

JAPANESE ANIMATION IN SINGAPORE: A HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE STUDY

by Wai-ming Ng

Like *Candy Candy* and *Astroboy* in the 1960s and 1970s, *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon*, *Dragonball* and *Pokemon* have swept the world in the 1990s and 2000. Japanese animation (*anime* in Japanese) is one the few forms of Japanese popular culture which has truly been globalized.¹ Only it can counterbalance the hegemony of American animation in Asia and the world, showing that globalization of popular culture does not necessarily imply homogenization or Americanization.² Even in the United States and Europe, where the cultural and language barriers are thick for Japanese popular culture, increasing numbers of young people have become crazy about Japanese animation. Western scholars and journalists are also interested in Japanese animation.³

Japanese animation enjoys tremendous popularity in Asia where it has become a mainstream youth culture due to cultural and geographical proximity. East Asia nations such as Taiwan and Hong Kong are the centers of this global Japanese animation boom, and Southeast Asia has been strongly influenced by it.⁴ Japanese television cartoons have become very popular in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, screened daily on local television stations in different Asian languages.

This article examines the birth of a Japanese animation culture in Singapore from historical, cultural and comparative perspectives. It traces the historical development of Japanese television animation in Singapore from the late 1970s to the present, provides an analysis of the characteristics of Japanese animation in Singapore from a comparative perspective, and discusses the impact of Japanese animation in

Singapore's society and culture. Through an historical overview of Japanese animation in Singapore, this article aims to deepen our understanding of the ongoing popularization and localization of Japanese popular culture in Asia.

Past and Present

Japanese animation came to Singapore more than two decades ago and its popularity has been growing steadily. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the number of Japanese television animated series screened in Singapore was relatively small. In the late 1970s, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC, renamed Television Corporation of Singapore or TCS in 1996) began to show Japanese cartoons.⁵ During this time, censorship was very rigid, and thus SBC was very cautious in choosing Japanese cartoons, making sure the contents were problem-free. Japanese cartoons which contained elements of sex, violence, bad taste and scatology were not considered appropriate to show to the public. Early Japanese cartoons screened by SBC contained humanistic themes, moral messages and educational values.⁶ Most of these were classics made in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Heidi's Song* (1973) and *Candy Candy* (1975). They were popular in Europe, the United States and some Asian nations before they were introduced to Singapore.⁷

In Singapore, Japanese animation started as a females' subculture, as majority of early televised cartoons were based on girls' comics. The first Japanese cartoon shown on Singapore television was *Candy Candy*, an all-time classic by Igarashi Yumiko about the adventure of a good-natured girl in the United States. This animated series was extremely popular in Europe, Taiwan and Hong Kong. First introduced in 1977 and screened again in 1984, *Candy Candy* created a commotion among girls and young women in Singapore in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its comic books and merchandise, such as bags, T-shirts, stickers and stationery, were hot items and the series jump-started a Japanese animation culture in Singapore.

Following the success of *Candy Candy*, in the late 1970s SBC introduced more Japanese cartoons with similar themes, including *Heidi's Song*, *The Dog of Flanders*

and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Though not as successful as *Candy Candy*, they were well received. Japanese cartoons based on Western stories, such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *World Famous Fairy Tales*, also were introduced in the late 1970s. They appealed to small children, both boys and girls. Singapore audiences were not yet exposed to other genres of Japanese animation, such as sci-fi, fighting, sports, comedy and romance.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, SBC showed 1-4 Japanese animated series a year. By the mid-1980s, the number increased to 5-10 series a year. At this time, most Japanese cartoons were screened between 4-7 p.m., and thus attracted many people, in particular after-school students, to watch. The majority of the series belonged to the girl and animal genre, such as *The Squirrel*, *The Adventures of Gamba*, *Kimba: The White Lion*, and *Jollie*. Cartoons based on Western stories continued to be popular as well, including two works by Tetsuka Osamu—*Treasure Island* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—who also directed the Kimba series.⁸

During the 1980s, Singapore audiences also were exposed to sci-fi, the most creative and internationalized genre of Japanese animation. In the early 1980s, SBC introduced several sci-fi series, including *Grayzer-X*, *Thunderbird 2076* and *Captain Future*. They were eye-openers to Singapore audiences and changed the misconception that Japanese cartoons were all about little girls or cute animals. Shown on SBC 8 in Mandarin from 5 to 6 p.m., *Thunderbird 2076* was particularly popular. During this period, Singapore audiences could watch more Japanese sci-fi cartoons on the Malaysian channel (which belonged to Malaysia), including *Astroboy* (another series by Tetsuka Osamu), *Battle Star Galactica*, and *Captain Skeleton*, dubbed into Malay or English. Shown between 4-5 p.m. in English, *Astroboy* was particularly popular in Singapore and Malaysia. The Malaysian channel also aired *Thunderbird 2076* in English for a year, in 1985.

