

Politics of Hybridity: The American Neo-Imperialism in Japan

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Yumi Kinoshita
Department of Art
University of California Santa Barbara

Where is our [Japanese] reality?

This book hopes to reconsider “super flatness”, the sensibility that has contributed to and continues to contribute to the construction of Japanese culture, as a worldview, and show that it is an original concept that links the past with present and the future. During the modern period, as Japan has been Westernized, how has this “super flat” sensibility metamorphosed? If that can be grasped clearly, then our stance today will come into focus.

In this quest, the current progressive form of the real in Japan runs throughout. We might be able to find an answer to our search for a concept about our lives. “Super flatness” is an original concept of Japanese who have completely Westernized.¹

Takashi Murakami

I had an opportunity to go back to Japan in summer of 2004. This was my first time visiting my parents in Osaka since *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, which started in March 2003. I was anxious that my family and friends would have problems with me because of my conscious decision to live in America. Would they think that I supported the Bush Administration and the war? Were they going to try to convince me to leave America?

I was very surprised that none of these issues were brought up. Japan seemed to love America, and I was shocked by the lack of social and political discourse relating to this issue. What I realized through this experience was that I could no longer consider myself a “Japanese” person when I am in Japan. I don’t look like them, think like them nor behave like them. Their priorities and values differ from mine, and I am interested in understanding the origins of these differences. This experience also leads me to question the notion of “Japanese” identity and how it is structured and functions in their everyday life. In this paper, my focus will be on the historical development of a cross-cultural discourse between the United States and Japan since 1945 and its influence in social and cultural reality in contemporary Japan.

¹ Takashi Murakami, *Super Flat*. (Tokyo: Madra Publishing Co., Ltd, 2000), 5. This is an excerpt from Murakami’s *Super Flat Manifesto*.

This paper will also address the impossibility of separating American influence from Japanese cultural and political identity since 1945. It explores the notion of “Japanese reality” as a by-product of American Neo-Imperialism. Japan defines herself as “other” in relation to the US and places an emphasis on what she “lacks” in comparing with the United States. This situation causes the notion of reality to be blurred. Contemporary Japan reflects the idea of cultural and political hybridity, creating a new identity through transmutations of two distinctive cultures.

I intend to argue that the contemporary Japanese hybrid identity has its origin in the post World War II period. America occupied Japan in order to establish this “new” democratic and demilitarized country. This occupation and its influence are essential components of American Neo-Imperialism in Japan, dominated by the politics of fear and survival as a result of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This post-war occupation is considered a “successful” one, and it is also the key element in understanding the positive reception of American Neo-Imperialism by the Japanese.

The study of the relationship between Japan and America since 1945 is also relevant to the current world situation, given the spread of American Neo-Imperialism throughout the world. It is also a unique example since Japan seems to welcome cultural and political domination by the United States. My intentions are to address new hybrid identities that are created in this political paradigm and to provide insights to understand the structure and mechanics of cultural and social reality in twenty-first century Japan.

American Occupation in Japan After World War II

Where is this American political and cultural domination coming from? To see the structures and mechanics of the present, it is necessary to trace back to 1945. Post-World War II

occupation by the United States is one of the most influential events in the contemporary history of Japan. American occupation lasted from 1945 to 1952, establishing foundations for a new “Western” democratic country. Because of Pearl Harbor, the United State’s priority in rebuilding Japan was a demilitarization and demolition of any structures that might lead to militarization. The secondary mission for the post-surrender arrangement was a more ideological one—“to introduce a system of ‘democratic self-government’ in Japan.”² General Douglas MacArthur was assigned to oversee the occupation, and was instructed not “to impose upon Japan any form of government not supported by the freely expressed will of the people.”³ This was a clear message that the United State had determined that Japan was going to be a democratic country whether it wanted to or not.⁴

It is a “historical fact” that the Japanese constitution was imposed by the American government. In his book, Duncan McCargo describes the constitution, which was implemented in 1947:

The American-drafted 1947 constitution was a very different matter from the Meiji [1868-1912] constitution, imported virtually lock, stock and barrel from an alien political culture. The Emperor was stripped of all powers, and designated the “symbol” of state rather than head of state...Sovereignty now rested with the Japanese people, who elected a parliament to which the Cabinet was answerable. The authority of the legislature was greatly enhanced, and women’s suffrage was introduced for the first time. “Local autonomy” was adopted as a central principle for local and prefectural government; a range of human rights was to be protected; an independent judiciary was established; and, most controversially of all, Article 9 decreed that Japan had forever renounced the sovereign right to wage war.⁵

