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Gimcracks, Dollar Blouses, and Transistors: American Reactions to Imported Japanese Products, 1945–1964

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This article examines the changing extent of the Cold War's influence on popular American perceptions of goods made in Japan. Although the National Security Council recommended in 1948 that the United States rebuild Japan's devastated economy to strengthen an anti-communist ally in East Asia (and America's position there), U.S. merchants, consumers, manufacturers, and journalists did not consistently go along with this official economic policy. The American press initially depicted the Japanese economy as needing assistance and producing only cheap, inconsequential products, but as Japan's economy began to recover in the mid-1950s and Japanese manufacturers produced better quality goods, concerns over competition revived racialized wartime rhetoric. Japan's emergence as a successful exporter of high-end merchandise by the 1960s seemed to prove the strength of American-style free market capitalism.

In the movie *Back to The Future, Part III* (Robert Zemeckis, 1990), Dr. Emmet Brown, a character living in the year 1955, comments on the shoddy quality of the parts his future self used to create a time machine. “No wonder this circuit failed,” he scoffs; “it says ‘Made in Japan.’” “What do you mean, Doc?” responds protagonist Marty McFly, who has traveled back from 1985; “all the best stuff is made in Japan,” to which Brown responds: “Unbelievable!” For audience members sitting in the theater, many of them members of the baby boom generation, this joke would have resonated with their personal experience. Some of the toys they played

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with as children in the 1950s, as well as a few of their mothers' less expensive household knickknacks, had been manufactured in Japan, a county well known at the time for producing cheap, imitative goods. By the 1980s, however, it had become accepted wisdom in the United States that Japanese electronics, appliances, and automobiles were among the best-made products in the world.

For many Americans, this transition meant more than just a change in the labels on their more expensive purchases. Over time, their reactions to the changing nature of Japanese-made products revolved around differing concepts of what historian Dana Frank has referred to as "the economic nation"—a conceptualization of the United States based not on geographic or political borders, but on foreign trade concerns. At times, this economic nation could appear to be open and engaged in the free exchange of goods throughout the world. At others, it appeared more closed off, exhibiting a fortress-like mentality to protect its own interests.¹ By the 1980s and 1990s the latter reaction seemed to have taken a firm hold in the United States with regard to Japan. Americans' appetite for Japanese high-end consumer products produced a \$160 billion gap between imports and exports and, with it, political and cultural backlash.² In the view of the U.S. business sector, Japanese industry had taken on the form of "Japan Inc.," a perceived unholy alliance between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, economic bureaucracy, and corporations that threatened the very survival of American capitalism. Books by historian Kenneth Pyle and journalist James Fallows depicted industrial Japan as a closed-off, isolationist society in which individuals pledged their lives to their companies and set aside their personal needs in favor of those of

1. Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston, 1999), xi. For other discussions of American reactions to foreign imported products, see, for example, Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), chapter 4; Liz Moor, *The Rise of Brands* (New York, 2007), chapter 6; and T. H. Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution," in Lawrence B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999). For reactions to Japanese products in particular, see Lawrence B. Glickman, "'Make Lisle the Style': The Politics of Fashion in the Japanese Silk Boycott, 1937–1940," *Journal of Social History*, 38 (2005), 584, and Myung-Soo Jo, "The Effects of Foreign Country-of-Origin on Product Quality Perceptions" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, 1995).

2. Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York, 1997), 376.

big business.³ Labor scholars and spokesmen declared that the so-called “Japanese system” of industrial management empowered corporate owners at the expense of workers’ rights.⁴ The movie *Rising Sun* (Philip Kaufman, 1993) popularized and intensified these images, portraying Japanese corporate heads as ruthless captains of industry, intent on taking over the U.S. economy and willing to stop at nothing—including murder—to achieve their goals.

Such fears of Japan’s economic strength had not been the case in the early days of Japan’s postwar recovery. During the 1950s and early 1960s the economic nation appeared more expansive as Americans viewed Japan’s new economic position more sanguinely.⁵ In October 1948, National Security Council (NSC) document 13/2 officially declared that the U.S. government believed a prosperous Japan could help defeat the Soviet menace, a position the council would maintain throughout the Cold War.⁶ This article examines how closely the U.S. business community, as well as consumers at large, followed this official line of reasoning in the early days of Japan’s “economic miracle,” as American perceptions of the quality of Japanese merchandise began their dramatic shift.⁷ In doing so, I rely most strongly on the contemporary mainstream press.⁸

3. Kenneth Pyle, *The Japanese Question: Power and Purpose in a New Era* (Washington, D.C., 1992); James M. Fallows, *More Like Us: Making America Great Again* (Boston, 1989); Fallows, *Looking at the Sun: The Rise of the New East Asian Economic and Political System* (New York, 1994).

4. For examples, see the “Further Reading” section in Donald M. Wells, *Empty Promises: Quality of Life Programs and the Labor Movement* (New York, 1987).

5. For further discussions on American perceptions of Japan in the post-World War II era, see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986), part IV; Yukiko Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan* (New York, 1999); Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Shelia K. Johnson, *The Japanese through American Eyes* (Stanford, Calif., 1988); James F. Hilgenberg, *From Enemy to Ally: Japan, the American Business Press, & the Early Cold War* (New York, 1993); and Hiromi Chiba, “From Enemy to Ally: American Public Opinion and Perceptions about Japan, 1945–1950” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawai’i, 1990).

6. National Security Council Document 13/2, “Recommendations with Respect to U.S. Policy toward Japan,” issued Oct. 7, 1948, U.S. National Security Council (NSC), Documents of the National Security Council 1945–1989 microfilm, reel 1, frames 0317–0326.

7. For a discussion of the term “economic miracle” and a review and analysis of the literature that employs it, see Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford, Calif., 1982), chapter 1.

8. The publications I examined include but are not limited to *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Reader’s Digest*. I have left out more obscure business

Admittedly, we do not know how many readers accepted journalists' viewpoints, for they were often well aware of the inherent biases of different periodicals. Moreover, many people undoubtedly drew their own conclusions about trade with Japan that did not agree with any opinions voiced in the press. Nonetheless, the information and ideas that manufacturers, economists, and other experts provided through these sources laid the groundwork for a wider understanding of the subject and set the terms for discussion and debate.

These sources reveal that, in the roughly fifteen years following NSC 13/2 that it took Japan to reclaim its status as a significant world power, the reactions of U.S. businessmen and consumers to this transition were not nearly as consistent as that of the government. At first, many Americans remained ambivalent toward their recent enemy, but, by the start of the Korean War, most had come to view the rebuilding of Japan's economy as aiding U.S. international economic and political interests. Later the flow of Japanese imports increased and began to pose competition for U.S. manufacturers, who fell back on a more isolationist and protectionist interpretation of what was good for the country. Their concerns were brushed aside as the Cold War heated up once again, and U.S. business experts applauded the technology transfer that accelerated Japan's movement into increasingly high value-added exports. For the time being, success for Japan implied success for the United States; it had a stable economy, brought back to health by U.S. aid, that functioned according to American values.

Stage one: Nurturing the Japanese economy

Historian Naoko Shibusawa has explored how the postwar American media often infantilized Japan through depictions that appeared in books, articles, and movies. These portrayals had roots in turn-of-the-century travelogues by noted authors like Henry Adams and Rudyard Kipling that described Japan as a "toy

trade journals in favor of the more popular publications, such as *Business Week* and *Fortune*, magazines that a non-expert would be more likely to pick up. I also examined articles in the *New York Times*, the most widely circulated newspaper in the United States, but to balance its reputation for a liberal bias, I also included the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the nation's largest newspapers that has tended in a more conservative direction.

world” and suggested its people engaged in childish behavior. In the postwar context, such images had the effect of making the nation seem compliant, non-threatening, and in need of American aid and tutelage. As such, these images were well suited to Occupation goals of remaking the Japanese peacetime government and educating the populace in the ways of American-style democracy. In such a framework, “many Americans began seeing the Japanese not as savages but as dependents that needed U.S. guidance and benevolence.” The images were particularly effective in that they built on an existing “natural” hierarchy of age and maturity. While childhood implied weakness, ignorance, and occasionally stubbornness and irrationality, it nonetheless also suggested the potential for instruction and improvement.⁹ This representation of Japan as juvenile, while highly condescending, was relatively benign. Throughout the Occupation, the American press’s discussion of Japanese goods fit well into this framework, as journalists wrote of Japan’s economy in terms of a neglected child.

