

The Impact of Japanese Comics and Animation in Asia

By Ng Wai-ming

Japan is a manga superpower. It has replaced the United States as the world's largest exporter of comics and animation. In Asia, Japanese comics and animation have been very popular and influential from the 1980s to the present. Nowadays, almost all Asian nations have their own editions of Japanese comics and their televisions show Japanese animated series on a daily basis. Different forms of Japanese comic and animation culture, such as comic café (manga kissa), comic rental, dojinshi (amateurish manga) and cosplay (costume play), have penetrated the consumer culture in major Asian cities. Merchandise of Japanese cartoon characters, such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, Chibimaruko-chan, Crayon Shinchan, Sailor Moon, Dragonball, Tare Panda, Pokemon, and Digimon is very popular among Asian children and young people. Asian businessmen also make use of Japanese cartoon characters to promote their products or services. Japanese manga has played a role in changing the youth culture and the people's perception of Japan in Asia. Youngsters in Asia are crazy about things Japanese. Unlike their grandparents and parents, they hold a positive image of Japan. To them, Japan is the land of Hello Kitty, Pikachau, Doraemon, Ultraman and Final Fantasy. This article looks into the impact of Japanese comics and animation in Asia, focusing on Asian comic and animation production as well as Asian popular culture and entertainment industry. Hong Kong and Taiwan, two consumption centers of Japanese comics and animation in Asia, are used as main examples for analysis.

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China, Singapore and Korea are also discussed briefly for comparison.

Japanese Impact on Asian Comic and Animation Production

Most Asian comic and animation artists are under very strong Japanese influence in terms of drawing, format, atmosphere, perspective, story and plot, and the production system.

Hong Kong has its own comic tradition and its kung fu (Chinese martial

art) comics are very popular in Chinese communities in Asia. In the 1970s and early 1980s, pioneering comic artist like Huang Yulang and Ma Yingcheng, forged the Hong Kong-style kung fu comic tradition. Both Huang and Ma incorporated Japanese elements in the making of kung fu comics.

Huang's Little Rascals (xiao liu-mang, 1971-1975) set the precedent in this genre. Its story is about seven Hong Kong martial art heroes who fight against gangsters in different districts in Hong Kong. Its story and drawing style were influenced by Mochizuki Mikiya's Wild Seven, a popular comic about seven heroes who fight against the evils. The main difference between Little Rascals and Wild Seven is that the former is a work of Chinese martial art, whereas the latter is a James Bond-like story in which

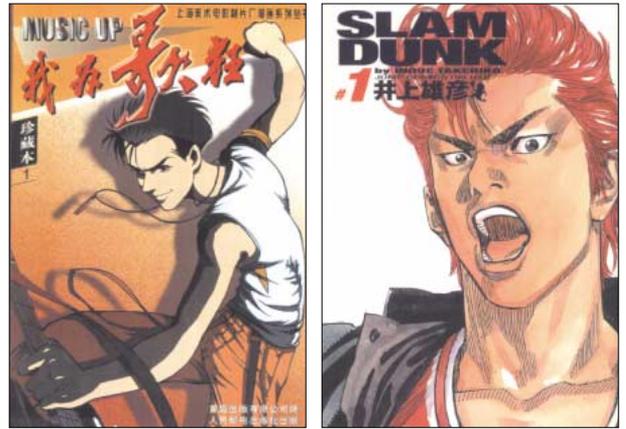
people use modern weapons. Mochizuki's realistic style, in particular, his drawing of violent scenes, inspired Huang. In 1975, Little Rascals was renamed School of Dragon and Tiger (long-fumen, 1975-present). In School of Dragon and Tiger, Hong Kong martial art heroes, having destroyed Hong Kong gangsters, find Japanese yakuza, right-wing organizations, samurai and ninja, their new enemies. This "righteous Chinese versus evil Japanese" scenario has set the formula for Hong Kong kung fu comics.

Ma's Chinese Hero (zhonghua yingxiong, 1983-present) revolutionized Hong Kong kung fu comics in drawing and story. Ma was indebted to Ikegami Ryoichi and Matsumori Tadashi in drawing and to Koike Kazuo and Huang in story. Ikegami is Ma's favorite comic artist and the realistic

Figure 1

Photo : Aaaaaa?

