From Furniture to Fantasy: How Final Fantasy XIV Perpetuates Orientalism

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Introduction

Final Fantasy XIV is one of the most popular MMORPGs in recent years. MMORPGs, otherwise known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, are online games that consist of a massive online player base and contain role-playing elements in their narratives. Typically, players create their own character to act out the story with (role-play), and they can interact with other players in a plethora of ways. MMORPGs encourage teaming up with other players (often strangers) to accomplish game objectives and often make teaming up mandatory.

Final Fantasy XIV has become so popular that sales for the game had to be completely suspended as of December 15th, several days after the release of its latest expansion pack, *Endwalker*.[1] Expansion packs (also referred to as simply expansions or expacs) are major additions to existing games, adding things such as new storylines, gameplay, and items. Upon the release of *Endwalker*, players were faced with queues that were several hours long due to the massive amount of players logging in.[2] As of January 8th, the game was still not available for purchase, and its servers were struggling to keep up with the sudden increase in player base after several influential *World of Warcraft* streamers had started playing and endorsing the game.

World of Warcraft has long been the most well-known and popular MMORPG. However, its developer, Activision Blizzard, came under fire in recent years due to ongoing sexual harassment lawsuits, an ongoing controversy that has caused even more World of Warcraft players to jump ship.[3] This brief background is important as it shows how influential *Final Fantasy XIV* is. At the original time of writing, the game was reported to have over 25 million registered users.[4] Additionally, it held the first spot for most active players and averaged over 3 million players a day.[5] This activity ranking has dropped ever since a new MMORPG, *Lost Ark* was released to the West, yet *Final Fantasy XIV* still firmly holds the spot for second-most active MMORPG, not lagging far behind *Lost Ark*. *World of Warcraft*, which still holds the most accounts in total, has dropped to fourth place and has not recovered since being overtaken by other MMORPGs.

Though some work has been written on *Final Fantasy XIV*, most of it focuses on the actual game development or elements such as player immersion in MMORPGs. Discussions of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s Orientalist narratives are limited to sporadic online discussions, where even then it is a select minority that doesn't always gain much traction. I wish to combine my perspective as a former Japanese studies major interested in the sociocultural with this issue of newer media; games.

My research question revolves around the ways *Final Fantasy XIV* perpetuates Orientalism. The reason it is not focused exclusively on self-Orientalism is that it does not just fetishise Japanese culture, but also has problematic portrayals of other cultures. This fetishisation of other cultures is important for understanding the context in which *Final Fantasy XIV* shapes its world. Additionally, there is the issue of romanticisation—a similar yet slightly different concept that works in tandem with fetishisation. To me, romanticisation is the base of othering, both

[1] Square Enix Ltd., 'Response to Congestion (as of Dec. 15)'; Van Stam, 'Endwalker is zo populair dat Square Enix stopt met de verkoop van Final Fantasy 14'.
[2] alabomb, 'Server Congestion and Login Queues (Errors 2002, 3001, 4004, 5003, 5006, and Others)'; Copyblade, 'Post Your Server & Queue Number Here!'
[3] Browning, 'Activision Blizzard Is Sued by California Over Workplace Culture'; 'Activision Blizzard Sued Over "Frat Boy" Culture, Harassment (1)'.
[4] 'Final Fantasy 14 Sets New Record for Concurrent Players'.
[5] 'MMO Subscribers & Populations - MMO Populations & Player Counts'; 'FINAL FANTASY XIV: A Realm Reborn - MMO Populations & Player Counts'.

regarding the Self and the Other; it is concerned only with almost utopian idealistic representation. Fetishisation pushes this narrative further, and real-life people and cultures are reduced to (often imagined) ties to the romanticised ideal.

I hypothesise that *Final Fantasy XIV* perpetuates Orientalism by employing stereotypical depictions of various cultures, with Japanese culture in particular as my focus. It does so in a plethora of ways, such as the naming of objects as "Oriental" items, the music (as much of its Japanese-inspired sections employ traditional Japanese instruments and include Japanese lyrics, whereas the rest of the soundtrack contains English lyrics), and through the narrative (such as the way Doma, the Japanese-inspired country, is portrayed as highly cultured and unique because of its mysterious Eastern qualities).

These things aren't inherently problematic nor do I wish to condemn their existence wholly, but I wish to be critical of the deliberate staging of certain "Japanese" qualities in this game. It is important to note here that *Final Fantasy XIV* is a multicultural and international product; the Japanese developers work closely with the English localisation team (to the point that they are somewhat the same team) and there are French, German, Chinese, and Korean versions as well. It is therefore a complex interaction of Orientalism and, to a certain degree, occidentalism; it feeds into stereotypes made by Western forces, having internalised these stereotypes and reproducing them for an imagined Western audience that enjoys these sort of ideas of "pure" Japanese-ness.

The game also includes an explicit section of cultural exchange for players who pursue crafting (making items in-game). Once the player reaches past level 60 in their crafting job of choice, [6] they are tasked with going to Kugane—the Japanese-inspired major city—usually to learn a refined art of some kind from the Japanese craftsmen. This is interesting to note as it shows that the game is not just made for a Japanese audience; it is very much aware of its international audience that enjoys Japanese culture. After all, I'd argue that a Japanese player would not experience the same feeling at being told to learn from Japanese craftsmen; naturally, some Japanese people enjoy Japanese arts, but many may also take it for granted.

All of this stereotyping is a key strategy in juxtaposing the Self and the Other, where the former can define itself by differentiating from the latter. This process of identification is important both to establish oneself within the world, but also to promote certain agendas. Orientalism in particular has a strong component of alienating yet making the Other desirable, to entice the Self-state (usually the West) into wanting to obtain things from the Other. This can extend to more major and overt causes such as colonisation, but these strategies can also be used by the Other (such as in the case of Japan) to get economic power and other positive gains such as reputation and cultural influence.

This leads to another key goal; namely to obtain and enjoy soft power. This is not always a deliberate, Machiavellian scheme, but the fact of the matter is that capitalising on Japan's currently favourable global cultural reputation is done with the intent to obtain things such as the aforementioned money and (cultural) influence. With *Final Fantasy XIV*'s rapidly expanding popularity, it stands to reason that one of its goals is to promote positive opinion on Japanese culture, regardless of whether that opinion is fetishist and/or romanticising in nature. This ties

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[6] In *Final Fantasy XIV*, players select a specific class they wish to play. This class allows them to perform actions in and/or out of fights that are exclusive to their class. The class is the base form of this set of actions, which eventually evolves into a job around level 30. This is a bit different for crafters and gatherers, but for the sake of simplicity I will be referring to all of them as jobs as the difference is not relevant here.

back into the aforementioned issue of self-Orientalism; to romanticise the Self is to employ the gaze used by the Other to set oneself apart and elevate stereotyped unique qualities.

Methodology

First and foremost, my main source will be the game itself. *Final Fantasy XIV* offers infinite replays of completed questlines,[7] and I can thus obtain most if not all information myself. Due to the popularity of the game, footage of gameplay and questlines is also readily available in case I am not able to replay certain parts (or if this would take a considerable amount of time). As mentioned before, I do not wish to condemn this game entirely; I am a fan myself after all, as evident by the fact that I have spent a considerable amount of time levelling most of the jobs available to their highest level. The Orientalist material in question comes predominantly from the level 60-70 questlines, though some of it may also be found in later questlines, something I will be looking at as well.

My examination of Orientalism within *Final Fantasy XIV* will be split into sections. Firstly, I wish to examine the actual Orientalism found within the narrative. I will be doing this in two parts; I will first focus on the greater overarching plot, which is made out of "Main Scenario Quests", making it so that the main story is referred to as the "MSQ". Here, I will be focusing on the level 60-70 MSQ, as that is the storyline introduced by the *Stormblood* expansion pack, a pack that focuses on the introduction of fantasy Asia and its liberation from the clutches of Russo-Roman-inspired oppressive forces. I will start the section by giving a brief explanation of the plotline, and then introducing my problems with the narrative and what I consider Orientalist about it. Afterwards, I will briefly examine the Orientalism found within certain job quests. I have mentioned these before, but all jobs have unique questlines up until level 70, after which the questlines get merged into category-specific questlines instead. This essentially means that there are more questlines around *Stormblood* and fewer after. Of particular interest is the Samurai questline, as this job was introduced with *Stormblood* and therefore contains plots revolving around Kugane, the aforementioned crafting jobs, as well as the *Astrologian* questline which also includes a cultural exchange.

After my examination of the narrative Orientalism, I will examine the representation of Asian subjects, characters and objects alike, through text and image. This examination will include a look at descriptions of "Oriental" furniture, the way the main Japanese-themed job, Samurai, is structured, and a key figure in *Stormblood* named Yotsuyu. I have chosen these particular case studies as Yotsuyu is a prime example of Orientalist depictions of Japanese women, and the samurai, in contrast, is a prominent romanticised male Japanese figure. The samurai in particular is of interest as a neo-traditional figurehead; they had not always been seen as the honourable vagabonds they are made out to be today. The concept of *bushidō*, the chivalrous moral code of samurai, is a relatively modern and ahistorical invented concept based loosely on various disconnected and unrelated samurai ideals.[8] The fact that the samurai has become such

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[7] A questline is a storyline that consists of multiple linked quests; a quest, in video games, is a task the player is given that usually furthers the plot in some way. For example, a player may be asked to speak to a certain NPC (non-player character, characters not controlled by players made by the video game developers), after which said NPC will tell them about themselves.