In the wake of the war, Japanese manufacturing was almost completely devastated. Beyond the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. forces had firebombed major industrial cities like Tokyo and Osaka, destroying many of the country’s factories and a significant portion of its infrastructure. A U.S. naval blockade, coupled with a bad harvest, had left thousands of urban residents at or near starvation. In this immediate postwar era, Japan lacked an economy that could provide for the basic needs of its own citizens, let alone produce substantial exports.¹⁰

When the Occupation first began in 1945, Japan’s economy was not a high priority for U.S. authorities. Instead, the first goal of the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers (SCAP) was to demilitarize Japan and ensure that it would never again wage war. At the same time, prevailing U.S. attitudes tended more toward bitterness and vengeance. Many Americans still harbored resentment toward the Japanese. They felt that devastation and misery were par for the course in times of war, as well as just deserts for the nation that had attacked Pearl Harbor. In fact, according to a September 1945 poll, 36 percent of those surveyed said they were

9. Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally*, 13–34.

10. See John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York, 1999). Chapter one provides an excellent description of the level of devastation Japan suffered, as well as the feelings of despair that ensued, which Dower refers to as *kyodatsu*.

perfectly willing to let the Japanese people starve.¹¹ The American public was hardly predisposed to purchase Japanese goods.

Nonetheless, in 1947 Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the head of SCAP, announced the resumption of Japanese foreign trade.¹² The contemporary U.S. press largely accepted this change of heart. In a *Saturday Evening Post* article entitled “Why We’re Trading with the Enemy,” author Sidney Shalett began by expressing doubts consistent with U.S. public opinion, claiming, “you can’t trust [Germany and Japan] much farther than you can throw a General Pershing tank.” But he went on to offer both ideological and practical reasons why the United States should re-establish trade with those two nations. He quoted Assistant Secretary of War Howard C. Petersen, who asserted that “the old idea of ‘to the victor belong the spoils’ doesn’t really hold any more. . . . The truth is that we have become such a ‘one world’ that the economic and political well-being of all the peoples of the world are intertwined.” Shalett encouraged his audience to show magnanimity by refusing to be vengeful or unjust toward defeated enemies, despite the atrocities that they had committed during the war. A year later, *Time* magazine also came out in favor of Japanese trade on humanitarian grounds. It claimed that “Japanese industry is needed, first & foremost, to keep Japan alive, for on her own meager acres she could not possibly feed herself even if everyone worked at it.” The article suggested that Japan must “export or die” and that, as the sole occupying power in Japan, the United States held the responsibility to help Japan’s economy recover.¹³

Some Americans agreed strongly enough to write letters to MacArthur expressing their feelings. Members of church congregations throughout the country worried about the well-being of the Japanese

11. In the week following the formal surrender of Japan, Edwin Pauley, U.S. envoy on reparations, issued a report specifically stating that removing the industrial plants used for manufacturing war supplies was of greater importance than rebuilding the economy. See Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 532, and Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally*, 89. The statistics cited are from Chiba, “From Enemy to Ally,” 65–66. To the question “During the next year, if the Japanese get to the point of starvation, do you feel that we should help them?” 55 percent said yes, 5 percent qualified their answers, and 4 percent expressed no opinion.

12. See Marian Klamkin, *Made in Occupied Japan: A Collector’s Guide* (New York, 1976), 8.

13. Sidney Shalett, “Why We’re Trading with the Enemy,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 12, 1947, pp. 25, 145; “Japan: One or Many?” *Time*, May 31, 1948, pp. 25–26.

people and held charity drives for clothing and other necessities. Sol G. Levy, who ran a grocery distributorship in Seattle, related that he helped organize a trade fair to promote Japanese goods, since he was “most anxious to improve trade relationships and friendships with the people of Japan . . . in our desire to be helpful.” Other businessmen at the Seattle trade fair told a local newspaper that they were “demonstrating [their] desire to help the Japanese people help themselves.”¹⁴ These businessmen stated that they preferred trade to direct handouts; they felt trade was a way to get Japan back on its feet so that it would not need charity in the future.

Their reasoning reveals that, in addition to a humanitarian purpose, a more self-interested argument for resuming trade with Japan also existed. To many, a revived Japanese economy would offer a money-saving solution for reconstruction. Undersecretary of the Army William H. Draper advised U.S. authorities to “help supply industrial raw materials to pump-prime Japan’s industry and put the nation on its own two feet.”¹⁵ The business press, in particular, was concerned with making Japan self-sufficient in order to relieve the financial burden on the United States. In 1949, for instance, the fiscally conservative *U.S. News & World Report* ran a story called “Getting Japan off U.S. Dole.” The article pointed out that, “during the present fiscal year, about \$470,000,000 is being spent, mostly for food, petroleum, fertilizers, medicine, [machine parts and raw materials]. Figuring in occupation force costs, U.S. [sic] is spending about \$1,000,000,000 a year in Japan.” The obvious solution, the article argued, lay in helping Japan become self-supporting by revitalizing its economy.¹⁶

It was a third factor that proved the most influential for encouraging trade with Japan: the looming Cold War. Viewing the Soviet Union as a growing threat, the National Security Council’s report on the U.S. position toward Asia in 1949 listed one of its key goals as the “gradual reduction and eventual elimination of the

14. Chiba. “From Enemy to Ally,” 470–471; Sol G. Levy to Douglas MacArthur, Feb. 12, 1951, box 35, Record Group 5, MacArthur Memorial Archives, Norfolk, Va.; quoted in *ibid.*, 458.

15. Quoted in LaFeber, *The Clash*, 272.

16. See Hilgenberg, *From Enemy to Ally*, chapter 3, and, as an example, “Getting Japan off U.S. Dole,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 4, 1949, p. 24. However, it is doubtful that such action would have given the American taxpayer much of a break, since aid to Japan never constituted more than 1 percent of the overall federal budget over the course of the Occupation; cited in Chiba, “From Enemy to Ally,” 255.

preponderant power and influence of the USSR” in East Asia.¹⁷ Japan’s role in this effort would be to serve as a producer nation or “workshop.” If other nations such as Korea, Thailand, and Singapore were able to purchase goods from a democratic trading partner, policymakers reasoned, these nations would be less likely to support communist countries.¹⁸ Many journalists also argued that, with widespread poverty, communism was more likely to take hold in Japan itself. The *Saturday Evening Post* quoted Assistant Secretary Petersen as saying, “nothing breeds disorder, political instability, and totalitarian regimes . . . more rapidly than an empty lunchbox.” *Business Week* predicted, “Without help . . . mass starvation would lead to a resurgence of dictatorial and political control . . . most likely by the old regime or the Communists.” *U.S. News & World Report* also feared that, if Japan could not trade with the United States, it would instead seek out markets in Manchuria, claiming, “if Japan depends on the Chinese Communists for essential materials, she will wind up, sooner or later, in the Russian orbit.”¹⁹ Reviving Japanese trade had thus become a matter of U.S. national security; if the Japanese economy could not grow to full strength, its weakness might encourage the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia.

Their arguments became even more compelling as the Korean War brought fears of communist expansion in Asia into the American public eye. By the autumn of 1951, 82 percent of surveyed Americans believed that Japan had every right to sell its goods in their local stores.²⁰ The first imports that had arrived three years earlier were mainly inexpensive and often disposable dime store wares, but these were exactly what American consumers had come

17. National Security Council document 48/2, “The Position of the U.S. with Respect to Asia,” issued Dec. 30, 1949, Documents of the National Security Council 1945–1989 microfilm, reel 2, frame 0111.