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The comic edition of Music Up which is made in Japanese style.

and delicate drawing of Asian faces and fighting in Ikegami's Crying Freeman and Men's Group (otokogumi) have an impact on Chinese Hero. Ma also learned a lot from Matsumori's God of Fist (kenjin) and God of Sword (kenjin) in drawing of fist and sword fighting. Koike, the scriptwriter for Ikegami and Matsumori, is skillful in controlling the pace, creating climaxes and adding humanistic dimensions to fighting story. Influenced by Koike, Ma draws according to the script, adds humanistic touch in story, and creates a climax at the end of each episode. Adopting the kung fu comic formula set by Huang, the main storyline of Chinese Hero is about Chinese martial art heroes against Japanese evil organizations.

Huang and Ma are the founding bosses of the two of the largest comic production companies in Hong Kong and they, together with contracted comic artists under them, continue to produce a large number of kung fu comics.

New-generation comic artists in Hong Kong, such as Situ Jianqiao and Li Zhida, have received a stronger Japanese influence than pioneering artists like Huang and Ma. Situ's early work, Saint of Gambling (dusheng), borrows heavily from Dragonball and Ultraman in character design and ideas. His recent works like Supergod Z (chaoshen Z, 1993) and King of Fist Fighters Z (quanhuang Z, 1996) are inspired by Japanese video games, such as Street Fighters and King of Fighters. Li is a creative artist who experiments different comic styles in short stories. His realistic and delicate drawing style is influenced by Otomo Katsuhiro, Mochizuki Minetaro and Maruo Suehiro and his discursive expression and plot are inspired by Murakami Haruki's novels.

Although Hong Kong has a strong comic tradition of its own, it is a new comer in animation production. Hong Kong has only produced several animated movies and it makes no television cartoons. Hong Kong animators are learning from the Japanese and Americans in making animation. Chinese Ghost Story (xian qian, 1997) directed by Xu Ke is an example that

Hong Kong artists attempt to create their own animated films with the help from the Japanese. Campaigned as the first Hong Kong-made commercial animated film, Chinese Ghost Story is indeed a product of Hong Kong-Japan collaboration. Hong Kong provided the capital, directorship, voice recording, script and ideas, whereas the Japanese did the actual production, such as drawing, coloring, and digitalization. This kind of collaboration will increase. For instance, in early 2002, Hong Kong and Japanese artists and televisions discussed a project of joint production of television cartoon series based on Jin Yong's novels. In April 2002, a Hong Kong producer and a Japanese director announced their plan to produce an animated film for the Asian market.

Taiwanese comics are the most Japanese of all Asian comics. Many Taiwanese comic artists copy the Japanese style faithfully and one can hardly find any Taiwanese elements in their works. However, there are Taiwanese artists who have attempted to create something original based on their mastery of Japanese techniques. The most successful example is perhaps Zheng Wen who has skillfully combined Japanese (particularly Ikegami Ryoichi and Kojima Geseki's) and Western comic styles with Chinese painting and calligraphic skills in his comics, such as Stories of Assassins (cike liechuan, 1985) and Stories of Eastern Zhou Heroes (dong Zhou yingxiong chuan, 1990).

Taiwanese animators have only produced a few commercial animated films and television cartoons, but they are very active in making on-line animation. The most successful Taiwanese on-line animation is perhaps Ah Kuei, a satirical and humorous short piece, in which character design and visual presentation are influenced by Japanese animated works, such as Crayon Shinchan and Chibimaruko-chan. Ah

Kuei will be made into a television cartoon series, live-action drama serial and animated film. Recently, Taiwanese on-line animators have begun to experiment animated serials and movies. A three-hour on-line animated film, Love 1/2E, has been serialized. Its story is similar to Tokyo Love Story and Beautiful Life and its drawing is very Japanese. Besides, influenced by the Japanese, Taiwanese animators pay attention to the important role of "voice actors or actresses." (seiyu). This is an area that most other Asian nations have overlooked.

In China, Japanese comics and animation are very popular and influential among young artists and consumers. Chinese artists have a mixed feeling toward Japanese comics and animation. On the one hand, they are learning from the Japanese. On the other hand, they are under pressure from the government and publishers or production companies to cut down Japanese influence in order to develop Chinese-style comics and animation. Regardless of official policy to promote Chinese-style works, Japanese influence is getting stronger in Chinese comics and animation. Works serialized in the two most popular comic magazines in China, Beijing Comics (Beijing katong) and King of Comics (katong wang), are largely influenced by the Japanese. Music Up (wo wei ge kuang, 2001), a popular television cartoon series, adopts almost 100% the Japanese-style. Its producer flatly admitted that Music Up is the "Chinese edition of Slam Dunk." (Figure 1)

Chinese animators become familiar with the Japanese style not only by

Figure 2

Photo: Aaaaaaaaaa?



