

# **JAPAN ON AMERICAN TV**

**SCREAMING SAMURAI FORM ANIME  
CLUBS IN THE LAND OF THE LOST**

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# INTRODUCTION

## VIEWING JAPAN ON AMERICAN TV



Figure 1. “Japanese” tourists (played by Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein) with “Johnny Depp” in “Coffee Land” (*Portlandia*, Jonathan Krisel, director, February 4, 2011). Screenshot by the author.

**\*\*\* Warning: This book includes spoilers. \*\*\***

**Reader:** Please watch the programs analyzed in *Japan on American TV* before reading this book. This way, you can enjoy shows that are meant to be entertaining, avoid spoilers, more fully understand my analysis, and come to your own conclusions about television’s representations of Japan. In the section after the bibliography, you can find a list of the main episodes and films discussed in this book. I have

not suggested ways to access these shows because the platforms through which television circulates change constantly. For example, streaming sites like Netflix and Amazon Prime make old programs available to new audiences, and university libraries archive DVDs of classic television. The endurance of American parodies of Japan is further proof of how influential these programs have been in television history and the role they have played in both perpetuating and dispelling national stereotypes.

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In a skit (Season 1, Episode 3, February 4, 2011) on the comedy-sketch program *Portlandia* (IFC Network, January 2011–March 2018), two “Japanese” friends—played by Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, wearing ornate wigs, glitter on their faces, outlandish clothes in pinks and purples, nail art, and colorful accessories meant to simulate Harajuku street fashions—fly to Portland, Oregon, to sample the city’s famous coffee culture. After their plane lands at Portland International Airport (to the sound of gongs), they take a taxi to a local café while repeating the phrase “Coffee Land” in falsetto voices, giggling and taking pictures of each other with a camera tucked inside a cute plush toy. At the café, they visually contrast with the all-white Portland “natives” clad in simple T-shirts and jeans. The tourists bow, slurp their coffee in the manner of older Japanese men (a trick to sip hot drinks without letting them cool down), and order seconds and thirds, each time requesting smaller cups, over which they coo and call “*kawaii*,” or “cute.” (As will be explained in this book, *kawaii* is a particular kind of cute that encourages affection by seeming vulnerable.) The accurately written Japanese text, overlaid on the screen to mark the passage of time—“*Mata norou. Meccha tanoshikatta ne*”—is partially and inaccurately translated as “Ride complete” (instead of “Let’s go again. That was super fun”). As seen in figure 1, they tell a lanky young man with light brown hair that he resembles Johnny Depp, mocking the Japanese small-talk convention of comparing people’s looks to those of movie stars, and they are sad when he does not reciprocate their attention. Armisen breaks into his own English voice twice: first to imitate the Oregon snobbery over coffee roasting, and second to scold the sheepish youth for rebuffing his friend. In the end, the characters shrink to the size of the smallest coffee cups, becoming “*chibi*”-like caricatures of themselves. (*Chibi* are smaller versions of characters used in manga to emphasize emotions during key scenes.) In the skit, Japanese people are shown as diminutive, harmless, and cute, unless they speak English; then they seem arrogant and unapproachable. *Portlandia* employs common elements of parodies of Japan: interactions between people from the United States and Japan, knowledge of Japan, language mistakes, slapstick involving miniatures, exaggerated gender performances, and the use of popular culture to categorize nations and cities, to name a few. Television viewers laugh, perhaps uncomfortably, because they are familiar with the images of Japan (and of Portland, Oregon) being parodied. This

“cutification” of Japan is not unusual on US television and serves to perpetuate notions of American superiority.

A small book with a large message, *Japan on American TV: Screaming Samurai Form Anime Clubs in the Land of the Lost* (hereafter, *Japan on American TV*) explores the political, economic, and cultural issues underlying depictions of “cute Japan” on American television comedies and on the more violent and earnest programs they have inspired. As I will show, many of the jokes (predominantly good-natured but some mean-spirited) have involved portraying Japanese people and culture as incomprehensible, nonthreatening, adorable, and/or small. In most of these skits, sketches, and stories, American characters try to make sense of Japan for the audience (even while misinterpreting it). Television reacts to prevalent trends and tends to perpetuate rather than subvert dominant discourses. Television cannot take controversial stances as easily as novels, fine arts, and other media due to its need for mass audiences, advertisers, and the state support of commercial networks. While acknowledging that the appeal of television lies in escapism and easy consumption without having to think deeply, this book demonstrates that it is possible to take these programs about Japan seriously without denying their playful delights. *Japan on American TV* asks this question: Can American media have fun with Japanese culture, or other national cultures, without advancing racist and sexist tropes or beliefs in American exceptionalism?<sup>1</sup>

## The Power Dynamics of Parodying *Kawaii* Japan

Most television parodies, and the more heartfelt programs they have made possible, either feature culture that is, by nature, cute, or they “cute-ify” Japanese practices to make them palatable. Japan is defined by, and made instantly recognizable through, colorful and often childlike versions of its historical figures and international exports, from samurai to Hello Kitty, thus shrouding historical memories of violence, economic tension, and war that percolate underneath. As stated by Daniel Harris, “The process of conveying cuteness to the viewer disempowers its objects, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are.”<sup>2</sup> As *Japan on American TV* will analyze, Japan parodies present more than just a fad for *kawaii*, an accessible, defenseless form of cute that characterizes much of Japan’s popular culture consumed worldwide; they also use cute as a way to affirm American dominance.