18. See Bruce Cummings, “Japan’s Position in the World System,” in Andrew Gordon, ed., *Postwar Japan as History* (Berkeley, 1993), 34–45; Michael Schaller, *Altered States: The United States and Japan since the Occupation* (New York, 1997), chapter 1; John Dower, “Occupied Japan and the Cold War in Asia,” in Dower, ed., *Japan in War & Peace: Selected Essays* (New York, 1995), 173–175; Chiba, “From Enemy to Ally,” part three; and Hilgenberg, *From Enemy to Ally*, chapters 5, 7, and 10.

19. Shalett, “Why We’re Trading with the Enemy,” 145; “Problem: Build Japan’s Exports,” *Business Week*, July 26, 1947, p. 94; “Getting Japan off U.S. Dole,” 25.

20. National Opinion Research Center poll, Oct. 1951, cited in Chiba, “From Enemy to Ally,” 382. The exact statement given was: “The U.S. ought to give Japan the same opportunity to sell her goods in the U.S. that it gave to other nations.” In response, 12 percent of respondents disagreed, and 6 percent had no opinion.

to expect of Japanese manufacturing. During the 1930s Japanese exports had consisted mostly of low-cost, often poorly made items, and it was assumed they would continue in much the same vein. At a party in Tokyo, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was heard to suggest to a Finance Ministry official that Japan rebuild its economy by shipping cocktail napkins to the United States.²¹ Other similarly priced Japanese products of this era included ceramics (figurines, plates, tea sets, lamp bases, mugs, planters, and salt and pepper shakers), toys (plastic dolls and wind-up toys), paper goods (umbrellas, fans, and flowers), glassware (wine glasses and perfume bottles), metal ware (ashtrays, serving dishes, and salt cellars), and Christmas tree ornaments. Most of these items imitated designs from other countries. Japanese factories made European-looking figurines, teapots with Chinese decorative motifs, and American-style Kewpie dolls.²² These products resembled higher-quality goods manufactured elsewhere but were markedly cheaper.

It appears that these new arrivals often met with mixed reactions, since not all shoppers were convinced that they should embrace Japanese goods with open arms. One clerk at a Woolworth's discount store told the *New York Times* that customer response fell into three general categories. Some showed "open antagonism . . . proclaiming themselves veterans or relatives of dead service men or former prisoners-of-war." Others appeared indifferent when they saw the country of origin. The third group never even noticed the label. The clerk's impressions neatly dovetail with Gallup poll findings of the time, which announced that 29 percent of survey participants still held "unfriendly" feelings toward the Japanese people, with the rest evenly split between friendly and neutral.²³ It is thus a fair conclusion that most consumers based their opinions of Japanese merchandise on feelings they already held toward the country.

Such products met with a somewhat warmer reception among variety store owners at a 1948 Chicago trade show, where the *Chicago*

21. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 536–537.

22. For an extensive catalog of Japanese items imported to the United States in the years 1947–1952, see Klamkin, *Made in Occupied Japan*, and Gene Florence, *Occupied Japan Collectibles: Identification and Value Guide* (Paducah, Ky., 2001).

23. "Japanese Wares Here in Quantity," *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1948, p. 36. *The Gallup Poll Cumulative Index: Public Opinion, 1935–1997* (Wilmington, Del.; the index consists of a total of twenty-five volumes, published at irregular intervals), vol. 2, April 18, 1949; 34 percent of Americans held "friendly" feelings toward the Japanese people, and 30 percent were neutral (7 percent were undecided).

Tribune reported that the wartime stigma had virtually disappeared. The managing director for the National Association of Variety Stores attributed this newfound goodwill to the key element that the label on these goods now read “Made in *Occupied* Japan.”²⁴ The new labels brought attention to the fact that this was not the nation Americans had fought during World War II. More importantly, these goods were produced in a country that was under the strict control and guidance of the United States. Such wording may have eased the lingering wartime anxieties of some potential buyers. After all, purchasing one of these items would support not just Japan but American efforts abroad.

To welcome these first postwar Japanese-made goods, the *Saturday Evening Post* used the metaphor of “the winner of the war wet-nursing the losers.”²⁵ Much of the press coverage of Japanese trade did indeed fit the postwar model of Japan as an infantilized nation. Wartime hatred had been so strong that Americans needed to be persuaded to accept the resumption of trade, and the image of Japan as a child that had to be properly nurtured and taught fit this purpose on several fronts. It suited the needs of those who took an internationalist view of the economic nation, which cast America in the role of benefactor, as well as more isolationist types, who were concerned that foreign aid might become overly burdensome. It also worked for the Cold Warriors, who wanted to keep Japan safe from the bad influence of communism. All three of these currents expressed in the press assured consumers that, under SCAP’s tutelage, the Japanese economy would grow strong and healthy in the proper American democratic way.

Stage two: Tensions reemerge as the Japanese economy expands and competes

Within the next several years, however, new problems arose as the Japanese economy quickly outgrew the “parent-child” balance of power that the United States had come to appreciate. In 1949

24. “Items from Japan Well Received at Variety Store Show,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug 5, 1948, B5; emphasis added.

25. Shalett, “Why We’re Trading with the Enemy,” 25. Admittedly, this metaphor is uncharacteristic of most American postwar rhetoric, in that it places the United States in a feminine role, as opposed to a masculine one. While this discrepancy could be problematic, the emphasis in this context is on the infantilization of Japan, here cast as a suckling infant.

U.S. News & World Report had speculated that “U.S. success in restoring Japan’s foreign trade is bound to bring new competition.”²⁶ Indeed, as Japanese exports increased in the mid-1950s, American manufacturers began to complain of competition and demand trade protection. At times, well-worn stereotypes re-emerged to provide the groundwork for their arguments. The sneaky and duplicitous Asian was one of the oldest and most common Orientalist motifs in Western culture. In addition to cruelty, he was often guilty of lying, blackmail, and cheating in general. In the early twentieth century he had appeared in films such as *The Cheat* (1915), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), and, most famously, in the recurring character of Dr. Fu Manchu. Such negative images were bound up in threats of the “Yellow Peril,” a feared mythical invasion of Asian immigrants that would overwhelm the white American population.²⁷ During the Great Depression, supporters of William Randolph Hearst’s “Buy American” campaign had applied all of these anxieties to Japanese imports, which, they argued, robbed American workers of their jobs.²⁸ Variations on this theme reappeared as Japanese goods once again seemed to offer dangerous competition and trade tensions posed a serious threat to the U.S.-Japanese friendship.

Troubles in the relationship began with the Korean War, an event that economists credit as the stimulus for a sudden growth spurt in Japan’s economy. The war brought such a dramatic change that Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida referred to it as “a gift from the gods.” The main reason for the boom was that the U.S. military purchased a vast amount of supplies and other “special procurements” from Japan to support U.S. forces. These purchases included goods such as clothing, shoes, small machinery, building

26. “Getting Japan off U.S. Dole,” 25.

27. General Yen and Dr. Fu Manchu are admittedly both Chinese, not Japanese. Nonetheless, while the details of the American stereotypes about people from China and Japan respectively were not entirely the same, Americans generally assumed that people from both countries (as well as others in East Asia) tended to appear two-faced. For a more thorough discussion of American stereotypes of Asians, see Robert G. Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999); Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle, 1994), especially chapters 1, 3, and 5; Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York, 2002); Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, 1993); and Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle, 1988).

