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ASIA SHORTS are concise, readable books written by authors—scholars, teachers, journalists, and policymakers—that engage broad audiences with up-to-date scholarship on timely topics in Asian studies. Asia Shorts bring fresh insights and forceful arguments, anchored in evidence and current research, to specialist and nonspecialist readers alike, offering nuanced and accessible analyses of interest to a broad readership.

Unlike Key Issues in Asian Studies, Asia Shorts are even shorter basic volumes for beginning undergraduate- and high school-level survey courses that focus on broad subjects and include multiple perspectives on controversial issues. Asia Shorts titles are intended to have an edge, a clear point of view, a well-defined (and even provocative) argument that will engage readers with compelling issues, critical debates, and profound complexities found in Asia and Asian studies. Asia Shorts volumes are available in print and e-book formats from the AAS distribution partner, Columbia University Press. For further information, and a Call for Proposals, please visit www.asianstudies.org/publications/asia-shorts.

Readers especially interested in this volume can visit the online supplements of this issue in the EAA archives or “supplementary materials” on the EAA website to access Freedman’s introduction.

An EAA Interview with ALISA FREEDMAN



Author of *Japan on American TV: Screaming Samurai Join Anime Clubs in the Land of the Lost*

Professor Alisa Freedman is Author of the most recent Asia Shorts volume, Professor of Japanese Literature, Cultural Studies, and Gender at the University of Oregon and the Editor-in-Chief of the US–Japan Women’s Journal. She has published widely on Japanese modernism, Tokyo studies, youth culture, gender, television, humor as social critique, teaching pedagogies, and digital media, along with publishing translations of Japanese literature.

Lucien Ellington: *Alisa, thank you for your time. Although readers can, if they choose, learn much more about your book from the introduction, please, in a couple of paragraphs, give EAA readers a glimpse of what interested you about Japanese popular culture in the first place and why in particular you focused on American TV treatment of Japan.*

Alisa Freedman: Thank you, Lucien. I am honored to talk with you. I will answer your excellent questions with examples from researching and teaching Japanese popular culture. *Japan on American TV* is designed for classroom use and includes discussion questions, watch lists, and teaching suggestions

Japanese popular culture is diverse and teaches valuable lessons about society, politics, marketing, aesthetics, globalization, ideas of nation and home, and more. This knowledge is useful in many fields, including education, law, business, art, and psychology. The emerging field of popular culture studies is based on the principle that “perspectives and experiences of common folk offer compelling insights into the social world.”¹

Japanese fashions, games, manga, anime, toys, and music have spread worldwide and have created a form of national superpower. Hello Kitty is arguably the most recognizable icon in the world and was made tourism ambassador to China and Hong Kong in 2008. Popular culture has revitalized Japanese neighborhoods and has played a role in international events like the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. Pokémon continues to inspire new franchises. Words like “sushi” and “otaku” are known in several countries, and the suffix “zilla” (from Godzilla) is part of American slang. Before the pandemic, global tourists came to Japan and engaged in shopping patterns around Japanese popular culture products that influenced Japan’s economic policies and national branding. During the pandemic, popular culture has been integral to campaigns to stop the spread of COVID-19.

I ask my students: What makes Japanese popular culture so fascinating? How are cute characters like Hello Kitty transforming global politics and the ways people construct their own identities? Are there any negative effects of regarding Tokyo as the “capital of cool”? We examine how people worldwide use Japanese popular culture to form communities and overturn stereotypes. We discuss how artists and corporations have spearheaded trends, often with support from the Japanese government. We analyze how Japanese popular culture both “belongs” to Japan and has become an “international” culture, linking people around the world.

I start class by asking students to share examples of Japanese popular culture from their daily lives. Popular culture is a social glue; students bond over enjoyment of trends and over the realization that Japan is all around us. (For example, emoji, originally from Japan, have been preprogrammed into global cellphones since 2011.)² Student examples launch discussions about the creation, circulation, and consumption of culture. My book developed through my experiences teaching the historical prevalence of parodies of Japan on American television.

Japan on American TV explores political, economic, and cultural issues underlying depictions of Japan on US television comedies and the programs they inspired. After television sets became less expensive and programming more extensive, television became the most accessible form of American popular culture at home and abroad. Since the start of regular television in the 1950s, US programs have taken the role of “curators” of Japan, displaying and explaining selected aspects for viewers. 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. Television reacts to things in the public eye and tends to perpetuate rather than subvert dominant discourses.