*Kawaii* is a concept that spans media forms. It is easy to recognize but difficult to condense under one totalizing definition. A common word of praise, *kawaii* has many nuances, including adorable, pretty, fashionable, and cool.<sup>3</sup> Literally meaning to be “lovable,” *kawaii* involves the use of appearances and gestures to create affective power relationships. Common *kawaii* aesthetic qualities include large heads with big eyes to clearly show emotion (rather than to look so-called

“Western”); a direct gaze at the viewer to form a psychological bond (Hello Kitty is always looking at us, no matter which direction her body faces); soft, round bodies and squeaky voices (exemplified by Pikachu in the *Pokémon* television anime); and bright colors (frequently blue, pink, and yellow). Humans performing *kawaii* adopt gestures, fashions, and behaviors that mimic these aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> *Kawaii* has its semiotic roots in Japanese culture, aesthetics, and society but also has universal features that overlap with global forms of cute. For example, scientists and art historians have found that humans are generally fond of “neoteny” (juvenilization or the retention of childlike features),<sup>5</sup> a fact evident by the countless photos and videos of puppies and kittens posted on global social media. Maru, the fat Japanese cat who squeezed himself into small boxes, won the 2016 Guinness World Record for the most viewed animal on YouTube, watched by more than 325.7 million people worldwide between his first video in 2008 and September 22, 2016.<sup>6</sup> Lil Bub, a big-eyed, tiny cat from Indiana, also received millions of hits, showing that Japanese *kawaii* and American cute can overlap. *Japan on American TV* will explore how Japanese *kawaii* and American cute converge and conflict on US television.

As discussed in chapters 4 and 5, the intentional promotion of Japanese *kawaii* through corporate and government efforts and the less organized and more grassroots promotion by fans have been reasons for the economic success of popular culture in Japan, as seen in “idol” bands (*aidoru*) who sing, dance, act, host programs, advertise products, and appear in public service campaigns on Japanese television,<sup>7</sup> and for the globalization of Japanese trends, as evidenced by Sanrio’s marketing strategies.<sup>8</sup> (Some American television programs analyzed here parody both idols and Hello Kitty.) Instead of choosing a person, the Ministry of Tourism made Hello Kitty, among the most recognizable logos in the world, Japan’s ambassador to China and Hong Kong in 2008, showing how *kawaii* can be tied to notions of “soft power,” persuasion through cultural means rather than through brute military or economic force.<sup>9</sup> The characters created for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games—named Miraitowa (from the words for “future” and “eternity”) and Someity (pronounced like the English phrase “so mighty” and referring to a variety of Japanese cherry blossom), respectively—were chosen from two other possible sets by vote among Japanese elementary school students, and they manifest the visual qualities of *kawaii* described above. Kumamon, a bear-like character with red cheeks symbolizing tomatoes, advertises Kumamoto Prefecture and its local products as one of Japan’s approximately 1,500 local mascot characters (*yuru kyara*). Marketed on a range of goods and appearing at events around Japan and internationally, Kumamon represents Kumamoto Prefecture better than any coat of arms could.<sup>10</sup> (As Debra J. Occhi explains, the Kumamoto government announced that Kumamon is not meant to be a bear but instead represents a hardworking businessman.)<sup>11</sup> As discussed in chapter 6, tidying consultant Marie

Kondo, whose entrepreneurial strategies rely on national and gender stereotypes, is more persuasive because she is petite, perky, and does not yell at her clients. As I will argue through my close reading of television examples, while *kawaii* can be empowering as it results in the receipt of care, it cements power dynamics and makes the carer feel in a position of domination over the object of their affection.

*Japan on American TV* heeds Laura Miller's warning against reducing *kawaii* to a unified set of attributes associated with mainstream Japanese trends targeting female consumers and ignoring how content producers in Japan and abroad have created diverse forms of cute and used cuteness to play with and resist cultural norms.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, I analyze how American television programs about Japan have employed mash-ups, eroticizations, and other secondary interpretations that "reshape the meanings of cuteness by satirizing, modifying, or parodying it."<sup>13</sup> The case studies I have chosen exemplify how television takes prevalent stereotypes and funnels them through constellations of cultural and aesthetic concepts and narrative forms to make Japan the butt of jokes and thereby seem endearing, weird, or ironic. American television has cleansed, simplified, sexualized, desexualized, and commodified images of Japan, often by simultaneously embracing and swiping at Japanese culture that has globalized in the United States. Television tropes associated with Japan are relational and negotiated, mixed and remixed, and historical. Analyzing how Japan has been "cutified" at different historical times reveals the power dynamics between the United States and Japan, changing education about Japan in the United States, and the role of television broadcasting in shaping viewers' worldviews.

