Who understands Asia better: “The Bride” (Uma Thurman) or James Bond (Sean Connery)?

In both movies, The Bride and Bond have been thrown into a setting that their directors believe to be encompassing Asia that is Japan. In You Only Live Twice, I find the Japan portrayed full of Western stereotypes – a land of mysterious ninjas and punctuality freaks, where exotic women bend to the man’s every whim.

In my opinion, Bond does not seem to appreciate the Japanese culture, or understand Japan at all. The movie is full of stereotypes of how Japanese behave, and how they are perceived through Western eyes. I thought that the movie made the Japanese look dumb and subjugated by Bond. Also, the idea of being Japanese was done with a cut-and-paste outlook, where Tanaka tries to ‘make’ Bond Japanese by wearing Japanese clothes, marrying a Japanese woman and through training in the Japanese martial arts. This is a very superficial understanding of Japanese culture that only focuses on external trappings.

Alternatively, The Bride in Kill Bill appreciates Japan more, from her immersion into Japanese culture. She appreciates it more so than Bond and is acutely aware of the traditions in Japanese culture. In addition, I felt that the movie was more ‘Asian’ because it is clearly influenced by many aspects of Asian cinema; through the use of actors such as Sonny Chiba, and paying homage to Bruce Lee. With the manga-like stylized amputations of the Crazy 88 and narrating part of the film in anime, Quentin Tarantino picked out some aspects of Japanese culture and incorporated it into his film.

However, even if there were ‘Asian’ elements, I do not feel that this shows any understanding of Asia, be it by The Bride or by the director himself. This is because the concept of what makes Asia is not just limited to knowledge and appreciation of Japan. What Tarantino seems to understand about Asia is defined by what he has injected into Kill Bill, which I think, is quite superficial as well – the choreographed fight scenes, the fast-paced swordplay, and Japanese popular culture like anime. I feel that perhaps the elements made up some part of the Japanese culture, but it does not represent Asia.

Both movies are set in Japan, and clearly, Japan does not define the whole of Asia. The appreciation of Japanese culture by The Bride does not necessarily mean that The Bride understands Asia, as she has only been exposed to one culture. I think that the diverse melting pot of people, cultures and traditions contribute to part of the definition of what makes Asia, and as such, The Bride does not achieve that in Kill Bill. Instead the ‘Asia’ that has been made for her is singularly based on Japan. This applies to Bond as well. Bond neither appreciates Japan, nor does he also seem to understand Asia.

In conclusion, neither Bond nor The Bride have any clue of what Asia is really about. Being exposed to only one of many Asian cultures does not mean that they have been enlightened on an understanding of Asia.
An obvious common factor between both Lewis Gilbert’s You Only Live Twice and Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill: Vol. 1 is that the main bulk of its narrative was set in Japan. Both leads go through some sort of assimilation with the Japanese in order to fulfill their respective missions of rescue and revenge. Before we can attempt to address the question of who understand Asia better, there are many other questions that need to be addressed.

For one, does Japan represent or constitute Asia? Although Japan and China do form the bulk of Asia, it does not justify the equation of Japanese values as Asian values. Hence, even if they do understand Japan, they might not necessarily understand Asia as a whole. Both films did not attempt to represent all Asia. Since Japan is the main aspect that is Asian about the films, we shall explore which of the protagonists understand Japan better.

Both films present Japan from a western perspective based on their stereotypes of what Japan is like. Fierce loyalty and dedication in their work is evident in both the Crazy 88 gang (Kill Bill) as well as Japanese spies and plant workers in the Bond movie. In the latter movie, the villager wife of Bond’s high level of commitment to duty was almost comical on many occasions. Women are always portrayed as submissive in the strongly patriarchal society. They were seen as traditional and closely tied to nature. This can be seen in the scene when Bond was declared to have a wife, as the scene was set on a hill in traditional costume on a hill under a paper umbrella. Realistically speaking, the kimono is not for everyday occasions in that time.

In Kill Bill, the Japanese were also portrayed stereotypically. However, it was expressed through a pastiche of popular culture icons and styles such as samurai flicks, yakuza pictures and Japanese anime (Powers). References to Chinese-ness was also made in its kung-fu sequences and Bruce Lee’s iconic yellow suit. Like in Bond’s movie, notions of duty, female subjugation, patriarchy and tradition were all presented. However, unlike the superficiality of the presentation in Bond, Kill Bill offers facets of the stereotype.

The familiar stereotype performed is usually undercut by exposing stereotype as a construct in itself. The patriarchal society is ironically ruled by a female boss (Lucy Liu). The owner of the club that she visited was also a lady, bossing a male attendant around. The famous sword-maker of Okinawa only relented to making a sword in the name of duty, as the vermin was his student. Unlike the nameless and faceless faithful Japanese workers in the ‘volcano’, the stereotype of their submissiveness is undercut by showing the rebellion of authority, as seen in comical scenes of the lazy sushi apprentice. By drawing attention to the fact that it is presenting a construct, it is highlighting the fact that such portrayals of Japan is a stereotypical one.

Unlike Bond’s superficial presentation of Japan, Kill Bill offered a more holistic approach offering different facets of Japan. Although neither completely understands Asia, the multiplicity of Kill Bill’s presentation gives it a better understanding ground.

1 John Powers, "Once Upon a Time in the East: Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill (or half of it, anyway)", LA Weekly, 10-16 October 2003