

From *Oshin* to *Beautiful Life*:
A Study of Japanese Television Dramas in Singapore

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The global popularization of Japanese popular culture has reshaped the world's cultural landscape. In Asia, Japanese popular culture has become the only force that is strong enough to challenge the hegemony of American popular culture.¹ Saya Shiraishi is insightful to point out that Japanese popular culture is becoming Asian popular culture.² Brian Moeran refers to the popularization of Japanese popular culture in Asia as "Corollanization of Asia."³ Various forms of Japanese popular culture have successfully penetrated the Asian market.⁴ Asian television is not immune to Japanese influence.

Television is the most popular form of modern entertainment and television drama serial is the most popular genre on television. Watching television dramas has become a national addiction in many nations. For instance, the American soap opera, *Dallas*, was watched in over ninety countries in the 1980s. In its heydays, about half of the Americans and Europeans watched it regularly.⁵ In Japan, during the same period, more than 60% of the population watched the NHK-produced melodrama, *Oshin*, every weekday. This drama was showed in most Asian nations and created an *Oshin* craze in Asia.⁶ In Singapore, all top television programs are dramas. For example, in 2000, on Channel 8, the most popular channel in Singapore, eight out of top ten programs were television dramas. The top six programs were all television dramas.⁷

Japan is a major exporter of television programs in the world and Japanese television cartoons, drama serials, and variety shows are becoming very

popular overseas.⁸ Japanese cartoons are well-received internationally, whereas Japanese drama serials are mainly popular in Asia. The 1990s is referred to as the “golden era of Japanese television dramas.”⁹ This evaluation is valid in terms of popularity, quality, quantity and impact. More than six hundred television dramas were made in Japan in the 1990s. The average was about sixty dramas a year. Television drama is the most popular genre on Japanese television, occupying more airtime (about ten hours a day) and receiving higher ratings (20-40%) than other genres. Its impact on Japanese entertainment industry and consumer culture is tremendous.¹⁰

Japanese television dramas have become very popular in Asia. Taiwan and Hong Kong are the two consumption and distribution centers, showing a large number of Japanese dramas on their televisions and producing the bulk of video compact disc (VCD) sets (mostly pirated) that fill the Asian market. Southeast Asian nations, in particularly Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, have witnessed a boom of Japanese television dramas in recent years. In the United States, Japanese television dramas are shown in multi-cultural channels mainly for Japanese expatriates and Japanese Americans, whereas in Asia, they are watched by Asians themselves, dubbed or subtitled in various Asian languages.

This paper is a preliminary study of the popularization and impact of Japanese television dramas in Singapore from historical and cultural perspectives. It provides a historical overview of Japanese television dramas in Singapore from its introduction in 1981 to the present, investigates the reasons behind the boom of Japanese television dramas in Singapore in the late 1990s and early 2000s, identifies the characteristics of Japanese television dramas in Singapore, and looks into the impact of Japanese television dramas in Singapore. This study uses Japanese television drama serials in Singapore as an example to demonstrate the popularization of Japanese popular culture in Asia, the Japanization of Asian popular culture, and the formation of an “Asian popular culture” as a result of cultural globalization and hybridization in an Asian context.

History of Japanese Dramas on Singapore Television

The first Japanese television drama was showed on Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) in July 1981. Compared with many other forms of Japanese popular culture, Japanese television drama has a relatively long history in Singapore, perhaps only next to Japanese comics, television cartoons and Sanrio products that were introduced in the late 1970s. The majority of Japanese popular culture came to Singapore in the 1980s (such as pop music, video games, karaoke and fashion) and the 1990s (such as photo-stickers and *kaiten* sushi).

There was a short craze of Japanese popular culture (especially television dramas and pop music) in Singapore in the mid-1980s. The first Japanese television drama that drew attention was Yamaguchi Momoe's *Our Beloved Daughter*, screened on SBC 8 in Mandarin in late 1982. The drama, a tearjerker belonged to Yamaguchi's famous "red series," was also a smash hit in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Both the original and Cantonese versions of its theme song were popular in Singapore. *Our Beloved Daughter* had a rerun on SBC 5 in English in 1986.¹¹ In 1984, *The Beautiful Smashers* and *V is Our Sign*, the two popular Japanese television dramas on sports (women's tennis and women's volleyball respectively), created a commotion in Singapore. Like *Our Beloved Daughter*, these two dramas were also very successful in Taiwan and Hong Kong. *V is Our Sign*, based on a comic about the success of a Japanese women's volleyball team, was the most popular sports drama ever screened in Japan and Asia. In Singapore, young people were crazy about this drama. Some young women tied their hair the way the heroine, Yumi, did in the drama, while others became interested in volleyball.

