Technologies of the Imaginary: Japan's Transhistorical Imago in World Travel Writing

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Abstract: This study examines the evolving image of Japan in premodern and modern world travel literature, tracing its construction across Chinese, Arabo-Persian, Jesuit, and French narratives. By adopting a multicultural framework and a transhistorical perspective, the paper aims to understand Japan's imago—understood here as a culturally encoded and semiotically mediated image—as a dynamic semiotic interface—a space where perception, narration, and cultural codes converge to produce enduring imaginaries, by moving beyond classical postcolonial frameworks based on the exclusive East-West binarity. Drawing on the concept of imago-genesis taken in a diachronic dimension—the process of the Other's imago formation through times and cultures—it demonstrates how recurring motifs such as femininity, opulence, and spiritual intensity function as algorithmic layers, recursively shaping the narrative representation and experience of Japan. Mapping the trajectory from early Asian chronicles to the immersive travel prose of modern French writers such as Pierre Loti, this analysis demonstrates that these narratives do not merely represent Japan; they simulate, encode, and transmit its cultural image across regions and centuries. The study thus positions travel literature as a technology of the imaginary, revealing how cultural alterity is continually enacted, mediated, and refined, leaving a durable imprint on the global imagination of Japan.

Keywords: Japan, travel literature, imago-genesis, semiotic interface, transhistorical imaginaries, cultural alterity

Introduction

With Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the study of cultural representation becomes shaped by the fact that "the Orient" is not a neutral geographical or cultural given reference, it is instead a discursive construct produced through Western regimes of knowledge and imperialism. Thus, the Orient, as it appears in Western literature, travel narratives, and, later on, scholarly works, is less a reflection of a real culture than a pure projection of Western desires, fears, and power structures: a highly politicized semiotic field through which the West defines itself in opposition. Within this framework, literary knowledge becomes a strategic form of domination, and the representation of the Oriental, a strategic act of othering.

Philippe Pelletier, extending this critical lineage, argues in *L'Extrême-Orient: L'invention d'une histoire et d'une géographie* that the "Far East"—particularly Japan—has emerged through geopolitical, cartographic, and narrative processes that produced the concept as a coherent spatial and cultural entity, which reinforces the insight that even Western geographical knowledge is indeed inseparable from power and narration. Each in their respective fields, Edward Said and Philippe Pelletier, both reveal the Orient as a full construction: Said through the literary and discursive framework of Orientalism, Pelletier through the geographical and cartographic formation of the Far East. However, this approach, despite its needed critical ambition, remains anchored in a framework that implicitly situates the West in the position of ultimate perceiver, the only one who can

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name, define, and shape the Other: even when the Orient is denaturalized, it continues, in fact, to appear as an object whose meaning is revealed, named, and stabilized through a predominantly Western gaze. Non-Western worlds, within such logic, tend to appear primarily as effects of Western expansion, interpretation, or domination.

This persistent centrality of Europe points to a deeper historiographical problem, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* calling for the need to break with this persistent centrality by exposing the historicist and Euro-universalist frameworks of modern thought, including in critical discourse. To provincialize Europe is not simply to critique colonial power, but to unsettle the temporal and epistemic hierarchies through which history itself is narrated and understood.

However, to move beyond the limitations of the classical postcolonial and imagological paradigms—which often boil down to a binary opposition between a dominant West and a subordinate East, thus risking the obscuring of other discursive dynamics—it is necessary to adopt a multicultural gaze and a transhistorical perspective that allow us to grasp—focusing on the Japanese imago as an example—how alterity is experienced and constructed in all its dimensions: political, certainly, in part, but also aesthetic, cognitive, mythological, spiritual, and historical. The image of a given culture, whether Eastern or Western, is indeed far too complex to be reduced to a simple product of a single entity. In fact, long before European travel writing turned toward East Asia—especially from the sixteenth century with the expansion of Jesuit missions through Asia—, a wide range of narratives circulating within and across Asia—Chinese dynastic texts and Arabo-Persian cosmographies among them—had already elaborated complex imaginaries of Japan. These texts did not only record distant lands; they actively produced symbolic geographies, mythological figures, and cognitive frameworks through which Japan became imaginable as a place. In this sense, the image of Japan emerges not as the passive object of a Western gaze, but as the outcome of regional and transcontinental circulations of narratives that both precede and complicate colonial forms of representation.