Most of my examples rely on parody to uphold the "power differential at the heart of the relationship between subject and (cute) object," as explained as a mechanism of cute in the introduction of the edited volume *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.<sup>14</sup> Other examples are inspired by parodic tropes and bear the history of Japan on American television. Broadly defined, a parody is a cultural work that imitates or appropriates an existing text or an individual's style—here, by extension, a place's style—for comedy or ridicule. In their analyses of architecture and literature, respectively, Linda Hutcheon and Simon Denith demonstrate that parody relies on "intertextuality," a term coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966 and now often used to describe text within another text, such as allusion or influence; in parody, the source text needs to be apparent for audiences to understand the joke.<sup>15</sup> Hutcheon and Denith explain how parody also entails critique. Hutcheon sees parody as a means by which cultural producers cope with earlier texts, for parody "repeats" past features with "critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity;"<sup>16</sup> parody shows how we differ from, rather than are uncomfortably similar to, things from which we would like to distinguish ourselves. Denith examines the "polemical" qualities of

parody, which perhaps differentiate it from “pastiche,” or the mixing of elements from multiple texts, often in homage and without commentary.<sup>17</sup> Parody differs, too, from “satire,” which, as a genre that conveys social criticism, uses exaggeration to foster disapproval of the object of ridicule; parody, as I will show, can convey a more positive, albeit highly mediated, message of cultural acceptance.

Parody renders possible competitors less powerful by exaggerating their characteristics and making them laughable and thus harmless. Parody, which works only when the subject is mainstream enough for audiences to easily get the joke, shows the extent of Japanese culture in the United States and cements fan communities through shared jokes. The joke is on viewers who behave as the Americans on-screen do.

## Six Categories of Japan on American TV

*Japan on American TV* takes a historical perspective to understand the diversity of parodies of cute Japan and how they have been utilized. It examines six main categories of television portrayals, representing different genres and comedic forms: (1) stereotypes of judo instructors (1950s and 1960s); (2) samurai parodies (prevalent in the 1970s); (3) the Bubble Era in *Sesame Street's Big Bird in Japan* (1988); (4) “Cool Japan” parodies (from the late 1990s through the present) and the association between current trends and war memories in animated sitcoms; (5) eager fans in sketch series (2010s); and (6) “foreign gurus” on makeover reality television shows (2019). These examples show changing patterns of cultural globalization, perpetuating national stereotypes while verifying Japan’s international influence. These programs react to changes in Japan’s international image from aggressor nation in Asia; defeated nation in World War II; exporter of high-tech commodities; 1980s economic superpower to “gross national cool” in the 1990s, to borrow the term from Douglas McGray’s seminal 2002 article on Japan’s globalization patterns after the bursting of the economic bubble in 1991;<sup>18</sup> and mecca for media-savvy cultural influencers in the 2010s. I argue that, since the 1950s, US television programs have taken on the role as “curators” of Japan, displaying and explaining selected aspects of Japan for American viewers (and other international audiences who watch on their local networks and online). Beliefs in US hegemony over Japan underpin this curation process. American television, like that of other countries, generally reaffirms that the country’s belief systems and behavioral norms are the right ones, even while poking fun at them. The most positive change has been the diversification of Japanese characters and their acceptance on American television.

Chapters 1 and 2 analyze two of the earliest international characters on American television—(1) judo instructors based on racist World War II propaganda (1950s and 1960s) and (2) samurai steeped in 1970s media images—



to understand how American television propagated the image of Japanese men as cunning businesspeople as Japan reemerged onto the international scene in the early Cold War period as a US ally against communism and became an exporter of technologies. Judo instructors and samurai are portrayed as money-grubbing workers, profiting off martial arts; they serve as foils for American men who want to protect themselves and their money. Both character tropes domesticized militant images of Japanese men to replace memories of recent wartime aggression with romanticized images of a distant feudal past in order to make Japan more palatable to the general American public. To prove this point about the interplay between television, consumer products, and notions of Cold War masculinity, I examine Hanna-Barbera's cartoons that were prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s and *Saturday Night Live's* (SNL) Samurai Futaba; both comedic forms relied on slapstick and led to spinoffs. Appearing at a time when Japanese products were being sanitized for international consumption, these characters did not encourage audiences to reflect on American provincialism and prejudice like later animated sitcoms and live-action skits did. To better understand the paradigm shift, it is helpful, in chapter 3, to analyze *Sesame Street's Big Bird in Japan*, a gentle parody that demonstrates the evolving role of American television in explaining Japan and softening its international image.