The most popular and influential Japanese television drama in Singapore and Asia in the 1980s was *Oshin* (By NHK, 1983-1984), a melodrama about a Japanese woman who was against all odds to live a successful life. Its popularity in Japan, Singapore and the entire Asia was overwhelming. Asian

officials, educators and social critics applauded this drama for having high moral and educational values. *Oshin* was introduced to Singapore in less a year after its screening in Japan. It was screened on Channel 8 at prime time at 7 p.m. every weekday for half an hour in November 1984. The timing was right for introducing *Oshin* because 1984 was the peak of “Learn from Japan Movement” in Singapore. Singaporeans learned about the Japanese work ethics, business management and traditional virtues through watching this drama. Due to its popularity, *Oshin* was repeated twice—the first rerun on Channel 8 in 1985 and the second rerun on Channel 5 in English in 1994. Thanks to *Oshin*, the image of Japanese among Southeast Asians changed from bloodthirsty soldiers and greedy business samurai to industrious, self-motivated and virtuous entrepreneurs.¹²

In the early 1980s, most Japanese dramas were showed on Channel 8 in Mandarin at prime time between 7 to 9 pm. In the late 1980s, SBC changed the time slots to late evening at 10:30 p.m. on Channel 8 and also began to show reruns on Channel 5 in English. The popularity of Japanese television dramas declined in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Japan and Asia due to lack of good works and promotion. The craze of Japanese television dramas also died down in Singapore during this period, as can be seen from the decreasing number of Japanese dramas on Singapore television and their disappointing ratings.

In 1992, Channel 8 showed *101 Proposals* at 11 a.m. on Sunday and it was a tremendous success. Its theme song, *Say Yes*, by Chage & Aska, was a smash hit. Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS, formerly SBC), however, did not take advantage of this success. For some reason, not a single Japanese television drama was screened in 1993.

TCS 8 and Channel 12 (which targets mainly minority groups and foreign communities in Singapore) became more aggressive in introducing Japanese television dramas after 1995. From 1995 to 2000, on average, more than ten Japanese television dramas were screened a year. Popular works screened include *Tokyo Love Story* (TCS 8, 1995), *Tokyo Cinderella Story* (TCS 8, 1996),

Heaven's Coin (Parts 1 & 2, Prime 12, 1997), *Under the Same Roof* (Parts 1 & 2, TCS 8, 1997), and *Beach Boys* (TCS 8, 1999). These works were big hits in Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong before their screening in Singapore.

In 1999, *Beach Boys* met with unprecedented success and created a craze of Japanese television dramas. It is hard to understand why TCS and Channel 12 reduced the number of first-run Japanese dramas (3) and showed a large number of reruns (12) that year. In 2000, TCS became active again in introducing Japanese television dramas, showing more recent and popular works to maintain its status as the main popularizer of Japanese television dramas.¹³

The following table shows the number of Japanese dramas showed on Singapore television between 1981 and 1999:

Table 1: Japanese Dramas on Non-Cable Television in Singapore, 1981-1999

	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	Total
First-run	1	6	9	7	7	3	4	2	3	4	2	2	0	3	11	16	15	13	3	111
Rerun	0	0	0	0	1	4	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	10	7	12	41
Total	1	6	9	7	8	7	8	3	4	4	2	2	0	4	11	16	25	20	15	152

Two obvious developments can be concluded from the table. First, the number of Japanese dramas has increased tremendously in recent years. From 1981 to 1999, 111 Japanese television dramas were showed on Singapore television. 42 (38%) were showed in the 1980s, and 69 (62%) in the 1990s. 1995 was a watershed in the screening of Japanese dramas.¹⁴ 58 out of 111 (52%) were showed after 1995. On average, from 1981 to 1994, SBC/TCS showed 3.3 Japanese drama serials a year. From 1995 to 1999, TCS and channel 12 showed 11.6 Japanese drama serials a year. Second, the rerun percentage was incredibly high. In Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States, the rerun of Japanese dramas (except extremely popular works like

Oshin) is uncommon.¹⁵ In Singapore, due to its multi-racial composition, 37% (41 out of 111) of Japanese dramas had a rerun on other channels. There were only 11 reruns (10%) in the 1980s and the number increased to 100 (90%) in the 1990s. This rerun percentage is perhaps the highest in the world.

