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Literary Criticism

**CLC**

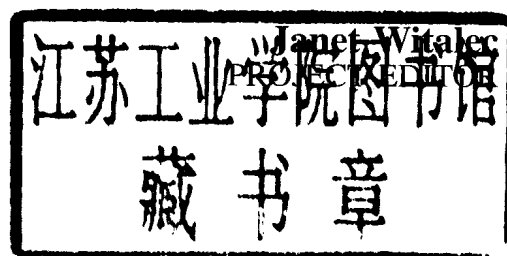
**163**



Volume 163

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers



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## Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 163

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# Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

## Scope of the Series

*CLC* provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

## Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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# Ian Buruma

## 1951-

Dutch journalist, nonfiction writer, essayist, travel essayist, and novelist.

The following entry presents an overview of Buruma's career through 2002.

### INTRODUCTION

A respected journalist and multilingual international traveler, Buruma has earned distinction as an incisive commentator on Asian popular culture and contemporary politics, particularly in Japan. *Behind the Mask* (1984), published as Japan's booming economy attracted renewed Western interest in Japanese society, was hailed as an insightful study of that nation's gender and cultural archetypes. Likewise, *God's Dust* (1989), in which Buruma challenged stereotypical views about Western influence on Eastern cultures, was praised for revealing the complexity of Asian self-identity and the impact of Western consumerism on the East. Buruma has also examined the impact of World War II on the national consciousness of Germany and Japan in *The Wages of Guilt* (1994), European attitudes toward Britain in *Anglo-mania* (1999), and the post-Tiananmen Square lives of Chinese dissidents and other South Asian radicals in *Bad Elements* (2001).

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Buruma was born in The Hague, Netherlands, to Sytze Leonard Buruma, a Dutch attorney, and Gwendolyn Margaret Schlesinger, a Briton whose parents were the children of German-Jewish refugees who immigrated to England in the late nineteenth century. Buruma's childhood in postwar Holland, where the Germans were still vilified as enemies, and his exposure to English culture through his grandparents is recounted in several of his works. Buruma's interest in Japan was piqued as a student when he saw a Japanese theater group performing in the Netherlands. After studying Chinese literature at Leiden University in Holland, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Chinese in 1975, Buruma moved to Japan. He studied Japanese film, performed with a Japanese traveling theater troupe, and worked as a journalist and editor for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* from 1983 to 1986. He married Sumie Tani in 1981. Buruma's interest in Japanese culture was reflected in the 1984 publication of *Behind the Mask*, which was published in Britain as *A Japanese Mirror*. After traveling extensively in several Asian countries, Bu-

ruma published *God's Dust*, essays based on observations made during his travels. Beginning in 1990, after relocating to London, Buruma worked as foreign editor for the news magazine *The Spectator*, though he resigned from the position the following year. He is also a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Observer*, and *Asia*.

### MAJOR WORKS

Buruma's work focuses primarily on Asia, exploring themes of duality and conflict both within Asian societies and between Eastern and Western culture. Much of his nonfiction was originally produced for publication in periodicals, and the style is journalistic rather than academic, characterized by first-hand observation, interviews, and personal anecdotes written in an engaging fashion. In *Behind the Mask*, Buruma examines recurring motifs in Japanese entertainment, focusing on a key paradox of Japanese society: the polite, proscribed, ritualistic daily life of the Japanese and the prevalence of extreme violence in Japanese popular books, film, and television. Six of the chapters focus on women, five focus on men, and two explore effeminate men and masculine women. According to Buruma, the mother figure—tragic and self-sacrificing—serves as the dominant female icon in Japanese film. Men are either infantilized by women or represented as hardened gangsters to be admired for their personification of Japanese manhood. Buruma contends that this paradox is influenced by Japan's native Shinto religion, which reveres the strong female mother, associated with the masses, and Buddhism, imported centuries ago by the Japanese upper class. *God's Dust*—based on Buruma's travels in Burma, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan—examines Asia in transition. The conflict stems from the idea that the industrialized, urban West has corrupted the idealized, village-based society of the East. Buruma disputes this simplistic theory, while acknowledging that Western influence has spurred changes in Asia. He argues that the East often embraces aspects of the West while retaining fundamental elements of its native culture. Buruma also draws attention to several Asian dictators, including Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Ne Win of Burma, and Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, whom Buruma interviewed with his wife, Imelda, and whose former home Buruma visits, noting the deposed Marcos' affinity for Western-style consumption. *Playing the Game* (1991) is Buruma's only published work of fiction. In this novel, Buruma's preoccupation with cross-cultural conflict is represented by Colonel Sir Kumar Shri Ranjitsinhji. This