Building on this diverse framework, the study introduces the concept of imago-genesis to designate the cumulative, recursive, and inter-imaginary processes through which cultural images of Japan are generated, circulated, and stabilized over time. Alongside the concept of the *imagotype*, long central to imagology as a discipline analyzing cross-cultural representations of the Other (Leerssen 14), imago-genesis would allow us to understand the image of Japan not as a static construction derived from a single origin, but as a dynamic, multi-layered, algorithmic system where each narrative—whether Chinese, Arabo-Persian, or European—contributes semiotic "inputs": motifs, myths, aesthetic cues, and perceptual codes. These inputs continue to be processed through textual, cognitive, and cultural mechanisms, producing an imago that is recursively interpreted, reactivated, and reformulated across time and space. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception,* we see how these inputs are actively mediated by embodied consciousness, while Yi-Fu Tuan's insights on spatial imagination illuminate how these semiotic layers form navigable, legible "territories" in narratives. In this model, Japan is not merely represented by one observer or one culture; it emerges as a multiperceived, algorithmically configured world, whose coherence and endurance depend on centuries of interaction between diverse semiotic layers, revealing a distributed architecture of perception rather than a singular, origin-centered act of representation.

Long before the Western gaze analyzed by Edward Said or Philippe Pelletier's invented Japan, this region of the Orient was already circulating in global mythopoetic networks: a matriarchal kingdom in some traditions, a cosmological land or even an anthropomorphic one in others (Auld 150). These depictions evolved into a contrastive and immersive cultural place, where all motifs contribute to the understanding of the stratified and proto-technological process of generation, reinforcement and perpetuation of images of Japan through travel narratives and long-term symbolic devices where alterity was measured, experienced and performed, thereby reinforcing its persistent status as "extra-normal" across centuries and cultural contexts—by "extra-normal," I mean

a characteristic of a culture or phenomenon that diverges from the perceiver's established norms, resisting immediate assimilation because it does not conform to the observer's cultural expectations.

The First Pixelizations of Japan

A Feminized Land

Travel literature is understood here broadly: not only as modern travel narratives, but as any narrative form emerging from displacement toward the Other. Whether based on direct experience, as in the accounts of Jesuits or Pierre Loti, or on indirect compilation, as in Chinese chronicles or Arabic cosmographies, such texts perform an essential function: mediating the unknown through discourse. The earliest testimonies of Japan in global narration reach us primarily through Chinese sources. As discussed in *Religions, croyances et traditions populaires au Japon,* edited by Hartmut O. Rotermund (32–38), the *Book of Han*, compiled around the second century CE, describes a land of several islands maintaining relations with China. It is, however, in the *Chronicles of Wei*, dating to the third century CE, that Japan is depicted as a realm ruled by a queen-sorceress, Himiko:

> The kingdom of the Wo experienced unrest; civil wars lasted for years. In the end, all agreed on the enthronement of a woman as queen. Her name was Beimihu [Jap.: Himiko]. She was versed in the way of the spirits and was able to deceive the crowds. She was already advanced in age and had no husband. She had a younger brother who assisted her in governing. Since she became queen, few people had seen her. She lived in seclusion in the company of a thousand slaves. There was only one man who brought her food and drink and who conveyed her decrees, entering and leaving her residence. It was a multi-story palace, strictly enclosed by a fence and ordinarily protected by guards. (Rotermund 33)

Himiko's depiction departs from classical figures of sovereignty, and her power derives from esoteric knowledge, intimate communion with spirits, and withdrawal from world affairs. Her palace is so enclosed, guarded, and exclusively inhabited by women, with only one man permitted to enter. This narrative choice situates Japan within a female sovereign space—secret, sacralized, and apart from conventional norms. The feminine thus becomes the principal vector of mystification in the early Chinese gaze. As Jennifer W. Jay notes, Tang China (7th–10th centuries) oscillated between empirical geography and narrative myth, presenting *Waguo* as the fabulous Nǚguó, a "Kingdom of Women" inhabited by women who could conceive through wind or water (Jay 226). These sources inscribe Japan within "female spaces" characterized by ritual inversion, sexual autonomy, and emotional excess—a gendered imaginary that later informs medieval Muslim perceptions of Japan.