The Craze of Japanese Television Dramas in Singapore since 1999

Japanese television dramas have become a craze among young people in Singapore in recent years. In the early 1990s, the ratings of Japanese dramas were only around 4% and they rose to about 10% in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, *Beach Boys* reached an impressive 13.1% or 440,000 viewers. The popularity of Japanese television dramas has reached a new height in 2000 and 2001. In January of 2000, *Love 2000* had the record-breaking 15% or 500,000 viewers for its first episode and its average rating was 11% or 390,000 viewers. Japanese dramas have become more popular than other Japanese programs on Singapore television, including cartoons, news, music and documentary. For instance, the rating of the most popular Japanese comic, *Dragonball*, only reached 7%.

Television and VCD are the two major factors affecting the popularity of Japanese television dramas in Singapore in recent years. Japanese television networks focus on the home market and do not actively promote their television dramas overseas.¹⁶ In contrast, Asian television stations are very eager to buy Japanese television dramas and they usually take the initiative in contacting Japanese televisions regarding the purchase of the copyrights.

For a long time, non-cable television was the only medium for Singaporeans to get in touch with Japanese television dramas. In the 1980s, all Japanese dramas were screened on Channel 8 in Mandarin. In the late 1990s, many Japanese dramas were screened on Channel 12 in Japanese with English subtitles to serve the increasing number of Japanese expatriates (now about 27,000) and the English-speaking populations. In the early 2000s, Japanese dramas are showed on Channel 8 again.

Singapore television did not take Japanese dramas seriously until lately, showing Japanese dramas on and off and changing the time slots frequently. Singapore television has made improvements after 1999. In the past, it took about two to five years for a Japanese drama to be screened in Singapore. For example, *Under One Roof* (1993) and *Elevator Girls* (1992) were showed in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Singapore television wanted to play it safe and only bought Japanese television dramas that had a good ratings in Taiwan, Hong Kong or Hawaii. It is also cheaper and more convenient to buy old dramas that have been dubbed into Mandarin or carry English subtitles. In the case of buying new dramas, extra cost is required for dubbing and subtitling.¹⁷ Now the gap has been reduced to about six months to one year. In January 2000, TCS 8 showed *Love 2000* simultaneously with television stations in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand. Singapore's participation in this pilot project strengthened its position as a leading consumption market for Japanese television dramas in Asia. In 2000, TCS 8 made an agreement with Fuji Television and began to screen a relatively new Fuji drama every Monday night. In addition, with the opening of a new television station, Channel U, in May 2001, Singaporeans can watch more free Japanese dramas on television.

Cable television plays an important role in promoting Japanese dramas. Singapore Cable Vision (SCV, since June 1995) began to show Japanese television dramas in 1998. In late 1999, every household in Singapore became cable-ready. Now more than one-fifth of Singapore households are SCV subscribers.¹⁸ SCV is very aggressive in buying Japanese television dramas. JET (Japan Entertainment Television) showed many Japanese dramas in NICAM (dual sound in Mandarin and Japanese with English subtitles), but it ended its operation in Singapore in July 1999. Two cable channels, Variety (in NICAM) and Phoenix (dubbed in Mandarin), showing two Japanese dramas a week., have introduced many hot titles unscreened on non-cable television, such as *With Love* (Variety), *God! Just a Bit of Time* (Variety), and *GTO* (Phoenix).¹⁹

VCD is a phenomenal product. Before the importation of VCD sets, Singaporeans could only rent out videos (in Japanese without subtitles) of Japanese dramas from video rental shops such as Constant Video in Daimaru and Takashimaya. The role of VCD in popularizing Japanese dramas is now as important as television.²⁰ VCD sets (6-12 VCDs, 12 episodes a set) of Japanese television dramas only came to Singapore from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Malaysia in 1999.²¹ Since 1999, their price has dropped from about \$100 to now \$10-15 a set. Their quality has improved and the most exciting thing is that many of them are relatively new dramas that finished their serialization in Japan only a few months ago and have never been screened on Singapore television. The number of Japanese drama VCD sets available in the Singapore market is about 100. Many people buy and watch them at home. Many video shops in Singapore now have Japanese television dramas (in VCD sets) for rental.

In addition, newspapers, entertainment magazines and Internet also help promote Japanese dramas. In particular, the *Lianhe zaobao* reports frequently on new Japanese dramas and their icons. Television guides sometimes contain articles on Japanese dramas. There are many websites created by Singaporeans and Asians about their Japanese television icons, dramas or theme songs through which people can gather information, exchange ideas and download pictures or music.