[8] Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai*, chap. Before Bushidō: Considering Samurai Thought and Identity.

an important figure in Japanese representation is ironic considering the heavy anti-samurai sentiments of the Meiji era.[9]

Overall, I am planning to spend more time on the Japanese and East-Asian side of Orientalism, but I also wish to include the South East Asian and Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) elements briefly if possible, as they help further contextualise the Orientalist framework the game employs, even if just to point out the pattern of carelessness of its developers and localisers. I will attempt to look at the Japanese versions of items as well, to see whether or not the same Orientalist framing persists in Japanese or whether it's a localisation issue only.

Beyond this, I will naturally also be using academic sources such as writings on Orientalism, soft power, and video games. I will start my thesis off with a literature review of relevant academic writings, starting with an introduction to the concept of Orientalism, the context which it was originally intended for, and the context to which I will apply it. Most of my additional literary sources will be on soft power, Orientalism, and video games, especially in Asian contexts as this is my field of expertise. My literature review section will, all in all, include a discussion on key concepts, and how they tie into my thesis statement.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Orientalism

At the heart of my thesis lies the issue of Orientalism, a term I've used without much explanation given most have a vague concept of it. But what exactly is Orientalism, why is it a problem, and how has the discourse around it evolved throughout the years? This is a difficult question to answer because, in truth, there is no singular definition of Orientalism. It is both a system of ever-changing historical dynamics, a field to be studied, and a complex set of ideologies about an imagined space named "the Orient". This imagined area as well is defined differently by different people. In 1978, Edward Said released his highly influential work, *Orientalism*, in which he criticised the contemporary studies of this imagined Orient as built on xenophobic prejudice founded on a legacy of imperialism.[10] Now, it must be noted that as a literati, Said focused mostly on the literary side of Orientalism, and with his background as an Arab Palestinian living in America naturally felt much more inclined to comment on anti-SWANA sentiment. Within *Orientalism*, he has also briefly touched upon the way modern media reinforces stereotypes and contributes to this Orientalised view of the Other, therefore arguing that Orientalism is not merely an issue of academia.[11] Arif Dirlik adds that Orientalism is not merely proof of Western domination, it is also an intellectual tool through which this domination is achieved.[12]

In her examination of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Kimiko Akita applies Said's concept of Orientalism to said Western hit film and further connects Said's mostly SWANA-oriented concept to East Asian contexts.[13] Akita further explains how Orientalist depictions aim to come off as detached and objective, therein appealing to the Western viewer with their sense of "authenticity". Naturally, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is an American-made product and is therefore different from *Final Fantasy XIV* which is a hybrid yet predominantly Japanese product. This is where the concept of self-Orientalism comes into play; as mentioned before, the Orient must adapt to the views of the

[9] Ibid.
[10] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*.
[11] Edward W. Said, First Vintage books edition:26–27.
[12] Dirlik, 'Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism'.
[13] Akita, 'Orientalism and the Binary of Fact and Fiction in Memoirs of a Geisha'.

West if it is to claim the power within the Orientalist framework. Said argued that Orientalism is upheld by a power dynamic that forces the Other to adapt Western ways of seeing to assimilate and obtain its own power, and I find that there are few better examples of this principle than Japan.

Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska examined Said's theory, and brought an overlooked point to light; namely that Orientalism doesn't purely consist of Western dominance, but also Eastern complicity, especially in the case of East Asia.[14] As mentioned in their writings, Asian elite scholars would visit Western academic institutes and return having internalised concepts about the exotic and mystic self, giving birth to an Orientalism-fueled nationalism. As they point out, though the imperialist-colonialist contact zones of the 1800s have had a noticeable impact upon formerly colonised areas, it must also be said that these pre-contact states were not utopian, and there are massive differences between Eastern states; Japan, again, was never actually under Western rule, but does feel the lasting impacts of cultural colonialism and was also unique in its World War II promotion of Pan-Asianism. Pan-Asianism in particular is a good example of what Burke and Prochaska mentioned; an Eastern country internalises messages of the romanticised Orient and uses them to fuel nationalist thinking. This is the goal; romanticisation is a powerful tool for domination. As written by Jennifer L. Hargrave, romantic depictions of the East reaffirms the reason for imperialist desires; it objectifies the Oriental subject and justifies the desire to conquer by rendering the subject appealing in ways one cannot find within the Self-state.[15]

The terms re-Orientalism and self-Orientalism have both been coined in the wake of *Orientalism*, with both referring to the way Eastern nations may reinforce Orientalism in constructing their own image, though I will be using the term self-Orientalism here as it is, in my experience, the more commonly used term. This self-Orientalism is explicitly utilised as a tool to reject the colonial by attempting to craft a superior, "cultured" identity distinct from the West which is only concerned with Euro-American standards of "modernity".[16] Naturally, this is also an oversimplification of Western cultural imperialism, and so we easily veer into the territory of Occidentalism; a lesser-studied concept in which the non-West ideologically stereotypes the West in return.[17]

Plenty has been written to expand on or correct Said's initial theorem. Scholars like Wael B. Hallaq have argued that Orientalism itself is only a part of the power structure that shapes othering and that Said in particular has largely neglected the historical dynamics at play involving Orientalism, and called for a complete re-conceptualisation and self-examination of concepts such as modernity and history.[18] Other scholars such as Meyda Yeğenoğlu, who provides a feminist reading of Orientalism, critiques Said's limited view of Orientalism as a purely "ideological supplement", once more pointing out his limitations as a professor of literature.[19] Yeğenoğlu dissects Said's original concepts of latent and manifest Orientalism;[20] subconscious and conscious expressions of Orientalism. She explains that this dichotomy ignores the fact that the conscious and subconscious often go hand in hand, as is the case with the fetishisation of the Oriental subject. Furthermore, she too points out that colonial and imperialist effect has been largely homogenised despite there being stark differences in the

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[14] Burke III and Prochaska, 'Orientalism: From Postcolonial Theory to World History'.
[15] Hargrave, 'Romanticizing the Chinese Landscape'.
[16] Yan and Santos, '"CHINA, FOREVER"'.
[17] Chen, *Occidentalism : A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*.
[18] Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*.
[19] Yeğenoğlu, 'Mapping the Field of Colonial Discourse'.
[20] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Vintage books edition:206.

legacies they leave behind depending on place and time; one such example is the French colonial rule based on concepts of egalitarianism vis-à-vis the British colonial rule based on views of superiority.[21]

In more recent years, scholars such as Waïl S. Hassan have started applying newer concepts such as queer theory to case studies of Orientalist critique, with Hassan examining queer Arab American fiction and their intersectionality; Orientalism and queerness, even in a context not revolving around homosexuality, are inherently linked.[22] This is no surprise, however, considering the latent Orientalism discussed by Said and expanded on by Yeğenoğlu and others; there is a fascination with the Other that borders (and often falls right into) a sexual fascination. If we understand queer theory as a lens through which we attempt to deconstruct typical gendered and sexual binaries, we can also argue that Orientalism in itself is an expression of the queer Other. That is to say, the processes of Orientalism that derive from the objectification and romanticisation of the Other can only exist through this othering; through queerness. Potentially, applying queer theory more thoroughly would aid us in further deconstructing the sexual dynamics of and desire for Orientalism. To connect this back to the main subject of my thesis, it could help answer a more general question of *why* so many international players are drawn to Japanese games like *Final Fantasy XIV*.

Stuart Hall poses questions as to why othering and difference matter in discursive. Not only is othering used linguistically to define through difference (especially in cases of imagined binaries, where the binary is never quite equal), but it is also used to construct the self through contact zones with the Other.[23] I find that this applies well to the case of self-Orientalism, in which the Self crafts its own identity through internalising and building off ideas imposed by the Other. These strategies of identity crafting echo throughout history, with examples such as 17th-century Japanese world maps, and prints that included a stereotypical roster of worldly peoples with Japan as the "normal" and its nearby neighbours as elevated.[24] In these historical examinations of Japanese self-identification, juxtaposition with the Other is inherently tied to identity, and the sudden re-introduction of the Other forced Japan to consider itself as a nation, formulating its own boundaries and qualities.[25]

Popular Japanese Culture

These prior examinations and critiques of Orientalism have largely focused on the SWANA region, but I will argue that it applies to Japan as well. I have already explained how Orientalism can lead to nationalism in the case of Japan, but in the modern era, the Japanese government has decided upon a much more blatantly self-Orientalist method of re-branding and nationalism. Enter the concept of "Cool Japan". Media is one of the most successful exports of modern-day Japan, both in terms of finances and in terms of soft power. Joseph Nye popularised the term soft power in 1990, when he explained that soft power is a way to obtain influence through indirect means.[26] Though the concept is, just like Orientalism, subject to much scrutiny and further development, it is particularly relevant in the case of Japan as *Cool Japan* is one of the most influential global movements; even if the concept itself isn't universally known, most people globally have at least heard of some form of anime, manga, and/or Japanese video games. Most

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[21] Yeğenoğlu, 'Mapping the Field of Colonial Discourse', 34.
[22] Hassan, 'Queering Orientalism'.
[23] Hall, *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 234–38.
[24] Toby, *Engaging the Other*, 83–93.
[25] Toby, 329–33.
[26] Nye, 'Soft Power'.

people have at least heard of *Pokémon* or *Hello Kitty*, although the association with Japan may be diminished due to their massive popularity essentially normalising them within the receiving culture, in addition to the localisation popular icons such as these receive (for example, *Pokémon*'s protagonist Ash Ketchum, who is called Satoshi in the original Japanese version of the show).

