

Ottomania and Japanmania in Comparative Perspective

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1. Aim

Japan and Turkey have comparable histories of modernization, with both countries experiencing the epitome of their westernization in the nineteenth century, at the end of their imperial eras. Both produced modernities that are considered a mix of “eastern” and “western.” Over the last decades, both have had to face their histories of modernization, pondering the question of what comes after modernity, and manufacturing their versions of an authentic and exportable modernity. Ottomania (a rising interest in Turkey’s imperial past, especially in popular culture) and Japanmania (or “cool Japan,” a government-sponsored project of reshaping Japanese identity) are two symptoms of this process. This paper aims to discuss Ottomania and Japanmania from a comparative perspective.

2. Data & Methods

This presentation uses media analysis and secondary literature, as well as 25 in-depth interviews for the case of Ottomania.

3. Results

Since the 1990s, both Turkey and Japan began to promote and export different identities. The collapse of traditional hierarchies in Japan and the erosion of the trope of modernity in Turkey have paved the way for the rise of new themes in popular culture: youth-centered “cool” culture in Japan, and a new look at the Ottoman imperial past in Turkey. Internal and external representations of Ottomania and Japanmania are different: 1) Internally, Japanmania and Ottomania are fragmented and without an overarching meaning. In Japan, the meaning of cool is perishable in the flimsy urban culture (Abel, 2011). In Turkey, different groups view the Ottoman past either as an age of great tolerance, as Turkish, Islamic, or burdensome. 2) Externally, Japanmania and Ottomania as popular culture are linked to “soft power,” through TV dramas and other exported cultural forms, and offer alternative and accessible forms of modernity to their former imperial hinterland—China and Korea for Japan, and the Middle East and the Balkans for Turkey (Daliot-Bul, 2009; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). The main difference consists in the fact that, while Ottomania corresponds to declining government intervention in popular culture, “cool Japan” represents an explicit governmental attempt to shape Japan’s image.

4. Conclusion

After decades of cold-shouldering their Asian and Islamic pasts as backward and pursuing aggressive paths of modernization, Turkey and Japan seem to be claiming new Middle Eastern and Asian identities, a process fraught with uncertainties and complex imperial legacies.