The heyday of sci-fi cartoons on Singapore television was during late 1980s. The first to create a commotion among young males in Singapore was *Macross*, which was screened in August 1986 on SBC 8, and then in the same year on the Malaysian

channel in English. It was extremely popular among primary and secondary school students, who rushed home to watch this animation and bought *Macross* merchandise, such as stickers and stationery. Comic books based on *Macross* became best-sellers. In 1987, SBC 8 showed two *Macross* sequels and *Astroboy*. Thanks to the popularity of sci-fi, the number of male viewers increased tremendously.

Although Japanese animation became a youth subculture in the late 1980s, they were only second best to most Singaporeans. Western animated series, such as *Garfield*, *Snoopy and Friends*, *Tin Tin Adventure*, *G. I. Joe*, *Marvel Heroes*, *Popeye* and *Bugs Bunny*, were more popular and accessible, shown daily on SBC 5, and they were available in video rental shops. In contrast, the number of Japanese series on television was limited and there were no video rental shops which carried them. The only way for Japanese animation fans to further their interest was to read Chinese editions of Japanese comics.

From the 1990s to the present, Japanese television cartoons have become increasingly popular among children and teenagers in Singapore. The Board of Film Censors under the Singapore government also seems to have adopted a more liberal attitude. As a result, more Japanese animated titles have been approved, and Japanese animation on Singapore television has become more diversified. Nowadays, Japanese cartoons are screened daily on TCS 8. As a matter of fact, except a few Chinese and Korean cartoons, almost all cartoons on TCS 8 are Japanese cartoons.

In the 1990s, SBC/TCS has become more open and aggressive in buying different kinds of Japanese animated television series dubbed in Mandarin. *Doraemon* was introduced to Singapore television in December 1992 and became a great success. This humorous, wholesome and imaginative work helps Singaporeans understand more about contemporary Japanese society and culture. Shown on and off on Singapore television in the 1990s, it is one of the most beloved television cartoons in Singapore and has created more spin-offs than any other Japanese animation series.

Doraemon comic books have been translated into different Asian languages and merchandise from the series, authentic or not, is always popular.⁹

A minor breakthrough came in 1994 when SBC showed *Record of the Lodoss War* and *Tenchi Muyo* after midnight. The former is a medieval fantasy with some violence and the latter is a sci-fi for girls which sometimes uses sex for humorous effects. Due to their popularity, SBC decided to buy more Japanese cartoons and to give different genres a try. One might divide the popular television animated series shown in the 1990s and early 2000s into such genres as comedy (e.g., *Doraemon* and *Bow Wow*), action series centered on female characters (e.g., *Ranma 1/2* and *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon*), action series centered on male characters (e.g., *Dragonball*), sci-fi (e.g., *Patlabor* and *Majin Hero Wataru*) and romance (e.g., *Maison Ikkoku* and *Kimagure Orange Road*).

What kinds of Japanese animation are popular in Singapore? First, television cartoons which have been screened on TCS. e.g., *Dragonball* and *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon*. In Singapore, television has jump-started many forms of Japanese popular culture, such as animation, comics, television drama serials, J-pops and fashion. Most Singaporeans come to know Japanese animation mainly through television. According to TCS source interviewed in 1999, the most popular Japanese cartoon on Singapore television was *Dragonball*. At the peak of its popularity, 7 percent of the entire population or 225,610 persons watched it on TCS 8. In second place were *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon* and *Ranma 1/2*; both had 5 percent of the population, or 161,150 persons, as viewers.¹⁰ Second, animated versions of popular comics. e.g., *Slam Dunk* and *City Hunter*. Although they have never been screened on TCS, their popularity is among the top. They are the hottest items for rental and collection. The exciting and humorous nature of these works is the major factor for their success. Third, works that are popular in Hong Kong and Taiwan. e.g., *Crayon Shinchan* and *Chibimaruko*. Singapore has been indirectly influenced by the boom of Japanese animation in East Asia. Some Singaporeans receive video tapes or VCDs of popular Japanese cartoons from their friends and relatives in Hong Kong and

Taiwan. Hong Kong and Taiwan-made videos, video compact discs (VCDs), and comic books fill the Singapore market. Fourth, cartoons which have been adapted from popular video games. e.g., *Street Fighters*, *Fatal Fury*, *Rock Man*, *B-Damen*, *Digimon* and *Pokemon*. Small children like to watch animation derived from their favorite video games. In particular, *Pokemon* has created a global craze and is extremely popular among small children in Singapore.¹¹

