



Sushi and Samurai: Western Stereotypes and the (Mis)Understanding of Post-Tsunami Japan

Heinrich Reinfried

Interviewed by Finn Canonica and Birgit Schmid of the Swiss weekly *Das Magazin*



Werner Bischof created images that shape our perception of Japan even now. Meiji-Shrine (1951)

Das Magazin: Dr. Reinfried, as has been demonstrated to us once again during the last three weeks, there is probably no other culture with which we are so unfamiliar as we are with Japan. Accordingly, many unrealistic images are projected by the media. For years, a poetic image of Japan as in the movie *Lost in Translation* has prevailed, but now martial images are being revived. Some writers have even referred to the deployment of fire-fighters in Fukushima as *kamikaze* missions.

Heinrich Reinfried: That's absurd. In Germany, too, nuclear plants employ contract workers on a regular basis. This is standard practice in the industry. Being Japanese is certainly not a prerequisite to taking on such a dangerous job.

DM: In this time of disaster, commentators have recourse to shop-worn concepts—“Japanese think collectively,” “the individual is subservient to the group,” “they are sadistic torturers of dolphins,” “submissive to authority,” “devoid of feelings”—and martial images such as *kamikaze* are revived again. How do you explain the abundance of stereotypes in the discussion of Japan?

Reinfried: It's due to *Völkerpsychologie*, a branch of psychology founded by the German ethnologist Wilhelm Wundt around 1900, which attributed national characteristics to each nation. Even today many of our school textbooks misrepresent the Japanese as a “homogenous unity acting collectively” because doing so accentuates the “individualism” idealized in our own culture. In order to define our own identity, we need a counter-example. In this case, we use Japan as a negative role model incorporating the opposite of the positive qualities we attribute to ourselves.

DM: Besides your professional activity as lecturer you advise Swiss companies who want to expand into the Japanese market. What is your experience in that role?

Reinfried: One Swiss company was planning to name one of its machines *Tsunami*. Of course, I advised strongly against it, which resulted in my being replaced by another consultant. Later I learned they had to change the name of the machine, since Japanese quite understandably did not have positive associations with this word. This kind of ignorance is quite typical. *Tsunami* is a Japanese term. Japanese have known this kind of large wave produced by earthquakes for centuries, *tsu* being a poetic term for harbor and *nami* simply denoting wave.

DM: How would you describe our attitude towards Japan?

Reinfried: In my opinion, for the most part, the Anglo-Saxon world has a far more pragmatic attitude toward the Far East, particularly toward Japan, marked less by cultural stereotypes than by sober business interests. In the reception rooms of our banks, however, we find images of Zen monasteries. The proverbial Japanophile collects Japanese art or *manga* and practices the tea-ceremony. These pastimes are not problematic as such; I simply want to point out that they stand for an aestheticizing way of looking at the Orient, a perspective which has its origins in the 18th and 19th centuries. What we know today as Orientalism was initially a reaction against the European enlightenment. At a time when European lives were becoming ever more determined by rationalism, we construed a counterworld filled with spirituality. Let me give you an illustration. Perhaps you remember the book *Tuivavii's Way*, which purports to be a description of the degenerate Western way of life as seen through the eyes of a Samoan tribal chief. It's actually entirely fictional.

DM: The Western world is materialistic; the East is somehow more spiritual. Nowadays, the lobbies of exclusive spas feature statues of the Buddha, and Bali is a favorite destination for stressed housewives.

Reinfried: All of this accounts for our one-dimensional image of Japan. Another misrepresentation was spread by the Nazis, for whom Japanese studies was a top priority. In the 1930s it was impossible to hold a chair in Japanese studies at a German university without being an active member of the Nazi Party. Nazi Germany made use of the samurai ideal of one who obeys orders unconditionally, who sacrifices himself on orders from above, who although not a Christian has a noble soul. This is the ideological basis of *Zen in the Art of Archery* by the Nazi Eugen Herrigel, a book which has exerted a powerful influence over the years. Some Swiss still today regard this book as the open sesame to Japan. It is amusing to hear of Europeans with an anti-authoritarian upbringing who go to Japan to let a Zen master hit them should they doze off during meditation.

