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Praise and Prejudice: American Attitudes Toward Japan in *Uncle Ben*

Rachel Baron, Anna Nielsen, Emily Orton

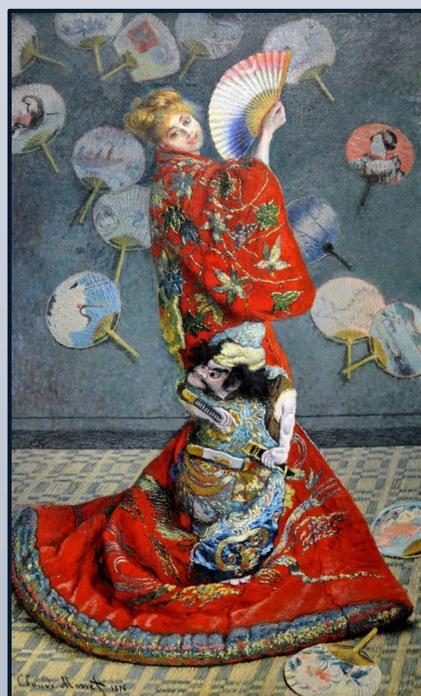
Mentor: Dr. Aaron Skabelund | Department of History

Introduction and Hypothesis

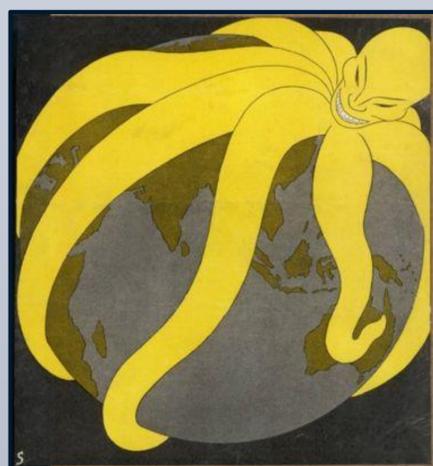
Uncle Ben in Japan is a 1933 geographical workbook intended to teach American schoolchildren about Japan. It is an issue of the Weekly Reader series *The Uncle Ben Books*, later acquired by Scholastic, that introduces the fictional international travel account of “Uncle Ben” as told through “letters home.” This text highlights both positive and negative American attitudes towards Japan in the 1930s. Although this work expresses certain views progressive for its time, it also contains evident assumptions of American national superiority.

Historical Context

The attitudes seen in *Uncle Ben* were influenced by earlier Western views of Japan and Asia in general. In the 1870s, the craze of *Japonisme* expressed the ideals of a safely distant, aestheticized female “Orient” of kimono and fans. Later discrimination, conceptualized in the racial epithet “Yellow Peril,” depicted faceless, numberless hordes in Asia poised to take over the world. These positive and negative views both exoticised Asians as “the Other.”



Left: *La Japonaise* by Claude Monet, 1876. Monet's life-size painting of his wife Camille exemplified the Western world's sudden, intense interest in the “mystic Orient” during the 1870s. This trope persisted well into the 20th century and can still be seen today. (Boston Museum of Art.)



Right: *Der japanische ‘Gehirntrust’* (The Japanese “Brain Trust”) by Erich Schilling, 1935. This satirical artwork depicts the “Yellow Peril” of the Japanese empire as an avaricious octopus threatening the rest of the globe. (From *Simplicissimus*).

Praise of Japan in *Uncle Ben*

Uncle Ben’s “letters” emphasize positive views of Japan in their adoption of Western customs and their native traditions of piety and respect.

- “Within the last few years, the Japanese have learned to eat more bread” (25).
- “[Schoolchildren] sit up at desks like American children and allow their legs and backs to grow straight” (33).
- “[Japanese children] did not say, ‘Oh please let us stay up a little longer!’ as I have heard American children say. The children of Japan obey their parents the minute they speak” (27).
- “Girls in Japan begin when they are very young to obey the ‘men folks.’ Girls generally ‘give in’ to the boys in Japan!” (27).

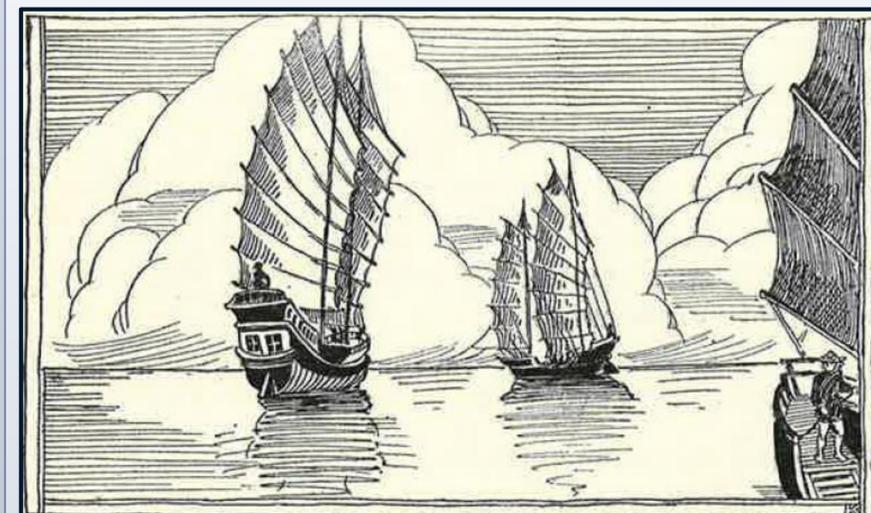


Japanese children participating in the Tokyo gymnasium drill. The central boy holds the banner of Imperial Japan, indicating the American illustrator's favorable view of Japanese patriotism and expansion. (*Uncle Ben in Japan*, 32).

Prejudice Against Japan

Despite the favorable opinions above, Uncle Ben also expresses critiques of Japanese customs and physical appearance which reveal American beliefs of superiority.

- “There was so much to see [on the train to Tokyo] that I felt as if I were at a circus” (4).
- “Japanese children always smile... their little narrow eyes twinkle” (33).
- “Everyone sits on the floor here... It is hard for me to get used to this custom. My long legs ache after sitting on the floor!” (42).
- “[A Japanese home] is like a large toy house. I keep thinking that it is not real” (20).



In the picture above, draw an American steamship passing the Japanese ships.

Readers are encouraged to engage with the text itself through simple activities. Here, the author suggests drawing a superior American vessel outperforming Japanese ships (which at the time were decidedly more advanced than the picture suggests) in their own harbor. This may be interpreted as a way for American children to consider their own national position in relation to the (supposedly inferior) Japanese people. (*Uncle Ben in Japan*, 34).

Conclusions

The view of Japan presented in *Uncle Ben in Japan* is quite progressive for its era. Nevertheless, its tone is often overly adulatory and even infantilizing, showing that the United States saw itself as a paternal Westernizing teacher to Japan. Although native Japanese traditions are portrayed as exotic and inferior, the author highlights certain qualities such as filial piety as admirable and worthy of imitation. Overall, the book's goal is to instill a sense of “American-ness” in young readers by emphasizing the mystic “otherness” of Japanese culture.

Selected References

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