

## Building Walls Through Cultural Exchange: NHK's Cool Japan and Home Sweet Tokyo

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**Abstract.** In this paper I look at two programs broadcasted on NHK—Japan's public broadcaster—featuring foreigners living in Japan, *Cool Japan* and *Home Sweet Tokyo*, and the refracted ways in which Japanese identity is constructed through gazes that are self-Orientalizing and Occidentalizing. I place the two within three contexts: the Cool and Sugoi Japan campaigns, the foreign talent industry, and the increased concerns over foreigners in Japan. Using a functionalist approach, my analysis highlights the roles played by these two programs within Japanese society and for a Japanese audience, especially in its representation of foreign residents in light of cultural nationalism. While NHK produces some programs featuring non-Japanese hosts and guests, *Cool Japan* and *Home Sweet Tokyo* are of unique interest for their purported aim to represent and give voice to foreigners living in Japan.

**Keywords:** NHK, Cool Japan, Television, Home Sweet Tokyo

### Article Info

#### Article History

Received:  
10 January 2022

Revised:  
5 April 2022

Accepted:  
7 May 2022

## Introduction

Although far from uncontested, nationalism is alive and well in Japan (Higuchi & Matsutani, 2016; Hurst, 2017; Kayama, 2002; Kitayama, 2018; McVeigh, 2006; Shimazu, 2006; Wallace, 2016; Yamaguchi, 2013). Aside from the ‘hard’ or ‘ultra’ nationalism advocated by a small but vocal minority, the most common form nationalism takes in Japan is cultural. Cultural nationalism is indeed widely broadcasted and promoted by eminent scholars and educators, and through popular culture and the media (Yoshino, 1992). Kayama (2002) describes the banal and unchallenged form nationalism takes nowadays, especially with young people, as ‘petit nationalism’ or nationalism light, a situation also explored by McVeigh (2006) and which he defines as ‘everyday nationalism.’ This everyday nationalism, McVeigh explains, advocates ‘ethnic exclusivism, heightened ethnocultural self-consciousness, racialized notions of identity, myth-making propensities and an economic guardedness vis-à-vis the world’—which really could be shortened simply as ‘guardedness vis-à-vis the world.’ Since cultural nationalism is guided by the claim that ‘the distinctiveness of the cultural community is the essence of the nation’ (Yoshino, 1992, p. 1), it results in intellectual pursuits actively engaged in affirming and discovering the essence and uniqueness of Japan. Known as ‘*nihonjinron*,’ this popular body of scholarship devotes itself to promulgating Japanese exceptionalism through affirming an essential, unique, and quasi-genetic conception of Japaneseness. According to Peter Dale, *nihonjinron* scholarship is premised on three leading assumptions:

First, ... that the Japanese constitute a culturally and socially homogeneous racial entity, whose essence is virtually unchanged from prehistorical times down to the present day. Secondly, ... that the Japanese differ radically from all other known peoples. Thirdly, they are consciously nationalistic, displaying a conceptual and procedural hostility to any mode of analysis which might be seen to derive from external, non-Japanese sources. (1986: i)

Albeit part of cultural nationalism, *nihonjinron* distinguishes itself by its concern for an ‘ostensible ‘uniqueness’ of Japan in any aspect, and hostil[ity] to both individual experience and the notion of internal socio-historical diversity’ (i). Popular interest in *nihonjinron* literature is by now well documented (Befu, 1993; Yoshino, 1992), and it is precisely in popular culture that we witness *nihonjinron*’s greatest influence. Television has become an especially powerful and pervasive medium to foster essentialist conceptions of ethnicity and nationhood in a country with one of the highest television consumption diets (Statista, 2018). The myriad programs and segments dedicated to unique, local ingredients and dishes—culminating in the inevitable ‘*oishi!*’ [delicious!] as the host confirms the item’s greatness—can in fact be seen as not only a form of cultural nationalism, but an everyday *nihonjinronism*, fulfilling quasi-religious functions (Ando, 2009, p. 41).

In his seminal work on Orientalism, Edward Said notes that through Orientalism, the West presents the East as 'absolutely different...from the West,' thereby promoting a 'difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')' (1978: 96 and 43). While Said emphasized the imperial reasons for the emergence and persistence of Orientalism, he also mentions that this binary opposition helps 'the mind to intensify its sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is closer to it and what is far away' (55). In other words, the concept not only describes the Other, but plays a functionalist role in national identity building by also defining oneself. Expanding on Said's work, scholars have explored three related concepts: Occidentalism, self-Orientalism and self-exoticism (Creighton, 1995; Iwabuchi, 1994; Lie, 2001; Schäfer, 2009). Orientalism has long been a 'two-way exchange' (Kaplan, 1991, p. 150). While the West constructed an image of the East as essentially Other, Japan has also participated in constructing a radically other Westerner (*gaijin*) through a process of Occidentalism. The term '*gaijin*' itself, by lumping together all white Westerners and creating a dichotomy between Japan and the West, also homogenizes Japanese identity in line with *nihonjinron* tenets and participates in Japan's self-Orientalism and self-exoticism (Creighton, 1995).

