

Institution: University of Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: 28 (History)		
Title of case study: Changing How the BBC Covers Japan and the Relationship Between Culture, Politics and Mental Health		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 – 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Christopher Harding	Senior Lecturer	2007 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Harding's research focuses on the ways in which culture and politics shaped experiences of, treatments for and commentaries upon mental illness in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Japan. It has also examined the contemporary effects of these processes in Japan and around the world, using a mixed historical and anthropological methodology. Harding has been able to use this research to steer mass media commentary – particularly within BBC Radio, but also more broadly – towards a deeper understanding of Japan alongside the ways in which culture and politics play a determining role in national conversations about mental health and illness.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Harding's research since 2009 has explored the ways in which culture and politics, particularly in Japan, have shaped experiences of mental illness, pioneering treatments and general social commentary on mental health.</p> <p>Harding uncovered the crucial role that nationalist myth-making in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played in how the country and its people understood, treated and publicly discussed mental health and illness. He found that influential Japanese thinkers responded to Western technological, economic and military supremacy in this era by claiming that such achievements came at the cost of the Western soul. By contrast, these thinkers argued, the people of Japan had remained closer to nature, more fully human, and far healthier – psychologically, and spiritually. They claimed that mental illness was a relative rarity in Japan as a result. Where it did occur, they blamed imported Western lifestyles, which they characterised as hectic, grasping and self-obsessed [3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4]. Harding's research showed, too, how modernising religious traditions in Japan developed their own forms of this general argument. Zen Buddhist leaders, for example, claimed both at home and abroad that their tradition was more philosophically credible than Christianity and that its practices were more conducive to psychological resilience in individuals – and, as a consequence, national strength. Other influential Japanese thinkers in this era used the emerging disciplines of psychiatry and psychotherapy to provide scientific and medical support for the idea that certain facets of Asian, and especially Japanese culture, were inherently healthier than their Western counterparts. Japanese social commentators played their own influential role, taking individuals' mental health as a barometer of a successful society more generally. Westerners critical of their home societies took up many of these arguments across the twentieth century. Some claimed to find a contrast between, on the one hand, Japan's close and co-operative familial</p>		

relationships, fed by quiet, poetic and empathic modes of understanding, and Western individualism and hyper-rationalism [3.2, 3.5, 3.6].

Harding based many of these insights on archival materials, which he was the first to discover, relating to Kosawa Heisaku (1897 – 1968): a devout Buddhist, and Japan's 'father of psychoanalysis'. Utilising these materials, alongside a wide range of interviews (including with Kosawa's son, Yorio, and grandson, Makoto), Harding showed how mental health practitioners in Kosawa's generation blended medicine, religion and politics in their therapeutic work. Harding backed up these findings by showing that critics of Kosawa had been concerned at the time about his heavy focus on correct morality, behaviour and Japanese national strength, at the expense of more open-ended psychological exploration [3.1, 3.4, 3.5].

Blending archival and anthropological methodologies, and working with scholars in Japan, the US and elsewhere, Harding explored the continuing influence of some of these themes into the later twentieth century and down to the present day. He found that influential people in the worlds of politics and mental health, both within Japan and abroad, have continued to imagine Japan according to stereotypes, myths, generalisations and half-truths that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries [3.3, 3.4].

3. References to the research

3.1. C. Harding (2013). The Therapeutic Method of Kosawa Heisaku: 'Religion' and 'the Psy Disciplines'. In *Japanese Contributions to Psychoanalysis* 4. The Japan Psychoanalytic Society. https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/46190784/paper3_harding.pdf [Peer-reviewed; research funded in part by peer-reviewed grants from the British Academy and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS)].

3.2. C. Harding, F. Iwata and S. Yoshinaga (eds) (2015). *Religion and Psychotherapy in Modern Japan*. (Routledge Contemporary Japan Series). Taylor & Francis. ISBN 9781138628991. [Reviewed in *Social Science Japan Journal* (2016: 19/2): 'Composing nearly a quarter of the entire volume, Harding's contributions are a synthesis of how the knotty threads of religion and the 'psy disciplines' have been inextricably intertwined in modern Japan, what he calls the 'religion-psy dialogue'... [His] chapter summaries are concise, analytical, and insightful contributions in their own right.'] (Can be supplied by HEI on request).

3.3. C. Harding (2017). Historical Reflections on Mental Health and Illness: India, Japan, and the West. In R.G. White, U.M. Read, S. Jain & D.M. Orr (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sociocultural Perspectives on Global Mental Health* (Palgrave).

https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F978-1-137-39510-8_4. DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-39510-8. [Research funded in part by peer-reviewed grants from the British Academy, JSPS and the Wellcome Trust] (Can be supplied by HEI on request).