Since its inception in 1969 and internationalization in 1970, the American educational program *Sesame Street* has influenced global children's culture, world politics, the spread of US ideologies, notions of race and ethnicity, language learning, television programming, cross-media promotion and product marketing, performance styles, and more. *Big Bird in Japan* (directed by Jon Stone), with the Japanese title *Big Bird Has Come at Last* (*Biggu bādo yatte kita*) was a coproduction between American Sesame Workshop and NHK (Nihon hōsō kyōkai, Japanese public television) and was shown in Japan in 1988 before being broadcast in the United States in 1989 (CBS network). It was a sequel to *Big Bird in China* (directed by Jon Stone, 1983), the only television program in which the Muppets traveled abroad; in most cases, international cultures came to Sesame Street (set in New York City). *Sesame Street* uses a striking amount of parody, especially of celebrities and commercial television, to appeal to adult viewers who watch the program with children. *Big Bird in Japan*, based in part on the tenth-century *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori monogatari*), was broadcast at a time of economic tension between the two nations, incited by the success of Japanese imports and the acquisition of American institutions by Japanese companies. Using humor and affection, *Big Bird in Japan* showed Americans Japan during the Bubble Economy era. Yet the focus is on classical culture, a contrast to stern images of corporate Japan that filled the news in the 1980s. By showing that Japan is welcoming, sweet, and harmless (read: cute), *Big Bird in Japan* promotes cultural acceptance during a time plagued by "Japan-Bashing."

*The Simpsons* (created by Matt Groening, premiering on the FOX network in 1989 and becoming the longest running fictional show in US history) resuscitated the animated sitcom, which had little commercial success for around thirty years after *The Flintstones*<sup>19</sup> and paved the way for later animated sitcoms like *King of the Hill* (created by Mike Judge and Greg Daniels, FOX, 1997–2010) that have also parodied Japan. As chapter 4 explains, episodes of these series set in Japan mobilize the trope of the “ugly American tourist” to convey poignant messages about father-son bonding. *The Simpsons* and the animated sitcoms it made possible speak to members of the American generation who came of age in the 1990s and have consumed Japanese popular culture differently from people born in earlier decades, thanks in part to changes in television broadcasting. Accordingly, audiences of *The Simpsons* and related animated sitcoms have associated Japan with popular culture rather than with war history.

Yet memories of World War II, the last war the United States won, linger in portrayals of Japan in animated sitcoms. In *King of the Hill*'s episode set in Japan (2002), the only double episode of the entire thirteen-season series, provincial characters cope with the legacy of World War II in order to bond as a family and understand Japan. References to World War II are most prevalent in *South Park* (Comedy Central, begun in 1997), created by Trey Parker, who studied Japanese language and culture, and Matt Stone. *South Park* centers around four Colorado boys who have Japanese *kawaii* attributes but say and do subversive things. These children know more about current events than the adults around them, who are drawn as less cute. In part because of its production schedule, budget, and the goals of its creators, *South Park* is driven by current events and mobilizes its fan base more than other animated sitcoms.<sup>20</sup> Notable episodes about Japan analyzed in chapter 4 have revolved around the theme of Japan seeking revenge on the United States for World War II. In each case, the four boys need to figure out an aspect of Japanese history and then explain it to the rest of South Park and to Japanese leaders. *South Park* accentuates the war memory that much Japanese popular culture in the early twenty-first century tries to erase by encouraging the association of Japan with *kawaii* culture rather than historical aggression. In addition, as chapter 4 explains, *South Park* tackles legal and ethical issues concerning the spread of Japanese popular culture, from videogames to boys' love media. *South Park* demonstrates the extent of Japan's “soft power,” persuasion through means other than “hard power” (military or economic force), and the inability of government and corporate interests to control how fans consume popular culture. Animated sitcoms are a turning point in how American television engages with the globalization of Japanese popular culture.

Chapter 5 analyzes another example of how American television has acknowledged fandoms for Japanese popular culture and the pedagogical potential

of trends: SNL's "J-Pop America Fun Time Now," a reoccurring sketch with four installments in 2011 and 2012, features fictional Michigan State University students who produce a television program on which they misinterpret Japan to the frustration of their Japanese Studies professor, who scolds them rather than teaches them. The sketch series can be viewed as a playful cautionary tale for fans to appreciate, rather than essentialize and appropriate, aspects of Japan and for academics to acknowledge how popular culture is changing universities. As a metaparody (parody within a parody) of television, "J-Pop America Fun Time Now" also raises the serious question of whether well-meaning students and teachers harm rather than help Japan's international image by promoting damaging stereotypes. The same question can be asked of television producers.

While the first five chapters of *Japan on American TV* focus on conceptions of masculinity, chapter 6 investigates how Marie Kondo—organizing expert, best-selling author, skillful entrepreneur, and media-savvy cultural influencer who has successfully established a transnational career—has interpreted the "ideal Japanese woman" (*yamato nadeshiko*) for American audiences on her Netflix series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019). Kondo is the first person to become a mainstream celebrity by speaking Japanese on American television and the first Japanese woman to inspire a "household brand" in the United States. Arguably, the history of the programs analyzed in chapters 1 through 5 paved the way for her success. In addition, Kondo's series demonstrates the potential of streaming sites like Netflix (with ties to Japan's Fuji Television) and Amazon Prime (connected to Japan's TBS network), developed in the 2010s, to promote understanding of Japan. Yet, as I will show, these streaming platforms have helped globalize Japanese television programs and celebrities, earning them more cachet in Japan for having been popular in the United States, but their original programs created for local markets further dominant cultural stereotypes of a demure, mystical Japan contrasted to an expressive, confident America. To emphasize this point, I read *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* alongside *Queer Eye: We're in Japan!* (part of the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Bravo, 2003–2007), released the same year. Both shows follow the format of foreign lifestyle consultants (arguably on the margins of their respective societies) who improve the lives of hurt local people through "tidiness," by cleaning up one's home, oneself, and one's personal relationships.

