

Japan as the Absolute 'Other'

Genealogy and Variations of a Topos

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Abstract

Japan has been the subject of a comparative discourse since the Portuguese first broached it in the sixteenth century. One of the most constant motifs of this comparative discourse is the notion of Japan as the "absolute other", an extremely alien culture, a perfect antithesis. This motive emerged early in a text written in 1585 by Jesuit Luis Frois. It has undergone several variations, like that of the "topsy-turvydom", and has recently resurfaced among several contemporary thinkers who never tire of brooding on this apparently inexhaustible topos.

If, to "compare comparisons"¹, we analyze the words that mean "compare" or "comparison" in Chinese or Japanese, we immediately notice the following: As we try to connect the Western (?) notion of the word "comparison" with its Chinese or Japanese equivalents, we do find translations quite easily; by doing so, we are creating what I would like to call a "space of translatability", between Chinese and Japanese on the one hand, and between each of these languages and our European languages on the other. So there is the notion of "comparison" both in China and Japan as well as in Europe.

As we examine the way comparisons are made in these languages, we realize the importance of its concrete dimensions, whether we compare side-by-side or cross-reference; as well as of location in space; reducing the distance between distant objects. We immediately begin to ask for the possible purposes of the comparison, whether they are cognitive (identify differences and similarities, highlight one aspect or another) or practical (identify merits and defects, make elements compete to find out which one is better, but also simply to have a relationship with and appreciate one another).

Especially in moments of historical transformation, when a given world order is disrupted by a new development, comparison can thus be a particularly effective

1 Emmanuel Lozerand, Comparer les comparaisons. Parcours buissonnier, in: *Socio-anthropologie* 36 (2017), 43-58 (26.11.2017), URL: <http://socio-anthropologie.revues.org/3095>, DOI: 10.4000/socio-anthropologie.3095.

method to face this change, diminish differences, tame strangeness, or welcome something alien; but it can also be a formidable weapon to keep the ‘other’ firmly at bay by pinning it down in a position from which it can not easily escape. To the actors of the day, comparison always seems to be an instrument to get a grip on the world and to organize their activities. In this respect, Japan is a remarkable case in point since it has been the subject of a comparative discourse since the Portuguese first broached it in the sixteenth century. It is a discourse led by Westerners who use interpretations of the Japanese archipelago as a benchmark for their own actions. One of the most constant motifs of this comparative discourse is the notion of Japan as the “absolute other”, an extremely alien culture, a perfect antithesis. This motive emerged early on in the phrase “our moral antipodes” (“*nos antipodes em morale*”), which has undergone several variations, like that of the “*topsy-turvydom*”, and has recently resurfaced among several contemporary thinkers who never tire of brooding on this apparently inexhaustible topos.

Comparison as a tool of proselytism: Luis Frois’s “Contradictions and differences of customs”

One sixteenth century text plays a fundamental and emblematic role in the history of Western representations of Japan. It was first published by a German and accompanied by a German translation in the mid-twentieth century, yet I don’t know if it is even known in Germany today. Written in Portuguese in 1585 by Jesuit Luis Frois, the text is entitled *Tratado em que se contem muito susinta e abreviadamente algumas contradicções e diferenças de custumes antre a gente de Europa e esta provincia de Japão*, which means “A very succinct and abridged treatise on some contradictions and differences in customs between Europeans and the inhabitants of the province of Japan”. This manuscript remained unpublished and unknown for a long time, until Jesuit Josef Franz Schütte discovered it in a Madrid library in 1946. In 1955, Schütte published an annotated edition of the Portuguese text in Japan with the title *Kulturgegensätze Europa-Japan (1585)*, accompanied by a translation into his mother tongue². A Japanese translation appeared in 1965 with the title *Nichiô bunka hikaku*, which means “A comparison of Japanese and European cultures”³. A French translation appeared in 1993, entitled *Traité de Luís Fróis, S.J. (1585) sur les contradictions de mœurs*

2 Luís Fróis, *Kulturgegensätze Europa-Japan [1585]. Tratado em que se contem muito susinta e abreviadamente algumas contradicções e diferenças de custumes antre a gente de Europa e esta provincia de Japão*, ed. by Josef Franz Schütte, Tokyo 1955.

3 Akio Okada, *Nichiô bunka hikaku* (Daikôkai jidai sôsho [Great Voyage Series] 11), Tokyo 1965, 495–636. Republished as a paperback version (Iwanami bunko) in 1991 entitled *Yôroppa bunka to Nihon bunka* [The cultures of Europe and Japan]. There is another translation by Matsuda Kiichi and Engelbert Jorissen entitled *Furoisu no Nihon oboegaki: Nihon to Yôroppa no fûshû no*

entre Européens et Japonais (republished as a paperback in 1998 with a preface by Claude Lévi-Strauss⁴); a new Portuguese edition in 2001 under the title *Tratado das Contradições e Diferenças de Costumes entre a Europa e o Japão*, a Spanish one in 2003, *Tratado sobre las contradicciones y diferencias de costumbres entre los europeos y japoneses* (1585), an English one in 2004 entitled *Topsy-turvy 1585*, by Robin D. Gill (reissued in 2014 under the title *The First European Description of Japan*), an Italian one in 2017: *Il "Trattato" di Luís Fróis: Europa e Giappone. Due culture a confronto nel secolo XVI*. I haven't found any trace of a current edition in German since Schütte's first edition in Japan in 1955, which might be an error on my part.

As we know, since the end of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo's reports have fueled the Western notion of the existence of land called "Cipango" (or Zipangu, or Zipangri; spellings vary according to manuscripts and editions), brimming with gold, located in eastern China. "Cipango" is a distortion of the Chinese *riběngguó*, which literally means "the land where the day begins", "the land of the rising sun" (*Land der aufgehenden Sonne*), which was the Chinese name for Japan, but today, is the country's official Japanese name (*Nihonkoku*). It is this imaginary region of Cipango—as represented, for example, on Paolo Toscanelli's fantastical map of 1463—that drove Christopher Columbus and his successors to take to the seas. Upon his return to Lisbon in March 1493, Columbus is purported to have said that he had just returned "from discovering the islands of Cipango"⁵. But it was not until 1542 or 1543, half a century later, that the Portuguese actually landed on what they called "Japão" (after a Malaysian name "Japang" found in Malacca), a land they then identified as Marco Polo's "Cipango". The missionaries followed the adventurers on the heels. François Xavier arrived in Kagoshima on August 15, 1549. The Jesuits were highly successful in their efforts to convert nonbelievers, and Japan seemed a particularly fertile ground for Christianization.

One of the great figures of this astounding missionary endeavor was Luis Frois⁶, author of the *Tratado* that is the subject of our study, alongside Alessandro

chigai [Notes by Fróis on Japan: Differences in customs between Japan and Europe], Tôkyô, Chûô kôron-sha, 1983.

- 4 A French translation appeared in 1993, entitled *Traité de Luís Fróis, S.J. (1585) sur les contradictions de mœurs entre Européens et Japonais*, republished as a paperback in 1998 entitled *Européens et Japonais – traité sur les contradictions et différences de mœurs*, with a preface by Claude Lévi-Strauss. All our quotations of the *Traité* come from the first french edition. Cf. Luís Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis, S.J. [1585] sur les contradictions de mœurs entre Européens et Japonais*, ed. by Xavier de Castro/Robert Schrimpf/José Manuel Garcia, Paris 1993; Luis Fróis, *Européens et Japonais – traité sur les contradictions et différences de mœurs*, ed. by Xavier de Castro/Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paris 1998.
- 5 Cf. José Manuel Garcia, Préface, in: Luís Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis, S.J. [1585] sur les contradictions de mœurs entre Européens et Japonais*, ed. by Xavier de Castro/Robert Schrimpf/José Manuel Garcia, Paris 1993, 7-39, see 7.
- 6 Cf. Garcia, Préface, 19-21.