Television animated series are much more influential than animated films. Television continues to be the most important agent in popularizing Japanese animation. The majority of young people in Singapore only watch animation on television and seldom in cinemas. So far, more than 150 Japanese television animated series have been screened on TCS, but there are only a few animated films, such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Perfect Blue*, which have been shown on television or in cinema in Singapore. Japanese animated films are also featured in international film festivals or animation festivals in Singapore.¹² On TCS 8, occasionally, Japanese animated films are screened in the film hours. *My Neighbor Totoro* is the most well-known Japanese animated film in Singapore, screened several times by TCS and SCV in the 1990s. Except Miyazaki Hayao's works and some sci-fi classics, such as *Akira*, Japanese animated films are relatively unknown in Singapore.

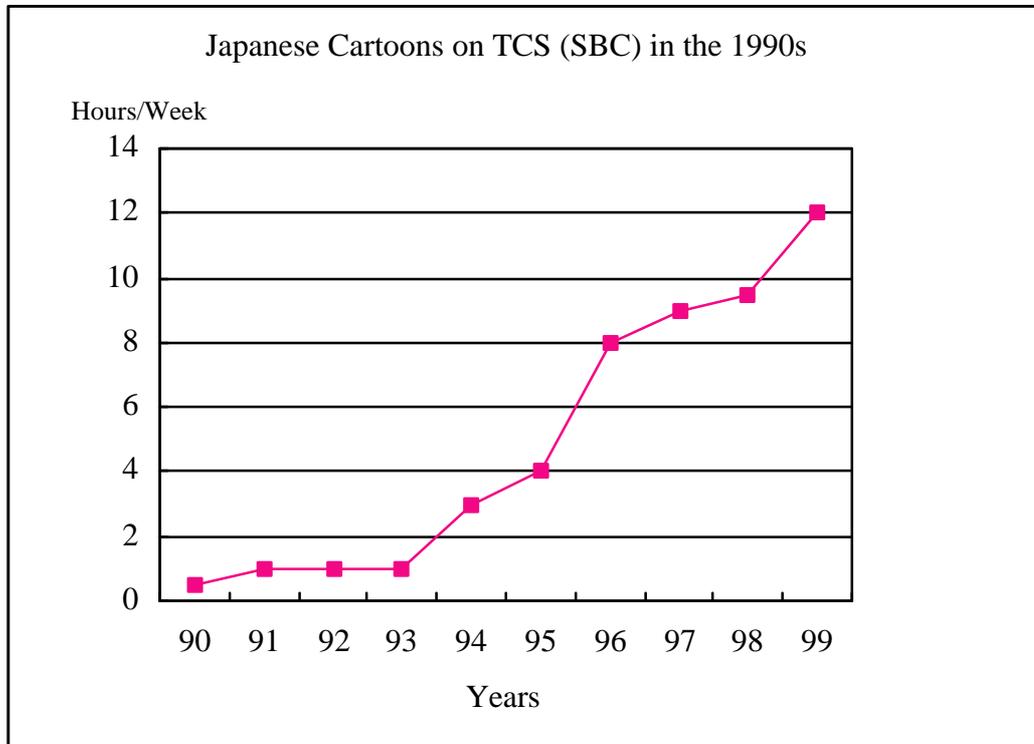
Factors Affecting the Popularity of Japanese Animation

Among the factors affecting the popularity of Japanese animation in Singapore are programming slots, the range of genres aired, censorship issues and the success of a series in other nations. Another significant factor is the availability of ancillary items, such as videos and VCDs that viewers can use at home.

Air time for Japanese animation on non-cable television channels (SBC/TCS) available in Singapore increased gradually throughout the 1990s. From about 2-4 hours a week in the early 1990s, it grew to about 4-8 hours in the mid-1990s, 8-12

hours in the late 1990s, and 12-15 hours in 2000. The following graph shows the hours per week allocated for Japanese cartoons on TCS (SBC) in the 1990s.

Graph 1: Japanese Cartoons on TCS (SBC) in the 1990s



As of February 2001, Singapore non-cable television was showing 25 Japanese cartoons a week (21 on TCS 8 and 5 on Channel Central), which took up 15 hours of programming time.¹³ Each cartoon program runs 30 minutes and usually contains one or two episodes.

While there has been a definite increase in the amount of programming, the series have been scheduled at times that are not very convenient for viewing. No Japanese series appear during prime time. On weekdays and Sundays, Japanese cartoons are shown in the wee hours of the morning, between 1:00 a.m. to 5:30 a.m. Except Saturday, when series are screened between 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., the hours are not good. Only a few die-hard Japanese cartoon fans go to bed late or get up early to watch their favorite cartoons. Predictably, the weak programming slots sometimes have had a negative impact on the popularity of Japanese cartoons. For instance,

Ranma 1/2 was first aired in early 1997, twice a week at 1:30 a.m. However, it did not become a smash hit until late 1997, when TCS 8 added another time slot on Saturday at 10:30 a.m.