28. Frank, *Buy American*, 70–78.

materials, and light weaponry, as well as services such as vehicle and aircraft repair, totaling an estimated \$2.3 billion. As a result, Japan experienced a sudden influx of U.S. currency; employment soared, and industrial production grew higher than it had ever been.²⁹

During this time, goods exported to the United States increased not only in number but also in variety and quality. In 1950 the United States imported \$180 million worth of Japanese products, 21.7 percent of its total exports. By 1956 that percentage remained the same, but, with the growth in Japan's economy, the United States was now absorbing \$543 million worth of goods.³⁰

Furthermore, whereas Japanese merchandise during the Occupation had been sold mostly in discount stores, it now began to appear in department stores as well. The most common higher-priced items included kitchenware, such as dinner sets, glassware, and silverware, and clothing, especially dress shirts. A 1953 article in *Business Week* noted the change; "One of the most encouraging developments for Japan is the acceptance of quality goods" that "helped break down the notion that 'Made-in-Japan' is synonymous with cheap imitations." Nevertheless, many of these new products were indeed less expensive copies of higher-quality American and European brands.³¹

Such developments created a new dilemma that a *Commonweal* article from 1951 summed up concisely: "A comparatively prosperous Japan requires substantial exports to the United States; yet such imports would inevitably cut into the domestic . . . market for our products."³² By mid-decade such fears of competition were looming large in American discussions of Made-in-Japan products. Since the Occupation, U.S. policymakers had taken it upon themselves to rehabilitate Japan economically, which eventually led its manufacturing sector to become especially dependent on the U.S. consumer market. U.S. policymakers knew that Japan needed to

29. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 541–542; LaFeber, *The Clash*, 293–294.

30. Warren S. Hunsburger, "Japanese Exports and the American Market," *Far Eastern Survey*, 26 (1957), 131.

31. See Percy W. Bidwell, *What the Tariff Means to American Industries* (New York, 1956), especially chapters 2, 3 and 6; Ursula McHugh, "Made in Japan," *Industrial Design*, July 1959, pp. 54–69; and "Japanese Sail into West Coast Markets," *Business Week*, June 6, 1953, p. 144.

32. "A Poser," *Commonweal*, Sept. 21, 1951, p. 565.

sell goods abroad to survive, but also that the United States had already imposed an embargo on Japanese trade with the lucrative nearby Chinese market. They were left with little choice but to open “Free World” markets to Japan, which they did by helping it become a signatory to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1954. Most European nations, however, especially Britain, feared Japanese underselling and enacted quotas against Japanese goods. This situation left Japan with few places to sell its products other than the United States.³³

As a consequence, a variety of domestic industries felt pressure from Japanese competition throughout the decade, and the one that faced the greatest challenge by far was textiles. Thanks to discounted imports of raw U.S. cotton, the textile sector in Japan was one of the first to revive after the war, as factories began to produce both cotton cloth and finished clothing. Although imports from Japan never amounted to more than 2 percent of the overall U.S. textile market throughout the 1950s, they eventually made up 28 percent of the discount clothing market specifically.³⁴ This development was not accidental. During the Occupation, SCAP had marked light textile production as an industry that Japan could reinstitute fairly easily. They brought experts to Japan to teach manufacturers how to produce shirts cheaply in a style that American consumers would appreciate. The eventual result of this program was that two Japanese companies began to export blouses to the United States that could retail for one dollar at a time when many discount American shirts retailed for at least twice as much.³⁵

The U.S. textile industry refused to take this situation lying down. In 1955 its members formed the American Cotton Manufacturers Institute (ACMI) to lobby Congress for protective legislation. An ACMI-backed resolution calling for a quota on cotton

33. For more on the U.S. struggle to include Japan in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, see Sayuri Shimizu, *Creating People of Plenty: The United States and Japan's Economic Alternatives, 1950–1960* (Kent, Ohio, 2001), chapter 2.

34. Schaller, *Altered States*, 109.

35. “Case of the Dollar Blouse,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Sept. 14, 1956, p. 65. Average shirt prices come from Scott Derks, *The Value of a Dollar: 1860–2004*, third edition (Millerton, N.Y., 2004), 334–335. The Sears and Roebuck catalog for 1958 listed men’s shirts at \$2.34 and women’s at \$2.37. In 2010 dollars, those prices would be about \$17.00, and a “one dollar blouse” would cost around \$7.00, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator, available online at data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl, accessed Feb 1, 2010.

imports reached the Senate floor in July, to be followed by a similar one that fall.³⁶ In response, the Japanese Ministry for International Trade and Industry (MITI), with some urging from the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, enacted voluntary export restrictions on selected fabrics that posed the greatest threat. As a result, support for the legislation died out, but American manufacturers remained unsatisfied. In an effort to discourage the sale of Made-in-Japan clothing, the states of Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia passed laws in 1956 requiring businesses to display prominent signs announcing that they sold Japanese merchandise. Meanwhile, the ACMI continued to lobby for import quotas, including two Senate amendments that were narrowly defeated in June. Once again, MITI responded with voluntary export restrictions; this time they were more comprehensive and were to remain in place for five years. The ministry was able to head off congressional legislation for a second time, and the matter finally seemed to be settled, as far as official policy was concerned.³⁷

Throughout this debate, textile companies found support from both Democratic and Republican congressional representatives from states in New England and the South, the two regions that included the largest concentration of textile mills. They frequently argued that increased competition was costing American workers their jobs, and they accused U.S. economic policies of selling out one particular industry for the sake of free trade.³⁸ The executive branch countered by holding to its earlier claims that trade with Japan had to remain open for interests of national security. In a 1956 speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Eisenhower addressed “pleas for greater protection against Japanese goods” by asking what Japan would do without the U.S. market. He answered, “she has to look less and less to us and more to her

36. Senate Resolution 2702, introduced by Senator James Eastland (Democrat from Mississippi) on July 30, 1955, called for import quotas on cotton of 150 percent of 1953–1954 imports. Senate Resolution 121, sponsored by Senator Strom Thurmond (Democrat from South Carolina), called for differential pricing for domestic and overseas sales of cotton, as well as an import quota on cotton textiles. Shimizu, *Creating People of Plenty*, 112–116.

37. *Ibid.*, chapters 5 and 7; Schaller, *Altered States*, 108–111.

38. See, for instance, Senate debates of June 28, 1956, in *Cong. Rec.*, 84 Cong., 2 sess. (1956), 11224–11241, and Senate Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Hearings on a Study of the Textile Industry of the United States*, 85 Cong., 2 sess. (1958).

mainland next to her,”—that is, communist China.³⁹ In a letter to Senator Margaret Chase Smith (Republican of Maine) that was later read into the *Congressional Record*, Secretary of State Dulles reiterated this argument and added, “Japan cannot be expected to maintain a high level of imports with the United States if we restrict her exports to us to a low level.” U.S. exporters would thus lose an important market, rendering protective quotas against Japan—as he had phrased it more bluntly in another speech—“stupid from an economic standpoint and folly from a political standpoint.”⁴⁰

Coverage of this clash varied throughout the mainstream American press, often leaving consumers to make up their own minds on the issue. Several publications agreed with the President and Secretary of State that Japan had not only a right but also a need to sell its products in the U.S. market. The *Atlantic Monthly* featured an article arguing that the Japanese economy was still in shambles, that it had to trade to rebuild, and that, if hardship continued, the country might eventually turn to communism. *The Commonwealth* warned that American protests against Japanese imports were harming U.S. relations with a key democratic ally in the Pacific and added that Japan was America’s largest market for raw cotton. *Business Week*, as a staunch advocate of free trade, came out most strongly in defense of Japanese textiles. Weighing in on the 1956 congressional bill, the magazine pointed out that the quantity of Japanese textiles and clothing imports for the year 1955 still amounted to only 1 percent of U.S. domestic production and that the United States exported almost five times more cotton cloth than it imported. In July the magazine reported on a Federal Tariff Commission investigation that announced to the Senate: “Textile manufacturers in Japan do not have an across the board competitive advantage.” Throughout the conflict, the magazine sought to assure its readers that significant protectionist measures would be unnecessary.⁴¹

39. *Cong. Rec.*, 84 Cong., 2 sess. (1956), 7520. The speech was delivered on April 21, 1956, and a transcript was reprinted in *U.S. News & World Report*, May 4, 1956, pp. 116–121.

40. *Cong. Rec.*, 84 Cong., 2 sess. (1956), 11240; John Foster Dulles, “Security in the Pacific,” *Department of State Bulletin*, June 28, 1954, p. 972.