character, based on real-life Indian prince Ranjitsinhji Vibhaji who was maharaja of Nawañagar from 1907 to 1933, became famous in England and British India as a world-class cricket player and flamboyant man about town. Popularly known as Ranji, he was a progressive ruler who developed seaports, railroads, and irrigation facilities in the city. The title refers both to the game of cricket and Ranji's effort to find acceptance in British society. Written primarily in epistolary form, Buruma reconstructs and reimagines Ranji through the persona of an unidentified narrator who is researching his life. The reader comes to know Ranji through a long letter written by him to his friend, the cricket player C. B. Fry, and through the narrator's encounters with friends and acquaintances.

Buruma again addressed the differences between East and West in *The Wages of Guilt*, in which he compares the legacy of World War II in Germany and Japan. Both countries suffered defeat and committed atrocities during the war. However, in Japan, Buruma finds a markedly different national zeitgeist concerning the war than he found in Germany. He constructs his argument by traveling through both countries, interviewing public figures and private citizens, visiting memorials and museums devoted to the war, and studying the war through the film and literature of each country. Buruma finds a sense of great national guilt in Germany, whereas Japanese citizens, in contrast, express little or no remorse. Moreover, Buruma notes that the Japanese maintain a prevailing sense of victimhood as a result of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Buruma ultimately proposes two key factors in these disparate responses: Germany's government was totally dismantled and its leaders tried for crimes against humanity, while Japan's emperor was allowed to continue his rule; and Germany's crimes during the Holocaust were much more horrific than Japan's acts of war. *The Missionary and the Libertine* (1996), a collection of essays—many of which previously appeared in the *New York Review of Books*—covers an eclectic variety of topics, including the Seoul Olympics, Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Singaporean politics, anti-Japanese racism in Michael Crichton's novel *Rising Sun*, and the work of Japanese authors Jun'ichiro Tanizaki and Mahoko Yoshimoto. Buruma posits that values currently considered Asian in nature are found in Western literature—and vice versa. The title of Buruma's volume refers to the yin and yang of sexual impulses, the prevalent stereotype of the repressed West and the dissolute East. *Anglomania*, published in Britain as *Voltaire's Coconuts*, examines the concept of Anglophilia—an affinity for England and English culture—as manifested by disparate representatives of Continental Europe. Buruma presents biographical sketches of famous Anglophiles who took refuge in England, notably Voltaire; the English title of Buruma's book alludes to Voltaire's notion that English democracy could be transplanted to revolutionary France, as coconuts could be cultivated in non-tropical climates. Along with his own meditations on the nature of Englishness and the German passion for Shakespeare, Buruma provides studies of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Karl