Other programming issues also complicate the success of Japanese animation. TCS sometimes stops the screening of a Japanese animated series after a few episodes without any warning. In recent years, *Hello Kitty*, *Dirty Pair*, *Georgie*, *Dr. Slump*, and *The Rose of Versailles* met with this fate. It also changes the time slots for Japanese cartoons too frequently, so viewers do not always know when a series will be airing. Another problem is that TCS repeats Japanese cartoons regularly and most of them have been screened more than once.

TCS chooses Japanese cartoons based on two criteria: popularity and content. A relatively wholesome cartoon that has proven popular in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, or the United States will be its top choice.¹⁴ Because of this cautious attitude, Singapore audiences are not able to watch the most recent works. Popular but controversial titles, such as *Crayon Shinchan* and *Dr. Slump*, were not introduced for fear that the Board of Film Censors would disapprove and parents, teachers and social critics would complain.¹⁵

Language issues also impact the success of Japanese animation to some extent. TCS purchases Japanese television animated series from Japanese distributors who have dubbed them into different foreign languages before distribution. TCS buys mostly the Mandarin version. Channel Central shows several Japanese cartoons on Saturday in English and *Pokemon*, a smash hit in Japan and the United States, is the most popular children program on Channel Central.

Cable television became available in Singapore in June 1995 and subscribers have increased dramatically in recent months. All households in Singapore are cable-ready and, currently, about twenty percent are subscribers.¹⁶ It seems likely that cable television will play an important role in popularizing Japanese animation in Singapore. Out of the 35 channels offered in the basic package by SCV, two channels—Phoenix from Hong Kong and AXN from Japan—feature Japanese

cartoons on a daily basis. Phoenix usually shows two Japanese cartoons a day in Mandarin. AXN shows Japanese cartoons in English or in Japanese with English subtitles. It also features a Japanese animated film about every two weeks. On public holidays, AXN shows more Japanese cartoons. It launches a 12-hour Japanese animation marathon once a year to celebrate the Singapore National Day. Some other channels in the basic package also show Japanese cartoons every now and then.

There are more options for Japanese animation fans if they subscribe to the premium package or international plus package for cable television. The Variety Channel features one Japanese cartoon three times a day (Wednesday to Friday) in Mandarin. Before it ended its operation in Singapore in July 1999, JET TV screened many classics, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Kimba: The White Lion* in Japanese. It introduced NICAM in February 1999 so that Singapore viewers could choose between Japanese and Mandarin in watching Japanese programs.

Besides television, comics are powerful in boosting the popularity of Japanese animation in Singapore. There are hundreds of Japanese comic books available in Singapore and more than two hundred and fifty titles have been published within the country. Comic books usually come to Singapore before their associated television animated series, although most become popular only after the series is broadcast. *Doraemon* and *Ranma 1/2* are such examples.

In the 1990s, video tapes, VCDs and laser discs (LDs) also helped to popularize Japanese cartoons, because local fans could rent or buy them at very affordable prices. Very few video rental shops in Singapore carried Japanese animation in the 1980s, but in the early 1990s, a few comic bookshops began to rent out pirated and uncensored Japanese animation video tapes imported secretly from Hong Kong. One shop, Kara Comics at the Park Lane Shopping Center, purchased Japanese animation video tapes through Hong Kong publishers. Most were popular titles in Hong Kong and were dubbed in Cantonese without subtitles. Because of its success, some shops in the downtown area began to offer a similar rental service. By the mid-1990s, most video

shops in Singapore carried numerous Japanese animation titles in video, LD or VCD form. Popular titles for rental include *Slam Dunk*, *Dragonball*, *Macross*, *Gundam*, *Lupen III*, *Nausicca: The Valley of Wind*, and *My Neighbor Totoro*.