Arabic narratives about *Waqwaq* operate on a similar logic to the earliest Chinese sources: spatial remoteness, dominant femininity, and cosmic abundance. *Waqwaq* illustrates how mytho-cartographic codes circulated along the Silk Road, establishing East Asia as a theater of alluring and ritualized alterity. Al-Qazwini provides a vivid account:

> It is said that it consists of 1,600 islands. It was named thus [*Waqwaq*] because of a tree whose fruits take the form of women suspended by their hair. When they ripen, they emit the sound "waq waq," which the inhabitants of these lands interpret as an omen. Mūsā ibn al-Mubārak al-Sīrāfī reported that he was able to reach this country, governed by a woman. He saw her on a throne, naked, wearing a crown, surrounded by 4,000 virgin handmaidens, also naked. (Al-Qazwini 33)

Other accounts specify that "people may have sexual relations with them, enveloped in the most exquisite fragrance and the most delightful intercourse" (Al-Bakri 212). The recurrent formula *qîla inna* ('it is said that…') functions not only as a narrative device, but also as a discursive threshold, permitting the seamless integration of the marvelous into a cosmographic framework. This linguistic mechanism establishes epistemic distance while permitting fantastical content—such an anthropomorphic tree bearing women or a naked queen surrounded by 4,000 virgins—within a text that presents itself as encyclopedic.

Unlike the earliest Chinese sources on Japan—Himiko in historical chronicles or *Fusang* in poetic travelogues (Schafer 380-381)—where fantasy and ethnographic observation are often separated, the geographical encyclopedias compiled in Arabic and based primarily on travelers' accounts demonstrate a deliberate coexistence of science and wonder within a unified textual economy. This symbiosis is technically supported by a hybridization of genres and a polyphonic discourse, and the text's technicality lies precisely in this capacity to absorb ancient transcultural motifs—matriarchal sovereignty, eroticized flora, golden lands—and reconfigure them within a register aspiring to empirical rigor.

Waqwaq functions as a semiotic attractor: a narrative vortex where dislocated cultural signifiers—vegetal eroticism, sovereign nudity—are recombined through association and hyperbole. The unknown is neither silenced nor fully rationalized; it is activated and amplified, rendered tangible through semiotic saturation. Japan is thus treated not as a fixed repertoire of curiosities but as a dynamic epistemic machine, producing a mode of knowledge in which fantasy is not excluded but systematized within hypertelic narratives where otherness, imagination, and knowledge converge. Across these Chinese and Arabic traditions, Japan emerges not as a living society but as a mythical feminine code, a zone of generative enchantment and ritual authority. This premodern code of *extra-normality*—here expressed through femininity—functions as an immaterial substrate for later representations of Japan. These narrative motifs act like inputs within a larger semiotic system, continuously processed, recombined, and transmitted across centuries. Recognizing this early codification allows us to see travel narratives not as isolated descriptions, but as proto-technologies of the imaginary, in which fantastical and ethnographic elements are algorithmically layered to produce a persistent and immersive image of Japan. Even as successive accounts diversify the "data" with added details or perspectives, they rely on, reactivate, and amplify the same foundational motifs of strangeness, ritual authority, and cosmic wonder.

These early narratives—whether Chinese chronicles or Arabic cosmographies—establish Japan as a mythical coded place, shaped by symbolic femininity, ritual authority, and imaginative excess. Yet, the premodern image of Japan was not confined to the feminine or the marvelous alone. Another complementary input emerges in these accounts: the representation of Japan as a land of opulence and abundance, a motif that emphasizes material wealth and cosmographic prestige. This parallel input illustrates how successive layers of narrative—ritualized femininity, fantastical marvels, and economic or material imaginaries—interact to produce a complex, multi-dimensional, and generatively fertile territory—a conceptual foundation upon which later European travelers, including Marco Polo, would further elaborate the discourse of Japan's marvel and wealth.