The Reception of Japanese Television Dramas in Singapore

Unlike Japanese video games, animation, consumer technologies and sushi which have become global products, Japanese television drama serials, due to cultural and language barriers, are only well-received in Asia. The boom of Japanese television dramas in Singapore has just begun. Japanese television dramas are more popular in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.²² In Japan, popular television dramas have the ratings of over 30% and Japanese television shows about 70 hours of Japanese dramas a week. In Singapore, Japanese

television dramas have the ratings of around 10% and Singapore non-cable television channels (including TCS, Suria and Channel U) show only six hours (three first-run dramas and three reruns) of Japanese dramas a week. In Singapore, Japanese dramas are less popular than local (15-20 hours a week, ratings about 20%) and Hong Kong dramas (10-14 hours a week, ratings about 20%).

Age, gender, ethnicity and social morality are important factors in Singaporean's reception of Japanese television dramas. Most Singaporean viewers are young people from the teens to thirty-something. Small children are only interested in Japanese cartoons and more mature viewers stick to dramas in their own languages. Small children and older people tend to sleep early and the late time slots (10:30-11:30 pm, Mondays and Thursdays) are too late for them. Females like Japanese dramas more than males, because they like melodramas or comedies about love. Japanese popular culture is largely a Chinese subculture in Singapore. Most viewers of Japanese dramas are Chinese Singaporeans, since all first-run Japanese dramas are screened on the Chinese channel and Chinese audiences can understand and appreciate Japanese dramas easier than their Malays or Indian counterparts due to cultural proximity. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the introduction of NICAM on TCS and increasing number of Japanese dramas screened on Suria and SCV, Malays, Indians, and foreign residents (including Japanese expatriates) in Singapore can also enjoy watching Japanese dramas. Since 2000, Suria has been showing old Japanese television dramas (e.g., *Heaven's Coin*, *Tokyo Love Story* and *Under the Same Roof*) in Malay almost everyday.

Compared with Japan, Singapore is a relatively conservative society. Japanese television dramas are subject to censorship, both formal and informal in Singapore. Singapore television chooses encouraging and light-hearted Japanese television dramas about true love, friendship, family value or making progress in life. Melodramas and "pure love" dramas by the scriptwriters Nojima Shinji (such as *101 Proposals* and *Under the Same Roof*) and Kitagawa Eriko (such as *Say You Love Me*, *Long Vocation* and *Beautiful Life*) are particularly

well-received in Singapore. Singaporeans have a misconception that Japanese dramas are always wholesome and do not realize that many actually contain elements of sex and violence. Topics like incest, rape, liaison, gang violence and serial killing are common in Japanese dramas, although dramas with problematic contents are not screened in Singapore. A manager of Channel 12 (now Central and Suria) said its channel prefers Japanese melodramas.²³

What do Singaporeans like about Japanese dramas? First, they see Japanese dramas as a good alternative to local, Hong Kong or American dramas. Generally speaking, local dramas are historical and situation pieces about life in Singapore, Hong Kong dramas are action pack about cops and gangsters, and American dramas are sitcoms. Japanese dramas offer new topics and perspectives. Their stories and plots are original, refreshing and complete. Many Japanese dramas are adopted and re-made from well-known Japanese comics and American movies.²⁴ Second, they can see their icons in Japanese dramas, such as Kimura Takuya, Sorimachi Takashi, Kaneshiro Takeshi, Sakai Noriko, and Matsushima Nanako. In a poll conducted in January 2000, Sorimachi was chosen as the most popular foreign male actor in Singapore and was ranked number seven in the overall ranking of television entertainers.²⁵ Third, Singaporeans see Japanese dramas as a way to learn Japanese culture and language. All Japanese dramas screened in Singapore are about contemporary Japan. Singaporeans can understand Japanese society and culture, such as their ideas of love, family, friendship and career, through watching Japanese dramas. Singapore has more than ten thousand Japanese learners and many watch Japanese dramas to learn Japanese. Fourth, they like the acting, production and theme songs of Japanese dramas. It is generally agreed among Japanese drama fans that the acting of Japanese actors and actresses is natural, the Japanese production is professional, the photography is excellent, and theme songs and their soundtracks are easy-listening. Fifth, the length (10-12 episodes) is just right to Singaporean viewers; many of them think Hong Kong dramas (30-50 episodes) and local dramas (over 20 episodes) are too long.