VCD is a phenomenal product in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Singapore. Hundred of shops are now selling VCDs. Makeshift vendors are everywhere. Many electric appliance shops and video rental shops also sell VCDs. A large number of VCDs are pirated copies made in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, China or Taiwan. Hong Kong and Taiwan also make authorized VCDs with license from Japanese companies, but they are rarely produced in Singapore, authorized or pirated. Hong Kong pirated editions, though mostly in Cantonese, are very popular, because they include smash hits, such as *Crayon Shinchan*, *Chibimaruko*, *Dr. Slump* and *Pokemon*. VCDs made in Malaysia, China and Taiwan are in Mandarin. Because most of these are pirated editions, they are cheap (\$5-10) [All money matters, unless stated otherwise, are in Singapore dollars. 1USD=1.74SD 1GBP=2.55 SD]. However a pirated VCD can be expensive in some cases, in particular when the licensed software is not yet available. For authorized VCDs, the price is about \$10-20. Some titles, such as *Doraemon*, *Hello Kitty* and *Ikkyûsan*, can be as cheap as three for \$10. If Singaporeans drive 30 minutes to Johor Bahru in Malaysia, they can buy a Japanese cartoon VCD for about SD \$2. Johor Bahru has some titles which are banned in Singapore.

Due to the falling prices and an increase in titles, Singaporeans thus have begun to buy and build their own collections. VCD sets have emerged in the market for collectors, including *Slam Sunk* (\$60 for 50 episodes), *Dragonball* (\$40 for 20 episodes), *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon* (\$40 for 20 episodes), *GTO* (\$50 for 25 episodes) and a collection of Miyazaki Hayao's animated films (\$71 for 8 films). Some shops (such as Vision Animate at Adelphi Shopping Center) sell and rent authorized VCDs made by Hong Kong or Taiwanese companies which have acquired a license from Japan. These authorized VCDs are usually in Japanese with Chinese subtitles. Japanese shops such as Kinokuniya and video rental shops in Takashimaya and

Daimaru sell and rent original Japanese videos in Japanese without subtitles. They are expensive and mostly for Japanese expatriates and their families. Only about 10 percent of the customers are Singaporeans.¹⁷ In the United States, hundreds of Japanese animation series, mostly sci-fi, are dubbed in English. Few video rental shops in Singapore buy these video tapes due to high prices. Without English dubbing or subtitles, individuals who do not understand Chinese or Japanese are unlikely to buy or rent Japanese animation.

In the 1990s, some Japanese comics rental shops were turned into video (and VCD) rental shops. A good example is Vision Animate, which rents out authorized videos and VCDs of Japanese animation made in Hong Kong and Taiwan. They are in Japanese with Chinese subtitles.¹⁸ It has more than 200 titles and its collection of sci-fi is excellent. New titles come every two weeks. The hottest rental items include *Gundam*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Mobile Suit Gundam*, and *Super Dimension Fortress Macross*. Its web site, which informs customers about the latest and forthcoming titles, has around 1,200 members; most of them are Chinese, between the ages of 16 and 33. About 78 percent are males and 22 percent are females. Males prefer sci-fi (such as *Akira*, *Blue 6*, *Macross Dynamic 7*, and *Green 7*), while females prefer comedy and romance (such as *Yuyu hakusho*, *Fushigi yugi*, and *RayEarth*).

Characteristics, Comparison and Impact

The characteristics of the Japanese animation culture in Singapore can be summarized from a comparative perspective as follows:

The popularity of Japanese animation in Singapore is booming, but it still has a long way to go. It lags behind mature markets like Taiwan and Hong Kong. The airtime in Hong Kong is about three times more than that in Singapore. Singapore non-cable television only shows 15 hours Japanese animation a week. In Hong Kong, non-cable regular channels (Channel Jade and Channel Asia) show Japanese cartoons about 45 hours a week: Channel Jade shows seven Japanese cartoons daily

and Channel Asia shows five. In Hong Kong, animation is screened between the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., not in the early morning hours as is done in Singapore (in Japan, television cartoons are usually screened between 4:00 and 7:00 p.m.). The cable and satellite television in Hong Kong offer more options for Japanese animation than the cable television in Singapore. Likewise, there is also a large number of Japanese cartoons on television in Taiwan. Viewing statistics underscore that Singapore is a lesser-developed market in which Japanese animation has never reached the top 10 on TCS's rankings. On TCS, top programs usually have a viewership of more than 20 percent. In Singapore, the most popular Japanese animation programs only reach 5-7 percent. In Japan, top animated programs have a viewership of more than 20 percent.

In Singapore, television seldom introduces recent works and genres for mature audiences. In Japan, more than a hundred animated series are screened on television a year. Most of Singapore's current television cartoons on TCS have been made a few years ago and have been screened in Taiwan and Hong Kong. TCS wants to introduce those Japanese cartoons which have had a good viewing records in Japan, Taiwan or Hong Kong, and it is not adventurous enough to buy more recent titles. Even in video shops, the number of Japanese animation items is relatively small and few are recent works. In contrast, Hong Kong and Taiwan are very fast in introducing new and hot Japanese animated series on television.