*Japan on American TV* strives to encourage debate and to promote active and critical, rather than passive and accepting, ways of watching television. As part of this effort, the afterword lists other American programs that use tropes and patterns analyzed elsewhere in the book and suggests future avenues for study. Because closing scenes and the punchlines of jokes are crucial to understanding the ideologies that television conveys, readers should watch the programs analyzed in *Japan on American TV* before reading about them. To assist in this effort, I have

provided a TV watchlist after the bibliography. *Japan on American TV* asks viewers “to take a second look at their favorite shows, not only questioning portraits of Japan but television depictions of cultures and history more broadly.”<sup>21</sup> I provide discussion questions to help readers expand upon and synthesize the content in *Japan on American TV*, and to help instructors use this book in the classroom. Throughout the book, I give information about Japan’s negotiations with American programs to support my claims of the global dominance of American television and because many Japanese marketers have viewed brand familiarity in the United States as a benchmark for success. By doing so, I provide insight into how some Japanese cultural producers have reacted to American stereotypes. *Japan on American TV* can be taught in a range of Japanese Studies, American Studies, media studies, television, history, and gender classes. It contributes a cross-cultural perspective to the growing field of Japanese popular culture studies. I hope enterprising readers expand on my study and conduct ethnographic research into how decades of viewers have consumed the programs I analyze. Currently, exact statistics about audiences, especially those from the 1950s, are difficult to obtain. Here, I focus on television’s content, form, context, significance, and creators rather than on the reception of programs.

### “Mythologies” of Japan on American Television

In addition, *Japan on American TV* serves a pedagogical function by demonstrating methodologies steeped in semiotics and innovative ways of using knowledge of Asian Studies. My methodology draws from the fields of cultural studies, television studies, popular culture studies, and history. I closely read example programs, accounting for their narrative content, visualizations, formats, broadcast patterns, engagement with genre conventions, and target audiences, and I analyze their historical contexts, highlighting key movements and events. I examine how television programs have been constructed and circulated within a nexus of discourses—those occurring in the mass media, those shaped by social practices, and those advanced through the historical peculiarities of television broadcasting—to make sense of the meanings they ascribe to Japan. I draw information from blogs in English and Japanese, in part because the blogosphere is the place where television programs have been most carefully cataloged, explained, evaluated, and debated by the people who produce and consume them. I model how academics can interpret the wealth of fan knowledge and emotional insights available on blogs and make arguments about them. This book is not proposing a complete history of postwar Japan as seen through television or an inclusive look at all programs about Japan. Instead, it considers how certain aspects of Japan caught the popular imagination and inspired television characters, tropes, and themes that broad audiences could understand. As part of this effort to understand texts

in their context, I rely on semiotics inspired by French theorist and cultural critic Roland Barthes.

Barthes believed that a society could be “read” and hence understood through its material culture—and I would add, popular culture—as semiotic signs for larger practices or “mythologies” that underlay metropolitan life. Simply put, “semiotic signs” are words and images that convey meanings and concepts: for example, the emoji of a television set (playfully retro instead of sleekly flat-screened), preprogrammed in global smartphones by 2015, is a sign that signifies both the appliance and the activity of watching television. In *Mythologies* (1957), based on his column in the journal *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, Barthes explicated fashion and lifestyle magazines, mainstream cinema, sports, advertisements, the circulation of images of celebrities, and other examples of France’s growing “middlebrow culture”—accessible culture in between intellectual art and lowbrow pulp. (Below, I explain my engagement with the term “middlebrow.”) He did so, in large part, to understand how these media forms, common in 1950s daily life, support rather than subvert the social and political status quo. *Mythologies* provides readers with essays that demonstrate how to critically consume middlebrow culture and analyze these “signs” as products of constellations of historical forces that solidify the middle class (bourgeoisie) as the representative people of the state and promote a sense of consensus among them. Thus, Barthes asks readers not to accept middlebrow culture as politically neutral and instead to excavate the systems of historical beliefs, or “mythologies,” that lead to the creation and circulation of middlebrow culture. For example, in *Mythologies*, Barthes analyzes how an iconic photograph of a young black soldier gazing up at and saluting the French flag on the cover of the July 1955 issue of the magazine *Paris Match* is not a coincidental moment but is instead deliberately meant to show that all people in France, regardless of race, support the nation, especially in the context of France’s wars to maintain its empire; France lost an eight-year war in Vietnam in 1954, the same year as a pro-independence uprising in Algeria.<sup>22</sup> As another perspective on this theme, Benedict Anderson’s seminal work in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, revised in 1991 and 2006) takes a historical approach to understanding how print journalism and other media aimed at general audiences bind communities together and help them to imagine themselves as unified under a shared goal of promoting themselves.<sup>23</sup>