Marx, Theodor Herzl, Giuseppe Mazzini, Pierre de Coubertin, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and others. The narrative is interspersed with autobiographic recollections in which Buruma discusses his patriotic English grandparents and his own early Anglophilia, which he shared with other Dutch youths. In *Bad Elements*, Buruma examines the state of the democracy movement in China more than a decade after the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. Buruma's investigation, informed by interviews with exiled Chinese political activists and former student leaders, reveals the bitter infighting that persists among Chinese dissidents and juxtaposes the travails of agitators in China with their counterparts in Singapore, Taiwan, and Tibet.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Buruma has received nearly unanimous praise for his astute, interesting studies of Asian culture and society. Critics have often noted his dual Dutch-British parentage, his facility with various languages, and his expansive knowledge of literature and history as distinguishing features of his unique personal perspective. His intimate understanding of the Far East, acquired through extensive first-hand engagements, has also earned him a reputation as an expert in Asian studies. Reviewers have praised *Behind the Mask* for providing a Western audience with an accurate portrait of the Japanese cultural psyche. *God's Dust* has been similarly appreciated for Buruma's insightful commentary on the intersection of Eastern and Western culture in Asia. In these works, as well as *The Wages of Guilt*, *The Missionary and the Libertine*, *Anglomania*, and *Bad Elements*, Buruma has earned respect for his intelligence, penetrating analysis, and engaging writing. Buruma's effort at fiction in *Playing the Game*, however, has received mixed reviews, with some critics lauding his historical re-creation and portrayal of cultural conflict and others finding the subject arcane, uninteresting, and unconvincing. Though a journalist rather than an academic, Buruma has been highly regarded for his significant contributions to the study of modern Asia. Reviewers have consistently commended Buruma's effort to dismantle Western misconceptions about the East, as well as his exploration of historical memory and the currents of national identity in both the East and West.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Behind the Mask: On Sexual Demons, Sacred Mothers, Transvestites, Gangsters, Drifters, and Other Japanese Cultural Heroes* (nonfiction) 1984; published in the United Kingdom as *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture*
- God's Dust: A Modern Asian Journey* (travel essays) 1989
- Playing the Game* (novel) 1991
- The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (nonfiction) 1994

- The Missionary and the Libertine: Love and War in East and West* (essays) 1996  
*Anglomania: A European Love Affair* (nonfiction) 1999; published in the United Kingdom as *Voltaire's Coco-nuts: Anglomania in Europe*  
*Bad Elements: Among the Rebels, Dissidents, and Democ-rats of Greater China* (nonfiction) 2001

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## CRITICISM

**Justin Wintle (review date 17 February 1984)**

SOURCE: Wintle, Justin. "A Pinch of Aji No Moto." *New Statesman* 107, no. 2761 (17 February 1984): 23-4.

[In the following review, Wintle praises *A Japanese Mirror*, calling it an "engaging, at times disturbing read."]

Much has been made of Japan's isolation. Western commentators, brought up in the meta-community of Christian states, are inevitably impressed by the long periods in Japan's history when, to all intents and purposes, the country had no contact with the outside world. And yet when contact has occurred the effects have been decisive, even traumatic. Buddhism, Confucianism, Chinese and Americo-European culture have each had a critical and lasting impact. For a people who constantly return to an ideal of national purity the Japanese have been curiously vulnerable to outside influences.

It is not then isolation of itself so much as isolation combined with episodic cultural invasion which, I suspect, explains many of the peculiarities of Japanese society, and which sets up just the kind of permeating ambivalence that makes writing about Japan at once enormously exciting and deeply frustrating. And the Japanese themselves do everything they can to exacerbate the challenge. 'I am Japanese' is a phrase that recurs again and again in their conversation with foreigners, offered sometimes as an apology, sometimes as a declaration that the speaker is somehow absolved from having to take account of an alien code, an alien logic, and sometimes as both. But then the Japanese have had their fair share of bifurcation to contend with as well. On the one hand there has been a steadily growing corps of Japan enthusiasts, beginning with the amiable Lafcadio Hearn and continuing through to Roland Barthes, whose *Empire of Signs* (trans. 1982) must surely rank as the number one example of stupefaction disguised as literature; and on the other hand, since the war at least, there has been no shortage of people willing to castigate the Japanese as a higher form of yellow peril. For both parties perhaps Japan's sin has been her success.

*A Japanese Mirror* is an audacious, compelling and entirely readable attempt to get to grips with the paradoxes, even if it is not particularly scholarly (the index is

execrable), and even if it does pander, in the manner of nearly every other cultural assessment of Japan, to the quest for national identity which the Japanese are so expert at packaging for foreign as well as domestic consumption. By mixing fairly conventional sociological, anthropological and psychological arguments, borrowed largely from such worthy predecessors as Ruth Benedict and Ivan Morris, with his own brand of hard-hitting, and just occasionally scabrous, journalism, Ian Buruma achieves, if not a balanced synthesis, at least an entirely contemporary view of a complex and important society. And, although the scope of his book is limited, I can think of no other account that will tell the reader so much in so little space.

Just how different are the Japanese? And why are they so different? At the heart of these difficult questions is that old bogey, the dichotomy between nature and nurture. Are the idiosyncrasies of Japanese society to be explained by its past? Or has history itself been supplied with a novel kind of raw material?

