America, something that was more accessible in foreign cultures, such as the Japanese. He also joined his predecessors in their opinion that it was the current state of affairs in the United States, rather than a fundamental characteristic, which had temporarily robbed it of meaning. At the same time, Snyder did not recognize Japan *per se* as the ultimate answer to his quest but concentrated his view on a symbolized perception of the land of the rising sun as shelter for those yearning for purity and simplicity in life. Consequently, Snyder constructs his identity as a spiritual seeker in relation to what he notes as valid in East and West. He and the other two representatives of the Beat movement discussed in this chapter show truly religious traits. Contradicting their ciritics, the Beats were neither anti-American nor anti-religious. They were simply not in tune with the official look on things but turned back (to the American past) and away (to the East) for inspiration. Kerouac had insisted that he and his fellowmen were on a spiritual quest, and that "if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side".<sup>743</sup>

## Summary

Gary Snyder had experienced Japanese culture through personal observation, whereas Kerouac could only speak from hearsay. Snyder rarely ponders his own being in the texts I chose for examination. He is more focused on observations of his environment and the general state of mankind. Japan frequently comes forth in his work, thereby offering itself as a ready alternative to day-to-day conduct in the United States. Although the tendency is doubtlessly there, we cannot define

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<sup>740</sup> Snyder, "Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji", in: Earth House Hold, p.51

<sup>741</sup> Snyder, "Buddhism and ...", p.92

<sup>742</sup> Ref. to Tonkinson, p.172

a clear anti-American pro-Japan attitude. Instead, Snyder singles out a number of images from each culture to support his theory of what he calls the "Great Subculture". Other than Kerouac Snyder knows Japan from prolonged stays, yet his insistence remains that it does not matter where one seeks enlightenment, "for which one needs only 'the ground beneath one's feet'"<sup>744</sup>. Enlightenment both for Snyder and Kerouac is equal to an immediate experience of the world, the sensation of feeling alive and awake in every moment of existence, a wholeness of being. Rexroth was the older and more intellectual contemporary. His celebration of Japanese culture takes place on a different level. He displays an intimate knowledge of Japanese language and literature and as a translator of Japanese poetry sees himself as a mediator of the foreign culture. Rexroth works against the myth of Japanese uniqueness by frequently drawing comparisons to other cultures. Simultaneously he praises a life-style concentrated on essentials, i.e. the simplicity and purity we already encountered as often quoted ideals in Kerouac and in Snyder.

The transitoriness of earthly existence is a motive present in all of these Beat writers. While middle-class America tried to find stability in the icons of materialism, Kerouac, Snyder and Rexroth sought persistence in a new blueprint for being. Social norms and expectations did not carry any weight for them. I selected the three of them not only as examples for a spiritual movement but also as representatives of three stages of occupation with a different culture.

In Kerouac's writing we find the I-narrator still struggling hard to find his place, that is his identity in the America of the 1950s. The desire to settle down is just as strong as the recurring need to move on towards new borders. The reader witnesses how the protagonist is trying to leave the past behind him and with it the restrictions of the traditional cultural community. But he also learns about his return to his home town, where he indulges in pastimes of his childhood. The narrator's described glimpses of revelation are of momentary quality, and his insistence on his own Buddhahood speaks of the barriers he has yet to overcome. To put it in Snyder's words: "If a Bodhisattva retains the thought of an ego, a person, a being, or a soul, he is no more a Bodhisattva."<sup>745</sup> Kerouac's images of Asia and Japan in particular remain vague because of lack of personal experience on the one hand. More importantly, he appears intentionally selective

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<sup>743</sup> Charters, p.6

<sup>744</sup> Snyder, "Buddhism and ...", p.91

in accepting or refusing ingredients of a certain culture to formulate his individual understanding of the true way to self-fulfilment.

What the three authors have in common is the shared experience of frustration with the state of affairs in the United States of their time, the desire to create a different and thus meaningful way of existence for themselves and their brothers and sisters in thought, and the perception of Asia/Japan as a possible and valid alternative to the belief system of their homeland. Furthermore they all go with the assumption that what can be achieved by adopting the philosophy and way of living of Japan is not unfamiliar to America. Like their predecessors, the Transcendentalists, they find something outside of their turf that has been lost but can be retrieved for their culture, provided that there is a change in perspective. Japan stands for the inspiration to look beyond officially sanctioned modes of conduct and mental sets.

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<sup>745</sup> Snyder, "Lookout's Journal", p.10

## Conclusion

Man thirsts to be deceived, said Emerson. Not because we are too stupid or too lazy to make our own judgments, but because this is how we cope with life. The perception of the Other requires a sense of the Self and at the same time is the foundation for its creation. Perception means to consciously and subconsciously view the world before the background of one's experiences and expectations of life. Nothing is observed without context and concept, and this study tried to prove that it is an illusion to believe that it could be otherwise. It also tried to show that there is no ultimate truth and no natural keepers of it, who would be authorized to judge on the state of enlightenment for each of us. Truth is what we make of it, reality in William James's words is simply the relation to our life. Thus, truth is our personal interpretation of being, it is based on our reality construct, the set of beliefs and standards we have come to accept. Nevertheless, life is confusing. New information overwhelms us every second of our existence, some of it fits our pre-set concepts of life, some does not. This is why we seek the security of a larger group of individuals who share the same beliefs. They help us find our place in society, they help us define the boundaries between what we think is right and what we perceive as wrong. Consequently, there are many different "truths", defended by the social, national or else defined groups that established them. One could say that there are as many "truths" as there are people on this planet, because each of them entertains a slightly different worldview. This explains why communication between individuals, let alone nations or religious communities, appears to be so utterly difficult if not impossible at times. But there is in my view one thing that is common to all men and that is that very need to create a sense of meaning, a sense of belonging and a purpose in life. This seems so obvious, but at the same time we struggle hard to accept that the convictions of the Other, because they may be so diametrically opposed to our convictions, are based on the same human condition and either just as legitimate or illegitimate. We assume *they* are wrong because they do not share *our* view, which by one authority or another was proclaimed good and right, but it is also vice versa.