In addition to the constitution, the American Occupation forces carried out implementations of secondary reforms in order to encourage participation in newly founded

² Duncan McCargo, *Contemporary Japan*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

democracy.⁶ The re-establishment of the right to form unions and other interest groups was one of the more significant reforms.⁷ In addition, education was also reformed under the supervision of the Occupation forces. Nationalist textbooks were rewritten to reflect the notion of democracy, and the new decentralized education system created many “new degree-granting institutions.”⁸ How did the Japanese respond to these major social and political infrastructure changes imposed by the American Occupation forces? Were they able to adjust to the transformation of national identity? What are the consequences of accepting democracy provided by the United States and the fact that the Japanese did not have to fight for “freedom”?

Japan was an imperial-nationalist country. The emperor was believed to be God, and a few powerful political and militaristic figures controlled the country. Wars and invasions that Japan instigated in other parts of Asia were done in the name of “God” in order to benefit those few powerful figures. Therefore, even before the end of World War II, the Japanese people were suffering from extreme poverty, a situation created by the militaristic government. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were devastating events for the Japanese: at the same time, the consequences of these atomic bomb attacks played a crucial role in creating a bond between Japan and the United States, which has become the foundation of Neo-American Imperialism in Japan. Kazuo Kawai argues that the American Occupation was the most powerful concentration of foreign influence ever to be exerted on Japan and its effect on the Japanese is not likely to ever fade away.⁹

The American Occupation re-arranged its priorities by 1948 because of the United States’ involvement in the Cold War. Democratization of Japan was no longer the priority: instead the Occupation forces focused on “forging an economically strong and self-sufficient nation, which

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kazuo Kawai, *Japan’s American Interlude*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), v.

would form a robust bulwark against communism in Asia.”¹⁰ This introduced the notion of survival within the capitalistic modes of production, resulting in even more dependency on the United States.

World War II destroyed a nineteenth-century idea of “Japan,” and ironically, the Korean War provided the foundation for Japan’s economic boost in creating a twentieth-century capitalistic construction of “Japan.” The American Occupation forces used Japan as a military strategic base during the Korean War. As a result, Japan experienced over-night economic transformation—from deep depression to the first economic boom since the end of World War II.¹¹ The United States revived and used the Japanese military industry to produce weapons, planes, automobiles and other military supplies. A number of other industries also benefited from the Korean War—the transportation industry, construction industry, service industry, textile industry, just to list a few.¹²

By the end of 1950, the United States spent over 600 million dollars in Japan and over 1.6 billion dollars for the next five-year period.¹³ This economic boom, a by-product of the Korean War, improved the condition of life in Japan and laid the foundation to survive within the global capitalism. One could say that Japan and the United States created political and economic ties during the period of 1945 to 1955, but this relationship was based on an “imperialistic” model. Overtime, ties between Japan and the United States have transformed into this political, cultural, economic and social dependency, which is based on global capitalism.

¹⁰ McCargo, 28.

¹¹ Akira Fujihara, *Japanese History Volume 15: Japan in the World*. (Tokyo: Shogakkan, 1986), 140.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

Postmodernism and Cultural Identity

This situation we have is an example of a postmodern and postcolonial study subject. Under political and economic domination by the United States, how was the notion of “Japanese” identity created? How did it effect the creation of “culture” in Japan and how was it represented? How can we trace the genealogy of contemporary Japanese cultural identity within the postcolonial framework?

In his book, *Godzilla on My Mind*, William Tsutsui uses Godzilla (*Gojira* in Japanese) as a cultural artifact, reflecting the Japanese fear of American domination. The original *Gojira* film was produced in 1954 by Tomoyuki Tanaka and considered “a somber, gripping, and thought-provoking film” by the Japanese audience at the time of its release.¹⁴ Tsutsui explains that “the original *Gojira* was a sincere horror film, intended to frighten rather than amuse, which engaged honestly—indeed, even grimly—with contemporary Japanese unease over a mounting nuclear menace, untrammled environmental degradation, and long shadows of World War II.”¹⁵ *Gojira* was created when Tanaka was flying back home from Indonesia. Looking at the Pacific Ocean, he thought, “What if a dinosaur sleeping in the Southern Hemisphere had been awakened and transformed into a giant by the Bomb? What if it attacked Tokyo?”¹⁶