My own view is that the differences, such as they are, should be treated as no more and no less than historical concomitants. Recently attempts have been made to show, for example, that the Japanese brain is not like other brains. But the thesis which this kind of research endeavours to validate ignores the overwhelming, if mainly silent, evidence. The fact that the Japanese are able to interact with the rest of mankind in all the essential ways (linguistically, sexually, commercially), at least when they want to, should rule against any notion that they are a different species either of homo sapiens or of nation. A different variety maybe, but then aren't we all? To suggest that Japan is a special case in some way is at once pretentious and trivial, a clear instance of barking up the wrong bamboo pole.

Buruma I think recognises this. If he is finally to be classed among the enthusiasts (his conclusion that the Japanese are intrinsically a gentle people is as incongruous as it would be if applied to any other division of humanity), he is not above taking what he sees and hears with a pinch of *aji no moto*. And seeing and hearing are important elements in his prismatic book. For while much of the ground that he covers will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the literature of Japan, at least equal space is given over to summarising modern Japanese cinema, theatre and other recreational facilities, such as the stylised brothels in Tokyo where the girls are dressed as airline hostesses, tarzan janes or hospital matrons.

What is attempted, and in large measure achieved, is a reconciliation between the new downmarket cultural forms to be found in the big cities and traditional values as exemplified in the classics. Where the picture is incomplete is that, while Buruma is good at spotting Western influences at work within the native idiom, he fails sufficiently to acknowledge that the major entertainment listings, including networked television programming, may contain anything up to 75% foreign (mainly American) product.



Thus, while he quite rightly draws our attention to Tora-san (Mister Tiger) as a homespun variant of Charlie Chaplin (with, for my money, a fortuitous dollop of Marty Allen), and tells us that his bi-annual films, released at New Year and Bon, are important events in the national calendar, he doesn't really indicate that the arrival of *Star Wars* or David Bowie are greeted with equal if not greater excitement. Samurai and yakusa movies provide a counterpart to cowboys and gangsters, but because they are recognisably genre pieces local audiences almost certainly give them less attention than Buruma warrants.

His book is subtitled 'Heroes and Villains of Japanese Culture,' but this tells only half, and precisely half, the story. Whereas Morris, in his most generalised survey (*The Nobility of Failure*, 1975), focussed attention on ritual suicide, Buruma goes straight for the jugular: sex. And a very elegant job he makes of it. Sexual roles, he tells us, are differentiated in broad alignment with the characters of the gods in Shinto mythology, Shinto being the one religion in Japan which has not been in part at least imported. These deities, and especially Amaterasu the Sun Goddess and Susanoo her darkling brother, are sometimes orderly, sometimes unruly, but can never pretend to be an embodiment of morality. On the contrary, in the key myths, their behaviour is distinctly amoral—unless (and this seems to be an important aspect of Japanese behaviour) being 'true to your feelings' can be classed as a form of morality. Indeed, as far as Amaterasu and Susanoo are concerned, they exemplify fairly universal patterns of sibling rivalry at its adolescent phase. We are dealing therefore, Buruma tells us, with a society in which absolute moral values are not present *ab initio*.

The siblings, closely involved in the creation story, between them preside over the country. From this Buruma extrapolates a simple but effective shape for his thematic narrative. Half the book is about the Japanese woman, and half about the Japanese man, in their various guises, with a bridging chapter on both-way transvestitism. In line with the legends, Amaterasu has decidedly got the upper hand over her brother, and so it should come as no surprise that Japan is woman-dominated. Indeed it would seem that the Japanese are even more hung up about their mothers than the Italians. But if there is a clear-cut precedent for the passivity of the modern salary-man (computer coolie?) in Susanoo's repression, when he breaks out he does so with a sadistic vengeance. Thus it is that the tough guy has a much longer pedigree in Japan than he does in the West, where, *pace* Hercules, the Christlike gentleman was the ideal hero at least until the mid-19th century.