The goals of soft power may not always be easily summarised, but it cannot be understated how important image is in the increasingly globalising world. Positive image and association drive tourism and the desire to obtain Japanese objects, it helps establish positive political connections, and it helps a nation plant its roots in other nations; the Japan Foundation, responsible for the promotion of the Japanese language and culture, promotes a plethora of international products such as international exchanges and Japanese speech contests.[27] The official *Cool Japan Fund* recently invested US$30 million to support anime licensing in North America.[28] Japanese aesthetics have been popularised globally, and a large part of this is intentional self-infantilisation that aims to obfuscate larger concerns with the country's political systems.[29] For one, despite often being viewed as a beacon of progress (as far as the Other goes), Japan still has not legalised same-gender marriage.

This strategy has been largely effective; international *otaku* (in international contexts often used to describe fans of Japanese media and other things) communities are rife with discourse on how Japan is simply Other somehow. This does not merely show in the way that international *otaku* treat Japan as an apolitical media haven, but also in cases such as media discourse. When racial representation or the sexualisation of underaged characters in Japanese media is criticised, critics are often met with agitated claims that Japan is different, that it is a nation comprised of people that don't understand "social justice", and that any hurt caused is unintentional and should be disregarded. The same applies to issues of Orientalism; as mentioned before, when problematic narratives and items within *Final Fantasy XIV* are criticised, the critique is often hand-waved away by claiming that not a single soul in megacorporation *Square Enix* knows any better. These claims of an ignorant, isolated Japan not only largely ring untrue (as from personal experience, many average Japanese citizens know at least some things regarding these subjects), but I have also wondered if they are rooted in the Dejima-era image of isolationist Japan.

An article by Koichi Iwabuchi points out Japan's complicity in what he calls this "Oriental Orientalism", in which Japan repurposes the West for its own benefit, becoming an active rather than a passive player in the process of othering.[30] He too argues that Self and Other as concepts aren't dichotomies, but rather a looping dynamic that feeds into each other.[31] There is an argument to be made for the idea that this brand of Orientalism is so powerful it moves beyond self-Orientalism and becomes its own brand of Japanese Orientalism; concerned with the relationship between Japanese Self and Other, in which writers such as Lee Yountaek hypothesise that Japanese Orientalism permits more agency to the Other,[32] something that would make sense considering its use of the West and the Asian Other. Another factor that might be relevant is Japan's treatment of other Asian countries, such as is the case in Iwabuchi's examination of Japanese affection towards Hong Kong. Here, Iwabuchi explains that Japan

[27] Tamaki, 'Japan Has Turned Its Culture into a Powerful Political Tool'.
[28] 'Cool Japan Fund Invests in North American Anime Group Led by Sentai Holdings'.
[29] Yano, 'Wink on Pink'.
[30] Iwabuchi, 'Complicit Exoticism: Japan and Its Other', 51–54.
[31] Iwabuchi, 78.
[32] 李, '『新しき土』と『支那の夜』にみるオリエンタリズムと日本的オリエンタリズム', 30.

projects a nostalgia on Hong Kong that relies on an Orientalist manner of identifying, wherein Japanese fans of Hong Kong popular culture feel that Japan has borrowed from the West too much, whereas Hong Kong has not.[33] In contrast, China's marketing of its pre-Western values is not seen as favourably, as Iwabuchi explains that the issue isn't getting rid of Western influence but how to co-exist with it successfully.[34] This ties into the previously used writings of Oleg Benesch on the invention of modern samurai as well; *bushidō* as a reinvented myth became popular out of a desire to cope with modernity by harkening back to tradition; the myth still serves to fuel a desire to combat the excessive Western influence of all kinds.[35]

My one problem with this is that, in the context of popular media, I find that Japan looks more favourably towards these pre-Western aesthetics than Iwabuchi suggests. Perhaps this was much less so at the time of his writings, however, there are currently plenty of Japanese franchises that embrace and even rely on selling the premodern image. Recently, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice,* a samurai-themed game made by Japanese developers, was released and did very well upon its release in both the American and Japanese markets.[36] Of course, I cannot conclusively determine whether this means Japanese gamers largely viewed *Sekiro* positively, but this generation of gamers at the very least seems more interested in feudal aesthetics than Iwabuchi hypothesised. Other premodern popular media that springs to mind are popular anime series such as *Inuyasha* and *Naruto*, although the latter sees an interesting case of modern technology combined with more traditional aesthetics.

As Michal Daliot-Bul further expands, what had once been a reaction to attain status by identifying with and against Western forces, has now evolved into a very deliberate strategy.[37] Japan still maintains its superiority over other Asian countries, although it's more subtle now in the way that it attempts to do so through cultural-intellectual superiority rather than through overtly political aims.[38] In 2009, Daliot-Bul speculated that one problem with this *Cool* strategy is the fleeting nature of trends,[39] and although Japanese productions are still doing well in 2022, new contenders like South Korea are seeing an increased presence in the (often Western) international citizen's life.

That being said, however, with the increased access that comes with globalisation, it is not necessarily the case that one cultural product will replace another, and as of right now I do not think Japan has too much to fear in the media department, though naturally, this may change at any time. On the other hand, there is also the fact that this Japanese cultural expansion has met with resistance, especially from countries formerly affected by Japanese imperialism.[40] This is especially so as figures associated with the Japanese government will still undertake politically controversial actions (such as the Yasukuni shrine visits), with Iwabuchi repeatedly pointing towards a naïve overreliance on media practice in the improvement of the Japanese image.[41]

Harkening back briefly to the topic at hand, this wilful hybridisation is important in understanding my examination of *Final Fantasy XIV*, and particularly in understanding that the framing I will be showing has to be deliberate to some degree. Scholar Koji Kobayashi did a case

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[33] Iwabuchi, 'Nostalgia for a (Different) Asian Modernity', 563–64.

[34] Iwabuchi, 568–69.

[35] Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai*, chap. Bushidō in Post-War Japan.

[36] Ramsey, 'Japanese Sales Charts'.

[37] Daliot-Bul, 'Japan Brand Strategy', 254.

[38] Daliot-Bul, 259–60.

[39] Daliot-Bul, 263.

[40] Iwabuchi, 'Cool Japan, Brand Nationalism and the Public Interest', 33–36.

[41] Iwabuchi, 'Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan', 425–27.

study on *Asics*' cross-cultural marketing of its *Onitsuka Tiger* brand, in which he concluded a manufactured authenticity was necessary for marketing to Western viewers, a process of self-Orientalisation created through collaborative efforts on the part of the Japanese and Western creatives.[42] This same concept, I argue, applies to *Final Fantasy XIV*'s teams, as the English localisation team is known for working together closely with the Japanese developers, something which is beneficial for the simultaneous release date of the Japanese and English localised versions.[43]

Chapter 2: Final Fantasy XIV's Narrative Strategies

Geopolitics

Now that I have introduced the core concepts of my thesis and the discourse revolving around them, I will begin my examination of the narrative of *Final Fantasy XIV*. Naturally, I will not be able to detail everything for the sake of brevity, and so I will be omitting parts that are not relevant.

I will start first with the story's basic geography, as it can tell us a lot. *Final Fantasy XIV* takes place on a planet much akin to ours in both structure and appearance, with five main continents inspired by the real-life ones. Othard is the continent based on much of (mainly East) Asia, with the region having strong Mongolian, Chinese, and Japanese influence. The Mongolian-inspired region is of particular significance due to a highly problematic story beat that I will explain later. This region, the Azim Steppe, is explicitly coded as Mongolian because its people live nomadic lives with yurts, and herd sheep. Some NPCs can be seen playing the morin khuur, and terms such as khan/khagan are frequently used. Southeast Asian and Central Asian cultures are represented on the continent Ilsabard through its major island Thavnair. This continent also hosts the Russo-Roman-inspired imperial force and main antagonist, Garlemand. I will also touch more on this later. Aldenard is host to the Eorzea, the player's starting region. Eorzea is comprised of five nations, of which one was colonised by the Garlean Empire twenty years before the start of the game.