Valignano (1539-1606) and João Rodrigues (1562-1633), and after François Xavier, who died in 1552. Born in Lisbon in 1532, he was raised at the court of King John III. In February 1548, he joined the Jesuit Order, and a few weeks later, at the age of only 16, embarked on a voyage to India. Arriving in Goa in October 1548, he met François Xavier. As soon as he was ordained for priesthood in 1561, he was sent to Japan where he landed on July 6, 1563. Except for a three-year stint in Macau, he spent the rest of his life in Japan and never returned to Europe. During this long period spanning more than three decades, he was immersed in the country and became an accomplished expert on Japanese language and culture, which made him indispensable to all his superiors, who, in 1579, asked him to write a “Commentary on the progress of the Faith in Japan, the composition of this land, its rulers, its inhabitants, and the wars that hindered the spread of the Gospel, as well as other details about its history”⁷. This task was the origin of his *History of Japan*—which has to be read as a history of the Christianization of Japan by the Jesuits; “the Japanese matter”, as François Xavier called it. A first volume was completed in 1586, a second one in 1594. Frois arrived in Japan at a time when Christianity had its first remarkable successes in the country with the 1563 conversion of the lord (daimyo) of Omura, who came to be known as Bartholomew and died in Nagasaki in 1597, a few months after twenty-six Japanese and European clergy members were crucified in that city⁸. The event marked the beginning of a period of persecution that is echoed in Martin Scorsese’s 2016 movie *Silence*. While Frois’s letters were widely distributed in handwritten or printed form in the West “where they found an eager readership”⁹, two other works of his met a more complicated fate.

Although his monumental *History of Japan* informed the writings of other Jesuits, such as those of Valignano, it never evolved beyond the state of a mere manuscript. It was only in 1894 that a copy was found; the first full edition was not completed until 1984.

The *Tratado* is even more mysterious, because the exact purpose of this singular, likely unfinished text of 40 sheets of 16 x 22 cm Japanese paper, dated June 14, 1585, remains unclear.

The treatise consists of 611 comparisons formulated in a few lines following a simple model—“we” (*nos*) or “people of Europe” (*gente* or *homens de Europa*) do it this way; “they” (*elles*), the Japanese (*Os Japões*) do it differently. For example: VI.15. We smell the melon at its head; the Japanese smell it at its tail. *Our cheiramos o melão pola cabeça; elles polo pé.*

7 Cf. Garcia, Préface, 29.

8 Cf. Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis*, 129.

9 Cf. Garcia, Préface, 23-29.

These comparisons are grouped by topics, because, as the author explains, "so as not to confuse certain things with others, we have ordered all this in chapters with the grace of Our Lord¹⁰". The *Tratado* is thus composed of thirteen thematic chapters, plus a complementary one, each containing 19 to 68 comparisons:

- Chapter I. Men, their personality & their clothes.
- Chapter II. Women, their personality & their customs (the longest with 68)
- Chapter III. Children & their customs.
- Chapter IV. Monks & their customs.
- Chapter V. Temples, icons, and matters relating to the exercise of their religion.
- Chapter VI. The way Japanese people drink & eat.
- Chapter VII. Offensive & defensive weapons of the Japanese & warcraft.
- Chapter VIII. Horses.
- Chapter IX. Diseases, doctors & medicines. (the shortest chapter with 19)
- Chapter X. Japanese writing, their books, paper, ink & letters.
- Chapter XI. Houses, workshops, gardens & fruits
- Chapter XII. Boats, their uses & "dogus" [ship equipment]
- Chapter XIII. Plays, farces, dances, songs & musical instruments of Japan.
- Chapter XIV. Some miscellaneous items & extraordinary things that would not fit in any of the previous chapters.

Comparisons were very popular in the Renaissance, in particular comparisons between Antiquity and the Modern Age, as is evident, from works such as Nicolas Machiavel's 1531 *Discourses upon the First Decade of Titus Livius*; but also, thanks to the expansion of their world, between indigenous peoples and Europeans, as in Jean de Léry's 1578 *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*. The Jesuits in Japan were just as prolific, such as Valignano who, immediately upon his 1579 arrival on the archipelago, drew up an inventory of the differences between the Chinese and the Japanese¹¹.

It should be noted, however, that it was not at all a foregone conclusion that such a text would have to be a survey of differences, since the very first descriptions of Japan in Western languages focused more on similarities than on differences. This is the case for José Alvares's *Information on Matters of Japan*¹². The navigator was in Japan in 1547 and wrote this text upon his return to Malacca at the request of François Xavier; it is also true for a letter from Father Nicolas Lanzillotto, written in Goa in 1548, probably based on a report by Anjirô, a Japanese man who fled his

10 Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis*, 41.

11 Cf. Robert Schrimpf, Commentaire, in: Luís Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis, S.J. [1585] sur les contradictions de mœurs entre Européens et Japonais*, ed. by Xavier de Castro/Robert Schrimpf/José Manuel Garcia, Paris 1993, 119-180, see 136.

12 Cf. Schrimpf, Commentaire, 163-172.

country aboard Alvares's ship¹³. But what is the logic behind Frois's comparisons, given that never expressly stated the purpose of his comparative endeavor? First of all, let's point out that there is something paradoxical about it. While the pattern of comparison might seem simplistic, even primordial, in its plain binarism, all commentators nevertheless agree on the high quality of its observations, to the point that historians of sixteenth century Japan consider the work as quality source of the utmost importance. Admittedly, some of his observations are stunningly accurate:

XIV, 48: We clean our nostrils with our thumb or index finger; they, whose nostrils are very narrow, do it with their little finger.

Or:

I, 10. Because of our buttons and laces, we cannot easily lay our hands on our bodies; Japanese men and women do not have this problem: in every season, and especially in winter, they wear wide, hanging sleeves, holding their hands right up against their bodies.

As for his approach *per se*, the very title of his manuscript already suggests that Frois was aware that not all of his comparisons are of the same nature, since he speaks of "*contradictions and differences*" (*contradições e diferenças*). He takes obvious pleasure in spotting genuine opposites or symmetries—is that what he means by "contradictions" (*contradições*)?

For example:

I.11. We wear the best clothing on top and the poorest underneath; they wear their best clothes underneath and the poorest on top.

III.1 In Europe, we regularly cut our children's hair; in Japan, they let it grow until the age of fifteen.

III.9. Our children learn to read first and then write; children in Japan start writing first, and then learn to read.

VI.41. We are reluctant to eat dog meat, but we do eat beef; they are reluctant to eat beef, but quite like to eat dog meat for medical purposes.

VI.26. In Europe, we cool the wine; in Japan, they heat it before they drink it in almost every season.

VI.55. In Europe, we eat wild boar cooked; the Japanese eat it in thin, uncooked slices.

XI.22. In Europe, horse manure is spread in the gardens and human excrements are thrown on the streets. In Japan, horse manure is thrown on the street, and human excrements are used in the gardens.

13 Cf. Schrimpf, *Commentaire*, 173-180.

Not to mention two other peculiarities to which we have become accustomed in the age of mangas and futons:

X.4. Where the last pages of our books end, theirs begin.