Initial D is being made into a Hong Kong live-action movie.

self-study, but also through on-site job training. Thousands of Chinese animators work for the Japanese in making Japanese animation in China. Under Japanese supervision and guidance, they are put in charge of uncreative and labor-intensive jobs, such as drawing the details and background, coloring and digitalizing. Nowadays, the majority of Japanese television cartoons and animated films are partially made in China to cut production cost. Chinese animators are learning from the Japanese through this kind of "division of labor" in animation production.

Southeast Asian nations, such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, are also under the spell of Japanese comics and animation. Southeast Asian nations seldom produce commercial animation and thus Japanese impact can be seen mainly in comic production. Many Southeast Asian comic artists copy the drawing, story, atmosphere, technique and style of Japanese comics. Singapore comics have a very strong Japanese flavor. For example, Huang Xiaowen's *Dragon Boy* (1999) is a copy of *Dragonball* and Chen Zhikun's *Potato Republic* (1999) is influenced by Toriyama Akira in style and *Shotai no sushi* in content. Some Singapore comic artists have acknowledged their indebtedness to Japanese comics. The most popular Singapore comic artist, Huang Zhenmeng, said: "Comic artists who have influenced me most are Tetsuka Osamu and his *Black Jack* and *Three-Eye Child* as well as Fujiko Fujio [a team of two artists] and their

Doraemon."

Korean comics and animation are very similar to their Japanese counterparts in drawing, style and technique, but they differ in the language and story. Korean comic artists and animators are under strong Japanese influence. In the past, many Korean animators acquired Japanese know-how by helping the Japanese do uncreative

and labor-intensive jobs in animation production. Now, they are confident enough to make their own animation and draw original pictures for Japanese animation. Besides television cartoons and animated films, Korean animators produce on-line animated short pieces. Korea is leading Asia in on-line animation. Cute and humorous characters created on-line, such as Mashimaro and Pucca, have become very popular in Asia. Most of these Korean cartoon characters look like Japanese cartoon characters created by Sanrio and San-X and now they are competing with Japanese products in the Asian market.

Recently, increasing number of Korean and Japanese artists work together to make comics and animation. For example, in May 2001, *Comic Punch*, a Japanese comic magazine published by Shinchosha, decided to publish both Japanese and Korean comics. Yang Kyong Il has been working with Hirai Kazumasa to produce a comic, *Zombie Hunter* (*shiryogari*) in Japan since 2000. In addition to comics, Korean and Japanese animators have collaborated in producing television cartoon series [e.g., *Alexander* (2000) and *The Adventure in a Flying Ship* (*pata pata hikosen no boken*, 2002)] and animated films [e.g., *Audition* (2002)].

Japanese Impact on Asian Popular Culture and Entertainment Industry

Japanese comics and animation have a strong impact on Asian popular culture and entertainment industry, in par-

ticular movies and television dramas. Japanese impact is especially strong in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In Hong Kong movies, the most salient Japanese impact is the adoption of Japanese manga into Hong Kong live-action movies. These include *City Hunter*, *Slam Dunk*, *Prince Peacock*, *Dr Kumahige*, *Sign is V*, *GTO*, *Black Jack*, *Iron Fist* (*tekken*), *Street Fighters*, *Kindaichi's File of Events*, *Killer Ichi* (*koroshiya ichi*) and *Initial D*. (Figure 2) Works like *City Hunter*, *Prince Peacock*, *Killer Ichi* and *Initial D* are collaborative films between Hong Kong and Japan and have acquired the copyrights from Japan. However, not a few Hong Kong producers and directors have ignored the copyrights when they adapt Japanese comics into Hong Kong movies. They can do so because they use Chinese translated titles and not Japanese original titles. For example, *GTO* becomes *Hot-Tempered Teacher* (*mala jiaoshi*). Japanese artists and companies only own the copyrights of Japanese titles and not translated titles. In order to avoid legal responsibility, Hong Kong directors and scriptwriters usually revise the story, sometime turning the Japanese background into Hong Kong and protagonists into Chinese. In addition, some Hong Kong movies adopt names from Chinese translated titles of popular Japanese comics and animated series, such as *Macross*, *Touch*, and *Inaga Table Tennis Club* (*Ike! Inaga Takkyubu*), although their stories have nothing to do with their associated Japanese works. Japanese comics and animation influence the content of Hong Kong movies. For example, a number of Hong Kong movies about cooking competition have been produced in recent years. They are inspired by Japanese comics and animated series about Japanese cuisine, such as *Mr Ajikko*, *Shotai no sushi*, *Food Fight*, *A Sweet Relationship* (*oishii kankei*), and Chinese Cuisine as *Number One* (*chuka ichiban*). Humorous elements and expressions in Japanese comics and animated series, such as nose bleeding when guys get sexually excited and falling on the

