



950707047

RICHARD GEHRMANN

## The Rising Sun of Australian Japan Bashing?

*Racism, American Cultural Imperialism  
and Australian Popular Images of Asia*



“WE ARE GIVING this country away”, remarks an American in Phillip Kaufman’s cinematic success, *Rising Sun*. An Australian cinema audience murmurs instant approval at such sentiments. The images in the film version of *Rising Sun*<sup>1</sup> might reflect both the legitimate socio-cultural concerns of the United States, and the populist appeal of that segment of the popular and academic community prone to ‘Japan bashing’,<sup>2</sup> but it is disturbing to observe the reactions of Australians to an American film, made for a specifically American popular market.

The reality and significance of Australian popular images of Japan and Asia differ from those images that belong to the United States, and the screening of this culturally inappropriate film has the potential to do much to develop and reinforce popular Australian attitudes towards a culture with which we historically have had poor relations.<sup>3</sup> ‘Asia’ is also a culture that we see as a homogeneous generality, and this refusal to acknowledge Asian diversity means that all negative images and negative realities from anywhere in the Asian continent coalesce in one image.<sup>4</sup> While *Rising Sun* is about Japan, its images will be appropriated by many Australians, and will be applied to ‘Asians’ as a generic group. Australia’s future culture faces the prospect of becoming subjected to American populist culture in this context. So the issues raised in the film must be addressed to place *Rising Sun* within the framework of its specifically American anti-Japanese narrative.

To review the Australian response to *Rising Sun* we must initially consider Australian perceptions of that misunderstood geographical

conglomerate, Asia. To paraphrase Metternich, Asia is but a geographical expression. Despite pleas that we accept the realities of the diversity and individuality of Asia, pleas most recently made by Jamie Mackie in the *Asian Studies Review*, and Pierre Ryckmans in *The Australian*,<sup>5</sup> we continue to perceive ‘Asia’ as a coherent whole, and attempt to discuss ‘Asian’ investment, ‘Asian’ food, and ‘Asian’ culture, all of which are meaningless terms when placed against the immense reality of the diversity that constitutes Asia. But for Australians this ‘Asia’ is a construction that becomes a reality, albeit usually one seen in negative, threatening terms.

The early artistic imagery of the British convict settlement, placed in a dark and threatening environment, posited the new colony against a hostile backdrop, with the sombre ‘savage state’ of its position contrasted with the shining utility of the new convict civilisation.<sup>6</sup> This tiny colonial beginning set on what was culturally the wrong side of the globe, metamorphosed into a provincial-minded group of middle-ranking colonies with negative perceptions of their environment, of hostile and untamed Aborigines, avaricious and morally corrupt Chinese gold diggers, ambiguous Japanese and Malay pearl divers, and other non-Europeans such as Melanesian plantation workers, all threatening an emerging white, British Australia.<sup>7</sup>

These fears, specifically those of the 1900 Bulletin’s ‘Mongolian Octopus’, are echoed in the sexual manipulation of ‘white’ women by evil, morally corrupt, cocaine-using ‘Asiatics’ in *Rising Sun*, a text whose very title evokes the war-time threat to Australians. While fascination

and humanity, rather cause to celebrations. ve of certain stralian heart less innocent recent media n incomplete rad’s insight le, the almost nied”. We as dging this to a critical dia- owever, has complex his- uations have y to counter

century give ground will ial extremes: it state as the istories, still erial propa- from these ed prejudice acts not only clearsighted

ears at the urb survives martyred by g reminder ne, and that hich require

man (ed.), *Poetry & ...*  
n ABV-2 on Sunday

. Vaterland und die  
*Die Zeit*, 10 Decem-

ature references are

lish at Monash,  
tury Australian

with Asia did co-exist with fear,<sup>8</sup> the primary emotions of fear, xenophobia and a sense of isolation dominated.

In addition to the historically specific Australian trepidation about a non-specific Asia, pre-Federation Australia was part of a broader western culture that feared and despised 'the orient'. From the Kaiser's evocation of a Japanese-led Yellow Peril in the years before World War I<sup>9</sup> to the fantastical machinations of Sax Rohmer's evil Dr Fu Manchu, popular western imagery presented an Asian other that was adopted by Australian popular culture. Literary gems in the *Boys Own Annual*, the *Empire Book for Australian Boys*, the *Monster Book for Boys* and other mass-circulation books, papers and magazines, propagated in the school-aged youth of the Empire an image of the evil, degenerate and racially inferior Asian.