In the absence of Jove or Jehovah anything may happen, and in Japan it usually does. But there are strong restraints as well, and here Buruma is less illuminating. If most women do not run amok *à la* Amaterasu at her most tempestuous, then that is because of effective behavioural codes. But while these are sometimes described, there is no clue as to their origin. To what extent are they indigenous, to what extent are they supplied by Buddhist

and Confucian precepts? Buruma does not tell us, nor does he go sufficiently far into the business world which, trade being what it is, is what we really need to know about. Nonetheless, *A Japanese Mirror*, with its rich and sexy anecdotalism, is an engaging, at times disturbing read, not least because its author, having derived his framework from the gods, knows when to pull a screen on them.

**Edward Seidensticker (review date 13-20 August 1984)**

SOURCE: Seidensticker, Edward. "Japan Kink." *New Republic* 191, nos. 7-8 (13-20 August 1984): 40-2.

[In the following review, Seidensticker compliments Buruma's commentary on Japanese culture in *Behind the Mask*.]

Ian Buruma has written a lively book [*Behind the Mask*] about what we may call the dirty side of Japan, more interesting to some of us than the pretty side that has been so much more widely publicized by the Japanese information services and by those of us who write about Japan. In his preface Buruma says that his book

is an attempt to draw a picture of the Japanese as they imagine themselves to be, and as they would like themselves to be. . . . I shall try to show the products of a more popular, more collective imagination: films, comics, plays, and books catering to the taste of the maximum amount of people, and thus often the lowest common denominator. This is not always the best art, though it is certainly not to be despised, but it is often revealing of the people at whom it is aimed. Because of this, I have devoted more space to the raunchy, violent, and often morbid side of Japanese culture than to the more refined and delicate forms with which we are familiar in the West.

Buruma is the first to describe at length this side of the Japanese nature, and we must be grateful to him.

Of the thirteen chapters, six are about women, five are about men, one is about mannish women and womanish men, and one is a conclusion and summary with the title, not a little ironic, "A Gentle People." Rather different Japanese emerge than those whom the cheerleaders have made us aware of. They are much impelled by emotions and by "sincerity" and not greatly concerned with the rational faculty, and they are scarcely interested at all in morals. Once I was sitting with an American friend who had long been in Japan. On the television screen before us was the spectacle of students tearing the most honored university in the land to pieces. "This country has never had any defenses against sincerity," said my friend. It was a very good explanation for the remarkable scene, and the best explanation for the fact that the students among this "gentle people" have been violent as have the students of no other land.

Buruma describes and he theorizes. Perhaps inevitably, the description is more effective than the theory, some of which is interesting but not entirely convincing. This is

true of one point which he makes early and repeatedly, and which is basic: "that the contrast between the native, Shinto-inspired popular culture and the more aristocratic, Buddhist-inspired aesthetic is so strong that one could almost speak of two separate cultures." A page later we are informed that the rulers of the land made people "behave according to imported codes, which they did not really share." This does not seem an adequate explanation for either the hedonistic or the puritanical elements in Japanese culture. The military chronicles of the Middle Ages reveal that a stern code governed the behavior of rustic warriors who cannot possibly have been indoctrinated by a hedonistic court. Moreover, it was during the Tokugawa or Edo Period that Japanese society came closest to totalitarianism, and the stern code of the Edo merchant was not externally imposed. It had very deep roots in mercantile culture. Nor is Buruma correct to blame a foreign cult, or give it credit, for the earliest Japanese pornography. Surely pornography is a product of sophistication, which takes many forms. The permissive Mediterranean cultures have it, and so do the repressive cultures of the north. All through the ages the Japanese, not as classes but as individuals, have been queer combinations of the repressive and the permissive.

Buruma also makes much of the Japanese view of moral absolutes, or rather the lack of absolutes. "Morality is [for the Japanese] very much a matter of time and place and nothing is absolute," he writes early in the book. It may be so, and then again it may not. We must be sure what we mean by such complex, suggestive words as "morality" and "absolute." At the very least, the Japanese sense of loyalty, crucial to the economic miracles we keep hearing about, approaches both absoluteness and morality. So does the sense of kin responsibility. In any event, these are arguable matters which have a way of eluding generalization.