XI.14. Our mattresses always stay in place on our beds; Japanese mattresses are rolled up and stored away, hidden from view.

But often, the comparisons seem to be mere “differences” (the *diferenças* mentioned in the title?). The boundary between the two categories *contradições* and *diferenças* is not always very clear:

I.30. For us, black is the color of mourning; for the Japanese, it is white.

I.49. We wash our clothes by rubbing them with our hands; they do it by treading them with their feet.

The following examples, however, can hardly be called “contradictions”. They are simple “differences”:

I.6. The honor and elegance that Europeans put in their beards, the Japanese put in their hair, which they wear tied in the neck.

VI.2 Our everyday food is wheat bread; the Japanese staple is boiled unsalted rice.

VI.24. Europeans enjoy chickens, partridges, pâtés and white meats; the Japanese love to eat jackals, cranes, monkeys, cats, and raw seaweed.

VI.27. Our wine is made of grapes; theirs is made of rice.

IX.15. We pull out teeth with forceps, pincers, parrot beaks [a kind of shoe stripper], etc.; the Japanese do it with a chisel and a mallet, or a bow and arrow attached to the tooth, or even forge hooks.

XIV.21. We emphasize nouns; the Japanese verbs.

Another type of opposite that Frois highlights is that of presence and absence. What one people does, the other just doesn't do:

VI.21. We wash our hands before and after meals; the Japanese, who do not eat with their fingers, have no need to wash their hands.

II.22. Women in Europe wear rings with gems and other jewels; Japanese women do not use ornaments, neither gold nor silver jewelry.

Japanese customs can sometimes seem really strange (from a Western point of view):

VI.14. We count the hours from 1, 2, 3 to 12, the Japanese count them this way: 6, 5, 4, 4, 9, 8, 7, 6, etc.

XIV.3 In our country, when a fire breaks out, everyone comes running with water and demolishes the neighboring houses, the Japanese get on the other roofs, waving straw fans and shouting at the wind to go away.

II.47. In our country, female first names are inspired by saints; Japanese women are named after pots, cranes, water turtles, sandals, tea, reeds, etc.

But the most striking aspects are variances judgments of decorum or tact:

I.45. In Europe, it is inappropriate to get undressed, even to bare just the bottom of one's feet, to warm oneself at the hearth; in Japan, someone standing by the fire is not ashamed to get naked for the same purpose.

VI.60. In our country, burping at the table in front of guests is very rude; in Japan, it is very common and no one takes offence.

To be more precise, when the Japanese act differently from "us" Europeans in a way that may seem shocking to us, they too have their own point of view, and therefore their own sense of what is right or wrong, good or bad:

I.29. We find it discourteous if a servant does not stand while the master is seated; in their case, it is wrong not to have the servant sit down.

VI.39. We like dishes made with milk, cheese, butter or bone marrow; the Japanese abhor all that and it smells very bad to them.

When it comes to value judgments, they also interpret things their own way:

I.27. We consider walking to be pleasant, healthy and recreational; the Japanese never go for walks and are very surprised to see us do something they consider a chore or a penance.

A modern reader will also be surprised by the fact that Frois does not express any clear hierarchy in his listing of differences between Europeans and the Japanese. In general, Frois does not seem to have any sense of superiority or feel any contempt for the Japanese.

Certainly, Japan does not seem perfect to him in all respects. For instance, he seems to find it hard to appreciate Japanese theater and music:

XIII.9. In our country, masks go down all the way to the tip of the beard; Japanese masks are so small that you can see the beard of the actors who play women.

XIII.15. In our country, choral music is resonant and soft; that of Japan, where they all blare out with one voice, is the most horrible music you'll ever hear.

It also seems to him that European men are generally better built than Japanese men, and he considers European horses to be far better.

I.1 Most Europeans are of tall stature and well built; the Japanese are usually smaller in body and stature than we are.

I.5. Most Europeans have a thick beard; most Japanese have sparse and very untidy beards.

I.11. In our country, it is considered a blemish to have scars on your face; the

Japanese pride themselves on them, and as the scars are poorly cared for, they are even more unsightly.

VIII.1 Our horses are very beautiful, those of Japan are much inferior to them.

VIII.2 Ours stop immediately while in full stride, their horses are less docile.

But the domain where he loses all equanimity and becomes outright hostile and unilateral is the subject of religion, or more precisely that of the Japanese Buddhist clergy, the monks, of whom he paints a ferocious picture, particularly in chapters IV and V of his *Tratado*:

IV.1 In our country, men enter the clergy to do penance and find salvation; Japanese monks do so to escape work and live a life of idle pleasures.

IV.25. In all things, we hate and abhor the demon; Japanese monks worship and adore him, build temples and make great sacrifices to him.

III. 10 Our teachers teach the children doctrine and holy and virtuous manners; Japanese monks teach them music, singing, games, fencing, and do their abominable things with them.

V.8. [Our religious imagery] is beautiful and inspires devotion; theirs is horrible and terrifying with devilish figures raging in the flames.

Frois also makes several observations to highlight a particular cruelty of the Japanese:

I.24. We practice sword fighting on poles or animals; the Japanese do it on human corpses.

IV.41. In Europe, upon the death of their master, his servants escort the deceased to the tomb and mourn him; in Japan, some open their own bellies and others slice off their fingertips and throw them into pyre where the body is burned.

VII. 41. It is a grave sin for us to kill; when the Japanese are at war and can no longer go on, they open their bellies, which is considered a sign of great valor.

XIV. 6. In our country, killing a man is shocking, while killing cattle, chickens, or dogs is not shocking at all; the Japanese are shocked to see us kill animals, but in their country killing people is commonplace.

XIV.9. We do not have crucifixion; in Japan, it is a very common punishment.

XIV.10. In our country, servants are punished and slaves are whipped; in Japan, punishment and chastisement is beheading.

And even:

XIV.24. In our country, killing flies with one's hand is considered dirty, in Japan princes and lords do it, tearing off the wings before throwing them away.

Another very interesting chapter is the one on women, which begins as follows:

II.1 In Europe, the honor and greatest asset of a young woman is her modesty and the unviolated sanctuary of her purity; the women of Japan do not care about virgin purity at all; and losing it does not dishonor them or prevent them from marrying.

In this vein, some of their behaviors seem downright criminal to him:

II.38. In Europe, abortion, as far as it even exists, is not frequent; in Japan, it is so common that some women have up to twenty abortions.

II.39. In Europe, killing a newborn is a rare occurrence that almost never happens; Japanese women smother their babies by stepping on their necks, killing almost everyone they think they can't feed.

Generally, Japanese women seem very indecent to him:

II.54. In Europe, it is very inappropriate for a woman to drink wine; in Japan it is very common; on holidays, they sometimes drink until they are rolling on the ground.

He doesn't, however, seem sensitive to their charm:

II.16. European women find ways and means to whiten their teeth; Japanese women use iron and vinegar to make their mouths and teeth as black as coal.

II. 4 European women scent their hair with pleasant essences; Japanese women always smell bad from the oil they grease themselves with.

However, he is able to see the positive aspects of what he encounters:

II.13. Europeans very quickly get white hair; Japanese women can reach sixty years of age without a single white hair, because they grease it with oil.

Beyond that, however, Frois paints a portrait of the women's situation in Japan that might perhaps even have appealed to European women of his time (even if he himself did not necessarily think well of what he described):

II.32. In our country, according to their corrupt nature, it is men who reject their wives; in Japan, it is often women who reject the men.