An Opulent Land

A second axis in the early construction of Japan emphasizes opulence and abundance, a motif deeply rooted in Eastern imaginaries and prominently featured in Marco Polo's account of Zipangu. Polo writes:

> "And I tell you also that they [the inhabitants of Zipangu] have gold in very great abundance, for one finds it in excess in this country […] and I tell you that they have so much gold that it is marvelous, as I have said, and they do not know what to do with it. [...] And he [their king] has a very large palace, entirely covered with this metal, just as our churches are with lead. The paving of the chamber, the halls, the windows, and all the other parts are laid with it to a thickness of two inches, so that the riches of this palace are incalculable." (Polo 397)

Polo's narrative operates through cultural mediation: by comparing the gilded roof of the building to the lead-covered roofs of Western churches, the writer establishes a reassuring cultural analogy, which makes the place more familiar and especially more prestigious in the eyes of his audience. The golden palace thus becomes a symbol of supreme secular power, far more evocative for a European reader than a non-monotheistic temple, perceived as foreign or even pagan. Polo does not simply

report; he adapts exoticism to increase its narrative and ideological impact on the Christian West. This semantic shift contributes to the construction of a Japan that is simultaneously wondrous and plausible, desirable, and conquerable.

This comparative strategy does not merely describe; it domesticates the marvelous by anchoring it in sacred architectural forms familiar to the West and translates otherness into prestige, rendering the foreign both legible and desirable. Although the palace itself is undoubtedly a distorted echo—of the *Kôjiki-dô* or a similar structure—its actual function is not documentary but semio-political. Polo's narrative is not an isolated invention, but the final link in a vast intertextual network conceptualizing Japan not only as a geographically distant place, but also as a mythically rich and epistemologically malleable space. In truth, the motif of Japan as a land of boundless opulence does not originate with Marco Polo, but rather is part of a long transcontinental genealogy. This begins with Chinese accounts from the Tang dynasty mentioning *Penglai* as Charlotte von Verschuer argues, during the Tang and Song dynasties, the Chinese association of Japan with the mythical island of *Penglai* was not purely imaginary, but rooted in a deep material reality, particularly Japan's export of pure mercury, a substance that played a central role in Chinese alchemical practices, notably in the preparation of elixirs of immortality (von Verschuer 45). This commercial link conferred symbolic value upon Japan: it became not only a neighboring land, but also a country renowned for its wealth in gold and rare substances, a source of five rare substances believed to confer eternal life, thus contributing to its integration into the mythological geography of Taoist utopias—the legendary island of the immortals, glittering with gold, jade, and mercury—and reappears in Arabic descriptions of *Waqwaq*, where gold is so abundant that it is used to adorn even animals (Ibn Khordadbeh 40). Polo inherits this narrative economy of excess and reconfigures it for a European Christian audience, through specific cultural techniques: distortion, mediation, and ideological repositioning.

Through this comparative strategy, wealth becomes semiotic currency—an indicator of alterity, desirability, and inaccessibility. Polo's Golden Palace and Zipangu more broadly, function as a discursive phantasmagoria, integrating earlier Chinese and Arabic motifs while embedding them within emerging European imaginations of trade and exploration. Japan is not only a geographic location on a map but also a narratively flexible, mythically opulent place, continuously reshaped through successive lenses of wonder, commerce, and ideological projection. This transcontinental circulation of aesthetic codes reveals that early perceptions of Japan were layered and algorithmic: fantasy, exaggerated material reality, and symbolic projection coexisted within a single epistemic system. The underlying layer of fertility which forms the core of Japan's *extra-normality* unites distinct motifs into a coherent semiotic principle. Parallel to the gendered and marvelous aspects, the representation of Japan as a land of opulence and abundance emphasizes material wealth, precious metals, and cosmographic prestige. Recognizing this genealogy of *extra-normality* as a constitutive stratum of imago-genesis allows us to trace the semiotic patterns that endured in later representations, from Jesuit letters to nineteenth-century European travel literature.