Buruma's descriptions of low-brow movies and "comic" books and the like, however, are uniformly lively, amusing, and to the point. There is, for instance, running commentary on the plots of the *hahamono*, the "mother things," as he calls them, of the cinema. It could be intrusive, and it is not. Mothers are cause for sentimentality the world over, but in few places can tragic mothers be more conspicuous than in the Japanese popular entertainments. There was an actress, now deceased, who so excelled at *hahamono* that she was known as "the mother of Japan" (and not, be it noticed, the sweetheart). Her most celebrated vehicle, *A Japanese Tragedy*, had in it far less bite than Dreiser's American one.

And how she suffers! She is thrown out of her husband's house by her brother-in-law and she slides lower and lower down the scales of poverty until finally she has to suffer nightly humiliation as a barmaid in a vulgar seaside resort. For the children she will do anything.

But are they grateful? Of course not. They despise her. . . . The poor, sacrificing mother of Japan has no

choice but to do what poor, sacrificing mothers always do in these cases: she jumps in front of the nearest oncoming train.

On the masculine side, there is a cult of babyishness and purity, which dovetails nicely with the cult of the tragic goddess-mother. In the movies the good guys and bad guys are not cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians, but gangsters of unsullied Japanese purity and those who have been tainted by foreign viruses. That there is a strong coating of nationalism, even chauvinism, over all this, should be quite apparent—one can see why the Koreans do not much want the Japanese back. Of a high school baseball tournament which occurs semi-annually to purify the land, Buruma observes: ". . . no wonder that the present chairman of the High School Baseball Association let it be known that it is 'official policy' not to let foreign reporters into the ground. Presumably they would sully the holy purity of the event."

These and many other delights await the reader of Buruma's book. In the first quotation above, he seems to be saying (or do I misread him?) that none of the material he treats is "to be despised." Some of it, though, is downright loathsome. What he calls "comics" are an example. There is very little trace of the comical in most of them. When I was a child we called the colored Sunday supplement "the funnies." These might well be called "the uglies" or "the ouchies," so filled are they with cruelty and the least lovable of people. Among those which I find most repellent is an exceedingly popular one about a motherly prostitute. She comforts mama-lorn boys by cuddling them against her breasts and between her thighs. In one episode a colleague of whom she does not approve is murdered in a most brutal and gory way. Of this she does approve. The colleague was not motherly enough. She was lustful.

Selecting somewhat different elements from the same popular genres, one might come up with a different view of the Japanese mother and father, for instance, than the Blondie-Dagwood combination which Buruma offers. One might, indeed, find the terrible, tyrannical father and the victimized mother. I sometimes wonder if Blondie might not in fact be responsible for the Japanese convention of the weak father and the strong mother. She has been a great success in Japan, and Japanese commercial artists do not at all mind revealing themselves as derivative. Observing families in the park on Sunday afternoons in Japan, I do not myself see the bored nonentity of a father whom Buruma seems to see. I see them trying rather hard and doing rather well—and it is not easy to arouse the respect and affection of one's children when one has a single afternoon a week on which to work at it.

There can be no question, however, that Japanese women love to mother and Japanese men love to be mothered. I have known Japanese men who, with their wives indisposed and unable to serve, have seemed unable to find the way to the front door. Similarly, we have the pretty boy at the center of the movie and television screen, not very

masculine, a bit of a sissy even, but idolized. Since women are the ones who sit all day at the screen and buy the products it purveys, we may say with confidence that it is they who love these pretty creatures, so *kawaii* (which we may render as “darling”), so ideal for cossetting.

Buruma makes the Japanese look somewhat silly. Very well; all of us are in some respects silly. Since Japanese popular culture is so different from ours, the elements of silliness emerge more conspicuously. Buruma is the first to undertake a systematic treatment of the dirty, sentimental, and yes, silly side of Japanese culture. Because it is there, and because it is important, it should not be neglected, however the dealers in “international understanding” may feel. He has done his work well, and indeed with restraint. And what might he have done with Japanese popular music, which he scarcely mentions? The lyrics represent the worst kind of self-pity, the treacly kind, and the accompaniment sounds like a computerized accordion playing minor variations on the same insipid themes for hours and hours and hours. And how very much more he could have written about television. Japanese television prides itself, rightly, on technical excellence, but the content is base; and, because no country in the world is more television saturated, a great many better things, such as literature, are suffering.

