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# Two different semiotic frameworks for viewing Japan

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I would like to examine, within a semiotic framework, two contrasting views of the contemporary culture of Japan – which is still relatively little-known outside its own shores. First, there is the *outsider’s view*, according to which Japan is firmly situated in the “Far East”. This is the usual interpretant of subject-sign Japan, which is taken to refer – as its object-sign – to all that is *different* from the “West”: language, culture, society, manners, et cetera. In other words, this is Japan still masquerading as the “Mysterious East”. The second view of Japan is that of *insiders*: mostly ethnic Japanese – but with nearly 3 million residents of different ethnicities. Beginning in the mid-1800s, Japan set out to modernise itself. By the mid Meiji Period (1887), the government had adopted the slogan *Datsu-A, Nyû-Ô*, literally ‘Get out of Asia/embrace Europe’. As a result, in many areas (health care and longevity, income distribution, education, public safety, public and personal cleanliness, social politeness, respect for the law, architectural technology, precision manufacturing, and cuisine), Japan is in a league of its own. The object-signs of this newer Japan are all non-Asian aspects of Japanese culture. Their interpretant is the “Far West”.

**Keywords:** contemporary Japanese culture; insider’s view; outsider’s view; “Far East”; “Far West”

## 1 The outsider’s view of Japan

### 1.1 Introduction

In this paper I would like to take a look, within a semiotic framework, at two contrasting views of the contemporary culture of Japan – which is still relatively little-known outside its own shores.

First, there is the *outsider’s view*, according to which Japan is firmly situated in the “Far East”. This is the usual interpretant of subject-sign “Japan”, which is taken to

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refer – as its object-sign – to all that is *different* from the “West”: language, culture, society, manners, et cetera. In other words, this is Japan as the “Mysterious East”.<sup>1</sup>

As in Hopkins (2022 [2020]) on modern poetry, the object-sign will have a propositional structure broadly analogous to that of the subject-sign. Especially in the USA, but also in European countries, there is a mistaken focus on all kinds of exotic aspects of traditional Japanese culture which no longer have much of a place in everyday Japanese life (despite the efforts of national television network NHK, including its excellent educational channel). Whereas outsiders see the multiple objects of subject sign “Japan” as a collection of traditional features (architecture, dance, Kabuki, Noh, martial arts), these things are remote to most Japanese people in the 21st century.

Let us reflect on the case of author Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848), who went blind writing the 106 volumes of the popular fantasy/historical romance *Nansô Satomi Hakkenden* and dictated the final episodes to his daughter-in-law.<sup>2</sup> My point in mentioning the *Hakkenden* is that it is set in the late Muromachi period, 350 years before Bakin lived. More recently, there is an often-performed kabuki version. The setting in the relatively distant past is reflected in the popularity of period TV dramas today – but this does not mean that elements of those distant periods are found in contemporary life. Rather, it is simply a matter of *nostalgia*. This sort of nostalgia is endemic in the outsider’s view of Japan. It may even be found among contemporary Japanese visitors to the ancient capital of Kyoto: victims of nostalgia, they too are longing to tread the hallowed flagstones of the small area preserved more or less in its charming original state, lying between the north side of Kiyomizu-dera (mostly in small shops and houses) and the Hôkan-ji pagoda near Yasaka Shrine.

If one is to believe the advertisements of the tourist industry, this sort of nostalgia is common to overseas tourists, who presumably come to Japan to catch a glimpse of such vestiges of the past. In certain historic towns – like our ancient former capital of Kamakura (1185–1333) – traditional temples and shrines are found throughout the city, generally at the end of a narrow road or alleyway. Their charm is undeniable, making Kamakura a favourite tourist destination for people from Tokyo, which is only an hour’s train ride away. Although such tourists expect to find a good number of houses of traditional Japanese architecture, they are increasingly disappointed as time goes by. Such houses – at least in their original state – are difficult to heat or cool, as *shôji* covered windows tend to have gaps around their frames. Moreover, such older houses have generally been standing for a century or

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1 That troublesome expression, the “West”, will be taken to refer to the whole area of ethnic European culture founded on a Greco-Roman background.