The Impact of Japanese Television Dramas in Singapore

It is no exaggeration to say that Japanese television drama is the mother of Japanese popular culture in Singapore. It has a considerable impact on Singapore's entertainment industry and youth culture, stimulating the consumption of Japanese pop music, fashion and idol merchandize, influencing local television dramas, and shaping Singaporean's perception of Japan.

Singaporeans are crazy about theme songs of Japanese television dramas. For a long time, Singapore television showed old Japanese dramas, and thus Singaporeans listened to old songs that were popular in Japan a few years ago. Now, with the introduction of more recent Japanese dramas and CDs/VCDs, Singaporeans are listening to new Japanese songs. Theme songs of Japanese television dramas, such as *Say Yes*, *Kagami no doresu*, *Hitamari no uta*, *Aoi usagi*, *True Love*, *Forever*, *Yesterday and Today*, *First Love*, *I believe*, *Forbidden Love*, *I have never seen* and *Can You Celebrate*, were very popular. CD soundtracks of *Beach Boys*, *Love 2000* and *Overtime* sold well. *Drama Mood 2000*, a collection of Japanese television drama theme songs, topped the Singapore music chart, SPVA, for four consecutive weeks in June 2000.

Being stylish, fashion-conscious and good looking, Japanese television drama stars have become fashion models and icons for young Singaporeans. Some Singaporeans dye their hair and dress like their Japanese icons. When *Under the Same Roof* and *Heaven's Coin* were on Singapore television, many young women adopted the "Sakai Noriko's hairdo"—cutting their hair short and straight. Panasonic used Sakai to make a television commercial showed exclusively for Chinese communities in Asia. When *The Sleepless Forest* was hot in the local rental market in 1999, many young men, including the local television actor, Li Ming Shun, wore the "Kimutaku hat." When Kimura Takuya's posters were posted in the Orchard subway station, many Singaporeans went to the station just to take pictures with Kimura's posters. All posters were "taken away" by Kimura's fans in a few hours.²⁶ In mid-2000,

Kimura appeared on Singapore television in a Levi's commercial. The merchandise (such as posters, pictures, photo albums, postcards, T-shirts, and watches) of Japanese pop icons is hot in gift shops in Singapore. Pretty In Tokyo (formerly Game Tokyo), a major distributor and retailer of Japanese pop culture items, sells posters of Japanese television icons. Kimura Takuya, Takenouchi Yutaka, Sorimachi Takeshi, and Sakai Noriko are the most wanted. Japanese television drama tie-in novels published in Taiwan are bestsellers in Singapore bookstores. The number of young Singaporeans traveling to Tokyo has increased and many visit famous sites where Japanese television dramas are frequently shot as the background such as Tokyo Tower, Rainbow Bridge, Fuji Building and Mount Fuji. Local travel agencies also organize package tours to visit these sites. Latest Chinese travel guidebooks on Japan usually include pages to introduce these television drama sites.

Japanese television dramas have influenced Asian television dramas.²⁷ Singapore is no exception. In 1999, critics began to point out that local television dramas on Channel 8 were influenced by Japanese dramas indirectly through Hong Kong dramas. For instance, *Fortune on Earth* was close to a Hong Kong television drama, *The King of Chefs*, which borrowed heavily from Japanese dramas about cooking like *Oshii kankei* and *The Chef*. Another TCS 8 drama, *The File of Doctors*, reminds us of a Hong Kong drama, *Good Doctor*, which was inspired by Japanese dramas about medical doctors like *The Novice Doctor* and *The Emergency Unit 24 Hours*.²⁸ In the same year, TCS 8 showed a Hong Kong drama, *The Transparent Man*, which was adapted from a Japanese drama. Likewise, Taiwanese television dramas are also strongly influenced by Japanese dramas. Since Taiwanese dramas are not very popular in Singapore, its impact is not as strong as Hong Kong dramas in promoting Japanese elements in local dramas.

In 2000 and 2001, the impact of Japanese dramas has become more direct and obvious. TCS (renamed as MediaCorp in 2001) has made a number of local dramas that have a strong Japanese flavor including *The Home Affair*, *Mind Monogatari*, *As Time Goes By*, *As You Like It*, *Love Encyclopedia*, and *Looking for*