DM: Do you mean by this that Japanese studies was instrumentalized for political purposes?

Reinfried: Yes. Especially during the Cold War. Before then, i.e., during the Second World War, Japanese were demonized in Western propaganda. The world had been told of the massacres committed by the Japanese army in Nanjing. After World War II, communism emerged as the new enemy, which prompted the US to invest large sums in Japanese studies. As part of the anti-communist struggle, Japan was instrumentalized to project the US worldview in Asia. Having lost mainland China to communism, the US shifted its focus temporarily from China to Japan. Under the auspices of Henry R. Luce, publisher of *Time* and *Life*, a new image of Japan focusing mainly on cultural values was created. Spiritual aspects were overemphasized to resonate with the broad middleclass. Geisha bowling, priests playing the bamboo-flute, rock gardens.

DM: How was this achieved?



Photo of bowling maiko (Life Magazine cover, 1960s)

Reinfried: Japanese literary works were translated for the first time in large numbers, and Western authors and photographers, among them the Swiss Werner Bischof, were given the opportunity to position Japan afresh in the family of nations through their personal impressions, this time as a country with a soul and religion and no longer—as was the case in the previous decade—a country demonized as the Yellow Peril. Japan was presented as a showcase anchored off the communist world in East Asia to demonstrate that capitalism was possible without class struggle. One must not underestimate the significance of the struggle in the 1950s for ideological hegemony. Japan mutated in no time at all from most hated enemy to closest ally under the nuclear umbrella of the USA.

DM: And Japan acquiesced to this?

Reinfried: Yes, it did indeed. Following the atomic bombs and Japan's surrender, the US presented a positive example of a foreign occupation. The Americans had read up on the country's history and society in the run-up to the occupation. Japanese as a result generally accepted US leadership willingly and even gratefully.

DM: Why do we generally feel that the Japanese like to live up to the expectations of others?

Reinfried: Japanese are quick to realize what others see in them. They are eager to incorporate foreign images into their self-image, above all, of course, those which are self-aggrandizing. This is what happened during the Cold War when Japanese adapted and subsequently internalized the positive image that the Western world had propagated in order to mark Japan off from communist China. This self-perception enabled the country to reach the goal it had envisaged since the Meiji-Period, namely to "catch up to and go beyond" the West. It made Japan unique but also nurtured its own brand of nationalism.

DM: There are those who maintain that Japanese just love playing the exotic role assigned to them by foreigners.

Reinfried: To some extent every country puts on a show for others. That is part of the success story of many nations. We Swiss, too, like to pretend that we are cowherds addicted to cheese. It is only when disaster occurs that we take note of the fact that we all live in one and the same world. Exceptionalist claims regarding culture then immediately fade into irrelevance.

DM: What do you mean by that?

Reinfried: It's not only Japan that has a problem now, but rather the nuclear industry as a whole. This industry is globally interlinked. When I accompanied my wife, an earth scientist, on a visit to the Swiss Nagra Grimsel test site, the only workers I saw there were two Japanese technicians who were studying the possibility of disposing of nuclear waste in Swiss granite. So at least the Swiss nuclear industry wouldn't dream of putting Japan in an exotic corner. Both Japan and Switzerland have the same reactors by the very same US maker, and both use the same manuals and consult the same checklists.

DM: But wouldn't you agree that certain national stereotypes do exist and cannot be explained away—"Italians are unable to get things organized," "Germans are subservient to authority," "Israelis are invariably boisterous."