Figure 3



Hana yori dango and Yamada Taro mongatari were adapted into popular Taiwanese television drama serials.

ground when people are surprised, have become clichés in Hong Kong comedies.

Some Japanese comics and animated series, such as Love and Sincerity (ai to makoto) and Story of Firefighters (me gume no daigo), have been adapted into Hong Kong television drama serials. Although the titles, settings, characters and stories have been revised, people who are familiar with Japanese manga can tell right the way that they are Hong Kong drama editions of Japanese comics and animated series.

Japanese cartoons enrich Cantonese pop in Hong Kong. Hong Kong artists like to make Cantonese covers of Japanese theme songs for popular television cartoons, including Doraemon, Angel Queen, Heidi, Dr Slump, Kitaro, Ninja Hattori-kun, Anpanman, Ikkyusan, Chibimaruko-chan, Card Captor Sakura and Digimon. Some of these Cantonese covers were once very popular. In recent years, Hong Kong singers also sing Cantonese covers of theme songs for Japanese animated films, such as Doraemon, Pokemon, and Digimon.

In Taiwan, the influence of Japanese comics and animation is particularly strong in television dramas. In the late 1990s, Detective Conan and Invisible Man (tomei ninken) were made into Taiwanese television dramas. In 2001, Meteoric Garden (hana yori dango), a Taiwanese drama based on a shojo

manga (girls' comic), created a commotion in Taiwan. Its four handsome actors, F4, have become national icons. Meteoric Garden has preserved many Japanese elements to the extent that even names of main characters are Japanized. In early 2002, a Taiwanese television drama serial based on the Japanese

comic Yamada Taro mongatari was also well-received. (Figure 3) Due to their overwhelming success, at least six Taiwanese dramas based on Japanese shojo manga will be made in 2002 and 2003. It will create a boom of Japanized dramas in Taiwan.

In China, youth and lighthearted dramas modeled after Japanese dramas have been produced in recent years and some borrow their storyline or plot from Japanese comics. For example, Love Until the End (jiang aiqing jinxing daodi, 2000) is regarded as the Chinese edition of Love White Paper (ashinara hakusho). In addition, The Wise Innocent Kid (jiling xiaobudong, 2001), copies the story and even the theme song from Ikkyusan and some plots from GTO. Like Ikkyusan, its story is about an intelligent monk who uses his wisdom to solve problems. Like GTO, in one episode, the monk destroys the wall in order to encourage his student.

Concluding Remarks

Japanese influence is extremely strong in Asian comics and animation,

and most Asian comic artists and animators are familiar with and indebted to Japanese comics and animation. It seems that "the flying geese theory" can also be applied to comic and animation industry in Asia. Japan is the leader who transfers technology and shifts the production line to Asia. Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea are in the second group, whereas China and Southeast Asia are in the third group.

While Asia is learning from Japan, Japan should also know more about comic traditions in Asia and work with Asian artists as partners in making comics and animation. Nowadays, except the works of a small number of Korean (e.g., Yang Kyong Il), Taiwanese (e.g., Zheng Wen), and Hong Kong artists (e.g., Li Zhiqing) who have published their comics in Japan, Asian comics and animation are largely unknown in Japan. Japan and Asia can learn from and supplement each other in comic and animation production. In recent years, the growth of comics and animation has come to a standstill in Japan. Knowing more about Asian comics and animation can generate artistic inspiration and business opportunity. In the age of cultural globalization, collaboration between Japan and Asia in producing comics and animation will increase in various forms, such as joint production, division of labor, translation and dubbing. Japan can provide capital, know-how and experience, whereas Asia can offer cheap labor, ideas and market. Both Japan and Asia will benefit from this kind of transnational cultural interaction and cooperation.

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