This image actuated a much stronger meaning in the culturally and physically isolated outpost that constituted Australia than it did in the European homeland. Servile, treacherous and evil Asians were presented in "dehumanising racist stereotypes" for generations of youth,<sup>10</sup> a depiction that was to be of particular significance to those who came after.

Australians prominent in civil life in the 1980s and 1990s such as Bruce Ruxton and Geoffrey Blainey were born in 1926 and 1930 respectively, and were products of a generation imbued with the perceptions of a paramount British empire and an advanced, superior Australia.

Such a powerful emotional belief came from this dominant paradigm of racism, in which there is an underlying supposition that Asians are inferior and should respect and look up to the civilised, dominant Europeans, and a consequent resentment and insecurity in countries with long histories of cultural attainment, such as Japan. These images have been dramatically challenged in *Rising Sun*.

**K**AUFMAN'S FILM adaptation of Michael Crichton's novel depicts a familiarly shadowy world of threat and evil, but with the important and aberrant distinction of Japanese superiority. The mastery of the Japanese is everywhere evident. For Americans such superiority might be problematic, but for Australians this is the ultimate nightmare from the dark days of Feb-

ruary 1942, returning to haunt.

In the opening scenes of *Rising Sun*, Japanese business negotiators calmly face their American counterparts across a table, with the essential distinction that the Japanese are operating electronic spying equipment and are listening to every whispered conversation of their American opponents. The wily, devious orientals are everywhere breaking the rules of the game of fair play, even spying on their own (American) security guard. As the detective in the lift remarks that "the Japs are taking over", his very words are recorded in the electronic hub of that tower of corporate evil, the Nakamoto Corporation building.



Furthermore, some Americans have been suborned by the forces of Nippon, and work to betray the United States to their new masters. Even the American police are seen as inferior and incompetent outsiders in this Japanese world, a world that exists in some bizarre form of extraterritoriality in downtown Los Angeles. When good cop Web Smith searches for the guru (or sensei) John Connor, he locates him in a darkened world of oriental mystery.

The ubiquitous Chinatown ghetto image is played again in the film, as Smith and Connor enter the atmospheric underworld that is familiar to any reader of Fu Manchu. The denizens of this world may wear suits rather than oriental robes, but Connor's words – that "this is not America" – send an unequivocal message to the cinema goers.

Far from being the servants and inferiors of our culture's childhood fiction, the Japanese have become our masters, in our own (western) land. "Don't fuck with these guys", warns the (black American) Nakamoto security man, sweating with fear, while the hidden camera observes his every move.

The sellout of America motif is also apparent. This is expressed in numerous ways, with the

protagonist (erous) fellow establi companies' owned, are Americans parts of 'A tures, wher than Sony) all Americ majority o: before its p

*Rising Sun* new Japan previously power. Our son Corpor foreign gr happier ti Corporatio Japanese-o sanity and by pointing don't want

Again th geneous m for some f domination: America a Americans midst.

In the cc white Ar their equa suffering Afro-Ame: mother of burakumin margins w black and

The bizi moting A tolerant s Angeles, t deliciously lost on Ar and on C: sets the sc their natic

The sell selling of

protagonists admitting that (presumably treacherous) fellow Americans are helping the Japanese establish "competition against our own companies". The companies, being American owned, are clearly part of the birthright of all Americans everywhere, and are constituent parts of 'America'. Presumably Columbia pictures, when purchased by 'the Japanese' (rather than Sony) in the late 1980s, became the loss of all Americans, despite the fact that the vast majority of Americans owned no shares in it before its purchase.

*Rising Sun* is peppered with references to the new Japanese economic mastery of what was previously the world's premier industrial power. Our occidental heroes visit the Donaldson Corporation, or rather, a piece of ambiguous foreign ground that has changed from the happier times "when this was Donaldson Corporation ...", before the takeover. Only the Japanese-oriented Connor sends a message of sanity and reason in this maze of xenophobia, by pointing out that if the owners of companies don't want 'Japan' to buy them, don't sell them.

Again the Japanese are portrayed as a homogeneous mass, as 'them', as one people headed for some form of economic and political world domination.<sup>11</sup> Japan as Evil is posited against America as Good. The Japanese are united, the Americans are divided, with traitors in their midst.

In the compassionate society of *Rising Sun*, the white Americans accept black Americans as their equals, and the Japanese reject a woman suffering from a deformity whose father was Afro-American. As a member through her mother of the ethnically Japanese, but outcast, burakumin group, she is pushed further to the margins when in Japan because her father was black and foreign.

