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THE HISTORICAL STUDY OF MENTAL IMAGES AS A FORM OF RESEARCH INTO CULTURAL CONFRONTATION*

Olavi K. Fält

Background

The historical study of mental images opens up one useful channel by which to approach the complex problem of research into cultural confrontation. When two cultures come into contact, whether in a peaceable or hostile manner, it would seem that the image which each has of the other can be of prime importance, in some cases of decisive importance. We live in a world of images. We are ourselves full of images, by which we are guided as we go forward in our lives. These images affect all the decisions we make, whether political, economic or cultural, and although various questions of interest and outlook are also involved, even these are tied up with images, since these reflect our world view, influence our interests and are influenced by them.

For this reason I believe that more emphasis should be placed on the historical study of images, both through discussion of the methods by which it should take place and the interpretative problems involved and through exploration of the opportunities for cooperation with other disciplines engaged in studying cultures. The study of images is concerned with topics, methods and a branch of research which may be said to function at a general level, surpassing the national boundaries and starting points which so easily complicate historical research as a whole. Its language, methods and topics are universal in the same sense that those of the physical sciences or medicine are universal.

The historical study of images has for a long time been a major topic of research at the Department of History, University of Oulu, where work has been concentrated particularly on the images of Japan and Turkey in western cultural circles and attempts have been made to consider theoretical aspects as well on the basis of discussions held in connection with international image research. What I intend to bring forward below will scarcely offer the connoisseurs of the field anything new, but it is hoped that this contribution will serve to initiate discussion on the field of research concerned and its significance.

*Translated by Malcolm Hicks
On the nature of image research

The concept of image as used here refers to the image which an individual, nation or culture in a broad sense has of another distinct person, nation or culture. An image has been described as a map that we have in our heads which depicts reality but is not in itself a reality. It is characteristically fixed and of long duration, and is apt to simplify the reality and, the most interesting aspect for us, to take a predominantly negative stance towards external or alien objects. The negative aspect is further compounded by the fact that we are inclined to accept most readily those messages which reinforce the stereotypes that we have already formed. An image can change, of course, but this usually takes place either by virtue of highly dramatic events which arouse mighty waves of passion, or else as a result of a cumulative series of repeated events that argue in the same direction and eventually break down the earlier image.

One important aspect of image research is to ask how an image has arisen, how we have gained a certain impression of something, e.g. of a culture. In general terms, we can say that it is a product of the information which we have received from various sources, although it has also been said to be a mixture of recollections, hopes, myths, love and hate. Perhaps the best answer, however, is to be gained by examining the process of image research itself. This is a broader concept than opinion research, and since it is impossible to study the opinions that prevailed at times before the advent of the Gallup Poll, the broader and more indefinite notion of image is a more appropriate object of research. Image research reveals very clearly the great importance to be attached to the creator and possessor of the image. It is axiomatic in image research that one learns something of the observer, the creator of the image, when one sets out to describe what purpose that image serves, what distortions it has suffered and what changes it has undergone.

People's impressions of other people and other cultures are dependent on their own outlook or view of the world, which will in turn be influenced by time, place, the conditions under which they encounter various phenomena, personal background and the political circumstances and balance of power at the time when they developed the given opinions. Thus the images that reflect their view of the world are individual, subjective views and incorporate all the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and predilections that the person concerned possesses. It is particularly important to be able to assess what the object of evaluation, in this case the alien culture, means in terms of the individual's own hopes and fears, while the surrounding conditions lend different weightings and significances to the content of the image, i.e. determine which feature of the image comes to the fore at any
given moment in time. In other words, the image of a certain phenomenon can be either favourable or unfavourable for the same person, nation or culture depending on the relation between the subject of that image and the hopes, interests or fears of its possessor and the environmental conditions prevailing at the time, e.g. political and economic factors.

An alien culture is an extremely revealing and rewarding object of study from the point of view of image research, as substantial geographical distances and cultural differences create a fertile basis for sketchily outlined images with a largely metaphorical content. In other words, it is when we are dealing with an alien culture that the typical features in an image come to stand out most clearly, so that the image exposes us to the maximum extent, as it were, and reveals most about our outlook on the world. The same is true when we study the character of a certain individual, in that the person’s attitudes towards distant, unusual things will often be more revealing that his relation to his immediate surroundings.