## Method

Proclaiming Japan's uniqueness and greatness isn't the purview of the Japanese-born only, however, as foreigners are engaged in bolstering Japanese exceptionalism in the media. This study was conducted by closely reading two NHK television programs available online on the NHK platform and on YouTube, *Cool Japan* (2005–) and *Home Sweet Tokyo* (2017–). While all episodes of *Home Sweet Tokyo* could be analysed, only a randomly selected sample of *Cool Japan* were watched, given their sheer number. Focusing on themes and language, I used a functionalist approach to look at the refracted ways in which Japanese identity is constructed through gazes that are both Occidentalising and self-Orientalizing: by representing the Other as 'absolutely different,' and oneself as exotic. Additionally, I examined how both programs use cultural exchanges to establish and reinforce a clear distinction between Japan and the rest of the world. *Cool Japan* and *Home Sweet Tokyo* are hardly unique in this respect and inscribe themselves in a long tradition. I contend, however, that recent representation of foreigners on both shows betray increased concerns over the growing presence of foreign workers in Japan.

NHK, Japan's public national broadcaster, currently owns two of the seven national terrestrial television networks, four satellite channels, three radio networks. While NHK is consistently perceived as the nation's most impartial and reliable news source (Agata &

Nakamura, 2001, p. 156; Jeff Kingston & Asano, 2012, p. 11), it is also widely considered a government mouthpiece, 'known predominantly for its aseptic newscast bereft of interpretive- or opinion-driven commentary.' Given Japan's low level of press freedom, (Reporters without Borders) the relationship between NHK and the state has recently been described as 'less two creatures eyeing each other warily, occasionally coming into conflict—as the 'watchdog' metaphor of the democratic press would have it—than two octopi, constantly locked in a multi-tentacle embrace jockeying with each other, but in which the state/LDP is the larger and more powerful of the two and usually prevails' (Krauss, 2017). Despite its tendency to avoid rocking the boat it remains Japan's main television source (Snow, 2019, p. 17,24). One could make the case that its 'bland broadcasting brand' carries beyond news reporting (19).

In addition to its domestic network, NHK operates an international, multilingual broadcasting service aimed at domestic and overseas markets—NHK World—which comprises a television and radio network and makes all its contents available online. From its inception, NHK World's stated aims have been, among others, to establish a link between Japan and the rest of the world by showcasing Japan's culture and worldview abroad and helping foreigners navigate life in Japan. While NHK and NHK World produce a few programs featuring non-Japanese hosts and guests, this paper focuses on the broadcaster's two programs purporting to represent the daily life of foreigners in Japan.



Figure 1: Promotional photo for *Home Sweet Tokyo*'s season 1.

## Results and Discussion

### *Home Sweet Tokyo's Refracted Gazes*

NHK's first English-language comedy, *Home Sweet Tokyo* (henceforth *HST*) premiered in November 2017. Broadcasted on NHK World domestically and abroad, and

freely available on the national broadcaster's website, the television series was screened at Japanese Cultural Centres outside Japan, and was renewed for three additional seasons. The modest show centres on London-born Bryan, his wife Itsuki (Yoshino Kimura), daughter Alice (Isla Rose), and father-in-law Tsuneo (Tetsu Watanabe), as they embark on their new life in Tokyo, following Itsuki's mother's passing. *HST* follows the 'fish out of water' formula, as Bryan stumbles from one cultural misunderstanding to another.

Although *HST* may at first be perceived as a television program conceived for newly arrived foreign nationals, my analysis points to the show's functionalist role within Japanese society and for a Japanese audience, especially in its representation of foreign residents. The overall message, executive producers Keiko Tsuneki and Mitsuru Mizutaka, hoped, would be for 'Japanese and foreigners alike ... "I love Japan!": the program should 'make people abroad look at Japan and think, "Wow, that's an interesting country," ... and Japanese people [should] feel proud to be Japanese' (<https://nhk.or.jp/homesweettokyo>).