The China-inspired region of Yanxia is an odd case; though its name, objects, and architecture (the abundance of moon gates for example) suggest China, its important named locations are all Japanese. Within Yanxia one finds places such as Doma, Namai, and the Gensui Chain; alongside this, the four auspicious beasts of Asian mythos make an appearance in several side stories, and although they all reside in Yanxia, they are all addressed by their Japanese names (Genbu, Suzaku, Byakko, Seiryu). The casual conflation of Chinese and Japanese culture and place is interesting considering the two countries' tense real-life relationship, with Japan often acknowledging China as its (now out-of-style) cultural predecessor. Doma was abandoned and ruined after the Garlean Empire conquered it, which yet again poses an interesting question of representation; naturally it is a fantasy world in which the cultural inspiration is not meant to directly parallel real-life history, but this avoidance of that history may be problematic in and of itself. What does it mean to portray a Japanese kingdom within China colonised by Greek Russia? Is the issue here just the fact that Japan was never actually colonised by Western forces, or the fact that this framing incorporates Japan into Chinese (adjacent) colonial suffering? Would it not have been more appropriate for Doma to instead be a fantasy Hong Kong, or even Taiwan?

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[42] Kobayashi, Jackson, and Sam, 'Globalization, Creative Alliance and Self-Orientalism', 168.
[43] Square Enix Co., Ltd., 'FINAL FANTASY XIV Localization Team Interview! Part 1 | TOPICS'.

Indeed, my problem here is that the narrative's emphasis on the liberation of Doma as a key strategy to the liberation of Ala Mhigo seems to frame a portion of fantasy Japan as the main victim of Western imperial forces. This is, of course, very much not true to real life. Again, it can be argued that the geopolitics of the game do not need to reflect real life, and I will agree—however, the fact of the matter is that when real-life cultures are referenced, this will inevitably bring about comparisons to real life. Again, a large part of *Stormblood* is dedicated to the oppression of its version of the Japanese people.

But Doma isn't the only representation of Japan in the game. Off the coast of Othard is yet another island that seems distinctly familiar if we look at its shape.

Figure 1. A screenshot of a partial map of Othard, taken from the *Final Fantasy* Wiki.[44]

The region obscured by clouds, Garlean-controlled Dalmasca, is mentioned in yet more side content after finishing the *Stormblood* MSQ, where it is mentioned the Dalmascans have also started rebelling against the Garlean Empire. The region is a reference to an older *Final Fantasy* location, in which the kingdom draws heavily upon Ottoman culture.

But back to the other Japan; the archipelago resembling a very oversized Japan is called Hingashi. Hingashi is explicitly said to be ruled by a *bakufu*, and it is currently undergoing *sakoku* with the exception being the port city of Kugane. As you'll see if you look closer, there is also a distinctly snowy mountain named Daitenzan in-game. Indeed, it is clear that this is meant to be closer to the real Japan sociopolitically—but then what of Doma? Is Doma meant to be a minor community of Hingan immigrants?

No, without a doubt, Doma is *also* meant to be the "real" Japan. Though Hingashi is Japan in all of its visible markers, Doma is the location that is truly important to the narrative; it is the place the samurai and the ninja hail from and the place true liberation starts. When we examine the history of Doma more closely, we stumble upon another problem; according to Doman lore, its founder Ganen Rijin, a Japanese-coded man, is the one who supposedly united all of Yanxia. This

44 RommyRayne, 'Othard.Jpg'.

makes the composition of Yanxia even more puzzling; it is Japan clad in a vague body of Chineseness. To which end? This is something that I am unclear on, however, it is possible the writers wanted to have it both ways. That is to say, they wanted to depict a mysterious, isolationist Japan with Hingashi, and an open, heroic Japan through Doma. Take for example the following dialogue of an NPC when pressed for information:

> *"I see. And you are familiar with the ways of Hingashi? How we elect to stand apart and support no cause but our own? Indifferent and callous, some may call us, but pragmatism is essential if a humble island nation such as ours is to survive. But we are not fools. Complete isolation is impractical. And so Kugane is open to ijin, and we are equally hospitable to all. Or, if I must speak more plainly: Yes, I can help you. But if I do, I must also oblige the ones who ask after you."[45]*

This dialogue, originally written by Japanese developers and translated in tandem with said developers, seems to almost boast of Hingashi's isolationist practice. This seems to reflect generally favourable sentiment towards the old situation of Dejima, which is unsurprising considering the forced re-opening of Japan is generally seen as problematic even if later justified as necessary. Note the use of the word *ijin* also, a word used in the Tokugawa era to signify Westerners that has a somewhat derogatory nature.

But here we return to that issue of problematic representation. While China has not exactly been heralded as a liberator either, this double representation of Japan as both victim-turned-saviour and coldly indifferent seems almost like stolen valour in a way. Japan *must* be depicted positively, and since the actual Japan drawn upon is not like that, there must be a new type of Japanese-ness made through other means. As Stuart Hall explained, representation is the active selection of presentation rather than a neutral presentation of reality.[46] If nothing else, this is an issue of image; I can understand that a Japanese writer would not want to depict their own people as completely uncaring of the player character and their cause, after all.

Liberating Ala Mhigo

The base game story of *Final Fantasy XIV*, *A Realm Reborn*, has the player fighting off the Garlean Empire's attempts at conquering yet three more of Eorzea's major states. Its first expansion, *Heavensward*, sees the player solve a rather typical fantasy war between a fantasy version of catholic France and dragons, after which the four states form an alliance to oppose the Garlean threat. Ala Mhigan refugees, tired of the other major states doing nothing to help retake their home, conspire together to stage an Eorzean attack on Garlean property, a move that works as the Garlean Empire declares war upon the Eorzean forces.

As the player and their friends start on their mission to gather forces to liberate Ala Mhigo, the characters devise a plan that, in my opinion, is contrived and somewhat baffling. They intend to aid the rebellions in the East in order to force the Garlean forces into being spread thin, however with the resistance being mostly comprised of the player, their friends, and a few small groups here and there, this does not play out in that manner, and the strategy is almost immediately abandoned in favour is a general sentiment pro liberating Doma for the sake of.

The player arrives in Kugane first, as it is directly west of Eorzea. They are then greeted by Hancock, a white man in kimono who works for some dubious Eorzean political figures.

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[45] Square Enix Business Division 5, *Final Fantasy XIV*, chap. A Good Samurai Is Hard to Find.
[46] Hall, *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

Hancocks acts as the tour guide for Kugane, introducing the player and their friends to various Japanese facilities. Hancock is an interesting figure in the context of a hybrid product; who is he meant to appeal to? Note various lines of his;

> *"One is compelled to talk in circles around everything here, and one finds oneself longing for the invigoratingly candid speech of the Ul'dahn markets…"[47]*

> *"The Sekiseigumi punish breaches of the peace quite severely. I have seen foreigners permanently exiled for a single violation—though, to be fair, this is not common. More often than not, they are executed on the spot."[48]*

> *"Hold on a moment! You mean to tell me the ijin they arrested the other day was Gosetsu? Oh, had I but known! If he is in the custody of the Sekiseigumi, I need only see to it that the requisite funds find their way into the right official's hands, and your friend will walk free."[49]*

From Hancock's dialogue, we can gleam several things. Firstly, Hingashi is dripping with Tokugawa-era allegories, including the repeated mentions of rampant corruption. Secondly, the way he describes is much akin to a Western viewer indeed—he speaks like an expert, but simultaneously others the Hingan people. What is curious about his presence, to me, is the fact that actual Hingan people are minor side characters; Hancock, a foreigner, is the one who introduces us to all manners of Asia. Note also the mention of the Sekiseigumi, an obvious reference to the Shinsengumi, a *bakufu* era special police force made after the forced reopening of Japan to the West.

I question the intent of this in the narrative in the context of *Final Fantasy XIV* as a hybrid cultural product. For a Japanese audience, it may make sense that a foreigner would introduce them to their own culture with such excitement, and they may feel that it is more appealing to have someone not from your culture speak of it. Still, the trouble here is that Hancock also seems quite critical of Kugane, so perhaps instead it is an issue of a foreigner criticising one's country coming off as less harsh and direct. Yet what of the non-Japanese audience? Perhaps for them, the intent is to be able to relate to the foreign expert. This wouldn't be unusual; tour guides for overseas trips are frequently led by people not of the destination, and many people, in general, prefer listening to someone from a familiar background explain things to them.

As Chris Goto-Jones put it, the power of video games is that it lets us visit a "Digital Asia" that is meant to be lived in and interacted with.[50]

Nevertheless, the player moves on to cross the Ruby Sea in order to get to Doma. The Ruby Sea is interesting as it doesn't necessarily have any clear parallels to any specific culture, although naturally all the locations within are coded as Japanese, in particular the underwater village that is reminiscent of Japanese folklore, in particular *Ryuuguujou*, a mythical undersea palace ruled by dragon kami. The inhabitants of this village are all dragon-like fantasy creatures, which strengthens that connection. The area, Sui-no-Sato, also contains a large palace like in the tales of *Ryuuguujou*.

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[47] Square Enix Business Division 5, *Final Fantasy XIV*, chap. The Man from Ul'dah.
[48] Square Enix Business Division 5, chap. Where the Streets Are Paved with Koban.
[49] Square Enix Business Division 5, chap. Making the Catfish Sing.
[50] Goto-Jones, 'Playing with Being in Digital Asia', 39.