Stars. Many critics point out that a large number of TCS 8 dramas have copied the atmosphere, plot, character development, dialogue and photography from Japanese television dramas. For example, *As You Like It* is regarded as the Singapore version of *Beach Boys* by the mass media. *Looking for Stars* reminds us of *With Love*. It uses the Tokyo Tower as the background and some pictures were shot in Japan. The dialogue is very poetic and the acting of the main actresses, Fann Wong, is considered very Japanese. Critics point out that she likes to “act cute” like many Japanese actresses do in Japanese dramas. Besides, many Japanese characters (usually played by local actresses) have appeared in local dramas (e.g., *The Home Affair*, *As Time Goes by* and *Mind Monogatari*, all showed on TCS 8). The local television actress, Chen Yu Yi, played the role of a Japanese girl in *The Home Affairs*, expressing her wish to act like Fujiwara Norika in *With Love*.²⁹ The use of English theme songs in local dramas is also believed to be a Japanese influence.³⁰ *The Home Affair* is another example of a local drama under the Japanese influence. Its scriptwriter, Hong Yongdi, himself a big fan of Japanese dramas, admitted his indebtedness to Japanese dramas:

The special features of Japanese television dramas are that the emotions of the characters are very delicate and the dialogues are very literary. They are beloved by young people. I think the impact of Japanese television dramas on the production of local television dramas is subtle and gradual. In particular, when the content is about the feelings of modern people, delicate approaches of Japanese television dramas serve as good models for us to learn.³¹

Japanese television drama is perhaps the best medium to inform Singaporeans and Asians about contemporary Japanese society and culture for two reasons. First, Japanese dramas are about contemporary Japan, and many are based on current hot issues. Secondly, as a cultural form, television drama

serial is more realistic than comics, animation, video games, and pop music. Japanese television dramas help us understand the reality and social problems in contemporary Japan, such as sex abuse, liaison, prostitution, drug, AIDS, bully, corruption, gangsters, unemployment, and discrimination. However, to young Singaporeans, the thing that impresses them most is perhaps the determination of protagonists in Japanese dramas to find their own freedom, dreams and love. Japanese youth attitudes, tastes and values internalize gradually and unconsciously in the mind of young Singaporeans who not only incorporate some Japanese elements into their life, but also hold positive views of Japan. Many see Japan as the Mecca of fashion, music, comics, and things trendy and cool. They are impressed by the individuality, freedom, material richness and fashion sense they find in their Japanese counterparts. The Japanese dream has replaced the American dream among die-hard Japanese fans (*harizu*) in Singapore. A high-publicized survey conducted in late 1999 gives the astonishing finding that about one-fifth of young Singaporeans want to be born as Japanese in the next life.³² This forms a great contrast with the old generation Singaporeans who are mostly anti-Japanese due to their bitter memories about Second World War. Obviously, Japanese popular culture has served as an “unofficial cultural ambassador” (because it does not have the blessing of the Japanese government and major foundations) and has successfully cultivated a positive image of Japan among young Singaporeans.

Concluding Remarks

With the exceptions of video games, animation and consumer technologies, the global popularization of Japanese popular culture has only reached half of the globe. Asia is now experiencing Japanization of its popular culture. Japanese comics, animation, video games, J-pop, fashion, television dramas, and merchandise have become an integral part of Asian youth culture. It seems that different forms of Japanese popular culture are interrelated and they reinforce each other. American popular culture is no longer dominant in Asia,

giving way to its Japanese counterpart gradually. Like Americanization in the past, this Japanization of Asian popular culture will not be complete. For instance, Hong Kong and India will continue to be influential in Asian popular culture.

It would be simplistic to see the current Japanese popular culture boom in Asia as a one-way cultural colonialism. It should be noted that Japan is experiencing an Asian popular culture craze at home that increasing number of young Japanese are crazy about Asian movies and music.³³ Transnational cultural flows and interchange have become very common. Some Japanese television dramas, like *V is our Sign* and *GTO*, were made into Hong Kong movies. Japanese television drama icons are invited to participate in Hong Kong movies. Tokiwa Takako, Fujiwara Norika, Nishida Hikaru, Katori Shingo, Koshitani Gorô and Nakamura Naruto have played a role in Hong Kong movies. Kimura Takuya, Sorimachi Takashi, and Miyazaki Rie will make their debut in Hong Kong movies in 2001 and 2002. A few Taiwanese (e.g., Kaneshiro Takeshi and Vivian Hsu) and Hong Kong entertainers (e.g., Kelly Chen) have participated in Japanese dramas and movies. Singapore does not have these kinds of interactions with Japan yet. TCS once considered inviting Takenouchi Yutaka to play a part in its drama. In the realm of Asian television dramas, Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Singaporean dramas are getting more and more like Japanese (particularly in terms of plot, approach, dialogue, photograph, acting and music), but Japanese television dramas have also added certain Asian dimensions (particularly in terms of story, cast and action) lately. This kind of hybridization is an inevitable trend in the age of cultural globalization. Perhaps the ongoing Japanization of Asian popular culture and Asianization of Japanese popular culture will forge an "Asian popular culture" which is based largely on Japanese models, but also includes various Asian elements in the future.