3.4. C. Harding (2018). *Japan Story: In Search of a Nation, 1850 to the Present*. Allen Lane. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/304460/japan-story/9780141985367.html> ISBN: 9780141985367 [Research funded in part by peer-reviewed grants from the British Academy, JSPS and the Wellcome Trust] (Can be supplied by HEI on request).

3.5. C. Harding (2014). Japanese Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: The Making of a Relationship. *History of Psychiatry*, 25(2), 154-170.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X14524307>

[Peer-reviewed; research funded in part by peer-reviewed grants from the JSPS and British Academy]

3.6. C. Harding (2016). Religion, Psychiatry and Psychotherapy: Exploring the Japanese Experience and the Possibility of a Transnational Framework. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*. 161 – 182.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/18752160-3459406> [Peer-reviewed; research funded in part by a peer-reviewed grant from the Wellcome Trust]

4. Details of the impact

Producing accurate, credible coverage of Japan is a challenge for the BBC, as it requires specialised knowledge combined with the ability to convey it to broad audiences. Over the past eight years, Harding has used his research insights and expertise on the country to progressively build the necessary reputation and trust in the organisation to help it overcome this challenge. His work with the BBC has been at the heart of a broader range of activities in the mass media.

Harding's relationship with the BBC began in 2013 when the broadcaster and its Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) partners selected him as one of only ten academics to become 'New Generation Thinkers' that year. The AHRC describes this highly competitive programme as a 'pioneering public engagement scheme' which 'aims to develop a new generation of academics who can bring the best of university research and scholarly ideas to a broad audience through working with the media and public engagement' [5.1a]. It selected Harding based on his performance in a selection day and on the strength of his research on the connections between culture, politics and mental health in Japan [3.1, 3.5]. In the years since, Harding has enjoyed a considerable degree of creative and intellectual freedom in pitching programme and segment ideas for BBC Radio, and then writing and presenting those that the organisation commissioned.

The Head of BBC Radio Current Affairs writes that Harding 'is one of the very few academics I have worked with who understands how to translate complex ideas into intelligible documentaries which work on mass media outlets, with no diminution in intellectual ambition. He writes elegantly and clearly, is full of ideas and is a born communicator. He has suggested several ideas which have succeeded in the BBC's competitive commissioning process' [5.2].

Harding made his first media contributions as a panellist on BBC Radio 3's flagship arts and humanities programme, *Free Thinking*, in 2013. These appearances led the programme to commission him to write and present two radio essays the same year [5.3a and b], based on his research on the relationship between Buddhism and psychoanalysis in Japan [3.1, 3.5]. Radio 3 commissioned Harding to explore the same research themes in a 2014 documentary, *Freud in Asia*, which was placed in the high-profile 'Sunday Feature' slot [5.3c]. The editor of *Free Thinking* notes that 'Harding has shared his expertise in Japanese literature/thinking/attitudes towards mental health in various broadcasts, and it would be true to say that without his expertise *Free Thinking* wouldn't have broadcast as many discussions

looking at Japanese culture... [Harding's expertise] has allowed [us] to reflect non-western perspectives on culture in our discussions' [5.4].

Positive reactions within the BBC to Harding's early work gave him the chance to shape coverage of Japan on BBC Radio 4 and the World Service. His *Archive on 4* documentary, *Misunderstanding Japan* [5.5a], explored the lingering effects in the Western mind of some of the national stereotyping for which Kosawa Heisaku and his generation were partly responsible [3.3, 3.4, 3.5]. It was the most listened-to of the World Service's online programmes during the week of its broadcast in 2015, with more than 23,000 downloads [5.2]. Twitter comments, such as 'Loved this R4 doc about our stereotypes and fantasies, def recommended' [5.5b] suggested that the programme struck a chord with listeners.

In 2016, Harding drew on the more comparative and anthropological dimensions of his research work [3.3, 3.6] to create a four-part documentary series for Radio 4 and the World Service called *The Borders of Sanity* [5.6a]. The series focused on the under-recognised power of culture to shape people's experiences of mental illness, whether they regard themselves as 'ill' or not, and to influence the ways in which doctors and commentators treat them. Harding set the intellectual agenda for the series, conducting interviews in Japan, Ghana, Sweden and Scotland, writing the scripts and presenting the finished result.

The 'Hearing Voices in the UK' episode, which focused on auditory hallucinations, attracted a positive response on Twitter, including: 'a huge and complex and contentious issue and you handled it absolutely beautifully' [5.6b]. In an email to Harding after the BBC aired this episode, the manager of a day-centre for psychiatric patients at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital noted: 'we're still getting really good feedback from people... it has been really good at informing people about voices' [5.6c].