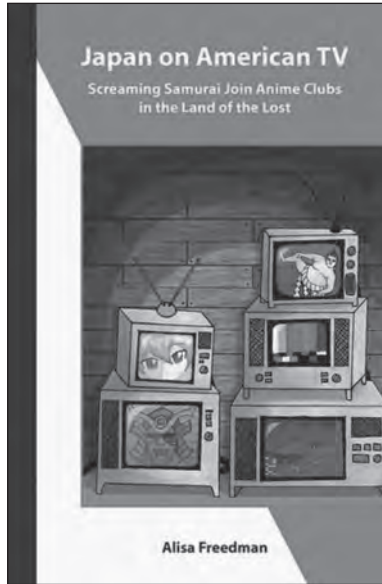
Japan on American TV is a call to action: to watch television with a critical eye and to ask questions about what you see. Television as popular culture tends to comfort and amuse rather than offer solutions to social concerns. Yet by analyzing historical and commercial forces behind television images of Japan, much can be learned about the role of Japan in American life.

Lucien: Including the subtitle, the complete title of your new book is *Japan on American TV: Screaming Samurai Join Anime Clubs in the Land of the Lost*. I am particularly interested in your specific clarification for our readers of the meaning of your phrase “in the land of the lost.”

Alisa: The lighthearted title sets the tone for taking Japan parodies seriously. Japan has been one of the first and most consistently parodied countries on American television—from early commercial broadcasting to digital streaming platforms, in various genres, and to audiences of different generations. As alluded in the title, *Japan on American TV* takes a historical perspective to understand the diversity of Japan parodies and examines six main categories of television portrayals representing different comedic forms: (1) stereotypes of judo instructors (1950s and 1960s); (2) samurai parodies (prevalent in the 1970s); (3) the bubble economy era in *Sesame Street’s Big Bird in Japan* (1988); (4) “Cool Japan” parodies (1990s through the present); (5) eager fans in sketch series (2010s) and (6) makeover reality shows (2019).³ These examples show changing patterns of cultural globalization that perpetuate national stereotypes while verifying Japan’s international influence. More than presenting a catalog of stereotypes, I examine how television depictions of Japan are constructed within a nexus of discourses—those occurring in the mass media, constructed through social practices, and advanced through the historical peculiarities of television broadcasting—to make sense of the meanings they ascribe to Japan.

Broadly defined, a parody is a cultural work that imitates or appropriates an existing text or an individual’s style for comedy or ridicule. Parody, which is successful only when the subject is mainstream enough for audiences to easily get the joke, shows the extent of Japanese culture in the US and cements fan communities through humor. Parody also renders potential competitors less powerful by exaggerating their characteristics and making them laughable. Parody shows how we are different rather than uncomfortably similar. I argue that television parodies can convey a positive, albeit highly mediated, message of cultural acceptance.

American television programs depicting Japan extend definitions of parody to include hegemony, or the political power dynamics underlying parody. This entails making Japan appear a strange, wacky, exotic land inferior to the United States. Many jokes portray Japanese people and culture as incomprehensible, nonthreatening, adorable, and/or small. 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 a history of violence, economic tensions, and war that percolates underneath. In most of these skits, sketches, and stories, American characters try to make sense of (even while misinterpreting) Japan for the audience. Viewers



ASIA SHORTS

Japan on American TV
Screaming Samurai Join Anime Clubs in the Land of the Lost

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laugh at these “ugly Americans,” while buying into their ability to show Japan to us. These programs are not harmless, for they risk offensively “othering” international cultures and dredge up hurtful public memories.

Japanese language and American fans of Japan are parodic tropes. Especially on programs before the 1990s, Japanese language was reduced to screams, gibberish, and racist slurring of “rs” and “ls” (“solly,” “bery,” “prease”), with lots of “oohs” and “ahs.” This was true of the judo instructors in Hanna-Barbera cartoons (e.g., *Pixie and Dixie and Mr. Jinks* and *The Flintstones*), which were derived from racist stereotypes of Japanese men in wartime propaganda cartoons and of John Belushi’s “Samurai Futaba” on *Saturday Night Live* (1975–1978), based on Mifune Toshiro’s intense acting style. In the early 2000s, fans of anime became a desirable market for television producers and a population to playfully lampoon. In 2019, Marie Kondo mobilized national and gender stereotypes and a history of television portrayals of Japan to be the first person to become a US celebrity by speaking Japanese on American television.

Starting with *The Simpsons*, the most popular animated sitcoms all have included at least one episode in which the characters travel to Japan, where they misunderstand culture and demonstrate their superiority over political figures, including prime ministers and emperors. The characters, caricatures of provincial people from “small-town America,” bond together as they make sense of a Japan that seems the antithesis of everything representative of “home.” This is true, for example, of the only double episode of *King of the Hill* in the entire thirteen-year series and of the many *South Park* episodes about Japan.