*HST* opens with Bryan having been in Japan for three months. A year later, when the second season aired, Bryan had still been in Japan for only three months. In fact, he receives his boxes from London on the second season's very last episode, paying homage to the KonMari Method, described as 'the Japanese way of tidying up.' The third season takes place 'still just a few months into their move to Tokyo' (<https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/tv/homesweettokyo/>). While BJ Fox has lived in Japan for several years, performing stand-up comedy in both English and Japanese, his character Bryan is perpetually new to Japan.

Despite having been married to a Japanese for nearly a decade and having a daughter who is more at ease in Japanese than English, Bryan knows 'only four Japanese words.' With the show airing its fourth season in 2020, it has become increasingly difficult to accept Bryan's newness: Alice has grown, Tsuneo has aged, and Itsuki has 'left on an extended business trip.' And yet, Bryan still can't order a cup of tea or a bowl of noodles. The few words he speaks, '*gomme nasai*,' and '*itadakimasu*,' he does excessively slowly and with an exaggerated accent, over-emphasizing the 'su' ending. He repeats the apology on numerous occasions, highlighting the fact that it is the only language he possesses. Bryan's poor Japanese skills may not reflect that of average foreign nationals in Japan, but it does align with *nihonjinron* conceptions of Japanese as being so complex that only the Japanese brain can master it. The show revels in Bryan's linguistic incompetence, and much of the humour is premised on incomprehension and cultural misunderstanding. Bryan's 'always new' quality, furthermore, reinforces a firm distinction between inside and outside and the impossibility of mixing.

I want to turn to two specific episodes to exemplify *HST*'s Occidental and self-Orientalist gazes: 'Alice's Lunchbox' and 'True Love Choco.' 'Alice's Lunchbox' directly addresses cultural identity and belonging. On this third episode of the first season, parents are asked to prepare boxed lunches for the week due to the school kitchen undergoing renovations. Upon learning that her father will be preparing her lunches, Alice begins having nightmares, recalling a school picnic where her classmates made fun of her 'weird' lunch box of waffles, hard-boiled egg, and fruit. Flashbacks of classmates huddled around and laughing disturb her sleep, and she gradually becomes withdrawn. To avoid attracting her classmates' mockery, Alice dumps her father's sandwiches in the trash and spends her piggybank savings on meagre convenience store-bought *onigiri* [rice balls]. Upon finding out, Bryan's initial reaction is to insist on English-style lunches; after all, he muses, 'just because other people are doing something, doesn't mean you have to do it too. It's not the right lesson for Alice.' As his wife Itsuki points out, however, 'Alice already stands out a bit,' so they need to try to help her fit in. The Japanese, she explains, have a saying: '*gou ni itte wa gou ni shitagae*; when you go to a new place, you should follow the customs of *that* new place.' Ultimately agreeing with his wife, Bryan attends a *kyaraben* workshop that will teach him proper Japanese lunch box making. The episode concludes on Alice finding acceptance from her classmates as they compliment her lunch.

Aside from reaffirming platitudes about the Japanese character (we prefer minimalism, we're not good at expressing our feelings, we value the intention put in the making of things), the episode contains a rather questionable message regarding school bullying as an acceptable form of socialization. Alice's integration and acceptance, it is implied, hinges on her rejection of elements which make her stand out. The items that are presented in the program as 'foreign'—waffles, sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs—are as common as rice balls in Japanese convenience stores and would certainly not cause uproar and bullying. With this scene, however, the program creates a firm dichotomy between Japanese and Western food in line with Occidental views. It also promotes the idea that to be Japanese is to eat rice, not bread, and that eating bread rather than rice might compromise social cohesion.

'True Love Choco,' promotes a similar message about the importance of fitting in above all else. The episode begins with Itsuki and her daughter preparing homemade Valentine's Day chocolates for male colleagues and classmates. After introducing Japan's unique twist on the tradition (that women are socially obligated to give chocolate to their male colleagues to thank them for their support), Bryan comments on the practice's un-romantic and time-consuming nature. Agreeing and noting how expansive it can be, Itsuki, nevertheless concludes that failing to give chocolates to her male colleagues 'might not be the best look in



the office.' To this, Bryan agrees: 'you have to fit in, in Japanese society.' The episode's conservative message might be surprising given that the *giri choco* custom is being increasingly criticized and ignored by both men and women. A recent survey indicates that only 35% of women were planning on observing the custom (<http://contents.xj-storage.jp/xcontents/82370/1df72238/536d/4bdb/94e7/f7c1c0e5189c/20190131154836272s.pdf>). Godiva also made national news in 2018 by running a full-page ad in the *Nihon Keizai Shinbum* (the world's largest financial broadsheet owned by Nikkei Inc.) inviting women to forgo the *giri choco* custom: 'Valentine's Day shouldn't be a day on which you're supposed to do something extra for the sake of smooth relations at work.'

