



Andrew C. McKevitt. *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-3447-0.

Reviewed by Hiroshi Kitamura

Published on H-Diplo (July, 2018)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

The United States today seems to be saturated with things Japanese. Take a walk around the neighborhood and you will find shiny Toyota and Honda vehicles zooming by. On the street corner might be a Japanese restaurant serving udon noodles, sushi rolls, teriyaki chicken, and even wagyu beef. Grocery stores carry napa cabbage, rice crackers, nori seaweed, and green tea. Flip on a TV set and you will see major leaguers Masahiro Tanaka and Shohei Ohtani hurling deadly splitters from the pitching mound, celebrity chef Masahiro Morimoto showing off his culinary skills, and restless Pokémons battling each other in that popular children's show. Fans of Japanese anime spend hours on YouTube, Netflix, and Hulu to binge-watch *Death Note* (2006-07), *Sword Art Online* (2012-), and *Attack on Titan* (2013-). At bookstores, young readers crowd around shelves of manga volumes. Gamers obsess over Mario Kart and the Legend of Zelda, while social media users affix countless emojis to their texts and tweets.

Why is there so much Japan in the United States? What has triggered America's interest in—at times, obsession with—a small island nation thousands of miles away? When did this all become so "normal"? What does the arrival of things Japanese mean to America and the world? Andrew C. McKevitt's *Consuming Japan: Popular*

Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America is a fresh study that offers compelling answers to these questions. Whereas scholars such as Christina Klein, Meghan Mettler, and Naoko Shibusawa have studied the US fascination with Japan during the mid-twentieth century or earlier, McKevitt, an international and transnational historian at Louisiana Tech University, grounds his research in the decade or so following the mid-1970s, when "the consumption of Japanese products ... [became] a central facet of US social and cultural life" (p. 2). [1] The interplay with things Japanese meant more than strengthening bilateral ties between the United States and Japan. According to McKevitt, it became a "catalyst for the material and ideological globalizing of America" (p. 7).

McKevitt shows that this love for things Japanese in the late twentieth century began, paradoxically, with fear and anger. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when the US economy sank low in the wake of the Vietnam War, many Americans came to believe that their country, while apparently winning the Cold War against the Soviet Union, was losing a "trade war" with one of its closest allies: Japan. This gave rise to a tense "Japan panic." Readers nervously flipped through academic and journalistic accounts by "structural revisionists" such as Ezra Vogel and Chalmers Johnson as well as the more problematic "cultural revisionists,"

who updated the "yellow peril" narratives from decades prior in ways that identified the Japanese as a cultural (not racial) threat. Others turned to Japan- and Asia-themed science fiction, namely *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Neuromancer* (1984). During this important era, the tone of popular representation, according to McKevitt, shifted from sympathy as represented by *Shogun*, a popular novel (1975) and TV series (1980) that depicted the sword-wielding Japanese of the Tokugawa era as following the Western path of modernity, to the kind that surfaced in Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun* (1992), a sinister tale that presented the power-hungry Japanese corporation as a "postmodern" threat against a declining America (p. 50).

Yet US-Japan relations involved far more than anxiety and panic. Beneath the surface of hostile discourse, Americans were actively and even enthusiastically consuming Japanese goods and ideas. This was best represented by the Honda automobile—Japan's greatest export of the era. In an illuminating two-chapter analysis, McKevitt shows how the Japanese car company expanded its influence by establishing its first US plant in Marysville, Ohio. The process involved the company's strategic placement of its first transplant facility in an economically depleted region, the recruitment of young farmers who desperately needed jobs, and the introduction of "Japanese-style" management techniques, from mandatory uniforms to holistic and flexible skills training. Drawn to the company's decent wages, the largely white workforce not only embraced this foreign and non-Western corporation, but even rejected the United Auto Workers' campaign to unionize on site. Careful planning and unexpected reactions led to the establishment and long-term success of Honda in America.

Other Japan-generated products, McKevitt shows, permeated the United States through cross-cultural negotiation. An example of this was the videocassette recorder (VCR). In the 1980s, Sony disseminated this recording device across

the US by claiming that its "time-shifting" function empowered the viewing public (p. 138). Not unlike the Honda vehicle, the electronics company removed traces of Japaneseness from its products in ways that mitigated an anti-Japanese backlash. Sushi also involved a form of de-Japanization, as its diffusion in the US market was considerably driven by new creations such as the California roll and the cream-cheese-heavy Philadelphia roll. Even more interesting is the persistence of Orientalist discourse in laudatory remarks of food critics and cookbook authors, as "hybridity has overtaken authenticity" (p. 174). Anime gained traction in part because it was a transnational vehicle of entertainment, but also because American fans, who eagerly engaged these Japanese creations via fanzines and fan clubs, treated it as a pedagogical tool to gain a better understanding of Japanese culture and society. In other words, US enthusiasts identified anime as a "national" (Japanese) product, even though media scholars often claim that Japanese anime is "culturally odorless" (p. 181).