41. Arthur H. Dean, “Japan at the Crossroads,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 1954, pp. 30–35; “Japanese Textiles Boycott,” *Commonweal*, April 27, 1956, p. 88; “Textiles: Fireworks in ’56,” *Business Week*, Dec. 17, 1955, pp. 129–130; “Imports from Japan No Serious Threat, Tariff Commission Tells U.S. Textile Men,” in *ibid.*, June 2, 1956, p. 136.

At the same time, other publications, including *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, appeared more sympathetic to the plight and demands of textile and clothing manufacturers. In 1956 *Newsweek* offered its readers the case study of Camperdown Mills in Greenville, South Carolina, which produced gingham cloth and, along with over a dozen other textile mills in southern states, had recently shut down. The article reported that, while gingham could be produced for as little as thirty-seven and a half cents per yard in the United States, the Japanese version was selling in New York stores for thirty-three and a quarter cents per yard. *U.S. News & World Report* also discussed the issue of underselling in the article “Case of the Dollar Blouse.” It suggested that Japanese manufacturers were “price chiseling” and discussed U.S. garment makers’ vain attempts to compete. Some companies were able to sell blouses for as low as \$1.79, it reported, but none could match the Made-in-Japan one-dollar price tag.⁴²

As a recession took hold in the United States at the end of the 1950s, more industries began to feel the pinch of competition, and journalists often gave voice to their complaints. At this point, press coverage became more uniform—even *Business Week* began to think that a few restrictive tariff measures might not be a bad idea—making it harder for readers to ignore the protectionist rhetoric.⁴³ But while fears about imports were directed at an increasing variety of foreign nations, many U.S. manufacturers continued their practice of directing blame specifically against Japan. These manufacturers included makers of knit gloves, hats, dinnerware, Christmas lights, watches, binoculars, plywood, canned tuna, sporting goods, and hand tools.⁴⁴

An in-depth article appearing in the *Chicago Tribune* quoted a spokesman from the Umbrella Frame Association of America (UFAA) at length. He told the newspaper that in 1950, 96 percent of the umbrellas purchased in the United States had been made in

42. “Case of the Dollar Blouse,” 65.

43. “Textile Imports Agitate Industry,” *Business Week*, Sept. 19, 1959, pp. 109–114.

44. “Japanese Sail into West Coast Markets,” 144; “Japanese Gloves under New Attack,” *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 1949, p. 48; “Charges Japs Undersell U.S. Bulb Makers,” in *ibid.*, Dec. 14, 1954, p. C7; “Hat Union Fights Foreign ‘Dumping,’” in *ibid.*, Nov. 7, 1955, p. 16; “When Goods from Abroad Hurt Businesses at Home,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 7, 1958, p. 43; “Made in Japan: The Deluge,” *Newsweek*, Aug. 1, 1960, p. 65; “Foreigners Hurt U.S. Tool Trade,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 27, 1962, p. 9.

America. That figure had dropped to 47.3 percent by 1958, with over 90 percent of imported umbrellas made in Japan. The organization claimed that its troubles had begun in 1955 when the United States decided to aid Japan by lowering tariffs on imported umbrella frames from 60 percent to 30 percent. After Japanese frames began to flood U.S. markets, the UFAA complained to Congress, and Japanese manufacturers enacted voluntary quotas in 1957. But they circumvented this self-imposed restriction by selling their raw frames to Japanese instead of American umbrella manufacturers for finishing. As a result, the number of completed umbrellas imported then jumped, hurting another arm of the American industry.⁴⁵

A notable element in this tale of woe told by the UFAA was its implication of Japanese craftiness in dodging quotas. Such depictions recalled earlier motifs of devious Asians who set out to trick their Western rivals. Similar accusations of chicanery appeared elsewhere. In 1956 a dress manufacturers' spokesman claimed that, since quotas applied specifically to blouses, Japanese textile producers had begun exporting dresses instead. A year later the Textile Fabrics Association complained that Japanese manufacturers shipped their goods first to Hong Kong and then to the United States to bypass quota regulations.⁴⁶ Another fear was that Japanese manufacturers would try to subvert country-of-origin labeling statutes. Even before World War II, rumors had circulated in the United States of a Japanese trick whereby a town near Osaka had changed its name to Usa so it could label its goods "MADE IN USA." After the war, the *New York Times* reported on several similar (though less egregious) offenses. In 1950 one clothing manufacturer complained that the country-of-origin label on Japanese shirts was "infinitesimally small" and washed out easily.⁴⁷ Five years later the Federal Trade Commission accused a sewing machine parts manufacturer of making its labels too difficult to read.⁴⁸

45. "Japanese Umbrellas Rain on U.S. Manufacturers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 2, 1960, p. C5.

46. "Japan Is Accused of Export Switch," *New York Times*, July 14, 1956, p. 22; "Textiles Imports Arouse Suspicion," in *ibid.*, March 27, 1957, p. 50.

47. Marcia Winn, "Front Views & Profiles," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 17, 1947, p. 29; "Scores Underselling on Shirts by Japan," *New York Times*, May 4, 1950, p. 54.

48. "Clear Markings Ordered by F.T.C.," in *ibid.*, May 12, 1955, p. 43, and "Charges FTC Wastes Time and Money on Minor Cases," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1955, p. G6. This association with deceptive labeling practices would continue to haunt the

Other articles were well in keeping with another long-standing negative stereotype about Asians—that they were cruel and exploitative. A number of journalists, as well as the manufacturing representatives with whom they spoke, emphasized the low wages that Japanese manufacturers paid their work force. Taken out of the context of cost-of-living differences between the two nations, Japanese earnings appeared inhumanly small. Not surprisingly, unions were often the most vocal about this particular complaint. In 1955 a spokesman for the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers International Union told the *New York Times* that allowing nations like Japan to sell cheap goods in the United States only encouraged unfair labor practices. He declared that “Japanese workers are not benefited when they are forced to work for as little as 7 1/2 cents an hour in order to enrich some sweatshop employer dumping low wage goods in this country.” In 1958 *U.S. News & World Report* also argued that “low-cost foreign labor” was “enabling competitors from abroad to market products at prices which cannot be matched by American companies paying union scales for labor.” The article featured a picture of assembly line workers in a camera factory with a caption stating that their wages were 2-to-30 cents an hour, compared to over \$2.50 an hour in the United States. Even *The Nation*, which generally supported liberalized trade policies, lamented: “It is apparent that Japan’s ‘being as a free democratic nation’ does not depend on the payment of a living wage to its textile workers.”⁴⁹

Several letters to the editor by readers of the *Chicago Tribune* reveal that some members of the general public took these accusations of labor neglect seriously. In 1959 a man named Paul Duffy pointed out that Japanese wages were one-quarter of wages in the United States. A year later a Minnesotan named Robert A. Bailey blamed unemployment in the northern part of his state on low foreign wages, which led to cheaper prices and gave foreign goods a competitive edge. He pointed to the example of a Japanese wrench that was made for 60 percent of what it would cost to produce it in Duluth but was of comparable quality. Finally, a writer identifying

sewing machine industry for years to come, forcing the Singer Company to launch a “Made In America” advertising campaign in 1959.

49. “Hat Union Fights Foreign ‘Dumping,’” 16; “When Goods from Abroad Hurt Businesses at Home,” 43; “Japan on the March,” *The Nation*, Nov. 26, 1955, pp. 449–450.

herself only as “Grandma” told the newspaper that she had received “a transistor radio; stainless steel knives, forks, and spoons, and a stainless steel chafing dish—all made in Japan” as Christmas presents. She then attributed this plethora of foreign imports to the fact that lower Japanese factory wages allowed their products to sell at competitive prices.⁵⁰

Some articles played on a specific gendered aspect of this motif, making Japanese manufacturers appear even more heartless by showing them taking advantage of supposedly naïve young women. *The Nation* characterized Japan’s grossly underpaid textile work force as “mostly young girls just out of high school.” One 1956 *U.S. News & World Report* article focused on low-wage Japanese textile mill employees who were “girls averaging between 16 and 25 years of age.” It reported that “frequently they are fired by management to make room for younger girls who work faster, accept longer hours.”⁵¹ Factory owners, the article implied, had coerced these young women into jobs where they would be subject not only to low wages but also to low job security and overwork.