Both *HST* episodes feature Japanese customs that are time consuming and normally burden women. Both also displace criticism of these customs onto Bryan, to better affirm a uniform Japanese position in support of the customs, voiced by a woman. Finally, both conclude on the importance of fitting in, even when dealing with non-traditional social obligations such as *giri choco*, which began in the mid twentieth century. In both episodes, it therefore isn't so much the foreigner's fresh point of view that is expressed, but a uniform, Japanese position. Doing so, the program can be said to play a functionalist role within Japanese society: displacing the source of criticism onto the outsider, and then taming it in the name of national unity.

*HST* can be seen as staging what Suzuki (2002) has termed 'cosmetic multiculturalism.' The effect of this kind of multiculturalism, as seen on the show, isn't to push forward a looser definition of Japaneseness, but precisely the opposite. Practically every episode contains at least one moment where the 'Japanese essence' is affirmed. Bryan's presence allows for a firmer affirmation of Japan's (supposed) homogenous identity. Indeed, when the suggestion is raised that some Japanese customs could or should be changed, it is quickly presented as a suggestion of an outsider who needs to adapt.

In addition to the Occidental lens through which Bryan is represented, a self-Orientalising gaze emerges from the show's emphasis on exotic and traditional components as essential to Japanese identity and culture. As Koichi Iwabuchi points out, 'while Orientalism enjoys the mysterious exoticism of the Other, self-Orientalism exploits the Orientalist gaze to turn itself into an Other.' Self-orientalism, however, goes beyond a simple emphasis on 'exotic' features in the process of self-definition. Indeed, self-Orientalism and western Orientalism are complicit in their mutual investment in a strict '*us vs. them*' binary; '[b]oth tend to use the Other to essentialise the Self and to repress heterogeneous voices within' (1994: 70 and 52).

## Foreign Guests and the Foreign Talent Industry on NHK's *Cool Japan*

A more widely broadcasted program, *Cool Japan* began airing in 2005 on NHK domestically and abroad. With its narrated introduction (“These days Japanese culture is considered cool overseas! What could be the reason for this? Will foreigners in Japan be able to find the next *Japanese cool*?”), each episode begins, like most *Cool Japan* documents, with an emphasis on an impressed outsider’s gaze. While special episodes are staged at various venues in and outside of Japan and can feature large panels comprised of as many as a hundred participants, regular episodes centre on a specific theme explored by a group of ‘foreign guests’ who recount which aspect of that theme they feel is uniquely cool. An expert—usually an older, male, university professor—provides explanations throughout and concludes the program by presenting ‘the Japanese perspective.’ The program features at least one documentary-style segment where two of the foreign guests go on location or conduct surveys. On regular episodes, the panel is made up of eight participants identified by their name and home country. Americans and Europeans greatly outnumber Asian participants.

From disaster prevention to fried food, the themes of the last five years seem to have been selected not so much based on how cool they are, but on how well they represent Japaneseness in the eyes of the Japanese. The January 21, 2018 episode claims that ‘people with good eyesight wearing glasses for fashion are unique to Japan.’ Similarly, the September 10, 2017 episode on Beer asks: “Is this a culture that is unique to Japan? Adding beer foam and chilling glasses is rarely seen overseas (...) Japanese beer is extolled as having delicious bitterness and a surprisingly wide variety.” Recent themes have included *Senpai-Kohai* relationships, housewives, winter cleaning, local tax payments, regional revitalization, early childhood education, laundry, paper, roads, and flour foods. Hardly cool subjects.

NHK’s *Cool Japan*’s stated goal is to gain a ‘fresh perspective’ on Japan through the eyes of an outsider. ‘Fresh,’ here, is to be taken quite literally, as the production recruits foreigners who have been in Japan for less than a year. The guests mostly appear to be in the wide-eyed, honeymoon phase, and seem—or at least pretend to be—relatively ignorant: they’re there to discover and ask questions, not to show expertise or knowledge. Popular guests are likely to be invited again and may become frequent guests. Though they are not identified as such, returnees are usually particularly enthusiastic and compliant in meeting producers’ expectations. Interviews conducted by Koichi Iwabuchi confirm that guests on a similar talk show, *Koko ga Hen da yo Nihonjin* (TBS, 1998-2002), were aware of producers’ wishes and modified their behaviour accordingly to secure airtime and repeat invites (2010: 45-46).