2 Throughout this essay, I will indicate long vowels, except for common place-names, as vowel length is phonemic in Japanese.

more, and gradually fall victim to rot and termites. What usually happens – and it is a shame – is that they are pulled down and either replaced with something contemporary, or, when the site is more spacious, are turned into pay-for-parking lots. At this point in the 21st century, the result is that traditional houses make up less than 10% of the total, even in Kamakura. In residential communities with a history of less than 50 years, there are virtually none.

## 1.2 The Japanese writing system

As we shall see below, if there is a common factor shared by the “Eastern/Asian” Japan and the “Western” one, it is the *kana-majiri* writing system. This combines Chinese-derived *kanji* with indigenous *Yamato* grammatical features written in the *hiragana* syllabary. Fluid, curvy *hiragana* (あかさたな: a ka sa ta na) is the syllabary used for verb tenses, particles, etc. Spiky *katakana* (アカサタナ) is used as italics are used in European languages – thus for the many borrowings, mostly from English (Cf. Hopkins 2019 [2016]: 24).

Japan’s history of writing begins with the introduction of Chinese logographic characters (*kanji* in Japanese, meaning ‘Han characters’) from China and Korea, supposedly in the 5th century. Kanji were first used either to write in virtual Chinese, or – as in the *Man’yōshū* poetry collection (compiled sometime after AD 759) – used mostly for their Japanized syllabic values only. The tedium of using a relatively complex kanji to represent the sound of a simple syllable was what led to their abbreviation, and so the *hiragana* syllabary was born.

Japanese employs the Latin alphabet only rarely; exceptions are for public use, for example on street signs – where it is often somewhat misused – and sometimes in advertising. The most important exception is that Japanese is generally typed in the alphabet on a computer. The object of so typing is to produce, onscreen, a combination of Chinese characters (*kanji*, 漢字) – often for more abstract concepts – and the two *kana* syllabaries for other words that do not need to be written in kanji for clarity.<sup>3</sup>

Basic syllables may be combined in various ways, for a total of about 100 possible sounds (some of which may seem to include more than one consonant). In the many cases where kanji have been assigned an indigenous Japanese (*Yamato*) reading as well as a Chinese-derived one, learning Japanese writing means learning at least two pronunciations – or “readings” – for every kanji. To take a simple example, the kanji

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<sup>3</sup> The Korean writing system is closer to the Latin alphabet than the Japanese syllabaries, as it allows for isolated consonants. The kana string for ka, ki, ku, etc. fails to indicate that the same consonant is used throughout, and this is a general feature of Japanese orthography.

食 (shoku), derived from some variety of Tang Chinese, meaning ‘to eat’, has been assigned to the old Yamato-Japanese word *taberu*. So, although one says *tabemashita* for ‘I have eaten’, ‘a meal’ is *shokuji* (eating-thing). There is also the more familiar word *gohan* ‘a meal’, derived from the general Chinese word for ‘rice’, which can have much the same meaning. Partly because Japanese is not tonal like the Chinese languages, there are several other words with exactly the same Chinese-derived pronunciation (shoku) – but written with different kanji.<sup>4</sup>

In Japanese schools, children learn only so many kanji per year. This means that it takes up to nine school years to learn the 2,136 *jōyō kanji*, or kanji for ordinary use. Once these are thoroughly mastered, reading can be remarkably fast. The alphabet would only take a day or two to learn, but Japanese children do not learn how to write Japanese in the alphabet until the third year of elementary school, and then the spelling system used is a Japanese system unfamiliar outside Japan. By contrast, a large percentage of Chinese children learn to write Mandarin in the alphabet *before* they learn *hanzi* (kanji). This is a much preferable order; it is one case in which Japan might follow the Chinese example. A Dutch friend who used to travel often to China on business tells me that Chinese businessmen are already much better at English, after 25 years, than their Japanese counterparts are after 150!

