

**Transcultural Representations of Japan in Four Chimneys:  
Japan's National Image in UNESCO's Orient Project 1957-1959**

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**1. Introduction**

In 1957, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and the BFI (the British Film Institute) launched a project aiming to produce a catalogue of Eastern films suitable for Western distribution. The project resulted in a 1959 publication *Orient. A Survey of Films Produced in Countries of Arab and Asian Culture*, the aim of which was to promote the presentation of films that might give Western audiences a fuller and more informed idea of the ways of life of Eastern peoples. The final publication consists of two parts: part 1 includes feature films suitable for screening at film festivals in order to help the West better comprehend and appreciate the culture of Asian and Arab countries, and part 2 focuses on documentaries and short films for television distribution (UNESCO, Elements of the contract to be concluded with the British Film Institute, 1957). The countries included in part 1 are Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Japan, Korea, Malaya, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Arab Republic and the U.S.S.R.. Part 1 includes 139 feature films, out of which 37 are Japanese. The majority of the films included in the Survey were produced in the 1950s. At the time, Japan was the world's largest film maker (UNESCO, Film and Cinema Statistics, 1955). Based on this, the seemingly large number of Japanese films included in the Survey seems proportional.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how representations of Japanese national image can be conceptualised in the context of the Survey project. To do so, I analyse *Four Chimneys* (Entotsu no mieru basho, 煙突の見える場所, 1953), a Japanese post-war film included in the Survey and seen fit to familiarise Western audiences with Japanese culture. The film is perhaps better known in the West as *Where Chimneys Are Seen*, but in this paper I use the title from the catalogue. The notion of a Japanese essence has been common in Japanese post-war political discourse (Leheny, 2009, pp. 117-119). Japaneseness is traditionally defined in terms of both cultural and racial homogeneity, and Western studies of Japanese cinema have traditionally focused on its status as a cinematic other or an alternative mode of representation problematizing Hollywood's hegemony (Yoshimoto, 1991). By adding the level of representation, I hope to avoid both the traditional, simplifying notions of

Japaneseness and the approach of evaluating Japanese cinema through polar oppositions, and move towards an understanding of how a national image can be represented through film.

David Leheny (2009, p. 115) argues that the most distinctive feature about Japan's international stance is the durability of the idea of Japanese distinctiveness, defining Japan as a space where the modern and the traditional and the East and the West meet. Takeuchi Rio (2010, p. 37) suggests that starting from the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese people, faced with a continuous stream of Western influences, attempted to find strategies for balancing between the 'traditional' Japanese ways and the 'modern' Western ways. This process can be detected in the collection of Japanese films chosen for the Survey. *Four Chimneys* in particular provides a practical example of representations of the balancing process between these conceptual polarisations. Based on this dichotomy, the focus here is on the representations of two pairs of concepts: traditional and modern; and Eastern and Western. *Four Chimneys* being included in the film catalogue is discussed here as a representation of Japan's national image through the concepts of East and West, as well as traditional and modern. It needs to be noted that, for the filmmakers, the conceptual interplay of Eastern and Western, and traditional and modern was probably merely one aspect of telling a story. For them, this discussion was maybe mainly contextual, whereas in this paper it is looked at as conceptual. In *Four Chimneys*, the storytelling is rather straightforward, and thus tracing the representations of these conceptual pairs is done in a quite direct manner. This reading is added through my own interpretation process aiming to address the issue of conceptualising Japanese culture through representation.

Representation is understood here as the construction of meaning through communicative acts, in this case words and images. Pictures and images function like a language: they are signs or symbols, which carry, construct and transmit meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 19; Mitchell, 1986, p. 8). Films, as a combination of words and images, are addressed here as struggles over meaning making. Stuart Hall (1997, pp. 17-19) distinguishes between two systems of representation. The first one enables us to give meaning by constructing a set of correspondences between things and our system of concepts. The second one depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our system of concepts and a set of signs or symbols organized into various languages, which represent those concepts. Representation is the process which links things, concepts and signs together. In order to interpret visual material we must have access to these two systems of representation.