The contents of Japanese animated series are relatively clean due to rigid censorship. The Board of Film Censors screen every Japanese animation. It takes about 1-2 months to screen a title in Japanese animation. An approved title will get a approval sticker on each of its copies sold in the market. This censorship costs about \$1 for each copy in the market. Censorship pays attention to sex, violence, drug abuse, denigration of religion or race.¹⁹ Because of TCS's conservative policy and censorship, many animation titles which contain some degree of sex, violence, scatology, and bad language, are not easily accessible in Singapore.²⁰ By January 1999, the Board of Film Censors approved 128 titles in Japanese animation. Of

course, there is a larger number of Japanese animation software sold illegally in Singapore.

Singapore, like many Asian nations, can understand and appreciate some level of Japaneseness. In terms of the reception of Japanese animation (and other aspects of popular culture as well), more mature the markets are, more they ask for Japanese flavor. Although Singapore is not as mature as Taiwan and Hong Kong in this respect, Singaporeans (especially ethnic Chinese) can enjoy many other genres in Japanese cartoons as long as they can go through the state censorship.

Singapore has no Japanese animation magazines of its own. Most Japanese animation fans do not read animation magazines, and therefore their knowledge of Japanese animation is not up-to-date or comprehensive. For instance, many have not watched classics, like *Black Jack*, *Yamato Warship*, and *Angel Queen* and modern hits, like *Crying Freeman*, *Section Chief Kôzaku* and *Detective Conan*. There are only a few foreign Japanese animation magazines available in Singapore. The most popular is *A-Club*, a bi-weekly made in Hong Kong. However, only old issues of *A-Club* are imported. A few American (such as *Animerica*) and Japanese magazines (such as *Animage*) can also be found in Singapore. There are Japanese animation clubs and web sites set up by Singaporeans.²¹

Watching Japanese animation is chiefly a young males' culture. Animation fans are mostly boys and young men in their teens and early twenties. A considerable number of adults and even middle-age people watch animation in Japan and Hong Kong, but in Singapore, the absolute majority of animation lovers are young people. Adults and middle-age people in Singapore seldom watch Japanese cartoons. Singapore society is relatively conservative and older people tend to see Japanese cartoons as childish and time-wasting. The government and schools seldom use animation. Parents usually discourage their children from watching Japanese cartoons. In addition, Singapore's censorship also screens out most animated works which target more mature viewers.

The relationship between gender and genre is not very clear. In general, males prefer sci-fi, fighting and sports genres, whereas females prefer romance, animal and humorous pieces. However, the crossover is common, particularly among females. Many adults, men and women, love *Doraemon* which is a work for small children. Many young men watch *Ranma 1/2* which is a work for females. Many young females are crazy about *Slam Dunk* and *Dragonball*, which are both made for young men.

Japanese animation is largely a subculture among Chinese Singaporeans, because very few Japanese animated series (such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* and *Blue Seed*) have been dubbed in English or carry English subtitles. TCS seems to have established this formula: TCS 8 shows mostly Japanese cartoons, TCS 5 shows exclusively Western cartoons. This makes Japanese animation only popular among Chinese Singaporeans which constitute 77 percent of the Singapore population. Non-Chinese and English-speaking Chinese populations turn to American animation. Things have improved lately when Channel Central added the Saturday morning time slots for Japanese cartoons in English. The similar situation also occurs in comics because most Japanese comic books are only translated into Chinese. Only Chinese Singaporeans can reinforce their interest in Japanese animation by reading their associated comics. Culturally, the Muslim culture embraced by most Malay Singaporeans (about 20 percent of the population) is less congenial to the Japanese animation which contains excessive sex, violence and scatology. Due to cultural differences, it is more difficult for the Malays and Indians to enjoy and understand Japanese animation than the Chinese.

In many ways, Japanese animation represents a popular form of entertainment, consumer culture and youth culture, and its impact on Singapore society and culture is not yet very strong. To a certain extent, Japanese animation, together with other forms of Japanese popular culture, helps to stimulate the consumption of Japanese products and the interest in Japan among young Singaporeans. Through Japanese animation, Singapore viewers come to know more about contemporary Japan,

although their understanding is usually superficial and stereotyped. More importantly, unlike old-generation Singaporeans who have anti-Japanese sentiments due to their war experiences, young Singaporeans in general are positive about Japan out of their passion for Japanese popular culture.

I, however, do not agree with some politicians, educators and social critics in Southeast Asia who condemn Japanese cartoons as a form of cultural imperialism to promote Japanese merchandise and values.²² I think Japanese animation is mainly a form of entertainment and commercialism in Singapore and its role in indoctrinating Japanese values and introducing Japanese society and culture is limited. It is not a part of Japan's cultural diplomacy. Neither the Japanese Embassy nor big Japanese corporations is interested in promoting Japanese animation in Singapore. Even Japanese cultural industries pay less attention to the Singapore market.²³ Singaporeans themselves promote and make use of Japanese animation. For instance, McDonald's, Singapore Airlines and Singtel used Hello Kitty and KFC used Pokemon to promote their products or services in Singapore in 2000.