Analyzing depictions of Japan on television from the 1950s to now reveals power dynamics between the US and Japan, changing education about Japan in the US, and the role of television broadcasting in shaping viewers’ perspectives on the world. That audiences understand the jokes is a measure of the globalization of Japanese culture. Until the 1990s, language misunderstanding was a common theme, as was the conflation of Japan and China. Wartime stereotypes of Japanese men persisted through the 1960s. Especially in post-1990s series, offensive “othering” of international cultures encourages viewers to mock American provincialism. The most positive change has been the diversification of Japanese characters and their acceptance on American television. Yet American television perpetuates beliefs in Japanese essentialism (“Nihonjin-ron”) while asserting that American ways are the right ones.

Lucien: Alisa and readers, forgive me for the length of this question. After reading large portions of your book, I have two concerns about the volume’s possible applicability to many, certainly not all, but many, EAA readers and the middle, secondary, and beginning undergraduate students they serve. My two concerns do not relate to the quality of your scholarship or the validity of focusing upon TV treatment of another culture, and undoubtedly some readers will be interested in the volume. The first concern is that based upon past AAS surveys of EAA readers, a majority of respondents (higher than the perpetual

In the Princeton study, 60 percent of US adults surveyed were ignorant of which countries the US fought in World War II.

plurality of historians who are AAS members relative to other academic disciplines) teach some form of world history. This is especially true of high school and middle school EAA readers. An innovative and effective teacher at these levels could conceivably use popular culture examples to enrich courses, and readers of the interview who are interested in the topic of your volume are encouraged to try. That said, given Japan may get, at best, a week in a typical middle school or high school academic year, there are inherent constraints that could make the volume's applicability limited to many readers. My second concern is what I believe to be a common misperception that is typical of many American social scientists and often historians about the acute lack of basic knowledge of American high school and undergraduate students about Japan and Japan-US relations (a majority of our readers are American or teach American students, so this concern is particularly important).

The misperception is that most undergraduates have basic knowledge about the history of US-Japan relations, including especially (but not exclusively) in the case of your book, World War II in the Pacific. Numerous studies indicate American undergraduates are historically illiterate, and this is probably especially true of the US and Japan. To cite just one study: In 2018, the then-Princeton University Woodrow Wilson National Fellowships Foundation Center took the history and civic examination immigrants must pass to become American citizens and administered questions from the test pool to 1,000 randomly selected Americans. Survey data indicate that American adults are ignorant of the most basic information about history, including wars and other armed conflicts. In the Princeton study, 60 percent of US adults surveyed were ignorant of which countries the US fought in World War II. Furthermore, respondents under forty-five years old were over three times less likely to know these rudimentary facts when compared with respondents sixty-five years old or higher (italics removed for emphasis).

As someone who teaches survey-level courses for nonhistory majors at a midlevel state university and who conducts East Asia teacher institutes throughout the country, if teachers are not history majors, the younger they are the less they are likely to know even the most basic information about the US-Japan relationship. Even in the process of working on this issue, one contributor commented on this very point in EAA elsewhere; this professor teaches at a relatively selective undergraduate private liberal arts college:

When I last taught my Modern Japan course in 2015, one of my brightest students who had earlier traveled with me on a study trip to Japan was jolted out of her complacency when I told the class we were now going to study about the Pacific War: "How could the US go to war against Japan, as we are such great friends today and the Japanese are so nice to us?"

Lucien (continued): *Japan and the US have a lengthy shared and complex history characterized by mutual cooperation, racial animosity and sexism on both sides of the Pacific, friends and enemies of each other in both countries, bitter military conflict, and now a relatively close diplomatic relationship. Even a basic knowledge of this bigger picture makes your volume more meaningful to undergraduates who*

can better understand the important popular culture medium you explore. The danger is that if students don't have the background knowledge needed to contextualize your book, the unintended consequences include substantially less understanding of Japanese and Americans. Your response?

