A Tale of Two Empires:

Victorian England, Imperial Japan, and the Reinvention of Oriental Queerness

Paris Shih

In her important book on Victorian Japan, *Quaint, Exquisite*, Grace Lavery powerfully argues that “the construction of Japan as an aestheticized exception to various taxonomies of race, gender, nation, ethnicity, modernity, and culture was possible *because* Japan confronted the West as an Other Empire” (x). Rising in the second half of the nineteenth century, Imperial Japan posed a threat to the British Empire and marked a turning point in the history of western orientalism. Previously, Victorian writers and artists commonly conceptualized the Orient through colonial relations, where Indians, Turks, and Persians stood for forms of subordinate positionality and moral corruption. As Edward Said theorizes in his seminal study, such orientalism “is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies” (1). Such a definition, however, could not account for Victorian England’s complicated relationship with Japan. Japan, after all, was never colonized by England; it was, in fact, a *colonizer* itself. To understand the pivotal role Imperial Japan had played in nineteenth-century imaginations, we must transcend the Saidian definition of orientalism and situate Victorian England and Japan in the history of global imperialisms. Facing the rise of another empire at the fin de siècle, writers and artists employed different strategies to represent the strange—and indeed, *queer*—presence of Japan. These strategies could be understood through two representational modes, the “satiric” and the “decadent.” In the first mode, the queerness of the empire was mediated through satiric representations, commonly found in trade cards, caricatures, and even operas. In the second mode, Japanese queerness was not only incorporated but also exaggerated, through which artists imagined transgressive forms of subjectivity along with the French decadent tradition. Such representations not only suggested the “Japanese turn” in European societies but also pointed to a renewed conception of what I call “oriental queerness,” meaning the peculiar nature and transgressive potential of oriental subjectivity in western imaginations. It is through the transnational trajectory of these imaginations that I trace an alternative history of racial formations and global imperialisms.