The Japanese way of learning to write privileges syllables – or *morae* (individual sound beats, of which final nasal /N/ is one) – over independent consonants and vowels. One might think that the way Japanese syllables are not analysed into discrete consonants and vowels could be a handicap when attempting to learn to write English. But today’s use of computers in order to write Japanese by alphabetic inputting automatically separates consonants from vowels, which are individual signs on the computer keyboard. Bilingual Japanese/English speakers sometimes wonder why, when simple alphabetic input would be sufficient in most everyday cases, Japanese writers go to the trouble of transmuting that input into a combination of kanji (which the computer sometimes gets wrong) and syllabic kana. The plethora of homophones is not such an obstacle to adoption of the alphabet as is generally thought. Of course there are historical/cultural reasons: the literature of the past few centuries was written in kana-majiri.

### 1.3 Literature

Literature, being too weighty a topic for this essay, will be omitted. Let us simply note the almost complete absence of reference to traditional Japanese culture in the

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<sup>4</sup> This is the “many homophones” problem which kanji enthusiasts use, with a certain amount of justification, to argue against the adoption of alphabetic writing.

popular novels of Murakami Haruki and other writers such as Yoshimoto Banana – which qualifies them for our model no. 2 of Japan. Have such references been discredited by the dramatic suicide of Mishima Yukio in 1970? Mishima was certainly nostalgic for the “floating world” of the traditional gay quarters of Tokyo, into which he was initiated by his playboy uncle. On a more serious level, he was also nostalgic for the militaristic culture of Japan’s imperial era, so his work properly belongs to Japan model no. 1.

## 2 The insider’s view of Japan

### 2.1 The Asia that Japan set aside

Beginning in the mid-1800s, Japan set out to modernise itself – by itself – uncoerced by Europe or the United States. The incursion of US Navy commodore Matthew Perry’s small fleet of “black ships” into Tokyo Bay in 1853 served as a reminder of the technological advances of the Occident in general. The fraught term “the West” (with its implications of Orientalism) is geographically and culturally vague, but it is nonetheless obviously important for this essay. Restricted to Europe and the USA, it is the part of the world that Meiji Japan set out to learn from.

This is evident from an important slogan adopted quite early in the Meiji Period (1887), and well known among educated Japanese people at the time. This is *Datsu-A, Nyū-Ô* (脱亜入欧), literally ‘Get out of Asia/enter Europe’: in other words, “Leave Asia behind and learn everything possible from European culture”. The USA was just recovering from its civil war in the mid-1860s; whether or not because of this fact, and notwithstanding its technologically important inventions of that time, the initial focus of Japanese officials was on Great Britain and the European continent, which for them *were* the West – at least according to the slogan.

The terms “Asia” and “Asian” need to be treated with great care where Japan is concerned. In normal Japanese parlance (unless we are talking in purely geographic terms), Asia is something that exists *outside* Japan. The East Asian continent is mostly looked at askance in Japan – much as the people of Great Britain denigrate the continent of Europe when it suits them. This is surely one of the reasons for Brexit. The 2016–2020 push to exit the European Union is symptomatic of this tendency, and Japanese commentators draw this parallel with their own situation (as below).

In an 18-country (nine Asian, nine European) international survey in 2000, conducted by University of Tokyo professor Takashi Inoguchi, [...] only 26 percent [of Japanese] described themselves as Asian when asked about the larger grouping to which they belonged, compared to 80 percent [of] South Koreans.

The reason for this is simple. The Asian identity of Japanese has traditionally been weak. Japan is very much like Britain vis-a-vis their respective continents. Keeping the continent/mainland at arm's length is the best phrase to characterize their relationships with the continent. To both, the continent is a potentially troublesome place. (Thakur and Inoguchi 2003)

In many media environments, especially when the Japanese economy is being discussed, we see the expression “Asia ex-Japan”. There is discussion about whether this expression is still relevant, yet the distinction between the two entities is still clearly made: “But Asian countries have made strides in catching up and are converging with Japan in interesting ways, such that they are even beginning to face challenges that Japan’s economy has long confronted due to its head start” (Olsen 2019).