Reinfried: They are invariably wide of the mark. We put what little we know about other nations under a microscope, observe it in magnified form and then attribute it to a whole nation. Until 1945, all Japanese were regarded as descendants of samurai, although these had never constituted more than 10% of the population. The overwhelming majority of peasants, whose ethics were completely different from those of the samurai elite, went unheeded. In the 1960s international interest then focused on the fast growing urban social stratum of the middle class, who were presented to the world as anonymous lemmings emerging each morning from the train-stations by the thousands on their way to work. The Japanese population has always been a conglomerate of millions of people in which a multitude of elements exist side by side.

DM: What has been your impression of the news coverage in Western media in the past three weeks?

Reinfried: I watch Japanese television programs by satellite and read Japanese newspapers and blogs on the internet on a regular basis. This is probably the best way to get precise information. There is no need to be in Japan to understand what is going on. At times like these, the presence of foreign correspondents is hardly needed. I pity the journalists who have to report from a streetcorner at three in the morning, and all they can tell the TV audience is that there is no more mineral water to buy in the supermarkets. Television viewers are bound to conclude from such reports that supermarket shelves everywhere in Japan must be empty. Wherever correspondents in Tokyo may be, they are never where the action is. A megalopolis with 36 million inhabitants is very difficult to put into words.

DM: Would you say that our impression that the Japanese maintained relative calm even during the disaster is mistaken?

Reinfried: No. In Japan, even a disaster is handled in an organized manner. Japan is generally characterized by a very high degree of organization. This also applies to disaster management. Japanese rely heavily on organization, simply because they do not see any real alternative to getting themselves organized.

DM: How do you account for this?

Reinfried: People in the Western world basically believe in their capability to live on their own, whereas Japanese tend to see themselves as part of a system. They do not see themselves as being capable of existing without an external system such as the state. There are hardly any visionaries of a self-sufficient life without a state. Thoreau's *Walden* was not written by a Japanese.

DM: What exactly does Nature mean to Japanese?

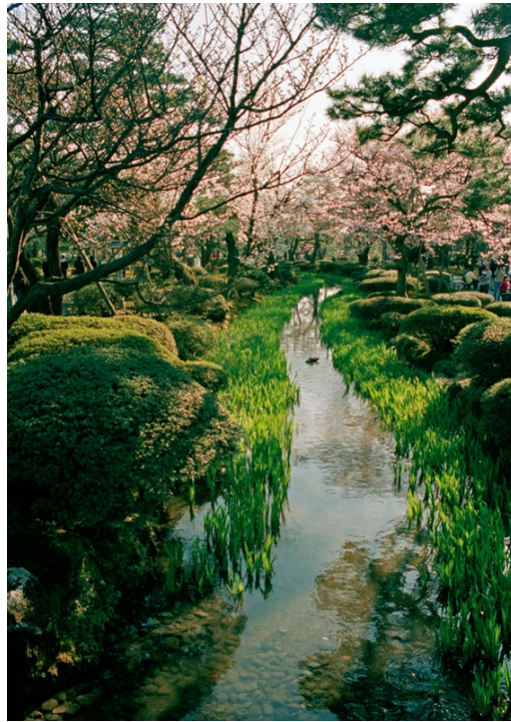
Reinfried: In Japan, man and nature are not in contradiction, since in their view man was not blessed by God with a mind and then placed in Nature. In Japan, man and what we call Nature together form a unity. This realm can be either orderly or chaotic, bestowing blessings at times, at other times demonstrating that its might cannot be controlled, such as when it produces huge *tsunami* or rattles the earth. At the same time, the conviction that man can keep the dangers of Nature at bay with the help of technology is being nurtured. Scientists refer to a disaster as an "occurrence." A disaster is the result of the fact that man settled in places he is not intended to settle. Only in the 17th century, when land reclamation and dam building became more widespread, did Japanese begin to settle in large numbers on the outer edge of the alluvial plains close to the sea.

DM: Do Japanese have a religion at all?