It is important to remember when setting out to study the image of a culture or a country, for example, that the general mass of the population has no spokesman to express its opinions. As Ruth Miller Elson notes, there is virtually no evidence in history by which we can trace what ideas the ordinary person accepted. All that historians have is the ideas expressed in the books that he reads. Melvin Small is referring to much the same thing when he says that all an honest scholar can do is to evaluate the varying body of material which probably influenced people’s images of given things.

With the study of images as such, it should be remembered that the basic structures of the images that an individual possesses are formulated in childhood, so that particular attention needs to be paid to school books, as these are capable of instilling images that will then last for the rest of the person’s life. The next influences in order of importance are bookstall literature, popular literature and non-fiction books, especially those intended for a wider readership, followed by travel guides, magazines, books and newspapers. A separate group then consists of plays (for the theatre, cinema or television) and their scripts and popular songs. Interviews carried out in the U.S.A. suggest that the principal sources of the traditional image of Japan in the mass media are books (29.9%) and that magazines are of much greater importance in this respect than newspapers (21.4% vs. 7.1%). Among the other sources, education and schools were in an influential position.

The major composite source of influence, of course, is tradition as a whole, for the image conveyed by the modern electronic media, popular literature, bookstall literature, magazines and newspapers may well have been handed down for thousands of years. This is certainly the case in the following discussion, in which we will apply the above theory to the con-
frontation between the eastern and western cultures, saying a little about the image of Asian culture prevailing in the western cultural sphere.

The image of Japanese culture

Ever since the encounters between the Greeks and Persians in the early days of European history, the 5th century B.C., European thought has adopted a basically negative attitude towards the Asians and their continent. They have been regarded in many senses as the antithesis of the Europeans. The Europeans have lived in freedom, the Asians in bondage; the Europeans have enjoyed democracy, the Asians have been subjected to tyranny; the Europeans have believed in Christianity, the Asians have been heathens; the Europeans have been confined to a small area, the Asians have spread over a vast continent; the Europeans have been industrious and progressive, the Asians have been dilatory and reactionary. And such notions have prevailed in spite of the fact that the China has stood out at a number of stages in its history as possessing the most advanced and most powerful culture in the world. On the other hand, we must remember that there was a period in the 18th century when the European philosophers of the Enlightenment regarded China as a model society in many respects.

It has always been easy, however, for western culture to find fault with the Asian culture whenever necessary for the purposes of pursuing the internal or external interests of given cultures or societies. In more recent times, i.e. in the 19th and 20th centuries, the relation between the western (European) culture and the Asian cultures has been determined for the most part by the interests of the western culture and the underlying assumption that this should be regarded in some way or other as inherently superior to all others.

This emerges extremely well if we look at the relation between the western and Japanese cultures, for example, this being the best known to me from earlier research. Japan finally opened itself up to western culture in the 1850's after more than 200 years of isolation, during which time there had been very little contact with the west. Admittedly, one could not say that the Japanese were entirely ignorant of what was going in the west, for the country did have some experts, albeit very few, who were acquainted with western culture, including its scientific achievements, and in fact Japan was probably the best versed in western ways of all the non-European cultures in the early 19th century.

A vigorous policy of modernization was pursued in Japan from the 1850's onwards, the primary aim of which was to guarantee independence
in the face of the threat posed by western imperialism and to achieve parity with the major western powers politically, economically and militarily. In this Japan was quite successful, so that it came to be regarded as a major world power by the end of the war with Russia in 1904–1905 and was counted among the five victorious powers in the First World War.

Japan as such is perhaps not the best example of an Asian country that one could take in order to study western attitudes, especially if one is interested above all in the notion of the superiority of western culture over all others, as it has attracted an exceptional amount of favourable attention in the course of time, ever since the very first contacts in the late 13th century. This was admittedly somewhat tarnished by the persecution of Christians there in the 17th century, but even so, popular opinion in the United States in the early 19th century looked on Japan as an ideal country.

The image of Japan in western eyes in the mid-19th century was a highly exotic one, and particular admiration was felt in artistic circles, for instance. It was regarded as a land of amazing beauty in terms of both natural and man-made landscapes. One outstanding feature of its image was a powerful aspect of femininity, attributable largely to the admiration felt by western men for the Japanese woman and the relations that existed between many western men and Japanese women. This was manifested in literature and in music, the best-known example of all being the opera Madame Butterfly. This picture became so ingrained, in fact, that Japanese power was evidently badly underestimated in Russia on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War on account of the feminine image. The spirit of the age is typified by the fact that the most popular song in Russia at the time when war broke out in 1904 was entitled ‘Geisha’.