Japan is just too different from the rest of geographic Asia in culture, individual standard of living, and in manufacturing technology and quality to speak or write about in the same breath. In a word, it is more *Western* (is this tantamount to saying that it is simply more *advanced*?). In many areas it has in fact gone further than much of the West – in the directions in which the West aims to succeed – to become something else: *the Far West*.

## 2.2 The “Far West”

### 2.2.1 Casting off “Asia”

I propose the notion of “Far West” as the interpretant of a Japan which officially – and thoroughly – cast off Asia back in the late 1800s and into the early 1900s.<sup>5</sup>

More than 150 years ago, Japan had already set its sights firmly on European economy and culture – and to a somewhat lesser extent on the USA. As an end result, in many areas, Japan is now in a league of its own. Briefly, in health care and longevity, relative equality of income distribution, education, public safety, public and personal cleanliness, social politeness, respect for the law, architectural and anti-seismic technology, precision manufacturing of all kinds, in sophistication of traditional culture – and in yet other fields such as cuisine, Japan is either no. 1 among nations, or very close.<sup>6</sup>

Traditional culture would include formal tea, *Cha-no-yu* or *Sadô* (“Way of Tea”, which does not properly involve any kind of “ceremony”). *Sadô* has had a great influence – particularly under tea master Sen no Rikyû (1522–1591) – on Japanese taste in architecture and other areas including manners and physical deportment,

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<sup>5</sup> The Japanese incursions into East Asia at that time established Japan as the only non-European imperial power – a new kind of “West” in fact.

<sup>6</sup> In Japan’s handling of the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, it is certainly far superior to all other G-7 nations.

even though formal tea events are expensive to organise and rare in the 21st century. Universities lucky enough to have suitable facilities still maintain a Sadô club. Sadô itself is hard to classify: it is neither Eastern nor Western, but simply Japanese, and as modern as could be wished, inculcating harmony with Nature and spiritual tranquillity (Cf. Okakura 1956 [1906]).

The object-signs of this newer Japan are all the non-Asian aspects of Japanese culture – modern Tokyo with its skyscrapers of ferro-concrete and glass (which may contain a dedicated Tea-room), thoroughly non-Japanese domestic architecture (ditto), top-ranking cuisine – which, it should be noted, is very often not Japanese, etc. The excellent education system should be treated with caution, as part of that education involves learning the Japanese writing system, which has Chinese roots.

As my neighbour of French background, married to a Japanese businessman, comments: the Japanese people are no longer “Asian”; aside from printed matter, products of Japanese tradition are hard to find in contemporary Japanese life. Unlike outsiders, insiders like my neighbour are dealing with a quite different sign-system for “Japan”, whose object-sign is the complexity – and Western-ness – of everyday life.

One of these object-signs is kanji-free spoken language: e.g. words/phrases *acquired as phonetic units*, kanji being rarely referred-to in everyday conversation. This is the same situation as in most languages: fast and fluid conversation does not leave time for questions about which kanji is being used – or, in European languages, which spelling is being used. This does not mean, however, that kanji have disappeared. In Section 3 below I will discuss their relative importance, and how the Japanese people, and public television, are moving away from using more difficult kanji.

### 2.2.2 Architecture

Chinese Tang dynasty wooden architecture is perhaps best preserved in Japan, in temple buildings like Tōshōdaiji (near Nara) and Heian Shrine in Kyoto. The latter apparently preserves the style of architecture initially used in Heian period palace buildings. Yet the bright colours in which Chinese buildings were painted were not really to later Japanese taste, and when the colours faded the wood was often allowed to revert to its natural colour. Certainly many Kyoto temples built in the late 13th century, and perhaps including even the beautiful nearby temple of Nanzenji, originally an imperial retreat, are an illustration of this (Cf. Hamashima 1995).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Under the rubric of nostalgia, back in 1967, when access was simple, one could enjoy reading quietly in a room just inside Nanzenji’s main entrance to the right, with sliding doors opening onto a slim waterfall. But the severe gaze of Bodhidharma’s searching eyes in an ink painting hanging on the wall was an obstacle to concentration.