II.34. In Europe, young girls and maidens are confined constantly and very rigorously; in Japan, girls go wherever they want by themselves, for one or more days, without having to account to their parents for it.

II.35. Women in Europe do not leave the home without their husbands' consent; Japanese women have the freedom to go anywhere they want, without their husbands knowing anything about it.

II.45. In our country, women rarely know how to write; an honorable woman in Japan would be held in low esteem if she did not know how to do so.

II.51. In Europe, it is usually women who prepare food; in Japan, men and even gentlemen take pride in cooking.

One area where Frois seems to consider the Japanese to be clearly superior is that of childrearing.

III. 6 In our country, a four-year-old child does not yet know how to eat with his hands, while in Japan, children from the age of three eat on their own using *faxis* [chopsticks].

III.11. Children in Europe reach adolescence before they even know how to write a note; in Japan, children seem to have written fifty of them by the age of ten, judging by the intelligence and judgment they exhibit.

III.12. In our country, a young man barely knows how to handle the sword before he reaches twenty years of age; Japanese boys from twelve or thirteen years of age carry *catanas* and *vaqizaxis*.

III.13. Our children show little judgment and refinement in their manners; those in Japan do it so early that one must admire them.

III.14. Our children are mostly shy and reserved when they go to the theater, Japanese children are uninhibited, free, graceful, and lively in their roleplay.

Each comparison gives the advantage to Japanese children. Sometimes it is unclear why, because while Frois notes:

III.7. We whip and punish our boys; in Japan, they rarely do that or even just reprimand them. he also adds:

III.15. Europeans are raised with lots of hugs and sweetness, good food and good clothes; Japanese children are half naked and almost deprived of tenderness and attention.

There are other areas in which he considers Japan to be superior:

I.33. We spit all the time and anywhere; the Japanese usually swallow their saliva.

VI.1 We eat everything with our fingers; Japanese men and women use two chopsticks from childhood.

IX.8. The flesh of the Europeans, which is delicate, heals very slowly; that of the Japanese, which is very robust, heals much better and faster from serious wounds, lacerations, pustules [abscesses], or accidents.

So what are we to make of this, what are the intentions or effects of this remarkable comparative system set up by Frois? Of course, his careful, almost obsessive alignment of a very large number of precise and varied observations (more than 600, let's recall) must, at least at first sight, give the impression of strong otherness, even bizarreness. The mechanical repetition of the binary difference "us *versus* them" – never relieved by the slightest statement of even the smallest similarity – seems to

create a spectacular, impassable cultural gap. As Valignano said in his *Summario*, “everything is so different and contrary that they are almost nothing like us”¹⁴.

While this sentiment is undeniable, the effects of Frois’s system are more complex and subtle than it seems. Another effect of this enumeration of differences is to put a crack into European ethnocentrism, to limit its universalist claims, to introduce a form of relativism: Overall, by their sheer number and variety, Frois’s observations prove that one can live quite well with a lifestyle that is starkly different from the European way of life.

Even more importantly, the systematic nature of the differences rouses a notion that the apparent oddness of the Japanese is perhaps more reasonable than it seems, that their behaviors, however amazing and confusing they may be, have their own inherent logic.

On January 14, 1549, even before he landed in Japan, François Xavier wrote to Ignatius of Loyola:

“I’m sending you the Japanese alphabet. Japanese writing differs greatly from others because the Japanese start from the top and go down. I asked Paul, the Japanese man, why they don’t write our way. He answered me: Why don’t you write our way?... And he gave me the reason that, just as a man has his head up in the air and his feet down on the ground, he must write from top to bottom, as well.”¹⁵

What can one reply to that? What Xavier implies here was expressed bluntly in 1588 by another Jesuit, Maffei, just three years after Frois’s *Tratado*:

They have their reasons to act the way they do [...] Europeans can only seem ridiculous to them, for the same reason that they seem ridiculous to Europeans.¹⁶

Not only does Frois often mention that the Japanese find us as different from them as we find them different from ourselves, but reading his text, one gets the notion that the Japanese are in a way symmetrical or inverted European figures, and thus resembling them. All of a sudden, the apparent differences no longer seem so fundamental. In many areas, in fact, the Japanese share the same fundamental values and principles as we do, but they apply them differently. To return to the first example we mentioned, it does not matter that they smell a melon at its tail and we at the top; ultimately, we both just want to pick a good melon by its smell. How exactly we achieve that does not really matter. As Lévi-Strauss pointed out in his 1998 preface, Frois really just repeated an argument by Herodotus from the 5th century BC according to which the Egyptians “in all things behave the opposite way from other peoples”. As Lévi-Strauss explains, “the symmetry we recognize

14 Cf. Schrimpf, *Commentaire*, 157.

15 Cf. Frédéric Tinguely, *Le monde multipolaire des missionnaires Jésuites*, in: Frédéric Tinguely (ed.), *La Renaissance décentrée. Actes du colloque de Genève*, Genève 2008, 67.

16 Cf. Frédéric Tinguely, *La Lecture complice. Culture libertine et geste critique*, Genève 2016, 49-63.

between two cultures unites them by their very contrast". As Plato says in *Lysis*, "it is the most opposite that is the closest friend of its opposite". In his search for symmetry, the traveler equips himself with "the means to tame strangeness, to make it familiar"¹⁷.

Thus, we can hypothesize that one of the purposes of Frois's comparative system was to describe a people ideally suited to be converted to Christianity, because, despite its apparent otherness, it seems to be much closer to European Christians than one first imagined. Their shortcomings, the immorality of monks and women, are presented as mere obstacles to be overcome, and compensated by the qualities of Japanese children that are assets, if not a great promise. This analysis is, of course, consistent with the assumption that the *Tratado* may have served as an introduction to *History of Japan*. This assumption finds further support in this remark in Frois's preface:

And many of their customs are so foreign & distant from ours that it seems almost incredible that there can be so many opposites in a people of such great policy, alertness of mind, and natural wisdom as they possess¹⁸.

Valignano developed a similar analysis two years earlier in his *Sumario* of 1583:

"And what I admire is that in everything, they govern themselves as a prudent and policed nation, while it would not be surprising if they behaved like barbarians. But to see that everything is the reverse from the way it is in Europe (*todo van al revés de Europa*) and that they have been able to organize their rites and customs in such a regulated and reasonable way (*tan políticas y puestas en razón*) for those who understand them well (*para quien bien las entiende*), is cause for great admiration (*es cosa que puede causar no pequeña admiración*)."¹⁹

We can thus understand François Xavier's enthusiasm, which resonates in the comments later reported by Frois: All the way from Rome to Japan, there is no people more predisposed to embrace Christianity than the Japanese (letter dated October 25, 1564).²⁰

One can easily guess the exaltation that this promise immediately aroused in Europe. For example, in *Martins of the world and mainly about admirable things about India and the New World*, published in 1553, Guillaume Postel, based on the very first letters of Francis Xavier, described "Giapan" as the "sovereign point of the East", and the "Giapangians" as "the most perfect humans in the world": "Thus it pleased God[to] to make them long ago."²¹

17 Lévi-Strauss, Claude, Préface, in: Luís Fróis, *Européens et Japonais – traité sur les contradictions et différences de mœurs*, ed. by Xavier de Castro/Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paris 1998, see 7-11.

18 Fróis, *Traité de Luís Fróis*, 41.

19 Cf. Tinguely, *La Lecture complice*, 49-63.

20 Cf. Schrimpf, *Commentaire*, 123.

21 Cf. Bernard Frank, *Dieux et bouddhas au Japon*, Paris 2000, 36.

Other classical comparisons: our “moral antipodes”?