Alisa: I empathize with these concerns. EAA is an excellent forum for exchanging teaching strategies. In this spirit, I offer some reasons why television is a useful teaching tool and some suggestions on how programs (or short clips) can be added to already-packed curricula. (Most shows I analyze are shorter than twenty minutes.) Television, as the most prevalent form of popular culture, reveals American fascinations with and fears of Japan. Programs are nodes through which to view constellations of historical forces. I consider how certain aspects of Japan caught the popular imagination and inspired characters, tropes, and themes that broad audiences could understand. Teaching television is a memorable way to engage students with history and to encourage them to apply what they are learning to their own lives. Knowing history is essential to understanding popular culture.⁴

I have taught *Japan on American TV* in my courses and have sought my students' feedback to ensure that I have provided essential background information so that the book can be understood without any previous knowledge of Japan. The book cover was created by one of my students (William Bolls). I presented the book to high school and university teachers, asking their input about pedagogical materials to include. Readers' feedback furthered my goal of "edutainment," a concept popularized by *Sesame Street*, to educate while being entertaining.

For example, I have taught *Big Bird in Japan*, a *Sesame Street* special with no offensive content, and chapter 3 of my book ("*Sesame Street's Big Bird Goes to Bubble Era Japan*") in entry-level courses, survey courses, and upper-division seminars. (If there is not enough time for the entire one-hour program, watching the first ten minutes or a song sequence is sufficient to grasp its main meanings.) Students appreciate *Sesame Street* for its nostalgic value; students who had never watched *Sesame Street* recognize *Big Bird* because of the character's global ubiquity. *Big Bird in Japan* demonstrates that children's television provides insights into adult values.

Since its inception in 1969 and internationalization in 1970, *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*, with the Japanese title *Big Bird Has Come at Last* (*Biggu bādo ga yatte kita*, directed by Jon Stone), 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 US in 1989. 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 other cases, international cultures came to Sesame Street (set in New York City). *Sesame Street* uses a striking amount of parody 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 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, *Big Bird in Japan* promotes cultural acceptance during a time plagued by "Japan-bashing," anti-Japanese rhetoric and violence in the US.

I teach *Big Bird in Japan*, its historical context, its significance to television, and what it includes and elides through varied class activities such as television viewing, PowerPoint lectures, discussions, group exercises, and assignments that help students develop critical thinking and creative skills, and synthesize what they are learning. As the students enter the classroom, I play songs from the program to set the mood.

To encourage discussion, I ask the students to describe their favorite scenes and songs from *Big Bird in Japan*, why they liked them, and what they learned. I ask them to find their favorite quotes in chapter 3 to encourage close reading. I use the discussion questions listed in *Japan on American TV*. In small groups, students prepare creative exercises. For example, they plan *Big Bird Returns to Japan*, a sequel set in 2021, determining the kinds of Japanese and American culture to include and the emotional messages to convey. My students have produced independent projects inspired by our class. For example, one student hosted a podcast to discuss the program with viewers from three different age groups: children, university students, and parents; another student wrote a song about US–Japan relations to add to the program.

Additionally, my classes discuss the fact that many Japanese recognize *Big Bird* but have never seen *Sesame Street*. We do so to explore *Sesame Street*'s role in Japan and one model of how American television changes as it globalizes. In 2004, American *Sesame Street* was taken off NHK and replaced by a Japanese *Sesame Street* with localized formats and Muppets. The program was canceled in 2007. When New York was erased and the emphasis on English language was removed, the localized *Sesame Street* could not compete with Japan's extensive array of children's shows. *Sesame Street* characters became more successful when removed from their original context and took unforeseen commercial usages, such as mascots.

Japan on American TV thus encourages reflection on how television has shaped Japan's international image by raising questions and encouraging active viewing. *Japan on American TV* is not a compendium of things that are "wrong" with television; instead, it is a means to use knowledge of Japan to explicate media meant for entertainment. *Japan*

on American TV provides a gentle way to approach racism, cultural essentialism, cultural appropriation, and other issues otherwise difficult to discuss. This lesson can be expanded to television depictions of other countries. Becoming aware of how we watch television is a step toward ending national, racial, and gender profiling

Lucien: *Again, Alisa, thank you for the interview!* ■

NOTES

1. Popular Culture Association, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, <https://pcaaca.org/resources/journals>.
2. For a four-minute educational video, see Alisa Freedman, *Understanding Japanese Culture through Emoji*, University of Oregon, November 21, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/smkx5k32>.
3. The overarching signifier "cool Japan" has been used in Japan to denote a national image inspired by global popularity for select forms of mainstream Japanese culture.
4. Chapter 5 of *Japan on American TV* analyzes parodies of teachers and students who, because they refuse to learn from each other, ultimately misunderstand Japan. For more on the role of teachers in helping students historicize and contextualize Japanese popular culture, see Alisa Freedman, "Death Note, Student Crimes, and the Power of Universities in the Global Spread of Manga," in *End of Cool Japan?: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Mark McLelland (London: Routledge, 2016), 31–50.

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