In the context of *Cool Japan*, compliance means emphasizing amazement, surprise and wonder rather than familiarity or criticism. Foreign guests must highlight differences with their home country—to the point of caricature. Australian-born Craig Taylor is probably the most obvious case in point; after spending more than a decade in Japan, he still claims to be ‘astounded’ and ‘amazed’ by the most common features of Japanese culture. Although he has not lived in Australia for several decades, he sticks to the script of offering an ‘Australian viewpoint.’ Taylor further embodies the Australian surfer image by regularly wearing outrageously slovenly clothing such as flip flops, Bermuda shorts and sleeveless shirts (Figure 2). Appearing on a segment on Izakayas—Japanese pubs serving small plates of food to be shared—, he calls them ‘amazing’ because food is never shared in Australia (“Izakaya”). Along the same line, two Canadians claim ‘they are never greeted as warmly [as they are in a Japanese izakaya] anywhere in Canada.’ The voice-over further explains, ‘In the West, meals are eaten at restaurants, and alcohol is drunk at bars’: a place ‘where you can both eat and drink is fresh [new] to them’ (“300 Episodes Anniversary”).



Figure 2: Cool Japan's Foreign guests, identified by home country.

Through its firmly established dichotomies, *Cool Japan* can (and should) be perceived as promoting a skewed image of the West. Its cultural exchanges, moreover, build walls rather than bridges. Indeed, the meetings the program facilitates are geared toward pointing out differences, even inventing them when necessary. Guests who make the most outrageous comments about their home countries will get the most reactions, increasing their chances of being invited back. They are therefore urged to emphasize and exaggerate differences.

Titled ‘Why do foreigners...?’, a recent series of Cool Japan episodes turns the table to survey Japanese on this question. Since the episodes focus largely on Japanese frustrations and irritations with foreigners, this new series appears as a sign of mounting criticism

toward the growing presence of foreigners in Japan (Ryall, 2017). While these episodes evidence a particularly telling vision of a firm Japan/West dichotomy, they can also be seen as re-affirming this very dichotomy and reinforcing broad stereotypes (Befu, 1984). The August 28, 2016 and February 19, 2017 episodes, for instance, give voice to commonplace accusations levelled at foreigners: they are loud, are always late to meetings if they show up at all, dress badly, drink in the middle of the day, never apologize when they make a mistake, etc.

The participation of non-Japanese on Japanese television has received scholarly scrutiny. Beginning in the 1980s, '*gaijin tarento*' (foreign talents) became familiar faces on television. Talents such as Dave Spector and Atsugiri Jason gained fame for their Japanese fluency and knowledge of Japanese culture and history. Their Japanese language ability was a source of amazement, but accents and occasional mistakes comforted the Japanese belief in a racially-grounded identity. Iwabuchi (2010) shows how, with time, the 'fluent foreigner' made way for the 'ordinary foreigner,' an everyday-person conversationally competent in Japanese. *Koko ga Hen da yo Nihonjin (KHN)*, which featured a large panel of foreign residents invited to vent their frustrations, in Japanese, to a panel of Japanese personalities, exemplified the ordinary foreigner on television. Panellists on *KHN* were not as proficient as foreign talents; even though they could engage in heated arguments, they were often frustrated by their linguistic limitations. Looking at similar programs featuring ordinary foreigners, Suzuki (2015) has documented the linguistic nationalism of Japanese media, more particularly, how television programs frame and manipulate non-native Japanese speakers' speech to further a nationalist conception of Japanese identity as unattainable for non-Japanese. Using conversation analysis, Fukuda (2017) has recently observed the co-construction of foreigner stereotypes on television through the manipulation of embodied and verbal resources.

Iwabuchi and Suzuki both trace the passage from foreign talents to ordinary foreigners at the turn of the millennium. While the foreign talents and ordinary citizens of the past three decades could speak Japanese, the foreign guests of today must be linguistically incompetent, or at least pretend to be so. Indeed, all foreign guests on *Cool Japan's* panels must express themselves in English, even when they are more comfortable in Japanese. The hosts and experts, on the other hand, express themselves in Japanese only, even though one of the hosts—American-born Risa Stegmayer—is fluent. Simultaneous interpretation ensures communication between guests and hosts, and subtitles and dubbing are provided for viewers. This format creates a linguistic dichotomy between Japan and the rest of the world (lumped together as English-speaking), presenting the two as being impenetrable, requiring mediation.