In certain ways, Frois's comparative work has remained unparalleled. Even though the text as such was not published or widely distributed before the second half of the twentieth century, the mindset it represents has doubtlessly been exerting a strong subliminal influence on Western representations of Japan. In order to better grasp the impact of this inspiration and understand which types of variations have emanated from it, we must compare it to other takes on Japan. As we will see, they also addressed the question of Japan's *alterity*, or otherness, albeit in a distinctly different way. We find a first interesting variation in Frois's own environment, for example in a letter by Valignano dated 25 July 1579:

“When it comes to attire and food, and in almost all their demeanor, they are so different from European or other races that one almost thinks they are making a deliberate effort to act the opposite way from everyone else, in particular from the Chinese, to whom they trace back their origins. In every way, they are trying to do just the opposite. [...] Japan is a world apart and the people there behave in a thousand original ways that are novel to the rest of humanity.”²²

In his *Summario* of 1583, he writes: “One might say that they have done all they can in order not to resemble any other nation.”²³

This notion, a fleeting idea amongst the missionaries, that Japan was not merely different, but that there was a distinct intention and *will to be different*, was eloquently expressed by major seventeenth century Jesuit priest François Garasse. In his *Curious doctrine of the beaux esprits of our times, or those who pretend to be*, written between 1623 and 1624, he harnesses the Japanese argument to attack libertines. When he calls the Japanese “true idiots”, “extravagant in their actions [...] and consequently quite foolish”, it is precisely because they “purposefully” seek to be different, just like the libertines. The same desire to stand out, to distinguish oneself by being the opposite of the ordinary, he argues, is the basis of the moral affinity between these strong-minded *esprits forts*²⁴. As Garasse puts it, “Thank God that we in Paris have Japanese folks who wallow in fanciful extravagance in order to be taken for more artful people and join the ranks of the Beaux Esprits”.

Garasse was, in fact, influenced by the *History of Navigation* by Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1563-1611), which was published in Dutch in 1596 and in French in 1610, resuming the Jesuit practice of contrasting the Japanese with other peoples, yet putting them in a conceptual framework taken from Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza's 1585 *History of the Great Kingdom of China*. This work elaborates on the theme of

22 Cf. Schrimpf, *Commentaire*, 136-137.

23 Cf. Schrimpf, *Commentaire*, 157.

24 Cf. Tinguely, *La Lecture complice*, 49-63.

the Japanese people's "extreme resentment" towards the Chinese, thus making the Japanese cultural difference, in the words of Frédéric Tinguely, a "vindictive commemoration, by their very customs, of a break with the legitimate powers²⁵". The philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment were to engage in a different type of instrumentalization. For example, in his 1748 work *The Spirit of the Laws*, in chapter 13 of book 6, entitled "The Powerlessness of Japanese Laws", Montesquieu cites the case of Japan to illustrate his notion of despotism (and, in doing so, reactivating Aristotle's ancient theme of "oriental despotism").

"Extravagant penalties can corrupt despotism itself. Let us look at Japan. In Japan, almost all crimes are punished by death because disobedience to so such a great emperor as Japan's is an enormous crime. It is not a question of correcting the guilty man, but of avenging the prince. These ideas are drawn from servitude and derive chiefly from the fact that the emperor is the owner of all the goods and so almost all crimes are committed directly against his interests. [...] It is true that the astonishing character of these opinionated, capricious, determined eccentric people who brave every peril and every misfortune seems at first sight to absolve their legislators for their atrocious laws."²⁶

Here, the bizarre nature of the Japanese people serves to explain the severity of their laws. In contrast, Voltaire highlighting only similarities in chapter CXLII of his 1756 work "About Japan" in his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, assuming the view that "at its core, human nature is the same everywhere":

"Of all the countries of India, Japan is not the one that deserves the least attention from a philosopher. [...] This kingdom borders on our continent, as we delimit it on the opposite side. I don't know why the Japanese have been called our moral antipodes, there are no such antipodes amongst peoples who cultivate reason. The dominating religion in Japan allows for rewards and penalties beyond death. Their principal commandments, which they call divine, are exactly like ours. Lies, impudence, theft, murder, are also forbidden, it is natural law condensed into concrete principles. [...] Their customs may be different from ours, but so are those of all the oriental nations, from the Dardanelles all the way to Korea."²⁷

Let's briefly turn our attention to the expression he cites: "our moral antipodes". Even though it seems to echo Frois's *contradictions and differences in customs*, its exact origin is difficult to determine. In his *Curious doctrine*, Garasse attributed it to Maffei, who supposedly spoke of "*antipodas morum*" in his 1588 *Historiarum Indicarum*. Garasse paraphrases the expression by saying "they are so extravagant that

25 Tinguely, *La Lecture complice*, 49-63.

26 Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des lois*, Paris 1817, 73.

27 Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs* (Œuvres complètes de Voltaire, 18), Paris 1784, 277.

they are antipodes in manners and customs”, but researcher Frédéric Tinguely reports not having found the expression in the cited source²⁸.

Whatever the exact origin of the expression, it was quite popular. In a description of Japan from 1600, Joao de Lucena, whose observations follow Frois’s narrative about starkly different manners, points out that Japanese customs “are remarkable only because of the great difference from our own”, adding: “It is safe to say that the Japanese are our antipodes even more by their manners than by their location.”²⁹

In 1626, François Solier proposed explanations that resemble those of Luis Frois. He, too, uses the formula:

“Because in all their ways, they do things so differently from us that it seems as if they purposefully want to do everything reversely from Europe. This is what caused a very erudite and eloquent figure of our time to describe them as our antipodes, both in temperament and in a location and country. It would take too long to note all the particularities. I will list only a few here.”³⁰

While this discourse on the Japanese as “antipodes” echoed throughout the seventeenth century, the notion was refuted by several eighteenth century authors, from Father Charlevoix in his *History of Japan*, first published in 1715, to Voltaire in 1756, as we have seen, but also Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet in his 1768 *Impartial History of the Jesuits*. Charlevoix wrote:

“It may not be a bad idea for me to now elaborate a little on this parallel, certainly much more suitable to get to know the Japanese than to point out some contrasts between their customs and ours, which have been eagerly collected, and that led us to the conclusion that they should be called our moral antipodes. To quote some examples, they use white as their color of mourning, and black as an expression of joy [...]; they wear ceremonial clothes inside the house, and take them off when they go out; in Japan, they greet with their feet instead of their hands or heads. These things have nothing to do with one’s way of thinking, let alone one’s feelings of the heart, which truly constitute the character of the mind; they are pure customs, which may have been born from a simple whim, or something even less significant.”³¹

Linguet wrote:

28 Tinguely, *La Lecture complice*, 49–63.

29 Cf. Garcia, Préface, 39.

30 François Solier, *Histoire ecclésiastique des isles et royaumes du Japon (Ecclesiastical History of the Islands and Kingdoms of Japan)*. Collected by Father F. Solier, monk of the Jesuit Order, Paris, ed. by Sébastien Cramoisy, 1627–1629, 2 volumes, Bordeaux 1628, 66.