The previous chapters were designed to explain the mechanisms of the construction of social realities in general and the creation and utilization of images of Japan in American literature in particular. With this, I hope that I was successful in proving that there is grounds to be convinced that there is no singular truth, not for the "Japanese character" nor for anything else, but a common *Urerfahrung* that all beings share. The *Urerfahrung* is an immediacy with being, which explains the reason for our existence beyond doubt. The longing to regain this meaningful existence persists. Many of the supposedly unique Japanese traits that were presented to us by the *nihonjinron* proponents accordingly are not so different from the characteristics of other cultural entities. This particularly applies to group orientation – what is society if not a formation of a group, the conventions of which its members "surrender" to? What Benedict branded as the Japanese "shame culture" could also be understood as a social system that relies on its members' willingness to repay their debt because the system cares for them. Fans and critics of the "Japanese system" alike have determined feudal structures as a core component. But are these structures, if defined in the above terms of a (paternalistic) group, not the building blocks of many modern nation states? To be fair to those who wrote about Japan in the past I agree with Reischauer in his preface to the revised edition of *The Japanese Today*, which itself underwent many changes over the years, that "the Japanese themselves have not changed greatly in so short a period, but knowledge about Japan among foreigners and attitudes toward the Japanese have changed".<sup>746</sup>

Several of the authors I discussed recognized the "illusionary appearance of the outer world", but many others did not. What I would like to be the gist of this examination is that stereotyping in itself is not bad. We have seen that it is a natural ingredient of human identity-creation. The problem lies in the manifestation of such judgments as infallible truths, which leads to rejection of observations that do not fit the pattern and to condemnation of the Other as false or evil. War propaganda on both sides of the Pacific utilized man's tendency to take for granted what is presented to him "through the medium of organized authority"<sup>747</sup>. But communication means exchanging information, giving and accepting views of the world. The accepting part is important. Conversing with other individuals has to imply the willingness to acknowledge their opinions as

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<sup>746</sup> Reischauer, Edwin O.: *The Japanese Today*. Change and Continuity. Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p.v – For criticism of Reischauer's earlier works ref. to Glazer.

worthwhile as our own. It is vital to accept that, in Rorty's words, somebody may come up with a better idea. And is this not what democracy is all about? To establish a basis for communication and peaceful coexistence, democracy acknowledges and respects the pluralism of worldviews. It calls for compromise and voluntary subordination to majority decisions. Democracy is therefore not interested in truth, it "simply" aims at establishing an equilibrium for the sake of social peace.

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<sup>747</sup> Dewey, p.58



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## **Kurzbiographie Ines Sandra Freesen**

Ines Freesen, geboren 1966 in Jülich, studierte von 1985 bis 1988 Betriebswirtschaftslehre in Siegen und Essen und wechselte im Wintersemester 1988 an die Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf mit der Fachkombination Anglistik und Modernes Japan. Ihre Studienschwerpunkte waren die amerikanische Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, sowie die japanische Kultur und Wirtschaft seit der Landesöffnung im 19. Jahrhundert. Mit einem Vergleich des Zen-Buddhismus und der Weltsicht des amerikanischen Philosophen Ralph Waldo Emerson erlangte Ines Freesen 1993 den Magister-Abschluß. Im Anschluß begann sie ihr Promotionsvorhaben, eine Untersuchung von Wahrnehmung und Identitätsbildung am Beispiel des Japanbildes in der amerikanischen Literatur. Gleichzeitig arbeitete Ines Freesen seit 1994 zunächst an der Universität, dann einige Jahre für einen amerikanischen Messeveranstalter. 1999 trat sie in das von ihrem Vater gegründete Unternehmen Freesen & Partner GmbH ein, das sie inzwischen leitet. Sie lebt mit ihrem Mann im niederrheinischen Alpen.

## **Short biography Ines Sandra Freesen**

Ines Freesen, born 1966 in Jülich (Germany), studied Business Economics in Siegen and Essen from 1985 to 1988, before she changed to English Studies and Modern Japan at the Heinrich-Heine-University of Düsseldorf. During her time at the university, she focused on 19th and 20th century American literature, and Japanese culture and economics since the country's opening in the 19th century. In 1993, Ines Freesen graduated as Magistra Artium with a paper comparing Zen Buddhism and the worldview of American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Following her graduation she started working on her dissertation project on perception and identity creation, using the image of Japan in American literature as an example. Simultaneously, Ines Freesen took up a job at the university in 1994, then worked for an American trade show organizer for several years. In 1999 she joined the family business Freesen & Partner GmbH founded by her father, which she now runs. She lives with her husband in Alpen in the Lower Rhine Area.



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