The linguistically inept foreign guest, it would seem, is the new face of the foreigner on Japanese television. NHK recently began featuring a Caucasian European comedian who goes by the name Mr. Yabatan (figure 3). Despite being fluent in Japanese, Yabatan speaks with various exaggerated, European accents, and walks around playing a dumb tourist character. Yabatan encounters everything as if for the first time. His catchphrase, 'I am really surprised,' is blurted out loudly whenever he discovers a new Japanese item, such as women's handbags, snow, or ramen. Mr. Yabatan, in fact, is not only new and linguistically limited, but also excessively childish. He walks around with his mouth open, wide-eyed, and is easily confused. In this, Yabatan's character is similar to Bobby Ologun's, a Nigerian-born Japanese television personality who gained fame for playing up offensive racial stereotypes (Capobianco, 2015).



Figure 3: Screen capture from Yabatan's 'Climbing Stairs in Yamanashi階段レース!' YouTube video, uploaded Dec 7, 2018.

### **Cool Japan, Sugoi Japan!**

Although not labelled a 'Cool Japan' product, NHK's *HST* and *Cool Japan* reiterate very similar tropes and rhetoric to recent Cool Japan and Sugoi Japan campaigns. A multifaceted national branding campaign, Cool Japan designates a series of measures enacted by Japanese ministries, and, since 2013, an export strategy steered by a large public-private fund (figure 4). The Cool Japan strategy emerged following the publication of Douglas McGray's *Foreign Policy* article 'Japan's Gross National Cool' (2002). Coining the catchy term, McGray sought to explain Japan's new cultural dominance on the world stage. Although Japan's economy had collapsed in the early 1990s, he explained, the country had managed to reassert its dominance by deploying the particular brand of cool that constitutes its 'soft power': J-Pop, manga, games, and anime. McGray could not have anticipated the

impact his article would have on Japanese trade policies. Shortly after its publication McGray's article provided cultural legitimacy not only to a host of low-brow cultural products, but to the nation itself. As early as 2005, JETRO—Japan External Trade Organization (2005), produced a position paper, based on McGray's article, which proposed a series of measures aimed at capitalizing on Japan's cool factor to stimulate foreign investment. From its very inception, domestic Cool Japan documents evoked the outsider's gaze as cultural validation by beginning, with very few variations, with the sentence: 'Did you know that Japan is considered *cool* overseas?' (JETRO—Japan External Trade Organization, 2005; METI—Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, 2012).

Because of the controversial nature and low cultural status of some of its objects (Matsui, 2014; Miller, 2011; Valaskivi, 2013) Cool Japan was slow in gaining social acceptance. The election of *otaku* PM Taro Aso—a fan of manga—and his decision to make pop culture a cornerstone of Japan's economic strategy in 2008 certainly helped turn the tide. Seeing the commercial potential of Japanese pop culture in a post-industrial era, seeking to foster a sympathetic image abroad through its soft power, and inspired by previous Cool Britannia and Cool Korea strategies, METI developed a campaign aimed at 'turning Cool Japan into a revenue source' (METI—Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, 2012, p. 5). It is important to note, however, that it has done so precisely by distancing itself from many of the elements identified by McGray and associating itself with elements of traditional culture instead.



Figure 4: Cool Japan logo.

Although Cool Japan originally designated Japan's soft power overseas, there is also a domestic dynamic at work that has largely escaped scrutiny. Cool Japan's unilateral outlook toward export strategies has been described as arrogant and imperialist, and its success has been questioned (Tamaki, 2017). Domestically, however, one could argue that Cool Japan has enjoyed steady success, especially in nation-building. Indeed, the return of the 'Japan Is Great' ethos is part of a greater movement in the media, with popular books, magazines, and television shows seeking to confirm Japan's global status and international recognition of

Japan's greatness. In the mid-2010s, the government shifted its Cool Japan strategy toward inbound rather than outbound efforts, seeking to stimulate growth by attracting tourists rather than exporting creative content. Part of this effort consisted in promoting local products and crafts and encouraging visitors to travel outside of Japan's main cities.

Perhaps due to its unease with the term 'cool,' perceived as both vague and presumptuous, METI has embraced a new national branding campaign: Sugoi Japan! (literally, Japan Is Great!, but translated as Wonder Nippon in the campaign documents). The campaign kicked off in 2017 with the production of a glossy 34-page concept-book with an eye toward the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games ([meti.go.jp/emg/osj/press/2017/0308\\_001.html](http://meti.go.jp/emg/osj/press/2017/0308_001.html)). Much of the Sugoi Japan! harks back, even with its name, to 1930s nationalist propaganda (Masakazu & Teiichi, 2017; Tadanori, 2017). Sugoi Japan!, in fact, can be seen as an effort at rebranding the nation along a more traditional image, away from popular culture.