In these cases, older assumptions about the ways in which Asian men typically behaved underlay the stories that the articles told; in several others, authors and spokesmen were more overt in their choice of language. *Newsweek* ran articles entitled “Textiles: Flood from the East” and “Made in Japan: The Deluge,” again evoking images of Oriental hordes overrunning the United States. The former story also stirred up memories of recent events, rekindling World War II anxieties through the use of violent metaphors. It quoted a “textile man” who described Japanese manufacturers as “using a rifle instead of a shotgun on American industry.” The reporter then added, “Last week, the rifle began to pick off some victims.” *U.S. News & World Report* was even more explicit. In 1956 it discussed trade competition in terms of “an all-out attack on Western markets.” Two years later the magazine quoted an umbrella frame manufacturer who went so far as to declare: “[W]e feel we are again being attacked, Pearl-Harbor fashion.”⁵² In the

50. Paul Duffy, “Pushing our Costs up,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1959, p. 24; Robert A. Bailey, “Imports in Minnesota,” in *ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1960, p. 12; “Made in Japan,” in *ibid.*, Jan. 9, 1960, p. 10.

51. “Japan on the March,” 451; “Case of the Dollar Blouse,” 65–66.

52. “Textiles: Flood From the East,” 66; “Made in Japan: The Deluge,” 65. Images of flooding as a natural disaster were frequently used to describe the “Yellow Peril,” most

metaphorical trade battles that took place a decade after the war, the Japanese had once again become the enemy.

American consumers were, of course, free to accept or reject such images put forward in the print media. Indeed, many did continue to support the President's policies and subscribe to the tenets of free trade and "One Worldism"; a 1954 Gallup poll showed that 61 percent of respondents still identified themselves as "internationalists." Among some sectors of the population, however, especially factory workers most likely to fear for the future of their jobs, this protectionist viewpoint toward Japanese imports took hold. It re-envisioned the economic nation to resemble a fortress-like community in which Americans had to band together to preserve their economy and resist external threats. This new framework defined its outsiders by skillfully employing older Orientalist notions that many Westerners had long ago come to accept as fact. For example, another Gallup poll revealed that in 1961, 23 percent of Americans continued to categorize Japanese people as "sly."⁵³ If "everybody knew" that Asians were conniving, then it would make perfect sense that the Japanese would concoct elaborate methods to subvert trade restrictions. Such a strategy helped create a particular vision of international trade that flowed counter to official U.S. policy, as negative images toward a former enemy floated to the surface once again.

Stage three: Japan becomes a land of technological genius

While this wave of anti-Japanese anxiety was cresting, a third view of Japanese imports began to emerge. As Japan's precision technology industries grew out of the ashes of the wartime economy, its manufacturers at first borrowed, then adapted and created, designs for new high-tech products for sale on both sides of the Pacific. These goods helped foster a new American vision of Japan, one that bore little resemblance to those previously seen in the postwar era but that has since become very familiar. Japan began to appear as a nation filled with talented designers and innovative businessmen,

notably in Lothrop Stoddard's book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy* (1920). See "Case of the Dollar Blouse," 67, and "When Goods from Abroad Hurt Business at Home," 47.

53. Gallup Poll Index, vol. 2, Aug. 18, 1954; 17 percent of respondents identified themselves as "isolationist." See also Gallup Poll Index, vol. 3, April 28, 1961.

renowned for its production of high-quality electronics and the health of its expanding free-market economy.

During the Occupation, the Japanese business community and government had decided that their country needed to improve the reputation of its exports by producing higher-quality merchandise. Many of the ideas they implemented toward this end came from Iowa native W. Edwards Deming. As a professor of business management at New York University and later Columbia University, he stressed quality control and eschewed notions of competition and Taylorism in his theories. In 1950 the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers brought him to Japan, where his seminars attracted wide audiences and his ideas quickly gained popularity. Inspired by his books and lectures, the Japanese government instituted the Deming Prize in 1951 for industries that produced goods of superior craftsmanship. In 1954 his methods found even broader application, as the newly elected liberal government decided that MITI should shift its attention to the production of small electronic appliances; that same year it established the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) to investigate foreign markets and promote Japanese goods overseas. The John F. Kennedy administration in the early 1960s took measures to liberalize trade further and granted Japan more of a “senior partner” status.⁵⁴ The stage was set for Japan to recreate its image as an exporter.

At that time, Japan continued to export a significant number of low-end products, such as those seen during the Occupation era. In 1959 the United States-Japan Trade Council (a private non-profit group comprised of Japanese and American businessmen) conducted a survey of American consumers. It found that the respondents’ opinion of the Made-in-Japan label was still not very high. Most considered Japan to be an exporter of “toy goods,” and 78 percent thought Japanese products were of lower quality than their American counterparts.⁵⁵ Akio Morita, one of the founders of Sony, admitted in his memoirs that in the late 1950s his company was at first reluctant to sell its products in the United States because “most people . . . associated Japan with paper umbrellas, kimonos, toys, and cheap trinkets.”⁵⁶ Scanning the articles in the *Chicago Tribune*

54. LaFeber, *The Clash*, 301–303; Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, 228–232; Schaller, *Altered States*, 169–170, 177–182.

55. “Buying Japanese,” *Business Week*, Sept. 19, 1959, p. 150.

56. Akio Morita, *Made in Japan: Akio Morita and Sony* (New York, 1986), 77.

from around 1960 further suggests that this was indeed the case. Several anecdotal and observational human-interest stories referred to Japan as the maker of tacky souvenirs, toys, and, with a touch of irony, the shamrocks for the city's St. Patrick's Day parade.⁵⁷

Change came about, however, when Japan began to introduce more high-end luxury goods to the U.S. market. For instance, when Japanese camera companies decided to export their products to the United States, they circumvented retail outlets and aimed their sales directly at more exclusive camera stores patronized by professionals.⁵⁸ Unlike inexpensive textiles and ceramic ware, these items were intended for smaller niches, which made them less susceptible to both the effects of import duties and accusations of unfair competition.⁵⁹ Such had been the case for the Allies' other recent enemy, Germany, whose automobile exports had raised few eyebrows in the American press.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the types of consumers most likely to purchase expensive consumer goods were also those more likely to have a favorable opinion of Japan. Indeed, the Gallup poll that reported that about one-third of those surveyed held "friendly" feelings toward Japan also found that people in that particular group were far more likely to be highly educated and, by extension, affluent. At that time, upper-middle-class America was experiencing a more general fascination with Japanese art and culture, and, as a 1959 article in *Industrial Design* magazine demonstrated, some of these same people drew parallels between traditional Japanese craftsmanship and its new precision engineering.⁶¹

57. For examples, see David Condon, "In the Wake of the News," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 4, 1958, p. C1; Herb Lyon, "Tower Ticker," in *ibid.*, March 9, 1960, p. B2; William W. Yates, "The Tribune Traveler's Guide," in *ibid.*, Aug. 14, 1960, p. F7; and "What Can't a Conversation Piece Provoke?" in *ibid.*, May 22, 1960, p. G27.

58. "Japan's Marketing Progress," *Tide*, Oct. 12, 1956, pp. 32–33.

59. For case studies and further explanation, see Bidwell, *What the Tariff Means to American Industries*, 50–51, 62–63, and McHugh, "Made in Japan," 59.

60. For examples, see "Adolph's Little Auto," *Newsweek*, Feb. 11, 1946, p. 64; "German Ford Plant Produces for Peace," *Business Week*, Feb. 28, 1948, pp. 22–23; "German Cars: Too High Priced for Buyers," in *ibid.*, Sept. 24, 1949, pp. 120–121; "German Cars Hit Export Road," in *ibid.*, Feb. 3, 1951, pp. 100–101; "The Egg That Hatched a Sports Car," in *ibid.*, Dec. 8, 1951, pp. 180–182; "Volkswagen: an Auto City in West Germany," in *ibid.*, July 11, 1953, p. 108; "The Car That Built a City," *Reader's Digest*, Feb. 1954, pp. 117–120; "Sportwagen King," *Time*, Oct. 17, 1955, pp. 106–108; and "The 'Model T' of the Jet Age," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 18, 1956, pp. 68–70.