Toward a Contrasting Clarity of Japan

This perceptual interface—a Japan "outside" normality—remains intact across centuries, but Jesuit narratives, particularly those of Luís Fróis, mark a turning point in the construction of travel imaginaries. These accounts do not abandon the quasi-mythical strata of earlier centuries; rather, they rearticulate them through the protocols of empirical observation. Japan is now examined physically, mapped, and described ethnographically; what evolves is the resolution of the narrative. The contrastive code, which previously operated through fabulation and allegory, now develops more through structured comparison.

Before examining Fróis's systematic contrasts, attention must be paid to the other ethnographic Jesuit writings, which have also pre-established semiotic patterns informing subsequent representations of the country. These accounts provide the first ethnographic glimpses of the archipelago,

highlighting the nature of its people, though not exhaustively. Valignano, in the first chapter of his *Les Jésuites au Japon: relation missionnaire* (1583), on the customs and peculiarities of Japan, begins with a brief description of the geography and then lists the qualities of the population. He describes them as "very civilized, [and that] even the common people and workers are so well-bred and so admirably courteous, that they seem to have been raised at court," and as "very gifted and highly intelligent, and [that] the children there are very capable of learning all our sciences," adding that "even in the lowest classes of society, there is no one who is as crude and uncultured as in our countries" (Valignano 58).

This portrait finds a parallel in Xavier's report, where he notes: "Of all the barbarian peoples I have seen, none can be compared to this one for the goodness of its nature." These passages, although formally structured and non-fictional, are not devoid of subjectivity. The Jesuits' discourse is rhythmically punctuated with intensifiers such as "very," "so admirably," and "so well," restrictive phrases like "no one can" and "there is no one who is" (Dubois 215), and stylistic devices, foremost among which is hyperbole.

Such linguistic intensification systematically shapes the perlocutionary effect of these texts: it is through this reception that the Western reader begins to reconstruct the Japanese people in terms of heightened qualities. From these early accounts emerges the first enduring stereotype of Japan as a polite, courteous, and exceptionally well-bred society. This foundational coding prefigures the more structured, contrastive approaches later exemplified by Fróis, establishing both a semiotic and narrative precedent for representing Japan as simultaneously admirable, *extra-normal*, and culturally distinct.

Luís Fróis's *Traité sur les contradictions et différences de mœurs entre Européens et Japonais*, compiled in 1585, exemplifies this method: he chose a format for his accounts of his stay in the archipelago that is entirely based on comparison, systematically listing and juxtaposing, for each theme, the differences separating Europeans from the Japanese, covering themes from the use of chopsticks to attitudes toward modesty, beauty, laughter, death, and architecture. His text is therefore difficult to read as a narrative: there are no logical transitions linking the sentences, nor can we speak of textual harmony, since the discourse proceeds from enumeration rather than narration. The repeated formulas— "the Japanese…" versus "We…" and "Their women…" versus "Ours…"—can be read as a code: each line acts as a command executed for the reader, producing measurable contrasts and reinforcing the distinctiveness of Japan. This reliance on listing renders the missionary's writing is markedly mechanical and systematized stylistic choice that serves to intensify and sharpen the contrasts it seeks to display.

From a Foucauldian perspective, Fróis's missionary gaze in Japan can be interpreted as an initial mathetic gesture (Foucault 71). His famous binary tableau—systematically opposing European and Japanese customs—does not merely reflect cultural shock, but constitutes an attempt to render alterity measurable, decomposable, and therefore seemingly graspable. Just as *mathésis* orders knowledge through systematic relations, travel narratives "order" Japan through recurring semiotic structures: the same inputs (myth, observation, symbolic motifs) are combined, compared, and projected according to a structured logic. In other words, the algorithmic processing of Japan's image across cultures mirrors the Classical idea of *mathésis*: a governing logic that makes multiple inputs legible, comparable, and interpretable.