The consumer items that McKevitt studies are far from extraordinary. But this highly readable monograph shows how they each played a vital role in cultivating America's transnational intimacy with Japan. McKevitt's goal is not to reduce cultural consumption to one-dimensional frameworks (as done in the cultural studies scholarship on techno-Orientalism, for example), but to historicize the "varied local experience of many globalizations" (p. 11).[2] As a result, the book ably casts a spotlight on diverse nodes of cross-cultural negotiation, from the assembly lines of an automobile factory to the daily activities of anime fan organizations. In addition, the author reveals that US efforts to cultivate a sincere cross-cultural understanding coexisted uneasily with Orientalist inclinations. In uncovering this nuance, McKevitt exposes the mixed and contradictory politics of cultural negotiation. The book, while undoubtedly adding to the field of US international and transnational history, makes an important contri-

tribution to modern US historiography. Even though McKevitt explicitly (and rightfully) challenges the artificial delineation of the "seventies" and "eighties," *Consuming Japan*, I argue, is as valuable to the study of the 1980s as works by leading historians including Tim Borstelmann and Jefferson Cowie have been for the 1970s.[3]

However, the ambitious attempt to locate "many globalizations" does leave the reader with questions. For example, one at times wonders about the role of Japanese cultural producers and brokers in shaping the transpacific relationship. Although McKevitt does provide us with glimpses of Japanese intentionality (e.g., Sony founder Akiyoshi Morita's attempts to brand his electronics brand without Japaneseness or Honda's managerial techniques in Marysville), we do not learn a whole lot about the agendas of Japanese sushi chefs, who were "almost exclusively" (p. 164) in the position of making sushi in the United States during the 1970s, beyond cursory anecdotes. Nor do we gain deep insight on key Japanese manga/anime creators and producers whose works greatly influenced US fan communities, most notably Reiji Matsumoto and Yoshinobu Nishizaki for *Uchu senkan Yamato/Star Blazers* and Katsuhiro Otomo for *Akira*. How did Japanese agents facilitate the permeation of things Japanese in the United States? Were their motives economic, cultural, or political? Did they encourage or reject the hybridization of their cultural artifacts? Did Japanese creations spread in the United States because or in spite of them?

Moreover, what are the "lessons" that emerge from America's consumption of things Japanese? While noting that "historians are not in the practice of predicting the future" (p. 204), McKevitt concludes with an interesting comparison of Japan in the 1980s with China today. In light of the massive trade deficit, the ubiquitous presence of "made in China" goods, the "theft" of scientific and technological know-how, and the influx of Chinese capital in the United States—concerns that

spark debate on cable television—are US-China relations replicating America's love-hate relationship with Japan? McKevitt suggests that the two instances are different because of the sheer size of the Chinese economy, the Chinese government's encouragement of joint ventures and foreign investment (a trend that has continued since the 1990s), and US ambitions to tap into the fabled "China market." Yet in regard to cultural content, he introduces the perception that Chinese culture "simply isn't cool" (p. 206) in contrast to Japan or South Korea's, and stops thus. Of course, it appears that things Chinese, in recent years, have been enjoying wider appeal in the United States, as can be seen in the popularity of Chinese restaurants in cities big and small, the expansion of Chinese-language courses in high schools as well as colleges, and the increasing volume of travel to China. In the absence of a crystal ball, we might still speculate that America's consumption of Chinese ideas and goods may follow the Japanese example, since "coolness" is a malleable construct and Orientalist perceptions die hard.

Consuming Japan is a fine study that inspires larger conversations about Japan, the United States, East Asia, and the wider international community. Through creative research and interdisciplinary analysis, McKevitt makes it clear that we do indeed live in a globalizing world. As the book so eloquently demonstrates, we should not take "ordinary" things—including cars, food, and TV shows—for granted. They can teach us a great deal.

Notes

[1]. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Meghan Warner Mettler, *How to Reach Japan by Subway: America's Fascination with Japanese Culture, 1945-1965* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); and Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining*

the Japanese Enemy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

[2]. On "techno-Orientalism," see, for example, David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 147-73.

[3]. Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Hiroshi Kitamura. Review of McKevitt, Andrew C. *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=51586>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.