

國際理解科目 P.A.C.

O'CONNOR **JAPAN'S
MODERN IMAGE**

- **KNOWLEDGE IN THE INFORMATION AGE**
- **FILM: 30 Minutes over Tokyo [1999]**
- **QUESTIONNAIRE**

WEEK 13 READING 1

WHAT DO AMERICANS KNOW ABOUT JAPAN?

THE TWO MOST POWERFUL INSTITUTIONS AFFECTING THE LIVES OF CITIZENS IN ADVANCED INDUSTRIALISED DEMOCRACIES TODAY MAY WELL BE THE STATE AND THE MASS COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA (KRAUSS 2000: 1).

This power is attested to and buttressed by most people's willingness to take their worldview from their local media, rather than from propaganda provided by foreign interests. This is in some ways a curious preference, given that behind the local media stands the state which taxes them, sends their children to war and asks for their vote, while behind the foreign media stand interests that ask only for sympathy and friendship. Such irrationality is sent to try the propagandist, but still the effort is made.

Looking back at pre-war propaganda between the West and Japan, one has to ask what difference it all made. In the twenty years from the foundation of the *Gaimushō Jōhōbu* to Pearl Harbor, for all the cloudbursts of cherry blossoms, shiploads of stone lanterns and dolls, and piles of friendly magazines; for all the efforts of the Japan Society and the Japan-America Society, the *Japan Times* and all their sister associations and publications, and for all the official banquets and speeches honouring political and intellectual celebrities visiting Japan from the West - for all these hands reaching across the ocean, few of those involved had much idea of who as opposed to what they were opposed to in the late 1930s and who they were fighting after December 1941.

Are things any different today? Do we know any better? In our time, Japan's foreign audiences seem much more knowledgeable than in the past, or are they merely more knowing? In the 1990s, films like *Rising Sun* repackaged the 'Yellow Peril' for late twentieth century audiences, but do such films occupy any higher ground when they address insiders? In *Black Rain*, when Takakura Ken explains to Michael Douglas that he cannot shop his corrupt Osaka police colleagues because, 'You see, I'm one of the group', the film implicitly confers a certain savvy on audience members who appreciate the finer points of Takakura Ken's dilemma and nod along with Michael Douglas, but it does not really exercise their understanding. This sort of veiled ignorance is an old Hollywood habit, but it is interesting to see the way Japan plays along with it in the content of her overseas festivals and other promotions.

In any case, whatever we know or think we know, the ways and means of knowing have changed. The distinctions between people on the spot in Japan and Japan watchers overseas, between experts and non-specialists, even between time zones, now mean less and less as the net opens up the same sources of information and much of the access to experts to anyone who can click a mouse. Nowadays, none of the really interesting Japan-related mailing list discussions take place without contributions from at least three continents, and the mailers' location seems to govern their outlook far less than it did even as recently as the 1970s, when the distinction between local and foreign Japan watchers was much clearer. Place is almost irrelevant, although one place is the object of discussion. The Internet, *pace* Pascal, has put our centre nowhere and our circumference everywhere, but the modern image of Japan seems to stay where it has always been. Anywhere but Japan. Anytime but now. **Just ask Bart Simpson. He'll tell you.**

Reading 2: The Simpsons do Japan: 30 Minutes over Tokyo



IN JAPAN, THE SIMPSONS CARTOON SERIES IS SHOWN ON THE FOX CHANNEL ON CABLE TV, IN THE ORIGINAL AND IN TRANSLATION.

However, the episode we are going to watch this week has not been broadcast in Japan, probably because it was made before Fox began broadcasting the Simpsons here and is out of date. This episode is not flattering to the Japanese, but neither is it likely to cause too much offense. The Simpsons regularly makes forays into the world outside America but most viewers see the funny side. Here's a TV summary

After attending a seminar on how to live beyond your means, Homer and his clan jet off to Japan. Unfortunately, trouble ensues when they squander all their money and must resort to desperate measures in order to afford the flight home.

NEEDLESS TO SAY all the Japanese people in the show speak English (with a Japanese accent). It's the same wherever The Simpsons goes (go). Everybody speaks English with an accent. The programme is full of 1990s Japan references – Nintendo, the Hello Kitty factory, Pokemon (the battling seizure robots that apparently caused many Japanese children to suffer epileptic attacks), the Kabuki play *Chushingura*, the film *Rashomon*, a Japanese TV game show called “Electric Irritating Stick” in which contestants receive powerful electric shocks, (motto: “**We don't reward knowledge; we punish ignorance**”), square watermelons, various monster movies including Godzilla. This is the sort of Japan where the Hotel sign says: **Royal Tokyo NOW WITH 20% MORE BOWING**. There is a place called ‘Americatown’ featuring robots of Marilyn Monroe, E.T., Abe Lincoln and the Statue of Liberty. A waiter wears a T-shirt with the words “UCLA YANKEE COLA”.



Another sign **PRICE OF A TOKYO GOLF MEMBERSHIP \$3.85475** Outside a sumo match: **SAKATUMI VS NAKADOWNA** **The Happy Smile Super Family challenge Show** (above)

In the end, Homer and family get on the Happy Smile Super Family Challenge Show (above) and get completely humiliated (the purpose of the show). The show manages to spoof Japanese ‘cruelty’ without really making any serious points. Homer Simpson seems to be slower and more bemused on this episode than usual.

Thirty Minutes over Tokyo says far more about the way America views the world than it says about Japan. The objective truth that journalism aims for and courts try to establish is not at issue here. This is entertainment. But there is a special quality of ironical, post-modern ‘knowingness’ about *The Simpsons*, and about their view of Japan, that colours perceptions and responds to the cultural requirements of a particular kind of audience. We should know that, just as with *Black Rain* or expensive whisky, consuming Bart Simpson and family's ups and downs grants their audiences a satisfying sense of their powers of discrimination and taste.

Japan's Modern Image Week 13 QUESTIONNAIRE: THIRTY MINUTES OVER TOKYO (THE SIMPSONS, MAY 1999)	Name Date	No.
1. What is <i>Thirty Minutes over Tokyo</i> about?	2. Do you think the Japanese characters were like real Japanese people?	
3. Do you think the Simpson family understand Japan?	4. Are Japanese TV game shows really so cruel? Give some examples.	
5. Do you think <i>Thirty Minutes over Tokyo</i> is just entertainment? Can we learn something from it?	6. Why do the Simpsons go to Japan?	
7. Did you enjoy <i>Thirty Minutes over Tokyo</i> ?	8. The Simpsons series has about 75 million regular TV viewers around the world. Why is it so popular?	
9. Any other comments on <i>Thirty Minutes over Tokyo</i> ?		