The bizarre picture of an American film promoting America-the-melting-pot, as a racially tolerant society within the setting of Los Angeles, the city of riots and Rodney King, is deliciously ironic, but such irony is presumably lost on American audiences, on the film makers, and on Crichton himself. As threatening music sets the scene, corporate America prepares to sell their nation to the new evil empire.

The selling of America goes further than the selling of mundane and essentially uninteresting

corporations to the fiendish orientals. The very bodies of American womanhood are served up for the inferior race as corporate tribute, with this taking place literally when the depraved, coke-sniffing murder suspect Eddie Sakamura consumes sushi and sake off the nipples, breasts and naked bodies of two blonde sex slaves.

With the threat of racial and sexual pollution, the Japan bashing of *Rising Sun* reinscribes racist stereotypes, evoking similar messages entrenched in western culture one hundred years ago. Short dark Japanese men continually seem to have tall, voluptuous blonde women fawning all over them, whenever the director needs to titillate the voyeur, or perhaps infuriate the racial supremacist.

The racism of this film is only equalled by its sexism. Women's motives for becoming the sex slaves are not examined - this is presumably the natural, receptive role of universal womanhood. They just drape happily in the background like the bimbos in a 1950s beach movie, but in this case they drape for the wrong reasons, for the wrong men. Elvis is replaced by Sakamura.

But back in the harsh reality that constitutes the 1990s, we repeatedly see on the security videos the blonde, semi-naked body of American womanhood lying on her back on the corporate office table, being systematically (and symbolically) fucked and then strangled, all by an anonymous and faceless man, who the audience presumes to be Nipponese.



SO WHAT IS THE Japanese-American relationship, and where does *Rising Sun* fit in the discourse of US-Japan relations? In recent American popular culture, Japan as an economic superpower has become the major enemy. While powerful industrial America did not suffer the same feeling of isolation in the pre-World War II era that Australia did, national confidence was shaken by what was seen as the treachery of Pearl Harbour.

This jolt in confidence was short lived, to the extent that the later making of a film about the Pearl Harbour defeat was possible. After all, the United States did indubitably win the Pacific War, and therefore need suffer no national trauma or shame over initial defeats, because MacArthur *did* return. Indeed, the treacherous behaviour of Japan, and the essential rightness of the United States are reinforced in the war film *Tora Tora Tora*.

But with relative industrial decline in the past two decades, and the military and political failure of the United States in Vietnam, American culture makers have been forced to re-assess America's position in the world. Typical of these assessments was the reaction in popular circles to Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, an academic book which in other times would perhaps have excited interest only within the ranks of university students in Departments of International Relations.

Kennedy's essential argument, that all great powers decline and will always eventually decline,<sup>12</sup> struck a chord in the psychic memory of the post-boom, post-yuppie United States of the late 1980s, with Americans being confronted with the inevitability of the eventual decline and fall of their empire. Chapter headings such as 'The United States: The Problem of Number One in Relative Decline' could be guaranteed to terrify readers, especially when absorbed in conjunction with van Wolferen's *The Enigma of Japanese Power*<sup>13</sup>, and other offerings of the suddenly fashionable Japan bashing school.

*Rising Sun* places itself firmly within this recently developed and extremely marketable cultural tradition of Japan bashing, a cultural tradition which while it reflects echoes of the past, represents a new present reality of perceived American weakness and vulnerability. It is all the more vicious for this. American politicians know that at any time they can attract electoral support and media attention by smashing a pile of Japanese electrical appliances, an anarchistic expression of jingoism.

The film *Rising Sun* may have been sanitised from the virulent book to attract a wider public audience, and to deflect accusations of racism, but while it is a toned down version of the book,<sup>14</sup> it still is centred firmly within the Japan bashing tradition. Americans need an enemy to

assault, and now that the Soviet Union is an item of pity rather than dread, does Japan take its place?<sup>15</sup>

AUSTRALIA'S JAPANESE phobia differs in many ways from the phobia which coexists in the United States. Despite earlier paranoia about a tiny number of Japanese pearl divers in the north, our fear became evident with the frenzied and hysterical reactions within Australia to the arrival of the American Great White Fleet in 1908.<sup>16</sup> This was of course linked directly to Japanese success in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, where Japan, an Asian country, had clearly demonstrated military superiority over a major European power for the first time.

Australian support for the American fleet can also be linked to the strong naval alliance developed in 1902 between Great Britain and Japan. At a time of fear and perceived threat, imperial concerns were excluding Australian interests. Despite the palpably obvious fact that the Japanese were thousands of miles to the north and were attempting to carve out an empire in China, and were thus in no way threatening Australia, we were threatened enough to feel saved by the arrival of the Americans.