**Figure 1:** Katsura Rikyū, Kyoto, mid-1600s (© 4travel.jp).

Although there were no doubt many interesting architectural experiments by Japanese architects and builders over the centuries, the definitive break with China and Korea came in the mid-1600s with Katsura Imperial Villa in southwest Kyoto – a project to which Prince Hachijō-no-miya devoted half a lifetime (Figure 1). When “discovered” by German architect Bruno Taut in 1933, the villa was recognised as *the world’s first modern building*. It was another 250 years before Le Corbusier produced something similar: the second floor supported on *pilotis*, from which the walls of the ground floor are set back. The severe colour scheme of Katsura is white for the plastered lower walls and second-floor paper shōji screens, which contrasts with the nearly black cedar shingles of the roof. The latter is of course the main difference from Le Corbusier’s flat roofs, being of hip-and-gable form. The fact that this building virtually pioneers world modernism in architecture shows just how far Japan had come, already in the mid-1600s. Tange Kenzō is probably Japan’s most famous modern architect of the 20th century. The similarities between Katsura and Tange’s own house are clear (cf. Figure 2).

### 3 Factors common to Japan-as-East and Japan-as-West

#### 3.1 European/US blindness to Japan’s Western shift

Against the recognition of Japan as Western is the somewhat BBC-flavoured notion of “keeping Japan in its place” (even though the UK witnessed the decline of its automobile industry due largely to superior Japanese technology, dedication, and



**Figure 2:** Celebrated architect Tange Kenzō's house, Tokyo, 1950s (© *BRUTUS* no. 892).

efficiency). European people, while using Japan branded ACs, cameras, TV sets, etc., manage not to see that such modern technological prowess (from at least the 1960s on) implies a great cultural shift Westward. Instead, while keeping cool in summer with their Mitsubishi and Fujitsu air-conditioners, they manage to retain an image of Japan as far away and exotic. Thus, the artistic wife of a gallery owner in the central Var region of southern France travels often to Japan to collect old kimono, snipping them into pieces in order to make attractive handbags, et cetera. It's an interesting question whether, in such small ways as this, it was Europeans who first rediscovered these beauties of Japanese tradition, or Japanese accessory designers themselves.

There can be no question of French people maintaining an attitude towards Japan influenced by the former British Empire. Instead, France and Japan are culturally close in a number of important ways. Both countries have a long history of graphic art at a high level. French-made cars, rare in the USA, abound in Japan. But the closest tie is no doubt that of *cuisine – ryōri* in Japanese, meaning something like “the science/art of materials”. Both countries have influenced each other considerably on this very important level.

### 3.2 The Japanese writing system

Among the cultural factors tying together our two alternative views of Japan is the writing system. The Japanese people prefer to retain a system which is impenetrable to anyone outside Japan – even including those Chinese who have learnt their kanji in the post-2013 abbreviated forms (which incidentally often obscure their etymology). This impenetrability acts as a *cultural defence system*. The graphic smokescreen is convenient. And, although English is taught in school (increasingly from the age of ten, but with focus on passing government-mandated tests), actually learning to understand or speak real-life English would likewise expose the Japanese to pernicious influences, above all from US culture. Japan is a cultural cocoon, inside which the Japanese people are happy to continue living undisturbed. This attitude harks back to the “closed-country” (*sakoku*) policy of the Tokugawa government (1630s–1853). When one considers the crime, the general violence, the unequal distribution of income, the divorce rate, the general uncleanliness of life in the larger English-speaking nations (among others), the Japanese people are glad to remain as isolated as possible. This situation will no doubt change as the population of English-speaking workers from Asia and elsewhere increases, as it surely must in view of Japan’s very low birth rate.