Disclosing the “mythologies” perpetuated by American television requires “cultural literacy” of both the United States and Japan. This is where knowledge of Asian Studies is essential. Coined by E. D. Hirsch Jr., “cultural literacy” denotes the ability to understand and participate in a culture by being able to “read” its semiotic signs. Hirsch advocated that being culturally literate requires knowledge of the shared body of information underpinning a society, something that he believed

children were not learning well enough in school. An understanding of history, beliefs, customs, arts, media, values, and idioms is also important, as spoken and written words are insufficient for social communication.<sup>24</sup> Cultural literacy can be demonstrated through shared references and jokes, both of which cement societies. Therefore, *Japan on American TV*, as much about Japan as it is about the United States, offers Asia specialists broader ways to apply their area studies expertise, along with language skills, in order to teach the influence of texts on international relations.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this book, I include cultural information about Japan to provide a deeper understanding of American television representations.

Especially when television sets became less expensive and programming more extensive, television became the most accessible form of American “middlebrow culture,” while concurrently offering lowbrow and prestige fare. I acknowledge the epistemological usefulness of terms like “middlebrow,” while considering their historicity, discursiveness, and limits, and I avoid uncritically dividing culture into levels based on content, creators, or audiences. In chapter 5, I analyze television parodies about hierarchies of knowledge. The term “middlebrow” was first used in the British satire magazine *Punch* in 1925 to denote the middle, amorphous rung in a cultural hierarchy of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture. Elite (elitist) critics before the 1950s pejoratively associated “middlebrow” with the rise of the middle classes and their attempts to elevate their status and tastes through the consumption of culture. For example, in an October 1932 letter written for the *New Statesman* but never sent, Virginia Woolf categorizes “highbrow” as concerned with art and ideas, “lowbrow” with the necessity of earning a living, and “middlebrow” with the pursuit of “no single object, neither art itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” and as being of “middlebred intelligence.”<sup>26</sup> The *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries* defines middlebrow culture as “of good quality but not needing a lot of thought to understand.”<sup>27</sup>

Instead, I find “middlebrow” to be a helpful heuristic designation for the programs meant for entertainment that form the bulk of American television and appeal to broad audiences; they contrast to “prestige” television that may have higher production values, denser themes, more intellectual or artistic aspirations, and niche value.<sup>28</sup> I also analyze programs, like cartoons, that have been called “lowbrow” for reasons including their child audiences and their reliance on gags instead of nuanced characters and plots. As stated by Angelica Jade Bastién, terms like “middlebrow” (or “midbrow”) and “prestige” (or “quality”) can be reductive but “can provide a useful lens in terms of distinguishing what types of stories we find culturally important.” She continues, “If ‘prestige’ television aims for the intellectual, midbrow is concerned with the visceral experience and pleasure that can come from TV. It cares less for blatantly weighty themes, instead prioritizing personality, directness, and engaging viewers without talking down to them.”<sup>29</sup>

I also borrow Christina Klein's analysis of 1950s middlebrow culture as the "broad swath" of "mainstream culture of the postwar era" that perpetuated the interdependence of media forms: "Middlebrow was not just a cultural category, however, but also a cultural formation: a more or less self-conscious movement of artists, writers, and intellectuals who shared an aesthetic sensibility and were loosely connected through personal relationships and through an institutional infrastructure of magazines, publishing houses, book clubs, reviewers, and organizations."<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, I am analyzing television as a form of "popular culture," another slippery term, that often encompasses both "middlebrow" and "lowbrow" culture in positing an opposition to highbrow culture. Popular culture scholars have challenged the division of things into "brows" as snobbish, oversimplified, grounded in modernist binaries and metanarratives, and tied to nationalism.<sup>31</sup>

*Japan on American TV* engages with enlightening studies about how Japan has been represented in early Cold War American middlebrow media and adds television to this larger conversation. For example, in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961*, Christina Klein adeptly analyzes how popular journalism, novels, and Hollywood films about Americans in Japan (and elsewhere in Asia) helped the general US population to favorably perceive Japan as a "junior" democratic ally, unequal to and dependent on the United States, rather than a former wartime enemy, and thus encouraged popular support for government-initiated cultural diplomatic projects. She argues that these texts did "a kind of cultural work: they helped to construct a national identity for the United States as a global power."<sup>32</sup> They created a consensus view of American hegemony at a time when European empires were dissolving and former colonial nations were achieving independence; in other words, the historical context of Barthes's *Mythologies*. She demonstrates that these texts were successful, in part, because they did not solely depict the people of Asia but instead focused on Americans' attitudes toward the people and places they encountered.<sup>33</sup> In *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy*, Naoko Shibusawa explores how 1940s and 1950s journalism and film written for the general American public connected discourses of race, gender, and maturity to encourage the support of US initiatives during the American-led Occupation of Japan (1945–1952). For example, the notion of a "domesticated" Japan that was willing to learn from and help the United States was promoted by associating the country with images of geisha in Hollywood films and war orphans in philanthropic campaigns. Shibusawa writes, "Feminizing the hated enemy or regarding them as immature youths made it easier to humanize the Japanese and to recast them as an American responsibility."<sup>34</sup> Both Klein and Shibusawa emphasize the role that middlebrow culture played in the Cold War project of "reorienting the hearts and minds" of both Japanese and Americans, to borrow a phrase from the Occupation goals for Japan. *Japan*