In general terms, however, the image of Japan began to alter once the country had gradually risen to the status of a serious contender with the western powers, and especially when it begin to defy their hegemony in East Asia. This is aptly symbolized by the painting sent by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany to his cousin Tsar Nikolai II of Russia in 1895, a painting which the Kaiser had himself designed, entitled “The Yellow Peril” and depicting a Buddha, representing Japan, rising on the European horizon. This painting aroused a great deal of consternation all over Europe.

The supremacy of European culture was in no way threatened at that time, however. On the contrary, when westerners in Japan followed the attempts at modernization that were being made they were inclined to advocate caution and warn the Japanese against excessive haste. It was not even regarded as possible for a non–European culture to adopt fully the fruits of western civilization.

Reservations were also expressed regarding the future of Japan.
The general opinion was that the main source of livelihood in the country should be agriculture, and the creation of extensive industries was deemed impossible because of the shortage of natural resources. In other words, there was a tendency to look favourably on those reforms that served western interests, while those that might endanger such interests were approached with much greater caution. All told, the principal motives behind the attitudes and image possessed by the westerners were western economic interests, in the same way as attitudes on the political front were governed by political and military interests.

By the early decades of the 20th century the confrontation between the Japanese and western cultures was beginning to give rise to increasing problems. This was once again a question of a conflict of interests and an attempt by each side to pursue its own aims vigorously, as has been visible everywhere throughout history, a tendency that is manifested at best in a balance of interests that is recognized and accepted by everyone and at worst in a state of war in which everyone is against everyone else. Following the western model, Japan aimed at attaining the same imperialist position that the leading western nations occupied in the world, and the latter naturally feared that this would pose a threat to their interests. Attempts were therefore made to establish a system of agreement which would guarantee the western powers the position which they had gained and prevent Japan from aspiring to such a position. The Japanese desire for a self-sufficient empire of their own and the concern of the western powers for their existing interests led eventually to a situation in which the former looked on war as the only recourse available. The consequence, as we all know, was unconditional surrender in August 1945.

Concluding remarks

The image of Japanese culture is seen in the above to reflect both the world view maintained by the western culture and the interests of the western nations. It was easy to find negative features in such an image when the necessity arose. In other world, it is typical of an image that though it may change from a negative one to a positive one its negative aspects do not disappear but are merely no longer visible on the surface. They in fact are still there “in the cellar”, gathering dust but nevertheless fresh and ready to emerge when times change again. For example, the image of Japan in the United States altered rapidly after the Second World War from that of an enemy to that of a close, trusted ally in the light of American interests during the Cold War, but as soon as the Cold War was over Japan began to loom
again as the major threat to American security, in terms of economic interests. The same elements seem to be appearing in the image of Japan as we met for the first time almost 2500 years ago in the world of the Greeks.

The methodology of the historical study of images can naturally be applied to other situations as well. One possibility is to study the image of a particular person either within a given culture or when viewed from the outside, and this becomes an especially interesting exercise when the person concerned represents or symbolizes his country or culture in some sense. This will often mean that when viewed from the outside that person's image may be synonymous with the image of his country or culture. He may be the figure that in effect creates this image. Examples of this might be Louis XIV, Hitler or Stalin. Within the country or culture, however, his image may reflect the aspirations, political or otherwise, of different groups or strata in society, even mutually opposed ones. He may act as a symbol for different things, an incentive or an instrument of political propaganda, and his image may give expression to internal ethnic or ideological conflicts. These latter may in fact be present to such a degree that one may still be dealing in the end with the basic situation of a cultural confrontation. One example of this would be the way in which the western and nationalist-imperialist outlooks on the world have been reflected in the image of the Emperor of Japan.26

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NOTES


4. Deutsch and Merritt, pp. 135–139.

5. Buchanan and Cantril, pp. 1–3.

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10. Small, Historians, p. 22.


15. Anschel, p. 11.


17. Small, Historians, p. 24

19. Ibid., p. 68; See also Small, *Historians*, p. 25.