Becoming the Benevolent Coloniser

After the player reaches Doma, they find the people largely seem uninspired to rise up, worn down by two decades of forced labour. To inspire them into taking up arms, the player decides to find Hien, the son of the late former ruler of Doma, who had gone into hiding after a failed uprising. Hien agrees to lead his people, but says he needs an army, and here comes one of the other major problems with *Stormblood*. Hien proposes to the player that they unify the Steppe tribes, and, worded quite nicely, strongarm them into fighting on the Domans' behalf. The player and Hien accomplish this by allying themselves with an underdog tribe, entering the sacred ceremonial battle of the Steppe that determines its leader, and winning said battle with the express purpose of forcing all of the tribes into war.

The parallels to ideas of Pan-Asianism seem troubling to me. Perhaps it is a bit of a reach to some, but the idea of a Japanese emperor-adjacent figure taking control of all of fantasy Mongolia by force and then forcing them into winning a war against the Western evils sounds strikingly familiar. Even if he is really nice about it and promises to relinquish control back to the underdog tribe later, we only know that he makes good on this promise because he is a heroic video game character. I must point out, however, that this plan falls back on a common pitfall of colonial ideas of rule that Souvik Mukherjee pointed out;[51] Hien is destined to be the future ruler of Doma again because of his blood, and the game never once considers any alternatives to that emperor-allegory imperialism.

What rights do Hien and the player have to enter this sacred cultural battle? Especially considering both are said to be exceptional fighters; certainly, the Steppe people are by no means weak, but the player character, in particular, has slain multiple godlike figures at this point; surely this isn't entirely fair or ethical in the slightest? Hien does the fantasy equivalent of employing a super weapon to win a title he had no claim to in the first place in order to pursue his own political goals. And certainly, in war sometimes the ends justify the means and again, the story of *Stormblood* isn't a direct parallel, but one can find problematic thought processes behind this as this move (the overtaking of the Steppe) goes entirely uncriticised by both the characters and the narrative. As Byron J. Kimball puts it, the power of games is asking the player to align themselves with the narrative and its ideals, [52] and this is doubly so in the case of a game like *Final Fantasy XIV* where the player *is* the main character.

Intent-wise, I will presume that the narrative intends to show that outside help is necessary sometimes, especially outside help by those who have not known crushing defeat like the Steppe people… but where does this idea come from? To my knowledge, deploying troops of people supposedly untouched by colonisation has never been a popular strategy; on the contrary, it tends to be the subjugated subject that is forced to fight for its oppressor in war. Do the writers of *Stormblood* intend to say that recruiting a relatively untouched nation would've been good for keeping high spirits in wartime? But then, we run into another problem.

Is there such a thing as a country entirely untouched by colonisation? When we rule out cultural imperialism, we naturally have Japan as a contender, but Mongolia is certainly a more complex nation considering its former Qing rulers. Do oppressed people *need* the help of those who do not know serious defeat? Do such people even exist? And what does it mean when this help isn't entirely given voluntarily? Of course, I do not mean to say that oppressed people are entirely wrong to go through more extreme channels in their fight for liberation, but this scenario does

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[51] Mukherjee, 'Playing Subaltern', 517.

[52] Kimball, 'The Gerudo Problem'.

not entirely work in the case of fantasy Japan forcing fantasy Mongolia to fight its battles, especially considering Japan did attempt to invade Mongolia in the 1930s after it took Manchuria. In *Stormblood*, the Steppe tribes feel like little more than tools to the other characters.

As Laurence Herfs mentioned in his thesis on Zelda's racial dynamics, Japan has had a complex identity due to its experience with Western colonisation and colonising Asia in return, and this is reflected in how the non-Japanese Asians are entirely othered.[53] The Steppe people aren't just other Asians, they're Xaela; humanoids with dragon-like features, covered in dark scales, horns, and a lizard tail. In contrast to the Hyurs of Doma and Hingashi—all regular humans—the marginalised Asian tribes are rendered literally not human. Japan's complex colonised-coloniser structure thus leaves its mark on the rest of "inferior" Asia again.

Either way, after accomplishing their mission, Hien, the player, and the Steppe tribes retake Doma by flooding the castle, and then the player heads back to focus on Ala Mhigo instead. Most of what happens from here on out is more fighting until Ala Mhigo is finally liberated. Lyse, the player's ally and newly made Ala Mhigan resistance leader, spends much of her time judging other Ala Mhigans for not doing enough to rise up against their oppressors. Lyse is a blonde, light-skinned and blue-eyed character, distinctly different from other Ala Mhigans who are largely people of darker complexions. Lyse grew up outside of Ala Mhigo, and is disappointed to see that the will to fight has literally been beaten out of her people. This alone would not be a problem; it makes for an interesting enough conflict between diaspora and mainland citizens. The problem arises because the narrative proves her right; once the revolution gets going, characters that formerly admonished her for her arrogance apologise to her. Fighting their way through *did* work, and there is no acknowledgement that the only reason it worked is that the player, a random person entirely unconcerned with the Ala Mhigans before this, happens to have an extraordinary amount of strength.

One of the major problems I have with *Stormblood* is that for the amount of focus there is on Doma, Ala Mhigo feels so glossed over in comparison to the point that the emphasis on Doma starts to feel like there must be some sort of nationalist spirit behind it. On top of this, despite Doma and Hingashi's highly specific cultural references, Ala Mhigo is a bit of a blur. As mentioned before, it is vaguely inspired by Turkey... but it also contains Indian snake people, and makes sure to keep its character names as un-ethnic as possible, with names such as Curtis, Conrad, Ilberd, and a few more ethnic but unplaceable names such as Meffrid. In comparison to names such as Hien, Asahi, and Sakyo, it is clear that the developers were much more concerned with putting as much of Japan as possible in the story, mostly leaving Ala Mhigo a generic and unspecific oppressed nation. I have not mentioned Ala Mhigo as a location before, because there is no real Ala Mhigo. The player is able to visit an introductory few streets that supposedly precede the actual city-state, but is never actually able to visit this supposedly important location.

The representation of South Asian cultures in all of *Final Fantasy XIV* is a mixed bag. Many of the South Asian-coded people, in particular, are quite literally beasts; *Stormblood* features an evil tribe of snake people in desi garb that summon a version of Lakshmi. Although beast tribes have recently been humanised in the game's story, for much of the game beast tribes were just that; tribes of barely sentient creatures. A tribe of Indian snake people very much feeds into Orientalist, racial caricatures. There is an evil and a good version of these snake people, named the Ananta—a word denoting infinity and representative of Hindu creator deity Vishnu, who

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[53] Herfs, 'Dreams of the Japanese', 50–52.

was often depicted with the mythical snake Shesha—and the evil ones are labelled with names from the Indian caste system, such as the "brahmin Ananta".

The player character is meant to be seen as devoid of race, but mostly resembles a white Euroamerican. Though Final Fantasy XIV indeed allows players to make their own characters, the default representation of the player in official promotional material is always a white man, and both Ala Mhigo, Hingashi, and Doma treat the player as if they've scarcely heard of the place. Indeed, it is clear the main character, at the very least, is not meant to be from the Orient, and so the taking of the Steppes, the white saviourism already displayed by Lyse's existence as a white woman leading a mostly brown people, all of this representation becomes more troubling when one realises there is no such thing as race-neutral. With an implied Japanese audience, there is also the troubling connotation that this race-neutral player allows the Japanese player to essentially perform feats of colonialism through a Western body.[54]

The Trailer

Before the release of *Stormblood*, a trailer was released in order to build excitement for the expansion. In comparison to the trailers of the base game and the other three expansions, however, *Stormblood*'s trailer is notably devoid of narrative. Whereas the other trailers all hint at upcoming story beats and events, *Stormblood*'s trailer is more concerned with looking cool. The first half of the video sees the player and one of the NPCs perform martial arts against each other, both using the typical actions and animations of Monks, an in-game job that has its origins as soldiers in the former Ala Mhigan military.

Figure 2. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 2:04*.*[55]

The video then shows the world map, briefly showing the underwater village, and then moving to Kugane. There, imperial soldiers dressed in *sengoku* era-inspired clothing are seen chasing after the player, who is now dressed in the clothes of a samurai. The player then displays a

[54] Martin, 'Race, Colonial History and National Identity: Resident Evil 5 as a Japanese Game', 575–78.
[55] FINAL FANTASY XIV, *FINAL FANTASY XIV*.

typically "cool" move seen in many popular depictions of samurai; in a swift move, he cuts up bullets and everything behind him breaks due to the force of his sword strike. Again, this elevated coolness of the samurai further aids the coolification of Japan.

Figure 3. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 3:09.[56]

Figure 4. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 3:27.[57]

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[56] FINAL FANTASY XIV.
[57] FINAL FANTASY XIV.

Figure 5. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 3:35.[58]

The scene then moves on to show us more of Kugane, clearly to try to entice the viewer into thinking how impressive the city is; how exciting it is going to be to visit Japan finally.