on *American TV* extends their arguments to television and takes them beyond the immediate postwar years. Popular media aimed at wide audiences supported “modernization theory” that ranked countries according to how “civilized” they seemed, with “white” capitalist, democratic Europe and the United States in the lead and Asia and Africa needing to catch up.<sup>35</sup> This notion has been perpetuated, whether intended or not, through a history of American television.

*Japan on American TV* expands Klein and Shibusawa’s analyses to disclose how “cutifying” Japan on television—the most prevalent, accessible, influential, and arguably “middlebrow” media of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—is a political project and a barometer of general American opinions about Japan. Notably, most US television programs about Japan feature American characters, many of whom take on airs of sophistication by purporting to understand Japanese culture. Humor comes from their cultural mistakes. Viewers laugh at these “ugly Americans” while buying into their ability to show Japan to us. Thus, like Klein and Shibusawa, I closely read media texts to broaden and challenge Edward Said’s groundbreaking work on *Orientalism* (1978), an analysis of how European literature (read: culture) and academic study of the Middle East supported imperialist projects and created notions of difference between the “civilized West” and the “backward East,” and beliefs that the East could learn from the West and not the other way around.<sup>36</sup> Like Klein and Shibusawa, I take into account the intersection of power structures—those impacted by gender, race, class, and regional location, in addition to nation—that have constructed Japan’s image in the United States and account for cultural producers’ different goals, aesthetics, background knowledge, and narrative techniques in depicting Japan. Some program creators have personal interests in and have traveled to Japan while others have not. Yet despite this personal diversity, I will show that fictional television, like much Orientalist media, ultimately relies on self-perpetuating discourses instead of direct encounters with peoples from other countries.

Accordingly, *Japan on American TV* encourages reflection about how television has shaped Japan’s international image by raising questions: How do the examples in this book depict dominant discourses about Japan during key turning points in international relations and represent changing patterns of globalization? Can they lead to the cross-cultural understanding needed for real change? Why is American television a useful teaching tool and a place for Asian Studies scholars and students to apply their knowledge? *Japan on American TV* is not a compendium of things that are “wrong” with television; instead, it is a means to use the academic study of Japan to explicate media that is meant to be funny. This book thus provides a gentle way of approaching racism, cultural essentialism, cultural appropriation, and other issues that are otherwise difficult to discuss. It sheds light on the role of culture in national branding.



*Japan on American TV* is inspired by scholars who analyze the relationship between the globalization of Japanese culture and American history and society. A prime example is William M. Tsutsui's research on *Godzilla* as a franchise that has taken on new meanings as it has localized in the United States, through erasing or inventing political subtexts, adding layers of interpretation through dubbing, and becoming available in different formats.<sup>37</sup> Anne Allison discusses how the amount of Japanese cultural context was calibrated in Japanese franchises commercially marketed in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s, including *Pokémon* and *Sailor Moon*, which both aired on television to mass audiences.<sup>38</sup> I add television to a growing academic discussion about how US cultural producers have been influenced by long-held stereotypes of Japan and have used American characters and celebrities to narrate Japan. For example, Christopher T. Keaveney records the many ways that images of Japan as a mysterious land of geisha, samurai, and advanced technologies have influenced American and British rock musicians during the "Age of Album Rock" (1960s–1990s) as heard in their songs, visualized on their album covers, enacted in their concerts, performed in photographs and music videos, and reported by journalists.<sup>39</sup> American television, however, places these images in larger plotlines. As *Japan on American TV* demonstrates, popular culture, as primarily a form of entertainment, tends to comfort and amuse rather than offer solutions to pressing social concerns. Yet by analyzing the commercial and historical forces behind the making of television programs, much can be learned about nation, identity, and notions of home. *Japan on American TV* brings together depictions of judo jacks, screaming samurai, tourists, anime clubs, and tidying experts to argue that television parodies present an alternative history of American fascinations with and fears of Japan.