In 2018, BBC Radio 3 commissioned *Night Blossoms*, an entire season of Japan programmes inspired by Harding's research and expertise [5.7a]. Harding's first contribution was a five-part series of radio essays about Japanese culture and national psychology, entitled *Dark Blossoms* [3.2, 3.4, 3.5]. The second was a documentary, *Supernatural Japan*, on grief and ghost sightings after Japan's triple disasters in March 2011. Both were critic's choices in *The Telegraph* [5.7b; multiplatform monthly reach: 19,697,000]. *Dark Blossoms* was also Radio Choice in the *Financial Times* [5.7c; multiplatform monthly reach: 16,107,346]. In its 21st April 2016 review of the series, *The Times* [multiplatform monthly reach: 16,606,000] noted Harding's intention, in his research and broadcasting, of tracing and revising widespread misunderstandings about Japanese culture. 'For westerners, Japan summons up images of businessmen in suits, cherry blossom, technology and tea ceremonies – past and present intertwined, incongruous yet serene' wrote the reviewer, Catherine Nixey. 'Yet, says the academic Christopher Harding, it wasn't always obvious that was how it would be... Harding explains the surprisingly conflicted processes that led to the Japan we know today. Fascinating and smart [...] listen with one finger on the pause button so you can stop and think about one sentence before the next hits you' [5.7d].

Harding has leveraged his BBC radio profile to carve out space online and in the print media for his research ideas. More than 1.1 million people read his piece for the online BBC News Magazine to accompany *Misunderstanding Japan*, entitled *Three Western Myths About Japan*. It was the third most-read item on the BBC News website that day [5.8a, 5.8b]. His *Ghosts on the Shore* article for *Aeon Magazine*, on Japanese seeing ghosts after the triple disasters of 2011, reached a broad audience too, achieving 73,704 page-views [5.8c and d].

Harding has also written for *History Today*, *BBC History Magazine* and *The Guardian* [5.8e – g]. More than 200 people commented on his opinion article in the *New York Times* [global online reach: 151,000,000], which placed the tidy-up guru Marie Kondo in the context of Japan's soft power strategy of encouraging positive Western images of Japanese culture and national psychology [5.8h and i].

Harding's impact has since come full circle, back to university education. Universities including Princeton in the US, Keio in Japan and Cardiff in Wales have used *Misunderstanding Japan* to introduce students to the myths and realities of Japanese culture, alongside the history and enduring significance of these misperceptions [5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 AHRC website, New Generation Thinkers page. Accessed June 2020.

5.2 Head of BBC Radio Current Affairs. *BBC* (testimonial email, 28 March 2019; email regarding listener figures for *Misunderstanding Japan*, 30 October 2015).

5.3 BBC Radio Three, Free Thinking essays:

- a) Psychoanalysis and Buddhism, first aired 17th June 2013 [[Link](#)] starts 28.25 minutes
- b) Therapy Versus Prayer, first aired Friday 8th November 2013. [[Link](#)]
- c) Freud in Asia, first aired 16th November 2014. [[Link](#)]

5.4 Editor. *BBC*. (testimonial email, 16 April 2019).

5.5 Archive on 4 *Misunderstanding Japan* evidence:

- a) *Misunderstanding Japan*, first aired August 2015. [[Link](#)]
- b) Twitter response to *Misunderstanding Japan*.

5.6 *The Borders of Sanity* evidence:

- a) *The Borders of Sanity* BBC Radio Four series, first aired 1st June 2016. [[Link](#)]
- b) Twitter response to *The Borders of Sanity*.
- c) Email comment to Harding from mental health worker Julie McPherson.

5.7 *Night Blossoms* evidence:

- a) *Night Blossoms*, BBC Radio 3.
- b) Telegraph review of *Supernatural Japan* and *Dark Blossoms*.
- c) Financial Times review of *Dark Blossoms*.
- d) The Times Today's Picks review.
- e) Newspaper figures from Newsworks for *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, and the *FT's* commercial website.

5.8 Additional media evidence:

- a) C. Harding (20 August 2015). Three Western myths about Japan. *BBC News Magazine*. [[Link](#)]
- b) Readership figures for Three Western myths about Japan (email from Head of BBC Current Affairs, 24 August 2015).
- c) C. Harding (6 August 2018). Ghosts on the Shore. *Aeon Magazine*. [[Link](#)]
- d) Managing Editor. *Aeon Media* (testimonial email, 22 March 2019).
- e) C. Harding (5 May 2019). Why Japan Stopped Fighting. *History Today* 69. [[Link](#)]
- f) BBC History Magazine, What's history's greatest mystery?, 27th May 2020. [[Link](#)]
- g) C. Harding (21 November 2018). Top 10 books about Japan. *The Guardian*. [[Link](#)]
- h) C. Harding (18 January 2019). Marie Kondo and the Life-Changing Magic of Japanese Soft Power. *The New York Times*. [[Link](#)]
- i) Audience reach for *The New York Times*.

5.9 Emails and a course handbook confirming take-up of *Misunderstanding Japan* at the named universities.