The relationship between national image and culture is rather problematic. To address this issue, Japan is discussed here as a cultural hybrid both internally and in relation to the conceptual polarisation of East and West. This allows me to question the essentialist view of culture, which sees culture as a representation of the essential character of a specific nation or a group of people, distinguishing them from others. The term cultural hybrid here does not refer to the traditional understanding of cultural hybridisation, which is usually seen to form as a result of a mutually dependent relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in constructing a shared culture

(Bhabha, 1994). One option here would be to instead turn to the idea of transculturalism, which is rooted in evoking sympathy and based on the idea of seeing yourself in the other. Richard Sennett (2013, p. 21) discusses sympathy in relation to empathy, noting that they both convey recognition, but sympathy overcomes differences through imaginative acts of identification, whereas empathy attends to another person on his or her own terms. Here, a more accurate approach might be that of empathy, or encountering the other as it truly is, embodied in the idea of transculturality (Welsch, 1999). This concept rather well captures my own take on the conceptual polarisations of traditional and modern and Eastern and Western, setting the focus on the significant border areas of these concepts. Thus, transculturality, defined here as the transformation processes resulting from and unfolding through relationships and contacts between cultures, forms the theoretical framework for the analysis.

## 2. Representations of Japaneseness in *Four Chimneys*

*Four Chimneys* is directed by Goshō Heinosuke and tells the story of two couples in post-war Japan. The film's narrator, store clerk Ryukichi, and the woman he believes to be his legal wife, Hiroko, live in a poor industrial neighbourhood of Tokyo. Hiroko had assumed her first husband Tsukahara to have died in a bombing during the war and had only briefly mentioned him to Ryukichi, unwilling to talk about him more. A soon-to-be-couple, tax collector Kenzo and bargain announcer Senko, have rented their upstairs rooms. The two main couples get tangled up in a series of misfortunes brought about by Tsukahara appearing back in their lives.

*Four Chimneys* is widely considered to be one of the most important Japanese post-war films and a classic work of Japanese cinema. Donald Richie (2005, pp. 115-116) notes that Japanese filmmakers had begun moving away from copying American cinema during the Allied occupation period (1945-1952) as an attempt to redefine Japanese cinema. However, they had also been keen to avoid the 'Japaneseness' imposed on them by the wartime government. *Four Chimneys* is a result of this development. It provides an example of post-war *shomin-geki*, 庶民劇, a Japanese film genre depicting the lives of ordinary people and often referred to as common people drama. The aim is simple: to show audiences life as it truly is. *Shomin-geki* has its roots in both Japanese and Western tradition and post-war *shomin-geki* is labelled by the tension between traditional and modern, as traditional values clash with societal changes.

The title of *Four Chimneys* is a reference to one of the visually most dominant elements of the film. The film opens with a series of shots of factory chimneys with the number of chimneys visible changing as the perspective changes, although the English translation used in the Survey slightly spoils the surprise. In the film, the main function of the chimneys is to represent different takes on life emphasising one of the central themes of the film: the way our approach alters through our

changing perspective. As Ryukichi explains, 'From my house they look like three, so people around here think there are only three'. They symbolise both the characters' attitudes towards life and their struggles in adapting to the changing societal conditions of post-war Japan.