Aside from the government’s disappointing attitude towards acquisition of oral/aural English in Japanese schools, we seem to have another factor that is common to our two versions of “Japan”: the writing system seems determined to survive in its traditional form.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, there is no very sound reason except longstanding custom why Japanese should not be transcribed in the alphabet concurrently with kana-majiri transcription. Homophones in wide use often number only two or three, and spelling variations might be used to disambiguate such cases. At least at the level of everyday communication, alphabetic transcription works remarkably well in Japanese. Prof. J. Marshall Unger has recommended to Japan’s National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics that the various forms of alphabetic spelling currently in use (*kunrei*, Hepburn, etc.) be unified into a single system (personal correspondence, May 2021; cf. Unger 1996). As Unger suggests, there is no reason except prejudice why digraphia – the coexistence of kana-majiri and alphabetic writing – should not be practised in Japan. Children could learn the alphabet before kanji, as is done in China, and alphabetic writing would permit the transcription of foreign borrowings (which are mostly from English) in their original form. This would be a stimulus to the learning of English. At present these borrowings are all transcribed in katakana, almost always distorting their pronunciation; meaning is sometimes also distorted. The katakana version of “reform” is used

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<sup>8</sup> On the semiotic level, might this system constitute the partial linguistic *ground* of each triad?

to mean “renovation”. A substantial apartment building is a “mansion”. English spelling often falls victim: the English word “ceiling” is transcribed in katakana exactly like the word “sealing”. The number of such words in use has exploded since WW II, reaching about 57,000 (Kenbō 2010). The number is so large that it is unusual to find two or three lines of written Japanese without one or two of these distorted English words in katakana pronunciation included. This phenomenon constitutes a considerable impediment to the subsequent acquisition of English by Japanese students, who have learnt a large number of deformed English words from a very young age – at least a decade before they come to study English per se (Cf. Hopkins 2019 [2016]).

It should be remarked that the plethora of English borrowings transcribed in katakana represent in many cases an *alternative* to kanji. Whereas the Chinese write 電視 (lit. ‘electric vision’) for television, the Japanese write テレビ/‘terebi’. One of the kanji for “category” being rather difficult, the Japanese write カテゴリー, a syllable-for-syllable transcription of the English word. This language-wide reaching-out to English is also a *reaching-out to Western-ness*.

In any case, it’s interesting to theorise about a future state of Japan in which the alphabet will have been adopted for writing Japanese in a large variety of situations. If that should happen, the Meiji period edict of “leave Asia/enter Europe” will have come full circle. In the meantime, the persistence of kana-majiri writing (Chinese logograms plus kana for indigenous Yamato Japanese syntactic features) will remain a partial barrier to the adoption of our second, Western, model for Japan.

### 3.3 Nationality and immigration in Japan: a force for change

Mr Sakanaka Hidenori, the forward-looking former head of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau and author of *Nyûkan Senki* (2005), notes that Japan’s population began to decrease in 2004 and with the current low birth rate will drop to 100 million by the mid-21st century. He sets out the various arguments for each of two possible courses of action.

The first is to be content with a “small Japan”, in which people would have to adopt a more frugal lifestyle as the country gradually loses its international economic competitiveness. The second would be to adopt a more liberal immigration policy, admitting 20 million people in order to maintain Japan’s population at about 120 million. These people would come mainly from the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Brazil, and Bangladesh. One result would be that 40% of ethnic Japanese would be married to someone from a different ethnic group. There would also be a rapid increase in the number of elementary school students who speak two or more languages. As a consequence, the population of fluent English

speakers would increase greatly; road signs etc. would be in both English/the alphabet and Japanese *kana-majiri* (as some already are). Although 70% of university classes would still be conducted in Japanese, the remainder would be taught in English. Ethnic minorities would account for around 30% of the teaching staff.

To return to questions of language and writing, throughout his book Sakanaka uses katakana for English and other loanwords. For instance, he writes the words “international school” in katakana, seeming not to register that this is actually an English term. In other words, Sakanaka displays a certain insensitivity to other languages, the chief of which in Japan would of course be English, being the common language of most of his theoretical immigrants, as well as Japan’s second language.