Figure 6. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 3:57.[59]

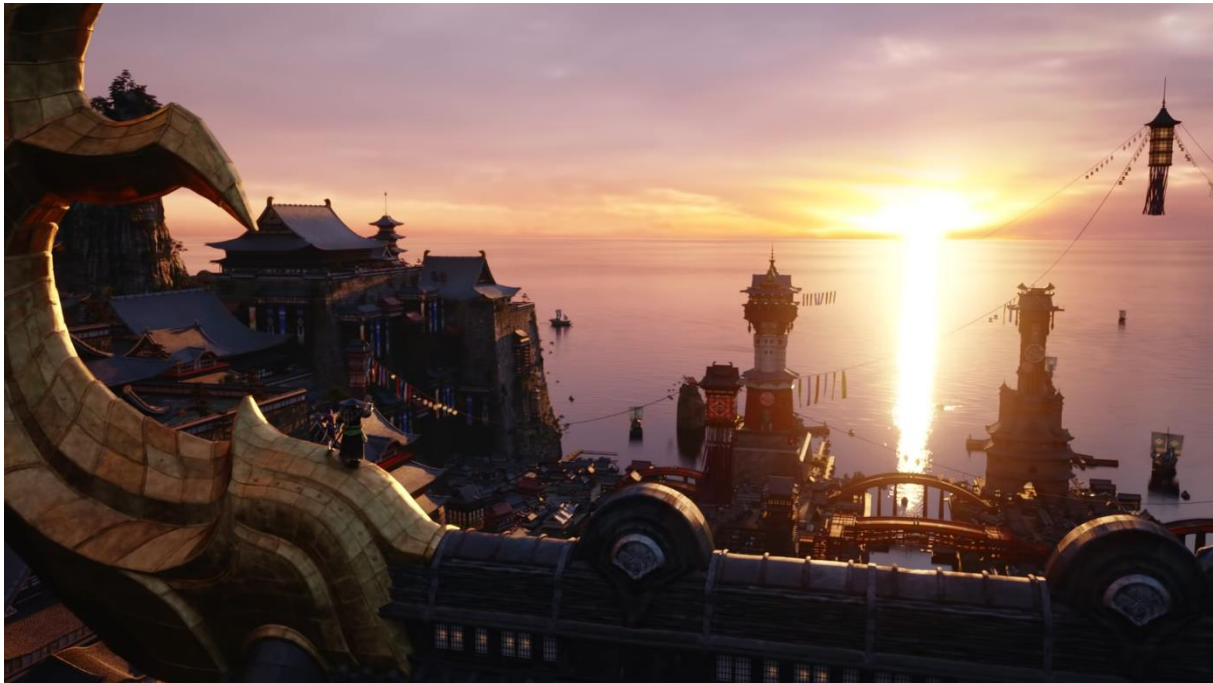[58] FINAL FANTASY XIV.
[59] FINAL FANTASY XIV.

Figure 7. Screenshot from *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Stormblood Trailer*, timestamp 4:19.[60]

Again, it is striking that while the other trailers mostly focus on narrative, this trailer is purely showing off martial arts and the Japan surrogate. It sends the message that the developers thought that the appearance of Japan and samurai alone (as this was when it was first announced the job would be added to the game) was all they had to say to entice players into buying the expansion. Again, Ala Mhigo is mostly cast aside here; even though the "Ala Mhigan" portion contains a roughly equal amount of screen time, all we see are small portions of the refugee camp as a backdrop to the martial arts. This once more falls into line with the fact that Japan is alleviated here in favour of other parts of the "Orient", especially since, as mentioned before, we do not actually get to visit Ala Mhigo. Though some NPCs that are actually from Hingashi and Doma are briefly seen at the end of the trailer, their role in the story is relatively minor, and the white-coded player remains the one to show off the new Japanese-themed jobs and aesthetics, most certainly encouraging (white) Western players to embrace Japanese-ness.

Chapter 3: Final Fantasy XIV's Representation of Characters and Objects in Text and Image

Yotsuyu: A Case Study

A character I have omitted thus far is Yotsuyu goe Brutus, a woman of Doman origin who is now working for the Garlean Empire, as evident by her Roman-esque title surname. Yotsuyu was made acting imperial viceroy of Doma due to her extreme hatred for her own people, which was brought about by a tragic past. Yotsuyu's parents died when she was young and her abusive aunt and uncle adopted her. They married her off to an abusive man, and after his death sold her to a brothel to settle his debts. This brothel narrative is quite familiar to the common tales of Edo's red-light district, the Yoshiwara. Yotsuyu climbed her way to the top of the courtesan rankings,

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[60] FINAL FANTASY XIV.

after which she was recruited by the crown prince of the Garlean Empire after a failed attempt at seducing him for Doman resistance forces.

Figure 8. Render of Yotsuyu goe Brutus from the *Final Fantasy* Wiki.[61]

Yotsuyu most notably still is coded as a sex worker, given her pipe, hair ornaments, off-shoulder robe, and high geta. Though perhaps not recognisable by everyone, those who are somewhat familiar with Japanese culture should be able to at least get the idea of what they were going for in this design, considering brothel women appear in many forms of media. Yotsuyu's depiction gives me mixed feelings. On one hand, she *is* an evil sex worker, a trope that is overused to demonise women. On the other hand, one can argue that she is written with enough nuance and that being unwillingly sold into the sex industry *was* common for the Yoshiwara's brothel women.

Getting back to the matter at hand, however, is how Yotsuyu relates to Orientalism. Though it is much less overt than my prior narrative issues, I would argue that her design does appeal to the Orientalist fantasy of the exotic Oriental woman. Consider the following; Yotsuyu was once forced to be a sex worker, this is true, so then surely once freed she wouldn't necessarily want to run around in the very garb reminiscent of the days that traumatised her further? What is the purpose of this? Certainly, it is possible to argue for her way of dressing as a sort of irony, but we

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[61] MrAceAttorney, 'Yotsuyu Brutus'.

must consider here that no matter how well-written a character is, they don't have true agency; there is always an author, designer, etc. It seems a bit odd that the woman traumatised by sex work would deliberately want to parade around in overt sex worker fashion. Therefore, I would argue that this design is Orientalist in nature—it appeals more to the Oriental fantasy than it is concerned about fitting into the narrative.

One thing that I do appreciate about her portrayal is the nuance of a countryman turning against her own people because of their cruel indifference. Indeed, Yotsuyu's life does not portray the Domans favourably as the Domans in her life were shown to turn a blind eye—and naturally, the existence of a brothel built on coercion itself is not a good a thing. It aids in portraying Doma as an imperfect country that, despite its faults, still deserves liberation… but again, we come back to my question of parallels; if Doma is Japan, then what does this message really say? Is this a message that works when conveyed through the sociopolitical body of a nation that has never actually been fully colonised? Is this a message about Japan rebelling against the cultural imperialism of the West? And once more, though inspiration does not necessitate direct reproduction of real-life events and dynamics, when the inspiration is so heavy as to make your fictional nation undoubtedly one real-life nation in its existence, it becomes impossible to fully consider it pure fiction wholly separate from the nation it draws upon.

Yotsuyu attempts to reclaim her bodily autonomy by making her people suffer, but ultimately fails to be in control of herself as a colonial subject. Though she's tried to join her oppressors, she ultimately meets her end by being set up and forced to summon a godlike deity to fight the player. Narratively, the colonial subject cannot achieve true freedom through assimilation.

Orientalism in Object

Moving away from narrative issues, I will now be looking at the objects that promote orientalism within the game. Confirming whether or not the naming of "Oriental" furniture and objects is a localisation issue or not is fairly easy, as all items are catalogued on the official *Final Fantasy XIV* website with their in-game description and other relevant information. For convenience's sake, I will be citing the European English page, as the descriptions are the same. Changing the language used on this website only requires a single click. From looking over several randomly selected pieces, we can ascertain with certainty that this is, in fact, not just a localisation issue, but an issue that exists within the original text. Below I have provided a table with English and Japanese versions of all objects that include the word "Oriental" in their name, taken from the *Eorzea Database*, a compendium of in-game items provided by the official *Final Fantasy XIV* website.

Table 1: English and Japanese Names of "Oriental" Objects

English Name[62]	Japanese Name[63]
Oriental Soy Sauce	醤油 *shouyu*
Oriental Miso Paste	味噌 *miso*
Oriental Grass Tuft	ドマグラスの苗 *doma gurasu no nae*
Oriental Grass Plot	ドマグラスガーデン *doma gurasu gaaden*
Oriental Snowcave	ドマ風かまくら *domafuu kamakura*

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[62] Square Enix Ltd., 'Eorzea Database'.

[63] Square Enix Co., Ltd., 'エオルゼアデータベース'.