One day Hiroko comes home to find Tsukahara's abandoned baby with a letter explaining he has left the baby for Hiroko to take care of. Realising that Tsukahara is alive and Hiroko is still legally married to him, the couple is afraid to go to the police since they could be accused of bigamy. The couple is stuck with the baby and reluctantly, Hiroko takes on the task of caring for her, while Ryukichi can hardly stand the baby's presence. Hiroko and Ryukichi themselves are childless. For Ryukichi, the reasons for not having children are financial, but Hiroko's reasons are never made clear. Hiroko is a housewife, but sells gambling tickets at a bicycle race track behind her husband's back to earn extra money. This is how she has been since the war, she explains, as being independent was a way to survive. Ryukichi finds out and assumes it is a result of his wife not being content with his low salary. The main reason for his upset is, however, the fact that Hiroko had failed to discuss it with him first. Hiroko's character seems to challenge the traditional conceptions of the role of women in society. A definition of the Japanese woman as 'good wife, wise mother' (ryōsai kenbo, 良妻賢母) emerged in Japan in the early Meiji period and it quickly became the official expression for the ideal of womanhood in modern Japanese society. It defined women as guardians and managers of the household and carers of children. After World War II, the significance of 'good wife, wise mother' as a part of state ideology started to diminish, but in practice after fifty years of proclamation, the influence did not immediately disappear in the post-war era (Uno, 1993, pp. 294-295). Thus, what now comes across as traditional was in fact a fairly recent construction by the modern Japanese state.

The fighting and accusations caused by the uncertainty of the legality of her new marriage along with the baby's endless crying drive Hiroko to attempt to drown herself in a river. Kenzo suggests Ryukichi stop cowardly playing the victim and go find Tsukahara to get justice, but he refuses. Kenzo finally tracks him down to learn that Tsukahara abandoned the child after his new wife, Katsuko, left them. It is revealed that Katsuko, tired of her husband gambling away their money, actually left her husband to teach him a lesson. Tsukahara and Katsuko had fallen to the bottom of society, becoming a part of the class of outcasts from the depicted context of Tokyo as an industrial centre. In the film catalogue, words such as 'poor' and 'struggling' are used to describe Ryukichi and Hiroko, whereas Tsukahara and Katsuko are 'worthless' and 'sluttish', and leading a 'wretched' life. In the film itself, even the hardships of the lumpenproletariat, embodied in the unfortunate character of Tsukahara, are treated with sympathy: The reasons leading to Tsukahara abandoning his child are in part portrayed as a result of him gambling away his money but also as being brought about by his ongoing struggle with the legacy of the war.

Heading in the opposite direction in society, is Senko's colleague Yukiko with her newfound riches after marrying a rich older man she refers to as 'the manager'. Yukiko is presented as materialist and modern – even Western – in nature. The images of the West embodied in the character of Yukiko can be seen as symbolizing modernity and civilization. Both economically and politically Japan was one of the most successful societies in Westernising itself, even though geographically it belonged to the East (Takeuchi, 2010, p. 25). *Four Chimneys* takes place in Tokyo, which had been heavily bombed during the war. Preserving tradition had not been a key goal in the attempts to rebuild the city as fast as possible, and thus the setting itself doesn't offer a counterpart to the imagery of the modern. Images of tradition and the past are present in more subtle ways. Yukiko's historical and cultural counterforce is an old lady living next door, who's loud chanting and drumming forms a major part of the neighbourhood's soundscape. She becomes a symbol of old Japan stating that the child's endless crying is a divine punishment for the couple's faithless lifestyle. It is almost as if Goshō uses tradition as a conscious response to the contemporary society: images of tradition come across as something to compare the rapidly changing modern society with, as the representations of tradition seem to symbolise continuity.

This clash between traditional and modern can be seen as characteristic of the post-war era. The occupation of Japan by the Allied States following World War II had ended a year before the film was made and the democratisation process embodied in the enforcement of the new constitution in 1947 had brought about feelings of both optimism and uncertainty. The representations of Yukiko and the old lady also indicate Japan as a cultural hybrid in relation to the East-West polarisation. Takeuchi (2010, p. 41) notes that after the Meiji Restoration, people attempted to find equivalences of the idealized Western civilization in pre-industrialised Japan. The counter discourse to Westernisation as a civilising phenomenon was built on writings such as Nitobe Inazō's *Bushidō. The Soul of Japan* (1900), claiming that Japan also had an old, refined civilization, just as the Europeans and Americans did. *Bushidō*, treated as the spirit of Japan, was utilised to argue an equal standing between Japanese civilisation and that of the West.