Reinfried: Such a question would place Japanese in a quandary. Since 1945, religion and state have been rigorously separated. Religious beliefs are a strictly private concern. There is, however, a strong link with one's ancestors, to whom Japanese feel very close. Religious feelings do exist in the form of



System and order have top priority in Japan



Tamed nature: The Kenrokuen garden in Kanazawa

gratefulness towards them as well as towards fellow human beings in general. The notion is widely accepted that in a society based on division of labor, one's existence depends precariously on one's fellow citizens doing their jobs properly. This, in essence, is the least common denominator in Japanese religion.

DM: Would it then be totally wrong to see something archetypically Japanese in their social behaviour following the disaster?

Reinfried: On the one hand, man has a social nature that does not depend on nationality. On the other hand, even in Japan there are those who take advantage of turmoil to do mischief. In Japan there is the view that man is neither good nor bad, but malleable: Just as water assumes the form

of the vessel it is contained in, man must always be embedded in a vessel, be it family, community or company.

DM: Now that this terrible disaster has struck, do Japanese talk publicly about their feelings? About how terrible everything is?

Reinfried: Television reports regularly show broken-hearted people who have lost everything, while anchors make no secret of how deeply they are moved by the events. But interviewers, when trying to express their sympathy, regularly get the reply from the interviewee that they are struggling hard (*ganbari masu*) and that they will do their best to get themselves out of their predicament by their own efforts. They even reassure the interviewer by begging him not to worry. It is common to affirm repeatedly that one does not want to burden others with one's own problems. In Japan there is no tradition of a concept of an innate right to existence or an entitlement to well-being. If one must name a tradition in

this field, then it would be more appropriate to speak of a tradition of innate duties rather than entitlements.

DM: What are the main differences between the Japanese and Swiss media in the coverage of the disaster?

Reinfried: In our media, a commentator who pigeonholes events and passes judgment on them seems indispensable. In Japan, news programs from abroad are also available in the original, simply dubbed in Japanese without further commentary. Here in Switzerland, we apparently are not supposed to watch news without a judgmental commentary that sometimes even casts wholesale doubt on the public statements by the Japanese government.

DM: Would you maintain then that the Japanese public was kept well-informed by its government?

Reinfried: In a comprehensive way, yes. In Japan, public discourse constitutes mainly an exchange of factual information, not of worldviews or personal convictions. Here in Switzerland, television audiences as well as high-school students tend to engage in heated debates even before they have gained a thorough grasp of the facts. Japanese public debates on TV generally run in orderly fashion. In Japan, differences of opinion are attributed to differences in the level of information and not to ideological differences. We have behind us a long tradition of disputes between believers and non-believers. In Japan, there are only those who know and those who do not. In case of disagreement, people do not raise their voices to shout each other but go home to recheck the vital facts. Saying this, I don't in any way want to suggest that Japanese are unable to raise their voices in a quarrel if they feel the need.

DM: There is even now talk of a possible economic rebound. Will the Japanese, as well organized as they are, recover fast from this crisis?

Reinfried: When I asked my first teacher of Japanese back in 1963 why Japan had recovered within a relatively short time after the Pacific War, he named Japan's high organisational level as the main reason. Progress was to all intents and purposes unstoppable once the initial snags had been eliminated.

DM: And what about the much-touted "Samurai-Tradition"? There are countless tomes for Western business persons with titles like "*The Way of the Samurai for Business*."

Reinfried: Utter nonsense. Japanese are not successful because they are ready to die for their company. Japanese are successful because they think in terms of systems. The individual is of little importance in this dimension of strategic thinking, so these handbooks are misleading. In Japan, everything is conceived as a system. Individuals and their achievements are of secondary importance.

DM: In the last decade, Japan lost its position as the second strongest economy. How did this come about?

Reinfried: Japan was demobilized, if I may use that term, only in 1990, after the end of the Cold War. For the first time in many years fathers returned home early in the evenings and realized they had a family. There was no more overtime, and many even lost their jobs or were employed only part-time. For many non-Japanese, these two decades have hardly left any trace in their image of Japan. Many of my students still want to write papers on lifetime employment in Japan.

DM: Has the economic downturn precipitated a mental crisis in Japan?