**Caroline Moorehead (review date 27 October 1989)**

SOURCE: Moorehead, Caroline. “Asia’s Crisis of Identity.” *New Statesman and Society* 2, no. 73 (27 October 1989): 33.

*[In the following review of God’s Dust, Moorehead commends Buruma’s anecdotal sketches but finds shortcomings in the book’s “dense” scholarly passages and Buruma’s failure to answer his own guiding questions.]*

Do McDonald’s hamburgers and *Dynasty* make the Thais less Thai and the Japanese less Japanese? This question, how a country becomes modern without losing its sense of identity and culture, fascinated Ian Buruma long before he sat down to write this book [*God’s Dust*]. On his many travels round the east he had grown increasingly irritated by the clichés that seemed to pursue him wherever he turned: that third world cities have been so westernised that to find the true east you have to go to the countryside, and that the material west and the spiritual east are clearly juxtaposed. In time, his irritation became such that he set himself to chart Asia’s crisis of identity.

He took a year to do so. Starting in Rangoon, he moved on to Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and finally Japan. His plan was to give “an account of the dilemmas, the cultural confusion, the needless searching for meaning and national identity that go on there.” This was his intellectual aim. He had a second, personal one.

The son of parents from two different countries, who has lived a third of his life in Asia, Buruma has always been fascinated by other people’s loyalties. His quest, then, was to look at people facing the problems that faced Europe 100 years ago, with the difference that Europe shaped its own modern world, while Asia is having one thrust upon it, and to try to decide whether it is better for these countries to reject modern trends, or accommodate themselves to them.

In Burma, Ian Buruma found decay and a rampant black market; in Thailand, violence and a return to Buddhist fundamentalism; in the Philippines an unhealthy obsession with America; and in Japan a glittering fashionableness, summed up for him by a novelist as having the shiny, stylish surface of a “crystal.”

His most enjoyable report is on Singapore, a country in the sterile, suffocating grip of Lee Kuan Yew, a man so obsessed with dirt of any kind that he forced the former President Devan Nair to undergo a medical inspection for skin diseases before allowing him to use the presidential swimming pool.

Even so, Ian Buruma lets him off lightly. He touches on the story of the 22 young Singaporean professionals—lawyers, businessmen, human rights workers—who were suddenly arrested two and a half years ago, roughed up and made to appear on television to “confess” they were plotting a Marxist coup, but then not tried. But he does not go on to say that two of them are still in solitary confinement and may remain there indefinitely, like Chia Thye Poh, a former Member of Parliament who has been in jail for the last 24 years, on indefinitely renewed detention orders, and who has never been either charged or tried.

One of the problems Buruma had to face and, hardly surprisingly, could not solve, was how to cope with the speed with which the modern world is moving. Since he passed through them, Burma has descended into a revolt, Japan has had a number of political scandals and Marcos is dead.

This is not an easy book, perhaps because it is at heart a book of politics and historical analysis, disguised as a travel book. Buruma’s interests are scholarly and, without his particular knowledge of the economic and social structures of these eight countries, much of what he writes is extremely dense. Places and people, unfamiliar and crammed together, merge. For the general reader, what Buruma excels at, on the other hand, are quick sketches of incidents and encounters.

There is, for instance, the account of his interview with the Marcos’s in their house in Honolulu six months after they left the Philippines. Marcos was solemn and affable; Imelda ate chocolates, sang American show tunes of the 1940s and, giggling, told him that it was better to have all those shoes in her cupboard than a lot of skeletons. In the

Philippines itself, he visited one of Marcos's country houses, and came upon dozens of rusting golf carts; he was told that they had once been used to transport the guests to the funeral of one of the President's granddaughters, who was buried in a nearby lake.

These scenes, and many others like them, are most enjoyable. But they do not provide the answers to Buruma's initial set of questions. Somewhere along the lines of this intelligent, provocative, interesting book, those threads have been lost.

### Richard West (review date 11 November 1989)

SOURCE: West, Richard. "Cultural Confusion in the East." *Spectator* 263, no. 8420 (11 November 1989): 54-5.