Even though *Four Chimneys* was chosen to represent Japanese culture in the catalogue, it was not originally produced for the purposes of the UNESCO and BFI film catalogue project. The filmmakers themselves most probably had very different motives for producing the films, as the purpose was very likely not to educate non-Japanese audiences, but rather to provide entertainment for the Japanese ones. This sets focus on the conscious selection process of the films by UNESCO, the BFI, and the Japanese national commission for UNESCO, which aimed to address the issue of which aspects of Japanese culture were suitable for representing to others. Thus, the representations of Japanese culture in the context of the Survey were based on the Japanese representatives' own choices about which aspects of culture were to be represented to others. However, as the analysis here concentrates on only one of the 37 Japanese films included in the catalogue, we need to

consider the question of how representative is it of all the Japanese films in the Survey. The question of whether the films reflect an existing truth or produce meanings through representation, constructing a community assumed to have a shared, coherent existence needs to be considered (Bromley, 2010, p. 11; Hamilton, 1997). Whether specific films adequately and accurately express the essence of a culture is not, however, a very productive question. Taking this approach would mean assuming that films can represent the whole diversity of a culture, compressing it into what is seen on-screen (Thornley, 2009, p. 109). Instead, we can look at them as choices about which aspects are seen worthy of representing to others, setting the focus on the importance of media literacy in evaluating these interpretations (Teurlings, 2010).

One day Katsuko appears on the doorstep to claim back her baby. Hiroko and Ryukichi, having just nursed the baby back to health from a serious illness, refuse. Katsuko, confronted about her suggested inability to look after the child, storms out breaking her shoe. Yukiko, who happens to be visiting, runs after her, physically colliding with the old lady living next door. Katsuko, dressed in a kimono, and Yukiko, in a Western-style dress with high heels, confront each other and despite their contrasting appearances are united through a single gesture of empathy as Yukiko hands Katsuko one of her shoes to replace her broken geta. This scene quite neatly ties together the key themes of Eastern and Western, traditional and modern while simultaneously hinting towards a possibility of a peaceful encounter of these polarisations as key aspects of Japaneseness. Eventually Hiroko decides to return the baby to her mother. The viewer learns that Yukiko's husband has committed suicide. The reasons behind this are never made entirely clear, but it can be assumed to be the result of financial difficulties as we learn that he has passed bad checks to pay for the gifts he has given Yukiko. Katsuko and Yukiko, both now alone, share the responsibility of looking after the baby.

### **3. Conclusions**

In this paper, I have discussed how representations of Japanese national image can be conceptualised in the context of the Survey project focusing on two pairs of concepts: Eastern and Western; and traditional and modern. The analysis of *Four Chimneys* has shown that the conceptual pairs of Eastern and Western, and traditional and modern were represented as key aspects of Japaneseness. The different aspects of Japanese culture were represented as separate, but looking at *Four Chimneys* as a whole, a conscious attempt to build a collective, coherent image becomes visible. This hints towards the possibility of a peaceful coexistence of the conceptual binaries of Eastern and Western, and traditional and modern. Thus, through the analysis, Japanese culture appears internally diverse, but unified through the process of representation.

In this paper, I have also questioned the representations which compress Japanese culture into a distinguishable, homogenous system shared by the members of the society. I agree that traditionally a national culture may seek to unify its members into one cultural identity in the form of a national

image, but cultures are by no means fixed or static. They are instead continuous constructions of history and power, mediating between social processes and location. The Japanese national image represented through *Four Chimneys* is not built on the essentialist notions of culture. Instead, in the film the existence of several cultural traditions within Japan's borders is recognised, and cultural hybridity is utilised as a part of the representations of Japaneseness.

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