METI's bilingual concept-book starts in a similar way to many Cool Japan pamphlets and promotional material by asking its readers, 'Did you realize that Japan is getting this much attention?' (1) It continues by claiming that the Japanese Brand is rooted in 'the idea of Japan's traditional sensitivity and values, continuing on through the generations.' (1) Among those elements exhibiting Japan's unique sensibility are traditional craftsmanship and natural phenomena. 'The essence of the Japanese,' the pamphlet claims, 'is found in their unique view on nature ... unique sense of colour,' their celebrations of all four seasons, and their unique appreciation of everyday beauty and physical sensations. The use of the term 'uniqueness' may seem redundant, but it is a crucial aspect of cultural nationalism. Its rootedness is perhaps most explicit in the section detailing the Japanese ability to 'listen [...] to the "voice" of insects':

A large inventory of adjectives related to nature as well as mimetic words and onomatopoeia exist in the Japanese language, which produce rich linguistic expressions deeply rooted in the Japanese concept of nature. By speaking Japanese, which has no peers when it comes to using a plethora of vowel sounds, Japanese people have come to achieve a brain structure that processes natural sounds as if they were human language. For example, non-Japanese speakers hear the sound of insects using the right brain just as they listen to the sound of music or machinery or some random noise, whereas Japanese speakers listen to the sound of insects using the left brain. This unique brain structure that interprets 'sound' as 'voice' has enabled Japanese people to listen to subtle changes in the natural environment and create abundant linguistic expressions. (18)

Without explicitly saying so, this section harks back to one of the most influential proponents of *nihonjinron* thinking, best-selling author Tadanobu Tsunoda (1985), especially his theories on the Japanese brain and its relationship with nature. Tsunoda's



research was allegedly inspired by hearing certain insects which went unnoticed by Westerners. According to Tsunoda, the abundance of vowel sounds means that contrary to the rest of the world, Japanese process language, nature sounds and traditional music in the left hemisphere of the brain. This, according to Tsunoda, explains why Japanese struggle to learn new languages: to speak a foreign language requires that they switch hemispheres. Contrary to non-Japanese, Tsunoda further claimed, the Japanese see themselves as part of nature, not separate from it. This, he adds, has important implications: the Japanese have a superior appreciation of natural beauty and sensual matters, and they cannot treat natural elements as mere ‘objects.’

Forty years on, Tsunoda’s work still exerts significant influence—so much so that the existence of a uniquely Japanese brain and a close bond with nature are largely accepted as fact, as evidenced in METI’s brochure. Indeed, much of *Sugoi Japan!*’s pamphlet details how Japan’s unique view of nature finds expression in various products and natural phenomena, none of which are linked to the content previously put forward by *Cool Japan*. Rather, emphasis is put on centuries-old crafts such as porcelain, textile, wood, and glass. For this reason, one can see in *Sugoi Japan!* an attempt at rebranding the nation along more traditional lines, which also appears congruent with cultural nationalism and *nihonjinron* discourse.

*HST* adopts a similar perspective in its tackling of Japanese identity. The episodes that focus on food, for instance, emphasize traditional preparations that are in fact the exception rather than the norm of everyday. ‘Mom’s Tea Cut’ contrasts Japan’s traditional tea ceremony with Bryan’s unrefined tea bags, and ‘Rice Pot Buddies’ shows the whole family manually harvesting rice. Not only does this episode present rice as a food that naturally invigorates the Japanese, but the British starch-of-choice, potato, is shown as inadequate to sustain the Japanese body. This episode goes further in presenting an exoticised version of Japanese identity by featuring *Inago no Tsukudani*—boiled locusts. While most young Tokyoite’s stomach would churn at the thought of feasting on a plate of insects, the episode shows Itsuki’s extended family enthusiastically tucking in. The alleged uniquely Japanese use of all senses described in *Sugoi Japan!* and *nihonjinron* literature is further expanded in the opening episode for the third season, ‘Cool Summer.’ While claiming that Japan boasts ‘the best air conditioning in the world,’ the episode maintains that, instead of relying on a/c, the Japanese prefer to use all their senses to cool down: eating cold noodles and shaved ice, listening to wind chimes, and using a hand fan.