The impact of Japanese animation on Singapore entertaining industry is not yet very strong. Toei Animation, the largest animation production company in Japan, set up subsidiaries in South Korea, Taiwan and even the Philippines to cut production cost by assigning jobs to artists of these nations.²⁴ However, Singapore has no Japanese animation subsidiaries for its high costs. Unlike Taiwan or Hong Kong, Singapore has not produced local movies or television dramas based on Japanese animation.

Following the global popularization of Japanese animation, it seems that the popularity of Japanese cartoons will continue to grow. How far can it go depends on a number of factors, such as the number of showings and time slots on television, the importation of television cartoons and videos dubbed in English or with English subtitles, and the attitude of the government, the public and the censorship authorities. Due to differences in racial composition, religion, languages' policy, geographical location and political and cultural climate, it is unlikely that the popularity of Japanese

animation in Singapore can match that of Hong Kong or Taiwan in the foreseeable future.

* The author is assistant professor of Japanese studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a cultural and historian working on a book project on Japanese popular culture in Singapore.

NOTES

¹ Because of the popularity of Japanese animation (mostly sci-fi) in the United States, the Americans usually refer to Japanese animation as “anime” and to American animation as “animation.” Koichi Iwabuchi has identified comics, cartoons, consumer technologies and computer games as the most globalized cultural exports of Japan, explaining that they are ‘culturally odorless’ and have strong universal appeal. See Koichi Iwabuchi, “Return to Asia? Japan in Asian Audiovisual Market,” in Kosaku Yoshino, ed., *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), p. 179, 183.

² See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 17, 32.

³ Representative works include Antonia Levi, *Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), Helen McCarthy, *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1999), Trish Ledoux, ed., *Anime Interviews* (San Francisco: Cadence Books, 1997), and John P. Jackson, *Buying and Selling the Souls of Our Children: A Close Look at Pokemon* (Fort Worth: Streams Publications, 2000). American journals, such as *Journal of*

Popular Culture, Animation Journal, Animerica, and *Mangajin* have published articles on Japanese animation.

⁴ For a general overview, see John Lent, "Manga and Anime in Asia," *Anime UK* (May 1995): 8-10. See also Wai-ming Ng, "A Comparison of Japanese Comics in Southeast Asia and East Asia," *International Journal of Comics Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Summer 2000): 44-56 and "Japanese Comics in Singapore," *Asian Culture*, Vol. 24, (June 2000): 1-14. For the reception of Japanese animation and comics in Indonesia, see Kurasawa Aiko, "Aijia ha Wakon no juyo dekiruka," (Can Asia be Japanized?) in Aoki Tamotsu and Saeki Keishi, eds., *Ajia teki kachi to wa nan ni ka* (What is Asian Value?) (Tokyo: TBS Buritanka, 1998), pp. 180-181.

⁵ Singapore television consists of two systems: non-cable and cable. There are two companies in the non-cable television business: Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) and Singapore Television Twelve. The former is the largest and the most popular television network in Singapore which owns a Mandarin channel (TCS 8) and an English channel (TCS 5), where as the latter runs a Malay and Indian channel (Suria) and a multi-cultural channel (Central). Non-cable television is managed by Singapore CableVision (SCV). Television Corporation of Singapore, Singapore Television Twelve and Singapore CableVision are all semi-government organizations and all television programs are subject to strict government's censorship.

⁶ In early years, the Singapore government used television to build national identity and public morals. Cartoons were under the category of children's program. See Erhard U. Heidt, *Mass Media, Cultural Tradition, and National Identity: The Case of Singapore and Its Television Programmes* (Saarbrücken: Verlag Breitenbach Publishers, 1987), pp. 160-163, 170-172, 196-197.

⁷ For a discussion of Japanese animation classics in the United States and Europe in the 1970s, see Luca Raffaelli, "Disney, Warner Bros. and Japanese Animation," in Jayne Pilling, ed., *A Reader in Animation Studies* (London: John Libbey, 1997), pp. 124-131.

⁸ For a brief discussion of Japanese cartoons on Singapore television in the mid-1980s, see Erhard U. Heidt, *Mass Media, Cultural Tradition, and National Identity: The Case of Singapore and Its Television Programmes*, pp. 197-200.