31 Père Charlevoix, *Histoire et description du Japon*, Tours 1842, 20.

"The Japanese have customs that many of our Europeans have found extraordinary. They mourn in white; they greet each other by wiggling their shoes. This led travelers with little common sense to call them our moral antipodes, as if it were morality that governs the color of our clothes and our forms of salutation. Rather, we should have admired the similarity between so many of our own practices and those of these islanders, whom nature placed at the bottom of Asia."³²

While Charlevoix minimizes the differences in Japanese customs by attributing them to the simple effect of their long isolation, Linguet, in a Voltairean tradition, laments that we have not been more sensitive to the similarities between them and us. As we can see, there are varying motives for the "difference and contrast of customs". Garasse leverages these differences to vilify both Libertines and Japanese in one fell swoop by insinuating malicious intentions. Montesquieu uses the Japanese otherness as the very picture of despotism. While Garasse considers the notion of "moral antipodes" a sign of reprehensible extravagance, those who believe in religious conversion, like Charlevoix, contest it, as do those who insist on the proximity between the Japanese and the Europeans, like Voltaire.

Modern variations: Japan as the *topsy-turvydom*

In the nineteenth century, the discourse on Japanese otherness took a sharp turn, influenced by several factors, including the rise of a racial discourse. Without dwelling on a subject that would take us too far, let's just point out that from the 10th edition of Linné's *Systema Naturae* in 1758, then in Blumenbach's *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* in 1775, or in Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* from 1853 onwards, these discourses profoundly changed descriptions of human diversity.

While Frois, in the tradition of Marco Polo, considered the skin of the Japanese as white:

1.8 In our country, there are many men and women with freckles on their skin; there are very few in Japan, although they are white.

Nineteenth century writings placed the Japanese in the category of the "yellow race", as is the case with Gobineau: "Japan therefore seems to have tend in the direction of Chinese civilization as a result of many yellow immigrants." The yellow race is defined as follows:

"In terms of their customs, none of these strange excesses that are so common among dark-skinned people. Weak desires, a will that is rather obstinate than ex-

32 Simon Linguet, *Histoire impartiale des Jésuites*, Paris 1768, 360.

treme, a perpetual but quiet taste for material pleasures; gluttony is rare, more variety than the negroes have in the dishes tended to satisfy it. In all things, tendencies towards mediocrity; fairly good comprehension of all matters that are neither too sublime nor too profound; love for what is useful, respect for rules, awareness of the advantages of a certain measure of freedom. The yellows are practical people in the narrow sense of the word. They do not dream, do not appreciate theories, they invent little, but are able to appreciate and adopt what is useful. Their desires are limited to living as gently and comfortably as possible. It is obvious that they are superior to the negroes. They are a population and petty bourgeoisie that any civilizer would love to choose as the basis of his society: there is not, however, anything to create this society or to give it spirit, beauty and action."³³

We have left the realm of concrete, reasonable, and localized observations, of differences in customs. Instead, we are seeing a globalizing, abstract, and general discourse on a psychological and moral disposition.

In particular, the new opening of Japan in the mid-nineteenth century following the expedition of Commodore Perry in 1853 revived the discourse on Japanese particularities, now gradually giving rise to the English adjective *topsy-turvy*.

Rutherford Alcock, the first diplomat deployed to in Japan in 1858, explains in his 1863 *The Capital of the Tycoon*:

"Japan is essentially a country of paradoxes and anomalies, where all—even familiar things—put on new faces and are curiously reversed. Except that they do not walk on their heads instead on their feet, there are few things in which they do not by some occult law, to have been impelled in a perfectly opposite manner and a reversed order. [...] The course of all sublunary things appears reversed. Their day is for the most part our night, and this principle of antagonism crops out in the most unexpected an bizarre way in all their moral being, customs and habits."³⁴

The word *topsy-turvy* appears in his book, but in a concrete sense, to describe inverted furniture.

Topsy-turvy was first used in 1888 to characterize Japan in Percival Lowell's influential work *The Soul of The Far East*. For Lowell, Japan's "antipodal situation" causes the Japanese to "see everything topsy-turvy". This work has never been translated into French (it was translated into German in 1911 under the title *Die Seele des Fernen Ostens*), but it has nevertheless had a significant influence in France, since it is at the root of an inexhaustible theme, namely the absence of personality, individuality, or subject in Japan. It can be found in the works of Alexandre Kojève, Jacques

33 Joseph Arthur Gobineau (Comte de), *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, vol. I, Paris 1853, 215.

34 Robin D. Gill, *Topsy-turvy 1585*, Key Biscayne 2004, 38–39.

Lacan, and Roland Barthes³⁵, and it is also, as we will see, at the root of Augustin Berque's theses on the Japanese milieu³⁶. Lowell writes:

"If we take, through the earth's temperate zone, a belt of country whose northern and southern edges are determined by certain limiting isotherms, not more than half the width of the zone apart, we shall find that we have included in a relatively small extent of surface almost all the nations of note in the world, past or present. Now if we examine this belt, and compare the different parts of it with one another, we shall be struck by a remarkable fact. The peoples inhabiting it grow steadily more personal as we go west. So unmistakable is this gradation of spirit, that one is tempted to ascribe it to cosmic rather than to human causes. It is as marked as the change in color of the human complexion observable along any meridian, which ranges from black at the equator to blonde toward the pole. In like manner, the sense of self grows more intense as we follow in the wake of the setting sun, and fades steadily as we advance into the dawn. America, Europe, the Levant, India, Japan, each is less personal than the one before. We stand at the nearer end of the scale, the Far Orientals at the other. If with us the I seems to be of the very essence of the soul, then the soul of the Far East may be said to be Impersonality."³⁷

Without relying on racial considerations, Lowell searches different "cultural" domains—family, the Japanese language, art, relationship to nature, religion—for certain psychological features, or a specifically Japanese mindset".

It was the great British Japanologist Basil H. Chamberlain who coined the term "Topsy-turvydom" for Japan by using it as a section title in *Things Japanese*, which appeared in six editions between 1890 and 1936. Taking up several of Frois's arguments (although they had not been published at the time), it goes like this:

"It has often been remarked that the Japanese do many things in a way that runs directly counter to European ideas of what is natural and proper. To the Japanese themselves our ways appear equally unaccountable. It was only the other day that a *Tōkyō* lady asked the present writer why foreigners did so many things topsy-turvy, instead of doing them naturally, after the manner of her country-people. Here are a few instances of this contrariety:—

Japanese books begin at what we should call the end, the word *finis* (終) coming

35 Cf. Emmanuel Lozerand, La dilution du sujet japonais chez les intellectuels français au tournant des années 1970. Avatars d'un stéréotype, in: Fabien Arribert-Narce/Kōhei Kuwada/Lucy O'Meara (eds.), *Réceptions de la culture japonaise en France depuis 1945. Paris-Tōkyō-Paris: détours par le Japon*, Paris 2016, 51-70.

36 Cf. Augustin Berque, *Poétique de la Terre: histoire naturelle et histoire humaine: essai de mésologie*, Paris 2014, 29-58.

37 Percival Lowell, *The Soul of The Far East*, Boston/New York 1888, 15.

where we put the title-page. The foot-notes are printed at the top of the page, and the reader inserts his marker at the bottom. In newspaper paragraphs, a large full stop is put at the beginning of each.

Men make themselves merry with wine, not after dinner, but before. Sweets also come before the *pièces de résistance*. The whole method of treating horses is the opposite of ours. A Japanese (of the old school) mounts his horse on the right side, all parts of the harness are fastened on the right side, the mane is made to hang on the left side; and when the horse is brought home, its head is placed where its tail ought to be, and the animal is fed from a tub at the stable door.

Boats are hauled up on the beach stern first.

On leaving an inn, you fee not the waiter, but the proprietor.