While Australian popular culture was influenced by past racist traditions and a feeling of unity with 'fellow Anglo-Saxons' against the 'Asiatic hordes', the greatest base for anti-Japanese feeling comes from the experiences of World War II, and in particular from the Malayan campaign, and the subsequent fall of the 'impregnable' fortress of Singapore.

This is a feeling deeply embedded in the popular culture of an older generation of Australians, and largely lay dormant until Japan's economic success in the 1980s, combined with the collaborative activities of Australian business, caused an influx of tourists and capital, forcing us to confront Japan again.

The act of suffering defeat is one humiliation. For male and female Australians raised on a tradition of the Anzac as an Australian hero, military defeat in itself involved shame, failure and emasculation. As Beaumont points out, defeat can be and is conveniently explained away in terms of failure on the part of allies, but an essential shame remains, indicating failure to be a 'true' Australian.<sup>17</sup>

A far greater  
at the hand  
Australian  
are replete  
ority of the  
ences to at  
shame of ca  
behaviour o  
the bounds  
the ultimate  
'bandy-legg  
horror and t  
rienced and  
lying belief

This pris  
ened by the  
by the real  
tralian nig  
Australia. T  
services in  
community  
spread the  
war, and m  
against the  
universalise  
the horrific  
oners of w  
thetic suffer

The Aust  
fore differ  
because we  
fered and v  
war experi  
global, and  
physically  
similar suff  
to become

Our Japa  
ception of  
ists. Becau  
such as th  
are develc

A far greater humiliation is implicit in defeat at the hands of the Japanese, an inferior race. Australian and other Allied captivity narratives are replete with references to the racial inferiority of the Japanese, in conjunction with references to atrocities and barbarism. Thus the shame of capture was linked to the uncivilised behaviour of the captors, who by going beyond the bounds of convention set themselves up as the ultimate other. Betty Jeffrey's perception of 'bandy-legged monkeys'<sup>18</sup> reflects both the horror and the tragedy of the atrocities she experienced and was witness to, as well as an underlying belief of racial superiority.



This prisoner-of-war experience was strengthened by the effects of wartime propaganda, and by the real sense of a fear of the ultimate Australian nightmare, an invasion of White Australia. The high percentage of those in the services in what was total war, and the close community networks of wartime Australia, spread the news of those captured or killed in war, and makes the breadth of feeling of hatred against the Japanese understandable.<sup>19</sup> This universalised an experience, and transformed the horrific suffering of more than 22,000 prisoners of war and their families into the empathetic suffering of a nation.

The Australian war experience of Japan therefore differs from that of the United States, because we suffered and lost, where they suffered and won. As in the United Kingdom, the war experience of the United States was too global, and both countries were too far removed physically from the zone of conflict for the similar sufferings of British and American POWs to become a crucial part of the national myth.

Our Japan phobia was reactivated by the perception of physical invasion by Japanese tourists. Because of the nature of tourism, enclaves such as the Gold Coast and the Cairns region are developed and attract concentrations of

highly visible overseas tourists. Perceptions of the 'Asian Invasion' are heightened by the increased numbers of Australians of Asian descent who until spoken to and identified appear to be foreign. Even those of Australian nationality but not upbringing find it hard to be Australian in the eyes of their fellows.

The insularity of Australians who have never travelled overseas to foreign tourist enclaves such as Kuta Beach in southern Bali means that any sign in a shop in a foreign language is intrusive, as is the sound of any 'Asian' speaking in their own tongue. This magnifies the Japanese presence out of all proportion to the actual numbers of Japanese in Australia, who are here due to the invitation extended by an economically rationalist Australian tourism industry.

THIS FINAL ISSUE of objection to Japan as a culture is based on a sense of economic invasion, and here again the generalised image of one Asia is paramount. The Australian media tends to treat Asia as an indivisible whole, using headlines such as 'Think-tank to boost trade with Asia', 'Ansett joins Asian frequent flier push', 'How to win in Asia without really trying', and 'Chance to network with Asia'.<sup>20</sup> Therefore the activities of 'the Japanese' as economic competitors who are buying in the peace the Australia they failed to conquer in the war, become merged into the totality of homogenised, threatening Asia.

For Australian audiences watching *Rising Sun* there is an unseen irony implicit in their approval of the racist image directed towards America. In a country that has historically been dependent on foreign capital investment, why is Japanese capital more repulsive and objectionable than British, American, New Zealand or, more significantly, German capital? If one claims there is little difference, one risks being labelled an apologist for the Japanese. Yet the opposition of many Australians to Japanese ownership of Australian land is only paralleled by their opposition to Aboriginal Australian ownership of Australian land. Unlike the perfect white Americans in *Rising Sun*, many Australians will clearly feel unable to enlist black Australians as allies.