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NOTES

¹ Brian Moeran, "The Orient Strikes Back: Advertising and Imagining Japan," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 13: 3 (1996): 72-112. See also Leo Ching, "Imaginations in the Empire of the Sun: Japanese Mass Culture in Asia," in John Treat, ed., *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 171.

² 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), p. 268.

³ Brian Moeran, "Commodities, Culture and Japan's Corollanization of Asia," in Marie Söderbery and Ian Reader, eds., *Japanese Influences and Presences in Asia* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 25-50.

⁴ For a study of Japanese comics, animation, video games and sushi in Singapore, see Benjamin Wai-ming Ng, "A Comparative Study of Japanese Comics in Southeast Asia and East Asia," *International Journal of Comic Art*, 2: 1 (Summer, 2000): 44-56; "Japanese Video Games in Singapore: History, Culture and Industry," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 29: 1 (2001, forthcoming), "Japanese Animation in Singapore: A Historical and Comparative Study," *Animation Journal* (2001, forthcoming), and "The Popularization and Localization of Sushi in Singapore," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* (2001, forthcoming). For a sociological study of Japanese popular culture boom in Taiwan and Hong Kong, see Ishii Kenichi, ed., *Higashi Ajija no Nihon taishû bunka* (Japanese Pop Culture in East Asia) (Tokyo: Sôsôsha, 2001).

⁵ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Oshin* is the most popular television drama in the history of Japanese television and its rating reached 62.5% at its peak. It is also the most well-

known Japanese television drama overseas, screened in more than forty nations (mostly in Asia and the Middle East). See Paul Harvey, "Interpreting *Oshin*—War, History and Women in Modern Japan," in Lise Skov and Brian Moeran, eds., *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), pp. 75-108. When *Oshin* was screened in Indonesia in the late 1980s, its rating was 65%. See Ajia puresu intanashoharu, ed., *Ajia TV kakumei* (Television Revolution in Asia) (Tokyo: Mita shuppankai, 1993), p. 136. For its impact in Egypt, see Dina EL Khawaga, "Ejiputojin ga mita Nihon," (Japan as seen from the Egyptians) in Igarashi Akio, ed., *Henyôsuru Ajia to Nihon* (Japan and Asia in Transformation) (Yokohama: Seio shobô, 1998), pp. 211-247.

⁷ *Lianhe zaobao*, 20 June 2000, p. 9.

⁸ Of Japan's export television programs, 56% are animated series and 23% are drama serials. Other programs, such as variety shows, MTV, news, sports, game shows and documentary, constitute the remaining 21%. See Bruce Stronach, "Japanese Television," in Richard Powers and Hidetoshi Kato, eds., *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 128, 142-144.

⁹ Ishida Yôko, ed., *TV dorama oirufairu 90's Minhōban* (All Files for Japanese Television Dramas in Commercial Stations in the 1990s) (Tokyo: Arupekuto, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁰ For a historical overview of Japanese television dramas in Japan, see Hideo Hirahara and Masunori Sato, eds., *A History of Japanese Television* (Tokyo: Kaibunsha Press, 1991).

¹¹ For a brief discussion on the early reception of Japanese television dramas in Singapore, see Erhard U. Heidt, *Mass Media, Cultural Identity and National Identity: The Case of Singapore and Its Television Programmes* (Saarbrücken: Verlag Breitenbach Publishers, 1987), pp. 212-216.

¹² See Kurasawa Aiko, *Nijūnenme no Indonnesia* (Indonesia in the Last Twenty Years) (Tokyo: Sôshisha, 1994), pp. 133-139.

¹³ Singapore television showed ten first-run Japanese television dramas in 2000. In 2001 (as of May), it has showed eight first-run Japanese dramas.

¹⁴ 1995 was also a watershed in the introduction of Japanese television dramas in Indonesia. Japanese television dramas became popular in Indonesia after the screening of *Tokyo Love Story* in 1995 in a channel mainly for ethnic Chinese. From 1995 to the present, many popular Japanese dramas (e.g., *Love White Paper*, *In the Name of Love* and *Christmas at 29*) have been showed on Indonesian television. They are all dubbed in Indonesian. See Kurasawa Aiko, "Aiji 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), p. 182.