61. McHugh, "Made in Japan," 57.

The first industry through which Japan achieved a positive reputation in this regard was cameras. In the aforementioned United States-Japan Trade Council survey, cameras were, in fact, the only Japanese product that consumers ranked highly. Wartime investment in the development of optics by the Japanese government had encouraged the growth of such companies as Nihon Kogaku (later known as Nikon), Canon, and Chiyoda Optical, all of which diverted their energies to consumer camera production after 1945. Boosted by the Korean War economic boom, they later found a ready market among both Japanese citizens and U.S. servicemen. Sales were booming by the middle of the 1950s and in 1955 *Fortune* magazine proclaimed, “at least one Japanese industry is proving the ‘Made in Japan’ label does not have to mean shoddy goods.”⁶²

The next high-end imports to become popular in the United States were small electronics. The development of radios and other types of electronic technology accelerated during the war on both sides of the Pacific. After 1945 the United States decided to employ new advances, like transistors, in the design of consumer goods and simultaneously aided Japanese manufacturers in developing their own fledgling industry. In 1949 the U.S. Justice Department brought anti-trust litigation against AT&T, forcing the company to license its transistor technology to anyone willing to buy it, including foreign companies.⁶³ Over the next several years, at the urging of the U.S. State Department, other American companies specializing in technology, such as RCA, DuPont, and Motorola, also sold some of their patents and discoveries to Japanese businesses. Most had little fear that this sharing of secrets would amount to much, since the Japanese consumer market was small at the time.⁶⁴ As a consequence, waves of Japanese businessmen began

62. “Buying Japanese,” 150; “Japan Has Boom in Camera Sales,” *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1953, p. 27; “Blouses and Cameras,” *Fortune*, April 1956, p. 85; see also “Japan Challenges Leadership of Germany in Camera Market,” *New York Times*, Oct. 3, 1955, p. 36. The fact that many Americans came to agree with such an assessment is made evident in a comic line from the 1964 movie *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick). British RAF Colonel Mandrake complains of the abuse he suffered in a Japanese prisoner of war camp but adds, “the strange thing is they make such bloody good cameras.”

63. Simon Partner, *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer* (Berkeley, 1999), chapter 4; Bob Johnstone, *We Were Burning: Japanese Entrepreneurs and the Forging of the Electronic Age* (Boulder, Colo., 1999), 9–10.

64. LaFeber, *The Clash*, 304.

investing in American patents as well as visiting American electronics firms to learn from their production methods and technological developments.⁶⁵

Armed with these new ideas, Japanese entrepreneurs were poised to enter the American consumer electronics market. In August 1955 the Sony Corporation launched the TR-55, the first Japanese transistor radio sold in the United States. Other companies like Toshiba and Matsushita (known in the United States as Panasonic) would soon follow with their own radios and other products. All their brands proved popular; for example, in 1958 American consumers purchased \$4.3 million worth of Japanese transistor radios.⁶⁶ By the early 1960s Japanese manufacturers were also exporting tape recorders, portable televisions, and even primitive video cameras to the United States.

Many of these products not only received acclaim themselves but also boosted Japan's reputation as a whole. Macy's department store ran full-page newspaper ads across the country in 1962, touting Panasonic's "world-wide reputation for the finest quality, finest performance." The next year *Time* described Sony as "addicted to quality" and claimed that it had "done as much as any company to demolish the cheap and imitative image of Japanese goods." *Reader's Digest* later added, "Perhaps better than any other company, Sony tells the story of the industrial revolution in postwar Japan that changed the worldwide image of Japanese merchandise from cheap imitative goods to high-quality optics, photographic and electronic equipment."⁶⁷ As these products became an increasingly common sight, such coverage encouraged Japan's image as a nation that possessed the expertise and skill to produce some of the most technologically advanced goods on the market.

A final Made-in-Japan success story from this era was the motorbike. The most famous brand of Japanese motorcycle in the United States at the time was Honda; Suzuki and Yamaha also had a presence, although smaller, in the United States. Magazines reported on their widespread popularity, but most consumers became familiar with the new bikes through Honda's clever

65. For more on this exchange, see Partner, *Assembled in Japan*, chapter 4.

66. *Ibid.*, 200; "Made Well in Japan," *Time*, Sept. 1, 1958, p. 56.

67. "Following Henry Ford," in *ibid.*, Feb. 23, 1962, p. 96; "Small Wonder," in *ibid.*, July 12, 1963, p. 91; J. D. Ratcliff, "Sony Turns Small Things into Big Profits," *Reader's Digest*, June 1964, p. 202.

marketing campaign. With its expansion into the U.S. market, the company hired sales manager Jack McCormack, who employed a strategy of appealing to white middle-class taste. He decided to cast aside the leather and chains, “rebel without a cause” image previously associated with motorcycles and instead promoted them as vehicles for family fun. The company’s commercials employed the slogan “You meet the nicest people on a Honda.”⁶⁸ It appeared that the strategy worked, as respectable Americans who previously would never have thought of riding a motorbike purchased over 87,000 Hondas in 1963. *Business Week* titled an article on Honda “Wooing the ‘mild ones,’” punning off Marlon Brando’s motorcycle-riding bad boy in *The Wild One*.⁶⁹ An enthusiast also told *Time* that his fellow Honda owners were “the most unlikely motorcyclists you ever saw, mostly professional people and businessmen who’ve always had the forbidden-fruit desire to try it, but were afraid of the image.” *Newsweek* reported in 1964 that “Hondas, should any parent not yet know, are selling like pizza pies among well-scrubbed, perfectly sane young people in the U.S., and have become the shining badge of status among high-school age American kids.”⁷⁰ Not only had these bikes apparently penetrated a very unlikely market, but they started a new nationwide teenage trend. In this case, a Japanese product’s Asian origins were basically forgotten; it even went so far as to inspire a new American family pastime.

While such goods garnered praise, the American press also reported favorably on the companies that made them. In these articles, Japanese electronics manufacturers did not appear anything like duplicitous sweatshop tyrants. Instead, they resembled plucky, personable paternalists. In following Deming’s production models, many Japanese companies had instituted policies of teamwork and corporate welfare in their factories. *Time* reported that CEO Soichi Honda’s employees dubbed him “Pop” (*oyaji*). *Time* and *Life* both claimed that Konosuke Matsushita of Matsushita Electric had gone out of his way to provide for his workers. *Life* explained that he offered employees furnished housing, a recreation center, weddings

68. “Two-Wheeled Chic,” *Time*, Sept. 11, 1964, p. 80.

69. “How the ‘Thunder Herd’ Boss Brought a Honda Boom to U.S.,” *Newsweek*, July 6, 1964, p. 66; “Wooing the ‘mild ones,’” *Business Week*, March 30, 1963, p. 27.