Yet beneath this surface of controlled narrative structuring persists the same immaterial software: Japan as *extra-normal,* a civilizational exception resistant to assimilation. What Fróis achieves is not a rupture with earlier imagos, but a refinement of the interface: a new textual technology that preserves the immersive matrix while simulating objectivity, now enhanced through the inclusion of genuinely ethnographic elements. Jesuit's Japan thus distinguishes itself through a realism that does not deconstruct the imaginary; rather, it inscribes it more deeply into the transcultural "semiosphere." Whereas Lotman originally defined the semiosphere as the semiotic space of a cul-

ture, composed of signs and codes that produce and organize meaning within it (Lotman 123), I adapt this concept to denote a global and mediating semiotic space, where the image of Japan is codified, negotiated, and reformulated across narratives and multiple cultural perspectives. This extension allows the genesis of any cultural image to be understood as a dynamic process of representations shaped by interactions among diverse semiotic systems—a dynamic that intensifies in the nineteenth century with the proliferation of travel narratives on Japan.

Building on these centuries-long semiotic processes, the late nineteenth century witnessed a transformation in the way Japan was represented: from ethnographic and encyclopedic observation to immersive, literary perception. Travel narratives no longer relied solely on codified inputs and measured comparison; they began to simulate experience itself, merging observation, imagination, and affective engagement. In this sense, Pierre Loti's *Japoneries d'automne* exemplifies a new stage in the technology of the imaginary, where textual form functions as a virtual interface: the reader does not merely learn about Japan but participates in its algorithmic perception, guided by the semiotic strata accumulated over centuries.

Novelistic Immersion and the Illusion of Access

The European knowledge of Japan has gradually gained a more empirical dimension from the eighteenth century onward, especially through Dutch accounts such as those by Kaempfer and Titsingh. These post-Jesuit texts provided more detailed observations particularly focusing on geography, customs, and material culture, and contributed to a sense of realism in the representation of Japan. However, the Far East—Japan in particular—remained perceived as an *extra-normal* cultural space whose alterity was never fully assimilable, even as ethnographic precision grew. Late nineteenth century French travel discourses, exemplified by Pierre Loti, inherited this epistemological trajectory: they offered immersive and sensorially rich depictions, filtered through pre-perceptual historical codes and semiotic layers, thereby producing a Japan that is at once real, imagined, and algorithmically constructed.

Travel novels of the late nineteenth century distinguish themselves from earlier texts through their narrative genre. While Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* represents the most widely recognized modern depiction of Japan, emphasizing exoticism and the European imperial gaze, his other narratives about Japan, including his journal *Japoneries d'automne*, introduce a different cognitive dimension. In these texts, immersive perception, historical imaginaries, and semiotic codes interact, revealing a subtle and complex engagement with the country, even within the framework of the European imperial discourse. *Japoneries d'automne* is structured as a journal, mimicking immediacy while maintaining a modality rich in verbs of hesitation, visual framing, and sensory amplification. The places visited are simultaneously represented by the writer-traveler, activating both material and immaterial archives. The reader experiences the same cognitive process by approaching Japan with a semiosphere already inscribed in their consciousness yet perceives it merely through textual simulation. Loti describes, for example, a visit to the Tōshō-gū shrine in Nikkō:

> The music of the priests continues to drag on, with an unsettling monotony, with the persistence of an incantation that seems destined, in time, to achieve its mysterious ends. And it is one of the most ideally Japanese scenes that has ever struck my mind; my impression differs from those I had experienced until now, in old temples where one had to make an effort to retrieve, through the dust, that past which seemed so far away. Here, for the first time, I feel I have penetrated to the very heart of this strange country, but in its living heart, in full activity of art, rites, and religion. My imagination is aware of the hidden presence of these idols, no doubt monstrous, which, behind the long brocade curtains, must perceive the luminous landscape around, and smile at the morning freshness, smile at this first prayer of the day, arriving trembling and light. Something very solemn, vaguely frightening, and especially incomprehensible hovers in this splendid place, as whenever there is proximity to the gods, whatever their names, or to the One God, in whatever form worshiped. (Loti 179)

Rather than subverting older narrative algorithms, Loti's prose validates and intensifies them, giving them a sensual texture through hypertrophied sensory perception. Spiritual Japan—a motif circulating since early Chinese accounts of Himiko and later Arabo-Persian narratives of *Waqwaq*—is revived and rearticulated through obsessive attention to temples, shrines, and ritual practices. The incantatory atmosphere immerses both Loti and his reader in a state of affective capture, where the experience of proximity paradoxically underscores the persistent otherness of the place. His description of the penetrating "to the very heart of this strange country" demonstrates that intimacy does not dissolve alterity; it reactivates the code of *extra-normality*: closeness enhances the strangeness rather than reducing it.