Australians possess a sense of weakness in terms of the possibility of Australians becoming

what Lee Kuan Yew called "the white trash of Asia", but this does not equate to the American sense of a loss of global empire. After all, we have tended to operate as subordinates for so long, why should this bother us? Or is the threat of our American ally turning Japanese a threat to our colonised selves?

The United States based negativity of *Rising Sun* matters to us more, because we already have stronger negative images of Japan, and of 'Asia', in our national consciousness. While the success of *Rising Sun* continues into the video outlets, and interested viewers turn to Crichton's far more anti-Japanese book, Australians will continue to see themselves as being in the same position as the former cheerleader Cheryl Austin, lying back on the board-room table. However in this case there will be no mystery about the national identity of the sex partner, and we will continue on the path of analysis taken by the Los Angeles police, and continue to blame Japan for any problems, while far worse is being done to us by the United States.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Michael Crichton, *Rising Sun* (Arrow Books, London, 1992).
2. For further information on Japan bashing in Australia see Allan Patience, 'Confronting a Terrible Legacy: Australia's Japan Problem and the MFP', *Policy Organisation and Society*, 4, Summer 1991, pp. 25-7.
3. See Alan Rix, 'Cry Havoc? Public Opinion and Recent Australia-Japan Relations', *Policy Organization and Society*, 4, Summer 1991.

4. This is a common perception in the west, although there are Australian variations. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1978), Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992).
5. Jamie Mackie, 'On the Question of "Asia"', *Asian Studies Review*, 17, 1, July 1993, pp. 155-156, *The Australian*, 24 November 1993.
6. Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire: Neo-classical Culture in New South Wales 1788-1860*, (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986) p. 54.
7. The Queensland version of this is presented in Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders & Kathryn Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, (University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1975, 1988).
8. John Ingleson, 'Australian images of Asia', in *University of New South Wales Occasional Papers*, 13, 1988, pp. 6-8.
9. Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser and His Times* (Penguin, London, 1972), pp. 143, 248, 260.
10. John Springhall, 'Healthy papers for manly boys': imperialism and race in the Harmsworths' halfpenny boy's papers in the 1890s and 1900s', in Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989) p. 177. See also John Mackenzie (ed), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986).
11. Humphrey McQueen notes that the Japanese are not and were not all the same, a point that is even made by Rohan Rivett in his most bitter work. See Humphrey McQueen, *Japan to the Rescue* (William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1991) p. 28, and Rohan Rivett, *Behind Bamboo: An Inside Story of the Japanese Prison Camps* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946).
12. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Fontana, London, 1989).
13. Karel van Wolferen *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (Macmillan, London, 1989).
14. This point is made by McGregor, who however seems to fail to realise the far greater potential of the film to incite racist feelings. Richard McGregor, 'The darker side of Rising Sun', *The Australian*, Weekend Review October 30-31, 1993.
15. John Creighton Campbell, 'Japan Bashing: A New McCarthyism', *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, Vol. 18, No. 4, March 1991.
16. Philip Bell and Roger Bell, *Implicated: The United States and Australia* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993), pp. 56-7.
17. Joan Beaumont, *Gull Force: Survival and Leadership in Captivity 1941-1945* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988) pp. 2-3.
18. Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1954).
19. Libby Connors, Lynette Finch, Kay Saunders, Helen Taylor, *Australia's Frontline: Remembering the 1939-45 War* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992), pp. 65-7, 197-9.
20. *The Australian*, 25 February 1993, 22 February 1993, 7 April 1993, 10 November 1993. For detail on specific anti-Japanese issues, see Paul Summers, 'Yellow Peril Revisited: stories on Japan after Hirohito's death', *Australian Journalism Review*, 12, January-December, 1990.

Richard Gehrman lectures in Asian Studies at the University of Southern Queensland.



23 Bridge Road Richmond 3121 Tel: 428 1252

- OFFSET PRINTING • COLOUR COPYING • BINDING
- LAMINATING • PHOTOCOPYING • TYPESETTING

ALTHOUGH the congressional death of the States, the accurately marking the democratic the fall of the end of not to say the disintegration Union, although that it does military strength during the the change the economic strength and the solid for the The economic greater than Australia has no in Union, even ability, as an example, from Canada's integration of free trade negotiations and is likely to try and chances to United States. Yet this American business at it never been pursued the potential. Group