It remains to be seen whether Japan’s immigration policy will change along the lines set out in Sakanaka’s vision of a “big Japan”. Certainly, in order to bolster the dwindling ranks of Japanese hospital nurses, Indonesian nurses are already being brought into Japan and trained. These ladies have a good reputation as kind and caring people. Many of them are Muslim, and this gives them a religious dimension which is often lacking in their Japanese counterparts. Yet these nurses have had to struggle to pass the difficult written Japanese-language test required in the past. Requirements have recently been partially relaxed, but Japanese characters are still the rule. If the alphabet could be adopted in such cases, many currently distorted katakana-ized medical terms could be written correctly in English.

All in all, when it comes to ethnic diversity, the shoe is on the other foot, and Japan has something to learn from the West. This has partly to do with the Japanese-language barrier. But this barrier has already been overcome by self-employed South American, Turkish and other Middle Eastern immigrants who competently handle demolition of old houses. Similarly, male immigrants may also be found on construction sites. Hopefully, we can look forward to a near future in which Japan becomes ethically more diverse and bilingualism becomes the rule rather than the exception. Along with digraphia in writing Japanese, this could remove the final barrier to Japan becoming equal – or superior to – the West in just about all areas.

## 4 Conclusion

### 4.1 Far East and Far West

Evidently, the balance between Japan as the Far East and Japan as the Far West has already swung substantially in favour of the latter.

In model no. 1, the multifarious objects of the subject-sign Japan are all tainted with exoticism. In no. 2 the corresponding objects are all Western-style achievements

(particularly technological) pushed even further than they have been pushed in the so-called West. This means that in effect the interpretants of the two triads differ in quality, in that the interpretant in the case of number one is the “Far East”, and in the case of number two it is the “Far West”.

What makes this difference possible is the difference between Japan no. 1 (that of the outsider) and no. 2 in the discourse linking subject-sign and object-sign. As part of the discourse in the case of no. 1, which privileges exoticism, will be a fascination with the kana-majiri writing system, as plain evidence of the “Far Eastern-ness” of Japan. In the case of no. 2, the discourse will downplay that writing system, preferring to see in digraphia the possibility of a completely alphabetic writing system, which would not only remove a lot of the obstacles to comprehension by young children and overseas visitors and immigrants (and even educated Japanese residents, who have trouble hand-writing more than about 800 kanji), but also make possible the representation of English borrowings in their original form. Such representation would greatly contribute to the competence in English speaking and comprehension of Japanese people in general, which at present remains at one of the lowest levels in the entire region (Cf. Hopkins 2019: 13–14).

Of course the Japanese language itself does not have to change – except to let English and other borrowings regain their original form. It remains to be seen to what extent digraphia can become established, as the first step on the way to more complete adoption of Latin alphabetic transcription (which is used by about 70% of humanity). In favour of phonetic transcription, we already have the examples of Korean (*Hangul*) and Vietnamese (the alphabet with diacritical marks). Both languages are closer to the Chinese languages in the phonetic form of lexical items. Japanese, by contrast, has the advantage that the indigenous multi-syllabic Yamato vocabulary is formally very different from the many Chinese borrowings.

Finally, it should be said that there need be no question of abolishing kanji per se. Learning to write them in fact provides a great artistic training for hand and eye. So they should be retained by all means on the level of *calligraphy* – beautiful writing. Of course, it needs to be said that only those with a real interest in calligraphy will take it up in the first place. Particularly since the advent of the computer, many young Japanese people are sadly no longer able to write beautiful characters. The computer does it for them! If and when kanji come to be seen as relics of the past (though still of aesthetic value), Japan will have fully embraced the West, and our no. 2 model will be fully valid.

In that vein, as I write (June 2021) the G7 summit conference is being held in Cornwall, UK. The only non-Caucasian leader of a full-member nation present is the Japanese prime minister.

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