## The Foreign Guest

Lastly, I want to place *Home Sweet Toyo* within the context of an increased presence and need for foreign workers. Recent measures adopted by the Diet to facilitate the hiring of foreign workers have increased concerns over foreign workers. Japan's economy has been stagnating for years, its population is rapidly aging, and the need for more migrants is evident. The 'm' word, however, is the kiss of death in Japan, a country historically averse to migration (Green & Kadoya, 2013). The very fact that Japan *needs* help from the outside is uncomfortable for many, involving admission of Japan's economic problems and the need for external help.

By centring on a character that is detached from labour, *HST* features a character whose reality is radically different from that of foreigners in Japan. Indeed, Bryan neither works nor wants to work. He is therefore dissociated from foreign workers and the labour shortage problem. Bryan's reason for coming to Japan are in fact established as a premise for the show: 'Bryan's there for a selfless reason — for his family, BJ Fox explained, 'It's not like he really wanted to come to Japan, or came for a business position. We've taken all his power away — he's stuck at home and doesn't know the language'(Kittaka, 2019).

This, significantly, is another prominent aspect of the show's marketing and several episodes: he is a homemaker, while his wife works outside the house. Referred to as *himo* ('string,' for their dependent status), stay-at-home men are the subject of humour and ridicule in Japan. Bryan wears a woman's apron (Figure 1), is often seen performing traditionally feminine chores, and introduces himself as Bryan Matsuyama, taking his wife's name. This, of course, is meant as a joke, a joke all the funnier that he doesn't see it. The oddness of the Matsuyama's domestic arrangement is presented as taking its toll on Alice, who misses her mother and suffers from her absence. On 'Domo Domo Salaryman,' she refers to Bryan as a 'housewife'—a statement unchallenged by Bryan who also lacks the words to describe his situation.

*HST* further exploits this with repeated suggestions of emasculation and Bryan's loss or lack of virility. In 'Naked Communication,' about public baths, a female attendant remarks, 'I don't see what the big deal is' after seeing Bryan naked. Obviously commenting on the size of his penis, the attendant's comment also implies that the Japanese have nothing to worry about. Not only does this confirm Japanese men's superior masculinity, but it also defuses anxieties regarding white men as potential romantic or sexual rivals. Japanese men's physical superiority is also affirmed in the 'Japan vs. England Football Face-Off' promotional video produced for 'True Love Choco,' in which an emotional Bryan's soccer skills are described as 'desperate' and contrasted with the Japanese coach's poise. Bryan is further infantilized throughout the series, raising his arm to cross the street (as children are taught

to do), and by comments by family members: 'Bryan has been trying to make friends,' his wife implores at one point, 'so please play with him.' ("Safety First"; "It's All Calligraphy!") When his wife comes home late after a long day's work in 'Mom's Tea Cup,' he is sitting in the living room looking miserable, petting a plush toy. While we should avoid thinking of Occidentalism as a simple obverse of Orientalism, it is in this representation of Bryan as 'irrational, psychologically weak and feminine' that we find the closest parallel to Said's study of Western representation of the East. Feminizing the East, Said points out, allowed the West to understand itself as rational, strong and masculine (1978: 65-67). Through Bryan, *HST* presents an Occidental view of the gaijin, one that is not only homogenized and diametrically opposed to an equally essentialist self-Orientalist conception of the Japanese self, but one that is also inferior physically and emotionally and poses no threat to the nation.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have placed two currently airing NHK programs, *Cool Japan* and *Home Sweet Tokyo* in the context of the domestic deployment of two national branding campaigns, Cool Japan and its more overtly nationalist offspring Sugoi Japan! Although *HST* could arguably be seen as enacting a domestication and integration of the foreigner, I have argued that the sitcom should be analysed for the function it plays within Japanese society and for a Japanese audience. Both programs project gazes that are both Occidentalizing (toward the non-Japanese) and self-Orientalising. As such, Westerners on both programs serve to confirm the uniqueness of Japanese culture and its essentialist qualities and presenting it as impenetrable to the non-Japanese. *Cool Japan* features a panel of guests who appear to be perpetual visitors, never talking about work or family life in Japan, and discovering everything as if for the first time. *HST* similarly relies on the presence of a *radically-Other* foreigner who principally acts as a refracted affirmation of a traditional and essential Japanese identity. While Bryan confirms the greatness of Japanese culture by being in continual awe and amazement, his confusion confirms Japan's uniqueness and radically distinct character. Few if any parallels are drawn between Japan and other countries in either program, their emphasis being put on difference and incommunicability—even suggesting, at times, foreign feeble-mindedness and weakness. In both programs, the non-Japanese are temporary guests, akin to tourists, bound to leave imminently without impacting Japanese society in any meaningful way.

## Notes on contributor

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