Western Representations of Japan & Orientalism

1. Getting Started

Q1.1 What do you think are some common Western images of (or ways of representing) Japan and Japanese people?

Look at the Western representations of Japan below

Q1.2 Which year do you think these representations are from and why? How do they represent Japan & Japanese people?

Q1.3 What similarities and differences do you notice between these representations? How do these changes and continuities relate to the date of the representation?
2. **Nippon: Being Japanese – a British documentary about Japan**

a) *Nippon: Being Japanese* is a BBC TV documentary that was made at the end of the 1980s to explain Japanese people and society to British people and other Westerners. It is particularly concerned with trying to understand Japan’s rapid economic development after WWII.

Q2.1 What aspects of Japan and being Japanese do you think the documentary will emphasize?

b) Watch the title sequence of the documentary.

Q2.2 What kinds of images of Japan does the title sequence use? What do these signify (mean)?

c) Now watch the first few minutes of the programme.

Q2.3 How does this section represent ‘being Japanese’? What signifiers (images of Japanese-ness) does it present?

Q2.4 How does the documentary explain Japanese economic development?

Q2.5 What do you think of the representations of Japan and Japaneseness in the opening section of Nippon?

Q2.6 How do you think a documentary about Japan made today would differ? How would it represent Japaneseness?

3. **The Bridge on the River Kwai – a 1950s British-American movie**

a) *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (戦場にかける橋) is an Anglo-American movie made in 1957. It is about British, and other Western, soldiers in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Thailand. The Japanese are using the British prisoners to build part of a railway line from Singapore to Rangoon in Burma, including a railway bridge over the Kwai river.

Q3.1 How do you think this movie will represent the Japanese?

b) Watch three short sections of the movie:

i) A scene in which Saito, the Japanese camp commander, talks to a group of British prisoners, and their commander, Nicholson, who have just been brought to the camp to start working on the bridge;

ii) A scene showing the building of the bridge with the Japanese engineer directing the British prisoners;

iii) A scene in which Nicholson and other British officers talk about how they would organize the building of the bridge.

Q3.2 How are the Japanese represented in these scenes? What kinds of differences between the Japanese and the British does the movie represent?

Q3.3 How do these representations differ from those in Nippon?

Q3.4 What do you think of the representations of the Japanese in this movie?
Dialogue from Nippon

Narrator:
The basic character of the Japanese is part of the Japanese story, as they’ve risen to become one of the wealthiest nations in the world. And the question that’s obsessed both foreigners, and the Japanese people themselves, is: How different are they? What is it about being Japanese – the attitudes and habits of everyday life - that helps to account for their success?

One hundred and twenty three million now live in the crowded islands of Japan, which changed at astonishing speed from an old feudal society, just under a hundred years ago, to a modern industrial state.

These are the men Japan depends on to drive the economy forward. They’re stoic, uncomplaining and hardworking. And what helps to motivate them is a degree of loyalty and commitment to the company that they work for that is seldom seen in the West.

At the age of 60, Mr. Teruo Oshima has just started his retirement, but he spent all his life as a middle manager with one firm and still feels part of it.

Mr. Oshima:
In Japan, company employees have a strong awareness of being part of a nobility. I think you can trace it back to when we had a feudal society, the samurai society where everyone served according to his position in the feudal hierarchy. Because Japan has been such an isolated country and had little contact with the outside world, the Japanese have evolved their own traditions and developed according to them. That’s what I think.

Narrator:
The firm Mr Oshima works for, close to Mount Fuji itself, is the Fuji Film Company. The people who work for it are among the 30% of the Japanese labour force who enjoy higher pay and greater security because they work for a large company.

Ashigara, 60 miles west of Tokyo is a typical Japanese town with shops, family firms and small factories. This is a film about the people who work for a big company and about the balance they strike between their time at work and their families at home.

4. Western Representations of Japan as Orientalism

Edward Said, a Palestinian writer, has used the term Orientalism to describe the ways that the West, particularly Britain, France and the United States, has represented the Orient, since the middle of the 18th century. In Orientalism, the Orient refers to an area from Egypt and the Middle East across Asia to China and Japan, that is often thought of one region by the West. It is also sometimes called the East or Asia (e.g. the Asian group in World Cup soccer usually includes East Asian countries such as Japan, China, Korea, South East Asian countries such as Thailand, Southern Asian countries such as India, central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, and Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.)

Orientalism always emphasises the superiority or the West over the Orient in some way (civilization, democracy, literature, morals, science). Much of the Orient was colonized and ruled by the West, so the discourse of Orientalism can be seen as a way of rationalizing or justifying the West’s colonial rule.
Some key features of Orientalism:

- The Orient is always represented as very different from the West – the Orient is the West’s ‘other’.

- Orientalism often describes the relationship between the West and the Orient in terms of binary differences or oppositions. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The West</th>
<th>The Orient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Childish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Animal/closer to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Sexual/sensual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool/calm</td>
<td>Hot/spicy/wild</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Whatever specific form these differences take, the underlying difference represented is usually that the West is more advanced or superior to the Orient in some way.

- The Orient is often represented as one place and all Oriental people are represented as having similar societies, cultures, lifestyles, beliefs, personalities, etc.

- The way Orientalism represents the Orient often reflects the West’s own ideas, concerns and fears more than the ‘reality’ of the Orient.

- The Orient is difficult to understand, mysterious and inscrutable – we have to look behind the mask to understand it.

- The Orient is usually represented as traditional, less developed than the West and basically unchanging – however modern the Orient looks on the surface, the basic character of the Orient is less advanced than the West.

5. Representations of Japan in Western magazines and advertising
These images are mostly from British advertising and magazines (a few are American). In them, we can see how Orientalism shapes the British view of Japan, and how the specific images of Japan have changed over time but certain key themes have stayed the same.

Q5.1 What common themes (images) do you notice in these representations?

Q5.2 What kinds of differences between Japan and Britain, or the West, are represented (or suggested)?

Q5.3 What changes and continuities over time do you notice?

Q5.4 Which of the features of Orientalism do you notice?