Reinfried: The Japanese say that the meaning of life must be decided on by each individual. So children are taught at an early age to set a goal for themselves. This was far easier some decades ago, when a company career could reasonably be expected to be rewarded at sixty with a house of one's own plus a Toyota Crown, with one's children married off. Nowadays none of this comes automatically. Life therefore can no longer be planned in the same way as in the last generation. That is why many people prefer to enjoy the mundane pleasures of everyday life, as long as circumstances permit them to do so.

DM: This time, a natural disaster has hit a society that is in many ways more advanced than our own. Usually, the poorest people are the victims: The tsunami in 2004 in Thailand, the earthquake in Haiti last year. What is the significance of the disaster for us?

Reinfried: That's a very important point. In the case of Japan, a society whose organization is more advanced in many aspects than ours was affected. And as far as Fukushima is concerned, let me repeat: This problem is not Japan-specific, but industry-specific. Otherwise I am convinced that Japan could be a model for us in many aspects. Very soon, the whole of the Germanic part of Switzerland will merge into a single megalopolis, very similar to the Kantô area around Tokyo. Ever more people live here; the process of continuing urbanisation cannot be stopped. People already today commute to work in Zurich from their apartments on the Lake of Constance. With so many people living and working together, more clear-cut rules and more organisational efforts are needed. One would for instance have to start thinking about how to channel large numbers of commuters in and out of the railway stations. When I change trains in the main station in Zurich, I have to walk zigzag in order to avoid colliding with other travellers. In Japan, the railway stations are designed in such a way that travellers can proceed smoothly without bumping into each other.

DM: Is it correct to say then, that we would be better off focusing our interest in Japan pragmatically on how Japan is tackling problems which await us in the future, too?

Reinfried: Exactly, and we should start doing this in school. In our history lessons, Japan appears for the first time with Pearl Harbor, only to be catapulted out of history with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But how, for instance, are the Japanese dealing with the problems connected with an ageing population? We, too, will be confronted sooner or later with this problem. We should learn from Japan's handling of modern life, not from their handling of tradition and culture. Urbanized life in the megalopolis is the fate of us all. What are the solutions? There aren't that many nations like Japan that have a comparably high level of knowledge. And we need partners to discuss problems.

DM: Again, is it correct to say that our image of Japan is basically a construction originating in the Cold War.

Reinfried: Exactly. Japanese are not the way they are because they shoot with bow and arrow or because they rake the gravel in a rock garden in a particular pattern. Recognize that fact, and individuals can still engage in one of the traditional arts and crafts. What would be sweeter? People say I sound somewhat grumpy, but that is not the point. If students want to write with a writing brush, I encourage them to go ahead and do so. But they should not cherish the illusion that Japanese today generally write with brushes. In fact, many Japanese use brushes only at wedding receptions to write their name in the guestbook. For this reason, not even the highly developed art of calligraphy can be regarded as a key to the much-touted "essence of Japan."

DM: In today's discussion you have destroyed many of our images of a beautiful and pure Japan. The sushi version of the Japan image, so to speak.

Reinfried: It's quite all right to preserve one's personal images of Japan. I, too, like eating *sushi*. But *sushi* should not be used to explain Japan. Japan is much, much more.

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This is an abbreviated version of an article published in German in [Das Magazin](#) (English: "The magazine"). **Das Magazin** is a Saturday supplement of the Zurich newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger*, the *Basler Zeitung* and the *Berner Zeitung*, featuring comments and reports on politics and culture. It reaches 800,000 readers each weekend (approximately ten percent of the Swiss population). Photographs © Werner Bischoff and Andri Pol.

FINN CANONICA (redaktion@dasmagazin.ch) is editor-in-chief and BIRGIT SCHMID is editor of *Das Magazin*.

Recommended citation: Heinrich Reinfried, "Sushi and Samurai: Western Stereotypes and the (Mis)Understanding of Post-Tsunami Japan," The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 32 No 1, August 8, 2011.