⁹ For an account of the popularity of *Doraemon* in Indonesia and the world, see Saya Shiraishi, "Japan's Soft Power: *Doraemon* Goes Overseas," in Peter Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi, eds., *Network Power: Japan and Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 234-273. *Doraemon* is also extremely popular in Malaysia where its animated series is shown at prime time. See Wendy Smith, "Japanese Cultural Image in Malaysia," in K. S. Jomo, ed., *Japan and Malaysian Development: In the Shadow of the Rising Sun* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 349.

¹⁰ Data provided by Ms Ivy Teo, Corporate Communications and Relations Executive of TCS, during an interview on 18 January 1999. Recently, Japanese television drama serials have become more popular than Japanese cartoons on Singapore television. Most Japanese drama serials screened in 2000 and 2001 have double-digital ratings.

¹¹ *Pokemon* has been the most popular title for video rental in Japan in recent years. In 1998, nine out of top ten video rental are *Pokemon* videos. See *Animage*, February 1999 (Tokyo: Tokuma shoten), p. 98. *Pokemon* has become one of the most popular television cartoons in the United States in 1999. For its impact in the United States, see John P. Jackson, *Buying and Selling the Souls of Our Children: A Close Look at Pokemon*.

¹² For instance, Japanese animated films are featured in Japanese Film Festival organized by the Japanese Embassy in Singapore in September annually. In 1997, *Tombstone for Fireflies*, and in 1998, *Galaxy Express 999*, *Barefoot Gen*, *Barefoot Gen 2*, and *Space Firebird*, were shown to Singaporeans for free. In 1999, Ôtomo Katsuhiro's *Spriggan* was featured in Singapore's International Film Festival and received overwhelming response. Temasek Polytechnic also organizes animation festival once a year. In June 2000, it held a large-scale 'Singapore Animation Fiesta

2000' (sponsored by organizations including Toei Animation Philippines and Animation Kobe) in which animated films were featured and forums and workshops were organized.

¹³ Channel Central shows cultural programs, Malay/Indian programs and children's programs.

¹⁴ This information about TCS's criteria in purchasing Japanese cartoon programs was acquired through an interview with Ms Lee Soo Hwee, the program executive of TCS, on 5 March 1998.

¹⁵ *Dr. Slump* was shown on TCS 8 but was discontinued after a few episodes because of complaints from parents.

¹⁶ It was 18.7 percent in early 1999. See "For a New Concept, Cable television has done well," *Straits Times*, February 1999, p. 26. In Hong Kong, 24 percent of households are cable TV subscribers.

¹⁷ We conducted an interview with the manager of the Constant Video Pte Ltd. at the Takashimaya Shopping Center on 4 January 1999. According to the manager, the shop has nearly 30,000 registered members and about 10 percent are Singaporeans (mostly Chinese). All video tapes are directly imported from Japan and take approximately two months to go through the Board of Film Censors. The shop attempted to lure more local customers by reducing the rental fee by 20 percent in 1997.

¹⁸ These data were provided by Mr. Mark J. Y. Leong, Marketing Executive of Vision Animate, on 11 January 1999. Vision Animate opened another shop in June 2000 and has begun to sell animated-related products, such as models and posters.

¹⁹ *Singapore 2000* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000), pp. 309-310.

²⁰ In 1997, the Board of Film Censors banned 387 videos and 19 films. See *Singapore 1998* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1998), p. 271. Few titles are Japanese animation, because local television stations, video rental shops

and theaters exercise self-censorship before they import Japanese animated television series or films. Some problematic titles are available in the Singapore market, because they are pirated copies which have not gone through the Board of Film Censors. The sale and possession of Japanese erotic animation software are subject to prosecution.

²¹ Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Polytechnic have a Japanese *anime* club. The Feng Shan Community Center has an *anime* fan club. There are web sites set up by Singaporeans on *Slam Dunk*, *Ranma 1/2*, *Pretty Soldier Sailormoon*, *Dragonball*, *Boo Wow*, *Pokemon* and *Doraemon*. The most comprehensive website on Japanese animation in Singapore is set up by Anime Inn Singapore (AIS), an informal Japanese animation club. It also runs a monthly newsletter on the web which has 215 subscribers. 500-700 Singaporeans visit this website daily. Data are acquired from interviews with Mr. Teo Wee Kian, the editor of AIS, on 22-23 September 1999. However, unlike Taiwan, Hong Kong, Taiwan or China, there are no fan clubs for Japanese cartoonists.

²² Friedemann Bartu, *The Ugly Japanese: Nippon's Economic Empire in Asia* (Singapore: Longman Singapore Publishers: 1992), p. 185.

²³ This can be seen from two things. First, Japanese animation production companies do not make licensed VCDs especially for Singapore and Southeast Asia and are not keen to crack down pirated software in the region. Second, Japanese animation production companies do not set up branches or subsidiaries in Singapore.

²⁴ See Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 413.