The Japanese do not say “north-east,” “south-west,” but “east-north,” “west-south.” They carry babies, not in their arms, but on their backs. Many tools and implements are used in a way which is contrary to ours. For example, Japanese keys turn in instead of out, and Japanese carpenters saw and plane towards, instead of away from, themselves. The best rooms in a house are at the back; the garden, too, is at the back. When building a house, the Japanese construct the roof first; then, having numbered the pieces, they break it up again, and keep it until the sub-structure is finished. In making up accounts, they write down the figures first, the corresponding items next. Politeness prompts them to remove, not their head-gear, but their foot-gear. Their needle-work sometimes curiously reverses European methods. Belonging as he does to the inferior sex, the present writer can only speak hesitatingly on such a point. But a lady of his acquaintance informs him that Japanese women needle their thread instead of threading their needle, and that instead of running the needle through the cloth, they hold it still and run the cloth upon it. Another lady, long resident in Tōkyō, says that the impulse of her Japanese maids is always to sew on cuffs, frills, and other similar things, topsy-turvy and inside out. If that is not the *nec plus ultra* of contrariety, what is? Men in Japan are most emphatically not the inferior sex. When (which does not often happen) a husband condescends to take his wife out with him, it is my lord's jinrikisha that bowls off first. The woman gets into hers as best she can, and trundles along behind. Still, women have some few consolations. In Europe, gay bachelors are apt to be captivated by the charms of actresses. In Japan, where there are no actresses to speak of, it is the women who fall in love with fashionable actors. Strangest of all, after a bath the Japanese dry themselves with a damp towel!”³⁸

It is difficult to discern the deeper logic of Chamberlain's remarks, but it seems to me that he is simply highlighting a curious, picturesque aspect of Japan (the word

38 Basil H. Chamberlain, *Things Japanese*, London 1905, 480-482.

"picturesque" is frequently associated with Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).

While the theme, even the form, of radical Japanese otherness represented in Chamberlain's *topsy-turvydom* seems to go back to Frois, albeit via rather complex, meandering paths, including the notion of the "moral antipodes"³⁹, the two authors do, however, pursue different objectives. Chamberlain, who, by the way, also acquired scientific expertise about Japan, no longer uses the logic of topsy-turvy as a means of taming strangeness, but on the contrary, to lock the Japanese in a persistent state of weirdness, of turning them into "curiosities". Let's not forget that what became the "West" in the nineteenth century, especially according to Hegel (*das Abendland*) was a concept that went beyond Europe and probably cultivated a stronger sense of superiority over non-Western peoples, a stronger feeling of being at the forefront of civilization, than what sixteenth-century missionaries would have felt, who were, of course, buttressed by their Christian faith, but at the same time very fragile and isolated, thousands of miles from their native land.

The theme of Japan as the opposite of the West is also found in two books from 1896. The first one, *Feudal and Modern Japan* was written by Arthur May Knapp, a Unitarian pastor from Massachusetts who led a mission to Japan in 1889. In the book, he develops his idea of a "*principle of inversion*" that governs Japanese customs:

"Inversion is the confirmed habit of the far Oriental. It characterizes, not only the general mode as well as every detail of his outward life, but also his intellectual and moral being. It is not simply that his ways and thoughts differ from ours. They are the total reversal of ours. In our childhood we were accustomed to picture the inhabitants of the antipodes as standing upon their heads. We were so far right in our imaginings that that is really the only thing the oriental does not to do in the inversion of our ways."⁴⁰

In the same year, 1896, Englishwoman Emily Patton published a very nice work entitled *Japanese Topsy-turvy-Dom* in Japan, this time, however, with the intent to fight, as she wrote, against narrow-minded anti-Japanese prejudice.

After World War II, Martin Heidegger saw in Japan the possibility of a completely different "House of Being"⁴¹, and Alexandre Kojève viewed it as an alternative to the triumph of the "American Way of Life"⁴². However, it was undoubtedly Roland Barthes who, in his 1970 *Empire of Signs*, most clearly put Japan in this role of

39 Chamberlain states: "Japanese logic is the very antipodes of European logic". Quoted by Gill, *Topsy-turvy* 1585, 43.

40 Gill, *Topsy-turvy* 1585, 47-48.

41 Martin Heidegger, Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache. Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden, in: Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann (ed.), *Unterwegs zur Sprache (1950-1959)*, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 12, Frankfurt a. M. 1985.

42 Cf. Lozerand, La dilution du sujet japonais.

the great “Other” of the West, a fascinating “empire of empty signs” to oppose to the horrible “Western Semioocracy”, fantasizing about finding a language abounding in “irreducible differences” that would “make the entire West crumble”.⁴³

In his lectures held in Japan during his travels to the country in the late 1980s, Claude Lévi-Strauss revived this theme once again, but in a more subtle way and making a better case. In his 1986 “A Recognition of Cultural Diversity: What Japanese Culture Can Teach Us”, he lists some oppositions lifted from, or in the vein of, Frois and Chamberlain:

“One certainly does not have to be an anthropologist to notice that a Japanese carpenter uses the saw and the plane the opposite way his Western colleagues do: He saws and planes towards himself, not by pushing the tool away from himself. At the end of the 19th century, this observation had already been made by Basil Hall Chamberlain, professor at the University of Tokyo, an astute observer of Japanese life and culture and an eminent philologist. In his famous book “Things Japanese”, under the heading Topsy-turvidom, he records this and other facts as oddities of no particular significance. In short, he goes no further than Herodotus more than twenty-four centuries ago, who noticed that the ancient Egyptians did everything the opposite way from his Greek compatriots. On the other hand, experts in Japanese linguistics have noted the curiosity that a Japanese person who needs go to away for a moment (to post a letter, or buy a newspaper or a pack of cigarettes) will often say something like “Itte mairimásu”; to which the other will reply “Itte irasshai”. The emphasis is thus not placed on the decision to leave, as a Westerner would put it, but on the intention of coming right back. Similarly, a specialist in ancient Japanese literature will point out that a journey is experienced as painful, uprooting, and haunted by an obsession to return home. Finally, on a more prosaic level, a Japanese cook doesn’t throw food into the fryer, but rather lifts it out (ageru)...”⁴⁴

He goes on:

“An anthropologist will refuse to consider these petty facts as independent variables, as isolated particularities. On the contrary, he will be struck by what they have in common. Across a variety of fields and under different modalities, there is always this theme of bringing back to oneself, or of returning to oneself inwardly. Instead of departing from the “self” as an autonomous and already constituted entity, everything happens as if the Japanese were constructing their “self” from the outside. The Japanese “self” thus appears, not as a primitive predetermined

43 Cf. Lozerand, *La dilution du sujet japonais*.

44 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Reconnaissance de la diversité culturelle: ce que nous apprend la civilisation japonaise*, in: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L’Anthropologie face aux problèmes du monde moderne*, Paris 2011, 101-142.

parameter, but as a result towards which one strives without any certainty to ever reach it. I am not surprised when people tell me that Descartes's famous adage: "I think, therefore I am" is absolutely untranslatable into Japanese! In fields as varied as spoken language, craftsmanship, culinary arts, history of ideas [...], a very profound difference, or more precisely, a system of invariable differences, manifests itself between what I would simply call the Western soul and the Japanese soul. This difference can be summarized as the opposition between a centripetal movement and a centrifugal movement. An anthropologist can use this dichotomy as a working hypothesis to try to better understand the relationship between the two civilizations."⁴⁵

Lévi-Strauss developed his point even more clearly in his 1988 "The place of Japanese culture in the world", showing how Japan, differently from the rest of the East, is a sort of an inverted symmetrical image of the West that shows us our own reflection like a mirror. "Protected from the metaphysical resignation of Eastern religions" as well as from the "static sociology of Confucianism", Japan has "inverted" its rejection of the centrifugal Western subject "the way you invert a glove", creating a centripetal subject. The rhetoric of inversion allows Lévi-Strauss to elegantly navigate around a thorny dilemma. By making Japan a pure symmetry of the West, it retains its particularity, but at the same time he places the two extremes of the Eurasian continent in the same category, completely distinct from that of the continental empires.⁴⁶

It is therefore not surprising that Lévi-Strauss clearly expressed his admiration for Frois and Chamberlain, whose method and observations he adopts, even mentioning them on the same breath in a laudatory preface to the 1998 pocket edition of Frois's *Tratado*⁴⁷.