[In the following review, West compliments Buruma's writing in *God's Dust*, though he acknowledges that he disagrees with "almost all Mr Buruma's views and opinions."]

Some four years ago, I read in the *New York Review of Books* an article on the Philippines of such originality and depth of understanding that I immediately wanted to know some more about its author, Ian Buruma. He turned out to be a young Dutch scholar of oriental languages who had already published what my informants called the best modern book on Japan, and now lived in Hong Kong. Having since read more of his articles, in *The Spectator* among other places, I waited eagerly for this new book [*God's Dust*] of travels in search of the character and cultural identity of Burma and Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, two former Japanese colonies, and lastly Japan itself. This book turns out to be quite simply superb, and Mr Buruma has now established himself as the finest western interpreter of the east.

Although Mr Buruma no doubt subsidised his travels by writing for magazines, these essays are not journalistic in the sense of telling us what is going on now. The question he wants to answer is not, for example, 'Whither Taiwan?', but 'Whence Taiwan?.' He is steeped in the history and the literature of these countries, almost all of which he has read in the native languages, and he has complemented this by conversations with writers, scholars and, less frequently, politicians.

The book is, thank goodness, free of the trivial anecdotes that publishers often demand of travel writers ('the funny things that happened to me on the bus to Bangkok'), but sometimes Mr Buruma steps quite forcefully into the story. In Japan, he became the only foreigner in a theatre group performing absurdist plays, in one of which he was cast as Midnight Cowboy, disguised as a Russian agent. After the last performance in Kyoto, the usual drunken party ended in bloodshed, as the producer, Kara Juro, banged a saké bottle against the nose of a film actor, then hurled a heavy glass ashtray at his Korean wife.

At this point Mr Buruma was overcome with feelings of European chivalry, and shouted at the producer, 'Don't throw things at women.' He adds rather sadly:

Kara never forgave me. I had betrayed his expectations. By breaking the code of expected behaviour, by challenging the leader to his face, by standing up, however absurdly, as an individual, by claiming to speak out for higher principles, by suddenly behaving like a Westerner, I had betrayed Kara, betrayed the group. Just an ordinary foreigner after all. I had been given the chance to be Japanese and I blew it.

There is a word *Nihonjinron*, meaning defining Japanese-ness, which has now grown into a national enterprise, almost an industry, producing hundreds of books, thousands of articles, TV programmes and radio talks. In his essay on *Nihonjinron* in this book, Mr Buruma has space for only a few, though brilliant insights on a nation which wants to be at the same time unique and universal, eastern and western, ancient and modern. For instance, the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 was described by the Japanese Foreign Minister as 'a collision between the new civilisation of the West and the old civilisation of East Asia.' To one who long ago gave up trying to comprehend the Japanese, it comes as a consolation to learn that *Nihonjinron* defeats them as well.

Some of the contradictions of Japan have passed to her former colonies. In South Korea, Ian Buruma encountered fury as well as bewilderment. The historian Professor Pak pointed at pictures of ancient rocks, shards, holy trees and other relics, then called them, 'Korean, all uniquely Korean.' He had found similar relics in Japan, which proved that Japanese culture came from Korea.

Ian Buruma found still more cultural confusion in Taiwan, which had been colonised by the Japanese under the name of Formosa, then occupied in 1949 by the Chinese army of Chiang Kai Shek, after the victory of the Communists. Although Japan had made Formosa a model colony, with European buildings, schools, hospitals, roads and electricity better by far than anywhere in China, the present rulers of Taiwan either reject or ignore the Japanese past. Japanese culture, still in western disguise, prevails in Taiwan:

The coffee shops with their quasi baroque, partly French château, partly Alpine Swiss interiors, where teenaged girls eat spaghetti and chocolate parfaits. . . . Like the colonial buildings, they are Japanese fantasies of Europe and America transformed to Taiwan. They are forms of modern kitsch twice removed from their source, and thus they almost defy interpretation. What to call it? Japanese modern? Asian baroque?

Ian Buruma says that the racial theories justifying western colonialism—the White Man's Burden—survive in the east from Malaya and Singapore to Japan, while long discarded in the west. Both Dr Mahathir of Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore denounce the decadent modern Britain while praising the old imperial rulers. In