Oriental Wood Bridge	オリエンタルウッドブリッジ *orientaru uddo burijji*
Oriental Deck	オリエンタルベランダ *orientaru beranda*
Oriental Wooden Deck	オリエンタルウッドデッキ *orientaru uddo dekki*
Oriental Striking Dummy	オリエンタルダミー *orientaru damii*
Oriental Partition	フスマパーティション *fusuma paatishon*
Oriental Bathtub	オリエンタル・バスタブ *orientaru basutabu*
Indoor Oriental Garden	東方風室内庭園 *touhoufuu shitsunai teien*
Indoor Oriental Waterfall	オリエンタル・インドアウォーターフォール *orientaru indoa wootaafooru*
Oriental Round Table	オリエンタル・ラウンドテーブル *orientaru raundo taaburu*
Oriental Pipe Box	東方風キセル箱 *touhoufuu kiserubako*
Oriental Dressing Case	東方風化粧箱 *touhoufuu keshoubako*
Oriental Breakfast	オリエンタル・モーニングセット *orientaru mooningu setto*
Oriental Supper	オリエンタル・ディナーセット *orientaru dinaa setto*
Oriental Tea Set	オリエンタル・ティーセット *orientaru tiisetto*
Oriental Sushi Lunch	オリエンタル・ランチセット:寿司 *orientaru ranchi setto: sushi*
Oriental Soba Lunch	オリエンタル・ランチセット:蕎麦 *orientaru ranchi setto: soba*
Oriental Udon Lunch	オリエンタル・ランチセット:うどん *orientaru ranchi setto: udon*
Oriental Rice Ball Lunch	オリエンタル・ランチセット:おにぎり *orientaru ranchi setto: onigiri*
Oriental Chawan-mushi Lunch	オリエンタル・ランチセット:茶碗蒸し *orientaru ranchi setto: chawanmushi*
Oriental Orange Basket	オリエンタル・オレンジバスケット *orientaru orenji basuketto*
Jumbo Oriental Orange Basket	オリエンタル・オレンジバスケット EX *orientaru orenji basuketto EX*
Oriental Altar	オリエンタルアルター *orientaru arutaa*
Oriental Wall Scroll	オリエンタル・ウォールスクロール *orientaru uooru sukurooru*
Oriental Wind Chime	風鈴 *fuurin*
Deluxe Oriental Wind Chime	風鈴 EX *fuurin EX*

To summarise, out of the 30 objects that contain the word "Oriental" in their English names, 19 objects are also called Oriental in the Japanese version. Of the remaining 11, 3 opt to use 東方風 *touhoufuu* (far eastern style), 3 refer to Doma, and 5 are purely descriptive in nature. A Japanese search for オリエンタル *orientaru* also confirms that there are 19 objects with the word "Oriental" in their name in the Japanese version.

From this, I can conclude that, while the English version is given to adding in descriptions of "Oriental" objects where there originally were none, it is not entirely the English localisation team's responsibility, as a significant portion of the Japanese items follow the same naming convention. What is curious to me is the change from Doman object to Oriental object; there are other objects in the game that have retained the Doman descriptor in English, however, they are only armour and weapons. My assumption here is that the English localisation team wanted to keep the Japanese-inspired furnishings consistent in theme, as well as make it easier for non-Japanese players to look up these furnishings as changing them all to "Oriental" makes it easier to search for housing items by style. However, as mentioned before, intent does not absolve harmful impact, and the casual use of "Oriental" descriptions is quite concerning. Perhaps the intent was simply to find a fancier term for "Eastern"… yet the issue remains that the word "Orient" is not apolitical; it is a loaded word that has long been controversial.

When looking at the descriptions of the items, it seems that the descriptions mostly attempt to remain factual (such as mentioning that soy sauce is made by fermenting soybeans). However, certain descriptions such as food items are further described as exotic. Again, the game uncritically parrots fetishist language in its way of describing the Asian-themed products. Interestingly, the world "Oriental" is only reserved for the East Asian products, and is not used to describe anything from the SWANA or South Asian regions. Items such as "Masala Chai", and "Laghman", few as they are, do not beget the "Oriental" descriptor.

Another minor yet significant note is that Kugane got player housing before any other expansion zone. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, there are special neighbourhoods where players can buy and own an in-game house, attached to major city-states. The three base game default city-states came with these, and for a while after, only Kugane had its own special housing wards; Shirogane. Shirogane has been notoriously popular and difficult to get a plot in (as there are limited spots available), further showing the popularity of Japanese themes in the game. It was only recently in April of 2022, half a decade after *Stormblood*'s release, that the previous expansion's major city got housing wards. Again, this shows the promotion and prioritisation of Japanese things.

The Samurai

In the Samurai questline, the becomes the pupil of master samurai Musosai, who explains the history of samurai; vigilantes from Hingashi who live to bring justice to the world. Note that I will be capitalising samurai only when speaking of the in-game Job in particular. The quests see the player apprehending and fighting multiple villainous characters, after which Musosai is revealed to be gravely ill. Confronting the man, the player is told that Musosai is looking for a man who refused to commit *seppuku* after he was made responsible for his murderous pupil's crimes, and who then fled Hingashi. He then later reveals that he is actually said man, and wishes for the player to end his life. A while after the player buries Musosai, a female samurai named Makoto comes looking for Musosai and explains that she thought Musosai didn't deserve his *seppuku* sentence. Once the player follows Makoto to Kugane, they learn more about the Hingan society; it is difficult to rise beyond the class system, one that is reminiscent of the Tokugawa era class system.

What is odd about this story is that it takes a sudden change in direction; a man disillusioned with the Sekiseigumi's way of running things attempts to murder the captain of the Sekiseigumi and several sex workers, and the player is tasked with killing the man, quelling the rebellion and maintaining the status quo of a police force that we have previously been taught was highly corrupt. I do not wish to say that murder is a particularly good way of making change within a police force, but the way the storyline is crafted just so the player empathises with the cruel and corrupt system of Hingan justice is strange.

Makoto's brother is revealed to be the head traitor and also the pupil whose murder of Hingan dignitaries caused Musosai to be branded by death earlier. The questline is barely critical of this guilty-by-association system, instead focusing on Makoto's desire for revenge against her brother. She ends up killing him and becoming the new captain of the Sekiseigumi, and then everything is simply fixed. The police force is good now because all the insurgents fled and the new members were all inspired by Musosai's love for the traditional samurai pursuit of justice, but this seems odd given the fact that, again, we've been repeatedly told that the Sekiseigumi is emblematic of a wholly corrupt system. The ending of the samurai questline does not address the root of this corruption, does not explain how a supposedly minor hidden faction was the only bad seed in a police force that was deemed entirely corrupt, and seems only concerned with making this Shinsengumi allegory look cool and just.

Again, what is the purpose here? Considering the repeated negative portrayal of the Sekiseigumi, I cannot state that this is a pure tribute to the Shinsengumi, but its sudden positive portrayal of the Sekiseigumi is also far from critical. Is it more akin to a fix-it then? A story in which the Shinsengumi was not a force of an oppressive regime but rather a righteous band of heroes? Regardless of what the intent behind this portrayal is, the Sekiseigumi being a reference to the Shinsengumi is troubling, as the questline seems to entirely gloss over the problems of such a corrupt police force. The narrative is simplistic in nature; remove the bad apples and everything is good now. It seems to me that in being preoccupied with portraying anything Japanese as positive, the writers did not consider the ramifications of having the player suddenly side with a morally corrupt agent which exists as a reference to a real-life morally corrupt agent. The depiction of Japanese things as cool once more takes precedent.

Anarchy is shown as the wrong solution to problems, and instead, the message is sent that one should work from within to change the system. This is, however, an overly simplistic message to send if we consider real-life parallels. While naturally, murder is not good, anarchy and/or violence have often been how marginalised people in real life force lawmakers into change. Even if we stick to just comparisons to real-life corrupt police forces, it is a commonly accepted sentiment that one either joins the corruption or becomes disillusioned with the job. Change is certainly not as easy as the game purports it to be, and the respectability politics proposed by the game are troubling, especially considering the player and their friends do a whole lot of murdering to get what they want.

Moving briefly to job actions and names, the Samurai actions don't simply have basic skill descriptors as their name (think things such as "wind slash"), instead many actions are thematic. For example, there is a skill named *Meikyo Shisui*, obviously named for the four-character compound 明鏡止水 (*meikyou shisui*, clear and serene). This skill allows the player to use other more powerful skills in succession without having to input the lengthy combination of skills that usually precedes them, with the intent clearly being that the player has adopted this "clear and serene" mindset to perform this feat. The Samurai skills contain more interesting phrases and skill names such as *Ikishoten* and *Tenka Goken*, the latter of course referencing the five Japanese swords that are part of the National Treasures of Japan. What's relevant here is that, as a

multicultural game, the skill names are also easily available in their original Japanese forms. Samurai is the only class that has its skills listed exclusively in kanji, something worth noting considering its praise of the virtues of the real samurai way of justice.