Tsutsui points out the complexity behind the birth of *Gojira*: he describes that *Gojira* was “spawned from a virtual primordial soup of political concerns, cultural influences, cinematic inspirations, genre traditions, economic crassness, simple opportunism, and sheer creativity.”¹⁷ *Gojira* became a prototype of a new genre of film in Japan—*kaijyu eiga* (monster films), which was considered to be science fiction. In her essay, “The Imagination of Disaster” (1965) Susan

¹⁴ William Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Sontag argues that *kaijyu-eiga* are “not about science per se, but instead are about disaster.”¹⁸

Sontag claims that monster films are about the voyeuristic spectacle of disaster and the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering and destruction.¹⁹ They also reflect fundamental characteristics of “atomic-age life”:

We live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allows most people to cope with these twin specters. For one job that fantasy can do is to life us out of the unbearably humdrum and to distract us from terrors—real or anticipated—by an escape into exotic, dangerous situations which have last-minute happy endings. But another of the things that fantasy can do is to normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it.²⁰

This notion of “fear” and the manipulation of it becomes a crucial element in the creation of postmodern hybrid Japanese identity. Politics of fear also is embedded in the relationship between Japan and the United States and plays a key role in “Neo-American Imperialism” in contemporary Japan.

Neo-American Imperialism?

So, what do I mean by Neo-American Imperialism in contemporary Japan? What would it be in the contexts of postmodernism and globalization? In their book, *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose a new concept of “Empire.” They define the term Empire as follow:

Throughout the contemporary transformations, political controls, state function, and regulatory mechanisms have continued to rule the realm of economic and social production and exchange. Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 108.

The authors make a distinction between the concept of Empire and imperialism. The notion of sovereignty of the nation-state was the fundamental ideology supporting the imperialism throughout the modern era.²² In contrast, Empire blurs the necessity for the sovereignty of the nation-state and incorporates the entire global realm.²³ As a result, Empire operates under conditions of “hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command,” which are driven by the capitalistic mode of production.²⁴ In addition, in this postmodernization of the global economy, the authors suggest, “the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another.”²⁵ So what is “a single logic of rule” under this circumstance? The authors give us a very straightforward answer to this question:

Many locate the ultimate authority that rules over the processes of globalization and the new world order in the United States. Proponents praise the United States as the world leader and sole superpower, and detractors denounce it as an imperialist oppressor... If the nineteenth century was a British century, then the twentieth century has been an American century; or really, if modernity was European, then postmodernity is American.²⁶

The authors argue that Empire is a concept rather than a metaphor and is “characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries.”²⁷ How does this apply to the relationship between Japan and the United States? Is it possible to locate this hybrid identity? What does it mean to be “Japanese” or “American” in the postmodern Empire era? In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha establishes the framework for analyzing contemporary culture and

²¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.

²² *Ibid.*, xii.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

society in relation to the notion of identity. Bhabha suggests that it is necessary to locate culture in the realm of the *beyond*:

The move away from the singularities of “class” or “gender” as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think *beyond* narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.²⁸

In this postmodern Empire era, every aspect of life seems to be blurred, requiring of us a careful re-examination of existing terms, concepts and ideologies. This “re-thinking” of the present involves tracing back to the past, and in the process of historicization of the present, one can observe similarities and differences, connections and disconnections between “present” and “past.” For example, one can make a connection between the American Occupation in Japan after World War II and *Operation Iraqi Freedom* in terms of functions and consequences of the United States as a superpower in the world. At the same time, one can see clear differences due to the transmutation of the idea of war, which is now based on the hope “of democracy on a global scale.”²⁹

In their book, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Hardt and Negri begin by quoting John Dewey: “War under existing conditions compels all nations, even those professedly the most democratic, to turn authoritarian and totalitarian.”³⁰ This quote reflects the current condition of the United States, which is experiencing the blurring of democracy and

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

²⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), xi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

authoritarianism on everyday basis. In the era of Neo-American Imperialism (or Empire suggested by Hardt and Negri), it is contagious and transmutable. An attempt to answer questions regarding the relationship between contemporary Japan and the United States provides a complex and blurring “world picture.” It requires further research on the United States as a world power in relationship to the rest of the world in a context of global war and capitalism. What becomes important under this circumstance are a careful observation and analysis of the present in social, cultural, economic, political, and historical perspectives and a questioning of existing discourses.

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