70. “Two-Wheeled Chic,” 78; “How the ‘Thunder Herd’ Boss Brought a Honda Boom to U.S.,” 66.

for \$2.78, and health care that included \$.83 births.⁷¹ *Time* further remarked that companies such as Matsushita heralded “the end of one of the traditional mainstays of the Japanese economy . . . survival on cheap labor and sweatshop conditions.” *Life* suggested that “thousands of teenagers, who a few years ago might have worked in sweatshops and brothels” were now gainfully employed at Matsushita. Other articles in *Time* and *Reader’s Digest* pointed out that the country was in the midst of a labor shortage that was driving up wages. *Fortune* predicted that Japanese earnings would be on par with most of Western Europe’s within five years, heralding the end of lurid accounts of employee exploitation.⁷²

Print media depictions of Japan’s technological industries also countered long-standing assumptions that the Japanese were expert imitators who could create brilliant copies but never develop their own innovations, a reputation that continued to cling to most of the cheaper Japanese imports. The *Wall Street Journal* suggested in 1955 that, for many of its goods, “the ‘Made-in-Japan’ label . . . may as well be pasted onto a ‘Designed in America’ product.”⁷³ Such was not the case, however, for the new high-end merchandise. *Fortune* pointed out that, while most early Japanese cameras were based on designs from Germany, newer models were “slowly incorporating Japanese-invented features that will eventually distinguish them from their German progenitors.” The magazine later reported that Matsushita was critical of other firms that “virtually stole” foreign designs instead of creating their own, as his company did.⁷⁴ *Time* quoted a British motorcycle maker who claimed that a Honda’s motorcycle was “made like a watch. And it isn’t a copy of anything.” It also reported on a striking reversal, wherein the American company General Electric copied Sony’s design for its portable television.⁷⁵

71. “Precision on Wheels,” *Time*, Aug. 25, 1961, p. 61; “Paternalism: Weddings for \$2.78, 83¢ Births,” *Life*, Sept. 11, 1964, p. 110.

72. “Following Henry Ford,” 96–97; “Pioneer with a Touch of Ford and Alger,” *Life*, Sept. 11, 1964, p. 108; Peter F. Drucker, “Japan Tries for a Second Miracle,” *Reader’s Digest*, June 1963, p. 188; Louis Banks, “Open Door with a Catch,” *Fortune*, July 1963, pp. 269–270.

73. “Know How Show,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 2, 1955, p. 1.

74. “Blouses and Cameras,” 85; “A Company’s President . . . Must Not Try to Pass the Buck,” *Fortune*, Oct. 1960, p. 112.

75. “Precision on Wheels,” 60; “Small Wonder,” 91.

Several Japanese business heads departed even further from their mid-1950s counterparts as magazines presented their biographies in sympathetic rags-to-riches terms that invoked American literary character types as opposed to Oriental ones. Often these biographies resembled the tales of Horatio Alger that had been widely popular in the late nineteenth century, in which struggling poor boys were able to find success through brains, gumption, and hard work. These articles attempted to make prominent Japanese businessmen familiar to readers by recounting the businessmen's lives along the lines of this well-known formula. In the early 1960s both *Time* and *Newsweek* told the story of how Soichi Honda came from a poor background, dropped out of school to become a mechanic, and then went on to found one of the most successful motorcycle companies in the world.⁷⁶ Konosuke Matsushita was also popular with the press, garnering stories in *Fortune* and *Life*, as well as the cover of *Time* on February 23, 1962. At one point an orphan and an errand boy, he had grown up to create Japan's largest appliance manufacturing company. *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* all compared him to Henry Ford. *Life* explicitly dubbed him "Japan's first Alger hero" and claimed (somewhat dubiously) that he was "the first man [in Japan] to start from absolutely destitute beginnings and achieve great wealth and influence." Not only individuals but also corporations like Sony were described in rags-to-riches terms. An article in *Reader's Digest* told of the company's humble beginnings in a bombed-out department store with only \$1,600 in capital and a \$100 car for transportation.⁷⁷

In such press coverage, the Japanese industrialist was no longer a wily Asian, but a man with an American ingenuity and spirit who happened to live in a foreign nation. Such depictions not only made these men appear less threatening to American audiences, but they also portrayed them as exemplary capitalist entrepreneurs. As the Cold War continued, China grew in power, and the conflict in Vietnam escalated, some journalists began to hold up Japanese success stories as proof of the superiority of American-style free enterprise. Implicitly, most of Japan's new big business owners could not have risen to fame and fortune unless they lived in an open,

76. "Precision on Wheels," 61; "Two-Wheeled Chic," 78–80.

77. "A Company's President . . . Must Not Try to Pass the Buck," 112; "Meet Mr. Matsushita," *Life*, Sept. 11, 1964, p. 107; James Mills, "An Idea Hit Me—It Was Ridiculous," in *ibid.*, 112; Ratcliff, "Sony Turns Small Things into Big Profits," 202–203.

unregulated society. A lengthy article in *Fortune* argued that men like Matsushita and Honda represented a new, more individualistic way of doing business in Japan, explicitly opposed to both its older, “cartel”-driven system and, by implication, a restricted communist economy.⁷⁸ *Time* placed these men “among the world’s most aggressive and imaginative free enterprisers.” The article further claimed that Japan’s new free-market economy was allowing Japanese consumers to enjoy a higher standard of living, as the successes of Matsushita and his ilk benefited every layer of society.⁷⁹

At the time the article appeared, Japan was indeed a vibrant capitalist nation producing top-of-the-line consumer goods. In 1964 a Japanese typewriter company advertised its goods with the slogan “Precision Engineered in the Tradition of Meticulous Japanese Craftsmanship.”⁸⁰ Instead of cheap imitation, the Made-in-Japan label on certain products now signified technological know-how. Their acceptance was due to several economic factors. First, products like cameras and motorcycles had long been imported from other countries—Germany and Britain, respectively—and in such cases, U.S. consumers merely exchanged one foreign manufacturer for another. Second, transistor production was in its infancy after the war, and Japanese manufacturers were able to enter the portable radio and television market on the ground floor without threatening established American producers. Third, these were all luxury items tailored to specific niche markets; as such, they did not compete significantly with American electronics firms. These new products reinforced positive visions of Japan in the eyes of the consumers who could afford them—an image reflecting the most common adjectives Americans had used to describe Japan in a 1961 Gallup poll: “hard-working,” “artistic,” and “practical.”⁸¹ As a nation whose people held such admirable traits, with a capitalist economy now as prosperous as those of many Western nations, Japan finally appeared ready to serve fully as America’s Cold War Pacific ally.

78. Banks, “Open Door with a Catch,” 141.

79. “Following Henry Ford,” 93.

80. “Japanese Plan Big Campaign to Sell Typewriters in the U.S.,” *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1964, p. 45.

81. Gallup Poll Index, vol. 3, April 28, 1961. When asked to choose words from a list that best described the Japanese people, 47 percent of American respondents picked “hard-working,” 36 percent “artistic,” 35 percent “practical,” 24 percent “sly,” and 24 percent “progressive.”

Conclusion

If the United States of the Occupation era was supposed to be instructing its Japanese pupil in the ways of democracy and capitalism, press coverage twenty years later suggested that the student had learned its lessons well. Keeping Japan out of “the communist orbit” had resulted in an economic boom that, at the time, appeared to copy American models based on free enterprise in an open and highly mobile society. In this case, concepts of economic national borders did not seem as strong—in fact, they were stretched to include the interests of another country, which now appeared to be in lockstep with the United States. There was little call at the time to “Buy American” or to “Buy Japanese” charitably, since by then Japan was considered a powerful ally and worthy trading partner. The foreign origin of its products became more of a curiosity than a plea for help or an impending threat.

However, such good feelings would not last as the century progressed, demonstrating that interpretations of imported goods can be influenced by political and economic climates as easily as by the actual quality of the products. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, Japanese electronics firms continued to expand and began to put American television manufacturers out of business. The arrival of Japanese automobiles posed new competition for Detroit, and the United Auto Workers Union even raised funds by letting their members pay for the opportunity to hit a Toyota with a sledgehammer. By 1990 the same kinds of entrepreneurs who had inspired admiration in the early 1960s began to receive condemnation. Japanese businessmen no longer looked like Americans but became foreign again, resembling the same stereotypes that textile manufacturers had resurfaced in the mid-1950s. Paternalism now appeared undemocratic, cooperation between government and business looked more like conspiracy, and Japanese initiative was interpreted as ruthless ambition. The companies that had once served to undo concerns about competition and supposed Asian duplicity later helped both to return with a vengeance.⁸² But, for a brief moment during the Cold War, such Made-in-Japan products had helped solidify an important international alliance through everyday practice.

82. See Frank, *Buy American*, chapter 7; *Inside Japan Inc.*, produced by the Annenberg/CPB Project, 1992; and Fallows, *More Like Us*.