I am grateful to have presented *Japan on American TV* to the audiences I hope to reach—scholars, teachers, students, and nonspecialists—who have given feedback and shared their television memories. They have helped my goal of "edutainment," a concept popularized by *Sesame Street*, which means to educate while being entertaining. This book began as part of a roundtable on "Misunderstanding Japan in Western Media," organized by Mark McLelland for the 2015 Asian Studies Conference Japan; I honed my methodology in a panel on "Democratizing Media Reception in Japan: The Limits of Participatory Culture" that Mark organized for the 2017 Japanese Studies Association of Australia Biennial Conference. I thank Mark for encouraging me to consider the legal and ethical issues implicated in the globalization of Japanese popular culture in this and my other work. I presented the book framework and chapters at the "Queer Transformations in Manga, Anime, and Games" conference at the University of British Columbia (2016) organized by Sharalyn Orbaugh and in a panel on "Exporting Postwar Japan: Japanese Business and Culture Abroad" (with Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu, Yoshiko Nakano, Robert Hegwood, and William Chou) sponsored by the Corporate History

Interest Group for the 2016 Association for Asian Studies Conference. I gave invited lectures on *Japan on American TV* at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (2017), DePauw University (2019), the Nan Desu Kan anime convention (2017, 2019), and the Japanese Studies Association webinar series (2020). Chapter 2 was published in a different form in *Japan Forum* 26:2, a special issue on “Geographies of Childhood.” I thank Taylor and Francis for permission to reprint parts of this article. University of Oregon student William Bolls expertly designed the book cover. I have discussed book chapters with University of Oregon students, and I am especially grateful to Kourtney Scrivani, John Moore, Nicholas Gombart, Kylie Pun, Mono Choo, John Garrison, Michelle Alexander, Taito Sakurai, Matthew Terry, Judd Smith, Nick Wirtz, and members of my spring 2020 seminar on “Women in Modern Japan” and my winter 2021 seminars on “Youth in Japanese Culture” and “1950s Japanese Culture and Its Legacy” for sharing their insights and fan knowledge. Paul Dunscomb, Patrick Galbraith, Alexandra Hambleton, Kendall Heitzman, Jason Karlin, Dave Reynolds, James Welker, Jenée Wilde, and Kaori Yoshida have exchanged ideas on culture, globalization, history, and parody. Marlene Mayo has inspired my study of gender and postwar Japan. Research for chapter 1 was supported by a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan Research Award to use the Prange Collection at the University of Maryland. Jan Bardsley’s suggestions have been invaluable, her work inspiring, and her support appreciated. Bill Tsutsui has been a mentor. Jon Wilson has been a helpful, thoughtful editor. Michael Jauchen skillfully copyedited the manuscript. I have benefited from feedback from Laura Miller and an anonymous reviewer. This book is in memory of Romit Dasgupta and Mark McLelland, who both fostered Japanese popular culture studies and made the world a better place for having been in it.

The television parodies analyzed here are not entirely harmless, for they risk offensively “othering” international cultures and dredging up hurtful public memories. Historical violence lurks behind their humor. These facts are apparent in television stereotypes of the judo instructor that we will now explore in chapter 1.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Has *Japan on American TV* changed how you watch television? View parodies? Think about national stereotypes?
2. How do the television programs analyzed in *Japan on American TV* portray dominant discourses about Japan during different turning points in US-Japan relations? How do they exemplify different patterns of globalization?
3. Why do US programs about Japan usually include American characters? Would these programs be successful without Americans?
4. Why do television audiences tend to like American characters who are confused by Japan more than those who are knowledgeable about Japan? Can television offer different American subject positions?
5. How has gender played a large role in television representations of Japan? Please discuss an example character to support your answer.
6. Have countries other than Japan been “cutified” on American television? If so, which countries? What kind of programs? Is cuteness political?
7. Should we take “playful” television programs seriously? Why or why not? Can television teach us things that other media cannot?
8. Can television lead to the cross-cultural understanding needed to initiate real political, social, or economic change?
9. Are there any advantages or dangers to learning about Japan only from watching American television parodies?
10. How can knowledge of Asian Studies help us understand American television?

11. Please give an example of the following from your own television viewing: cultural literacy, cultural acceptance, cultural essentialism, and cultural appropriation.
12. Would Japanese stereotypes on 1950s and 1960s cartoons still be acceptable on television today? Why or why not?
13. Why do memories of World War II persist on American television?
14. Would Marie Kondo be successful if she were Mark Kondo (an American man) or Kondo Maresuke (a Japanese man)? Why or why not?
15. Are samurai prevalent on television now? Why or why not?
16. Can television dispel stereotypes? Or must television rely on stereotypes?
17. How do depictions of Japan on television programs differ from those in novels, anime, manga, games, and other media? Have these media forms been influenced by television? Have they changed television?
18. If you were to create a television program about Japan, what would it be? What genre and format would you choose? Who would be the characters be? What would the main plot entail? Who would be your target audience? How would you like your viewers to feel about Japan? About America?
19. Please think about your favorite television program from when you were a child. Why did you enjoy this program? Would you recommend it to viewers today?
20. What is your favorite quote from *Japan on American TV*? Why is this quote so impactful? What does it teach about Japan on American television?
21. Suppose you were able to interview the producers of a television program analyzed in this book. Who would you choose? What would you ask them? How do you think they would answer?