Religious and aesthetic spaces in Loti's narrative remain suffused with a "vaguely frightening, incomprehensible" aura. In this place, ethnographic realism coexists with theatrical transcendence, resonating with centuries of layered imaginaries: the gendered and mystical sovereignty of early Chinese texts, the opulent mythic landscapes of Marco Polo and *Penglai*, and the codified observational structures of Jesuit missionaries. Temples and shrines become semiotic nodes, where historical, mythical, and affective codes converge, producing a highly immersive cognitive interface. By activating these inherited motifs, Loti's prose demonstrates how imago-genesis persists and evolves: the image of Japan is neither static nor purely fictional, but recursively refined, performed, and transmitted across temporal and cultural strata.

Loti's narrative, focusing on sensory and ritualized detail—sound, light, gesture, and spatial arrangement—further transforms perception into a simulated reality, allowing the reader to inhabit the semiotic space of Japan while remaining at a temporal and cultural remove. In doing so, Loti does not invent a new imaginary; he amplifies and virtualizes the preexisting one, translating centuries of layered myths, codified observations, and spiritualized landscapes into a literary experience that both confirms and perpetuates the *extra-normal* character of the country.

Building on Loti's immersive techniques, his prose can be further understood through phenomenology and theories of fictional simulation. Reading travel narratives as virtual realities, following Wolfgang Iser and Marie-Laure Ryan, reveals that they operate not merely as forms of storytelling but as technologies of the imaginary, recursively generating algorithms of collective imagos. These texts exceed the immediate author–reader encounter: they articulate a simulated consciousness rooted in movement, perception, and the experience of otherness. Across centuries, Japan is not simply foreign; it is programmed to remain—affectively, aesthetically, and ethically—outside normative frameworks, demonstrating the persistence and refinement of a transhistorical imago. Loti's travel prose thus functions as a "high-resolution interface," in which mythic layers are not erased by realism but subtly rendered through perceived reality, a process that resonates with contemporary simulation technologies such as virtual reality.

Concluding Remarks

From its earliest pixelated representations to its later textual simulations, the image of Japan has never emerged in isolation. Travel literature does not merely record encounters; it stages them. Over time, it becomes a proto-technology—an interface through which alterity is translated, refracted by syntax, deixis, narrative form, and perceptual habits. In Chinese chronicles, Arabic and Persian travel accounts, Jesuit relations, and modern journals alike, Japan is never simply discovered. It is rendered visible through centuries of textual sedimentation, approached not as an empty surface but as a palimpsest, saturated with prior readings, myths, observations, and aesthetic systems.

The imago-genesis of Japan is therefore not a fixed portrait, but a dynamic execution of linguistic and cultural algorithms. Each narrative activates specific functions—wonder-driven and contrastive description, moral projection, sensory stylization—which operate as a code, producing outcomes aligned with inherited patterns while integrating new "data," whether religious motifs, material forms, or visual artifacts. In this sense, travel narratives behave like algorithms: they continuously

process inputs—reports, geography, contact, lived experience—according to pre-established instructions such as genres, tropes, epistemologies, to generate outputs that are simultaneously novel and familiar. The result is an immersive yet always scripted imaginary: an interface between perception and projection, where Japan—and by extension, any culture—becomes legible within a plural, evolving system of signs.

To read travel literature as a technology of the imaginary thus means to understand it as a complex medium for the fabrication of the Other: a full system in which perception, narration, and cultural codes converge to produce durable, influencing scripts of alterity. Yet beyond their capacity to construct and encode, these texts also preserve traces of exchange—layers of resonance, echoes of past encounters, moments of interesting aesthetic reciprocity. The image of Japan, like that of any culture, resists reduction to a mere construct of the perceiver. The act of perception is never sovereign: long before domination, dialogue existed—and even under domination, it persists, inscribed in text, image, and form.

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