Table 2: English and Japanese Names of Samurai Actions

English Name[64]	Japanese Name[65]	Meaning
Hakaze	刃風 *hakaze*	Blade wind/style
Jinpu	陣風 *jinpuu*	Gale
Third Eye	心眼 *shingan*	The mind's eye
Enpi	燕飛 *tsubame*	Swallow
Shifu	士風 *shifuu*	Warrior wind/style
Fuga	風雅 *fuuga*	Elegance
Gekko	月光 *gekkou*	Moonlight
Iaijiutsu	居合術 *iaijutsu*	Technique of cutting down one's opponent and then sheathing the blade again
Mangetsu	満月 *mangetsu*	Full moon
Kasha	花車 *kyasha*	Delicate
Oka	桜花 *ouka*	Cherry blossoms
Yukikaze	雪風 *yukikaze*	Snow-bearing wind
Meikyo Shisui	明鏡止水 *meikyou shisui*	Clear and serene
Hissatsu: Shinten	必殺剣・震天 *hissatsuken: shinten*	Technique of certain death: trembling skies
Hissatsu: Gyoten	必殺剣・暁天 *hissatsuken: gyouten*	Technique of certain death: dawn
Hissatsu: Yaten	必殺剣・夜天 *hissatsuken: yaten*	Technique of certain death: night sky
Meditate	黙想 *mokusou*	Meditation
Hissatsu: Kyuten	必殺剣・九天 *hissatsuken: kyuuten*	Technique of certain death: heaven
Hagakure	葉隠 *hagakure*	Hiding in the leaves
Ikishoten	意気衝天 *ikishouten*	In high spirits
Hissatsu: Guren	必殺剣・紅蓮 *hissatsuken: guren*	Technique of certain death: bright red
Hissatsu: Senei	必殺剣・閃影 *hissatsuken: senei*	Technique of certain death: flashing shadow
Tsubame-gaeshi	燕返し *tsubamegaeshi*	Tsubame gaeshi; judo countering technique; literally "swallow counter"

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[64] Square Enix Ltd., 'FINAL FANTASY XIV Job Guide'.

[65] Square Enix Co., Ltd., 'ファイナルファンタジーXIV'.

Shoha	照破 *shouha*	Illuminating middle section of a song (in traditional Japanese performances such as noh/gagaku)
Shoha II	無明照破 *mumyou shouha*	Avidya (buddhist ignorance), illuminating middle section of a song; possibly a reference to 無明長夜 *mumyou jouya*, four character compound meaning "the long night of spiritual darkness"
Fuko	風光 *fuukou*	Scenic beauty
Ogi Namikiri	奥義波切 *ougi namikiri*	Secret technique, wave cut
Kaeshi Namikiri	返し波切 *kaeshi namikiri*	Repetition, wave cut
Higanbana	彼岸花 *higanbana*	Red spider lily; often associated with death
Tenka Goken	天下五剣 *tenka goken*	Five swords under heaven; group of famous Japanese swords
Midare Setsugekka	乱れ雪月花 *midare setsugekka*	Disorder, beauty of the four seasons

As can be seen in table 2, the Samurai actions are steeped in Japanese cultural references and phrases in order to further its image as an exotic Japanese job. These references seem to be more for a Japanese audience than a Western audience, as many of the references (especially without seeing the kanji) may elude the average Western player. Instead, Japanese players with knowledge of more traditional things will recognise the names. That being said, the skills also being mostly in Japanese in the English version is also a deliberate move to entice the Western audience with cool-sounding Japanese names. After all, *jinpu* sounds more enticing than a simple "gale". Localisation is typically also glocalisation—a practice of adapting one product to better suit the tastes of its new target culture—so the deliberate choice not to localise certain phrases to be more easily understood by an audience that doesn't speak Japanese in favour of style is noteworthy as being deliberate.[66]

The aesthetic of the Samurai job is carefully crafted in order to maintain an image of the Other, and as *Stormblood*'s signature job, it is as far removed from the otherwise localised Jobs as possible. Goto-Jones examined Japanese fighting games and learnt that many of its players grow an affinity for the "realism" of the martial arts depicted, and that the draw of these fighting games was the Western audience felt like they could really immerse themselves in these martial arts as the game still required a modicum of player skill.[67] I will argue that this, too, would apply to players that play Samurai; even though the more fantastical elements may not necessarily be as "realistic" as fighting game strikes, the many katana-based animations and stylish moves paired with a similar level of player skill needed to be good at the job can easily get players to grow attached to the noble Samurai.

As Ian Condry has argued in his case study on several samurai-related anime, the samurai is a powerful evocation of character, premise, and setting, which is not necessarily always meant to

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[66] Carlson and Corliss, 'Utopic Dreams and Apocalyptic Fantasies', 166–68.
[67] Goto-Jones, 'Playing with Being in Digital Asia', 42–44.

purely represent Japan, but can also represent cross-cultural dynamics.[68] This may be true of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s Samurai as well; given its localised Japanese-ness the Samurai also acts as a place of invitation, where Western players may come to enjoy and become samurai. The player's unique status as a Western and white-coded person from outside of Hingashi becoming the one true pupil of a master samurai is yet another way in which hybrid Japanese identity is performed. This identity, however, may also prove to reject the West.

As mentioned previously, the idealised image of *bushidō* in particular is often a neo-traditionalist way of calling upon an imagined conservative past free of Western influence. In the case of hybridity here, this is much more complex, but not completely contradictory; just as with the example of Japanese youth idealising Hong Kong for remaining "traditional enough" despite Western influence, it may be that that same idea of "traditional enough" is being projected onto the Samurai. Though it accepts Western contact, it rejects the idea of becoming Western, as can be seen in the skill naming conventions. The Samurai hereby negotiates Japanese identity in a way that centres itself, but is naturally also open to those who (ideally) come to idolise it.

Conclusion: The Power of Games

Now that I've laid out the issues of *Final Fantasy XIV*, we can get to answering how the game promotes Orientalism, and why. First, I will reiterate the purpose of Orientalism, especially in the case of Japan and Japanese products. Orientalism is a tool and means of domination, a complex framework of ideas that work to subjugate the Other that is the imagined Orient. To claim power within that framework, countries such as Japan have opted to co-opt the ideas of Orientalism and tried to reverse existing paradigms with varying degrees of success. The brand of nationalism that is created from this self-Orientalism is powerful, as it promotes favourable intent towards Japan (with varying degrees of success).

That is to say, *Final Fantasy XIV* internalises messages of the Orient, particularly of Japan, as a mystical albeit dubious place. It represents its culture of origin as disproportionately detailed in comparison to other areas that get generalised into an amalgamation of vague cultural references, in order to build up more interest in itself. We see this prioritisation of Japanese-ness constantly through the way the rest of the Orient is either made vague (such as in the case of Ala Mhigo) or entirely absorbed (such as Yanxia in its surface-level Chinese-ness). Time and again, *Stormblood* prioritises Japan and the promotion of Japanese culture, attempting to generate sympathy through the portrayal of Japan as a disenfranchised people of great culture who are in desperate need of help. It co-opts the stories of the marginalised in order to send mixed messages about what the "right" way to revolt against the status quo is.

All of this is made more complex by *Final Fantasy XIV*'s existence as a hybrid cultural product, although I would argue that it is still predominantly Japanese despite its collaborative existence. Still, its existence as a hybrid product at the very least tells us it is aware of international implications and ramifications. Even if we argue that the Japanese writers may not have been as aware of the baggage that comes with the word "Oriental" in English, the English localisers most certainly were—and they have said they have input on the original writings.

Beyond this, the game's excessive praise of Japanese qualities and the tour-guide nature of the player's trip to Kugane reinforces that this game isn't *just* made for a Japanese audience, but rather for an audience that enjoys fetishising Japan and anything Japanese. And even then, given the fact that (self-)Orientalism also serves to reinforce the idea that the Oriental subject is

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[68] Condry, 'Anime Creativity'.

superior, marketing Japanese-ness to Japanese people is not out of the question. In this, the prioritisation of the Japanese aspects of the game (such as the long peculiar existence of Shirogane) shows a clear goal to promote Japanese culture and aesthetics, feeding into Nye's schematics for soft power.

Although *Square Enix* may not necessarily be directly working for the Japanese government, it is still part of a system where media is actively being promoted by those in power in order to craft a positive image of themselves. Iwabuchi's theory about the preferred traditional yet modern state of Japan is seen in the game as well; historic Japanese aesthetics are everywhere, but there are also relatively modernistic guns and other technology present in the game.

Again, my wish here is not to condemn *Final Fantasy XIV,* but rather to show how a product as massively popular as this can use its influence to paint a positive picture of Japan. Its creation as a Japanese product, a *Final Fantasy* game, is already part of that positive association, but the narrative and other elements in and out of the game (such as the trailer) further work to provide to strengthen this connection. Though I reiterate that I am a fan of the game, it is important to acknowledge *Stormblood* for what it is; propaganda. It may not be deliberately so, but achieves that goal nonetheless in both its writers and its players' casual acceptance of the ideas presented.

Nobody is immune to propaganda, especially if it is crafted in such meticulously subtle ways where it's difficult to even point out the Orientalism to the average player, who believes they are merely having a fun, apolitical experience immersing themselves in fantasy Japan. Games are a newly emerging media, and their potential for manipulation has largely remained under-discussed. Yet I would argue that more caution must be given to this new form of media, for the very draw of games—and games where you, the player, are part of that narrative—is that they are able to immerse the player fully by making one play out the story. In this way, the *Final Fantasy XIV* player subconsciously consumes this (self-)Orientalist, nationalist propaganda, and becomes complicit with its message.

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