¹⁵ Mark Schilling, *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture* (New York: Weatherhill Inc, 1997), p. 272. See also Paul Harvey, "Nonchan's Dream," in D.P. Martinez, ed., *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 141.

¹⁶ See Koichi Iwabuchi, "Return to Asia? Japan in Asian Audiovisual Markets," in Kosaku Yoshino, ed., *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp. 179-181, 188. However, the Japanese government does promote NHK dramas in Asia. Through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation, NHK dramas are freely distributed to state-owned television stations in developing Asian nations (such as China and most Southeast Asian nations) as a form of cultural diplomacy. See Dai Ajia kyoei dômei, ed., *Ajia poppu karucha* (Asian Pop Culture) (Tokyo: Surie Networks, 1996), pp. 300-302. In recent years, Fuji and TBS, the two major producers of television dramas in Japan, have begun to pay attention to the lucrative Asian market. The former set up an international department in Tokyo to take charge of marketing and licensing its television programs overseas, whereas the latter produced authorized VCD sets for its television dramas for the Asian market.

¹⁷ *Lianhe zaobao*, 27 December 1999, p. 2. In the United States and Hong Kong, less than 20% of Japanese television dramas are dubbed. See Bruce Stronach, "Japanese Television," p. 143. In Singapore, about 70-80% of Japanese

television dramas are dubbed (mostly in Mandarin and a few in English or Malay).

¹⁸ *Lianhe zaobao*, Supplement, 2 January 2000, p. 4.

¹⁹ On SCV, NHK shows three dramas on weekdays and two dramas on weekends. NHK dramas are more historical and cultural, targeting mainly Japanese expatriates in Singapore.

²⁰ The role of VCD in popularizing Japanese television dramas in Asia is tremendous. The popularity of Japanese television dramas in Hong Kong declined after 1998 mainly due to the crackdown of pirated VCD sets. See Tong Cheng Siu, *Riju youyuandi* (Playground of Japanese Television Dramas) (Hong Kong: Feel Company, 1999), pp. 208-223.

²¹ They are all pirated editions. Licensed editions are only available in Japan (in video tapes and DVD) and Hong Kong (in VCD). In 2000, TBS, a major Japanese commercial television network, made VCD sets of its dramas for the Hong Kong market. Each set costs about \$400 HKD (or \$85 SD). Hong Kong and Taiwan also have produced many books, magazines, photo albums and products of Japanese television dramas.

²² For instance, Taiwan has five cable television channels that show Japanese programs exclusively. Japanese television dramas are their most popular programs and are topics for everyday gossip among young people. See "Return to Asia? Japan in Asian Audiovisual Markets," p. 196. See also "Life in Taipei takes on an air of Tokyo," *Asahi Evening News*, 3 September 2000, p. 6.

²³ *Lianhe zaobao*, 31 August 1998, p. 8.

²⁴ *TV dorama oirufairu 90's Minhôban*, pp. 124-129. Turning American elements into Japanese is a characteristic of Japanese popular culture. See Joseph Tobin, "Introduction: Domesticating the West," in Joseph Tobin, ed., *Remade in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 1-41.

²⁵ *Lianhe zaobao*, 15 January 2000, p. 2. In the same poll, Kaneshiro Takeshi and Kashiwabara Jun were ranked fourth and tenth respectively in the category of the most popular movie entertainers.

²⁶ *Lianhe zaobao*, 27 July 1998, p. 10.

²⁷ For a study of Japanese television dramas in Taiwan, see Koichi Iwabuchi, "Becoming Culturally Proximate: A Scent of Japanese Idol Dramas in Taiwan," in Brian Moeran, ed., *Asian Media Worlds* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001, forthcoming). Korean dramas are also under the spell of Japanese dramas. For example, a popular Korean drama, *The Youth* (1999, MBC) is criticized as a copycat of *Long Vacation*. See Ishii Kenichi, ed., *Higashi Ajia no Nihon taishû bunka*, p. 103.

²⁸ *Lianhe zaobao*, 8 April 1999, p. 3.

²⁹ *Lianhe zaobao*, 27 March 2000, p. 5.

³⁰ *Lianhe zaobao*, 28 April 2000, p. 11.

³¹ *Lianhe zaobao*, 11 April 2000, p. 8.

³² The survey (unpublished) was conducted by Chang Han Yin, a senior lecturer in the Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore in late 1999.

³³ See Hara Tomoko, *Honkon chûtoku* (Hong Kong Mania) (Tokyo: Japan Times, 1996).