Frois does not seem to have had any major emulators since Lévi-Strauss, but it must be said that bestsellers on this topic continue to flourish. The latest one by a certain Elena Janvier was published in France in 2011 under the title *In Japan, lovers don't say 'I love you'*. It goes like this:

"This book is an attempt to draw a lighthearted inventory of the thousand and one differences between our civilizations. From small details of everyday life to the more intimate universe of emotions, it offers its readers an unexpected and humorous key to deciphering Japanese mysteries and to understand the ways we live and love."⁴⁸

45 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Reconnaissance de la diversité culturelle*.

46 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Place de la culture japonaise dans le monde*, in: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L'Autre face de la lune*, Paris 2011, 49-55.

47 Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *Préface*.

48 Elena Janvier, *Au Japon ceux qui s'aiment ne disent pas je t'aime*, Paris 2012.

It aptly illustrates one of the latest avatars of how the French view Japan: As a gently exotic country, a great change of scenery, and... a new tourist destination.

But when it comes to instrumentalizing Japan to construct fake “mirrors”, philosophers are not to be outdone. In *Cosmos* in 2015, where he presented a “philosophy of nature” as part of his “Brief Encyclopedia of the World”, Michel Onfray took his turn to sing the tune of a “West formatted by Judeo-Christianity, which implies the separation between a Creator and his creature, a subject before everything else, and objects after this subject”. This he contrasts with the charms of a Japanese haiku: The thought that exists before a haiku is written does not suffer from this damaging separation: no “I” or “me” that pre-exists in the world, no dualism that would oppose a celestial world and an earthly world, no separation between self and nature.⁴⁹

Onfray is not afraid to summarize his analysis with a stone-cold: “Christianity has damaged humankind, Shintoism has upheld it”, before he goes on, still on the subject of the haiku:

“There is no exposed ‘I’, no exhibited ‘me’, no lyrical expansion, no schizophrenic dualism, no self that is separate from the world, no consciousness that is distinct from nature, no creator opposed to creation, no verbal religion, no concept of temptation, no literary formalism, no obscuration of the world. On the contrary, there is a body that feels, looks, tastes, enjoys the world, experiences reality, grasps both the detail and the universality of nature, of the cosmos, the word at the service of empirical life, a minimal phenomenology for maximal poetry, a tiny stylistic proposal capable of producing the sensation of the sublime, a clarification of what truly is.”⁵⁰

Augustin Berque’s analyses are hardly any different. One year prior, in his 2014 *Poetry of the Land*, he invites his readers to Touraine to meet a person who says: “My name is René Descartes”. Then he goes on to pursue the tracks of Percival Lowell, towards Levant, and after a long walk through the Hercynian forest he ends up in a country, Japan, where there is “no I”, where the “subject” gives way to an “ambient”, where a philosophy emerges “antipodally” that is “diametrically opposed” to that of the West and its “modern ontological topos”⁵¹.

While raciological discourses have obstinately provided a baseline for the discourse on Japan since the nineteenth century, they are often supplemented, or replaced, by the equally insistent motif of the “country where everything is turned upside down” (*topsy-turvydom*), or by that of the “Great Other” of the West, from Marin Heidegger or Alexandre Kojève to Michel Onfray, and Augustin Berque via

49 Cf. Michel Onfray, *Cosmos*, Paris 2015, 560.

50 Onfray, *Cosmos*, 569.

51 Berque, *Poétique de la Terre*, 29-58.

Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, or Claude Lévi-Strauss. This discourse never ceases to nourish “anti-modern” discourses that are critical of what the contemporary West has become, especially after World War II.

Conclusions

The theme and rhetoric of Japan's absolute otherness therefore have had a long history. Born from a Jesuit worldview, which leveraged the method of comparison to diminish the strangeness of the Japanese without denying it, while at the same time making them targets of their missionary enterprise, this discourse has produced a long series of avatars spanning four centuries until today. Since Marco Polo, Japan tends to be a fantastical and inaccessible country, an embodiment of a utopia. Yet since Luis Frois in the sixteenth century, and since the revival of Herodotus's approach towards the Egyptians, it also tends to occupy the spot of the “ideal opposite”.

Despite the profound inertia of this veritable wrinkle in European and then Western thought, it has nevertheless undergone some variations. The phraseology of the “contradiction of customs” has thus been transformed into that of “antipodes”, then of “*topsy-turvydom*”, to mention only the most striking catchphrases.

There even seems to have been some sort of alternation between periods that liked to inventory differences—the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and those periods that sought to diminish their importance in order to better highlight similarities (the eighteenth century). It should be noted, however, that the meaning and function of a model can change, even if its form suggests a sense of continuity. The pattern of the “contradiction of customs” does not serve the same purpose when Frois uses it in the sixteenth century as when the Anglo-Saxons propagated the *topsy-turvydom* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the vision of Japan as “extremely foreign” does not have the same meaning for French (and German?) intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century as it does for French philosophers who dabble in Japanology in the early twentyfirst century. Let's admit for our part that, with all due respect for the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, we find it deeply regrettable that he has chosen to follow in the footsteps of Frois and Chamberlain, because—does it have to be pointed out?—Japan is *not* the absolute Other of the West, but just another world among the many that inhabit our planet, without any exceptional glory nor indignity, with many similarities to other cultures, and of course, with certain singularities. There is no case to portray Japan as an inverted mirror of a vilified West. So how do we escape this discourse of absolute otherness in the twentyfirst century, which is now well underway? Probably by continuing to compare, but in a more flexible, agile way, from varying the angles and using multiple levels of compari-

son. Because a critical moment in any comparative endeavor that does not want to be comparatistical is the moment we leave the details to see the big picture, rise beyond the treetops to see the woods. It is the moment when observation becomes systematic and tends to thicken, or concentrate, those differences into a sort of essence. The issue here is not to refuse systematization, because then we would refuse to think and go back to wandering amongst the trees; it is to use multiple systematizations to make sure no single system becomes dominant, to avoid that the merry-go-round of comparisons, of “strangeness” and/or “familiarization” grinds to a stop. This might be the key to a proper use of comparisons in our age, a time torn between universalism and relativism, to ensure that the comparisons themselves are also objects of comparison, or, to put it another way, that they contain a meta-comparative dimension. This is an essential condition for them to stay agile, subtle, and open, to maintain “the humor and alacrity” that constitute their real merit.

In “Killing a Chinese Mandarin”, Carlo Ginzburg reflects on the “moral implications of distance” which, in various contexts, tends to numb our sense of humanity.⁵² The question of what is near or far goes beyond that of mere geographical proximity, and perhaps the true purpose of comparison is to keep us from killing “Chinese mandarins”, because, to put it another way, our moral imagination is not disconnected from our intellectual imagination.

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