A Comparative Study of Japanese Comics in Southeast Asia and East Asia

Wai-ming Ng

Japan is not only a global economic power but also a growing cultural power. Following the penetration of Japanese products in the Asian market, Japan has become a major force in shaping popular, youth, material, and consumer culture in Asia. In the 1980s and 1990s, we have witnessed a "Japanese culture boom" in the East Asian region (including Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and South Korea) and the Southeast Asian region (such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia). While Taiwan and Hong Kong are in the center of this boom, Singapore and other Southeast Asian capital cites have also been influenced. This can be seen from the increasing popularity of Japanese video games, comics, animation, cuisine, fashion, merchandise, TV dramas, pop music, karaoke, photo-stickers, and movies in Southeast Asia in the 1990s. The popularity of these forms of Japanese popular culture varies. Some (such as video games, comics, animation, karaoke, and merchandise) are very popular among a large portion of the population in the region, while others (such as pop music, TV dramas and movies) are only a subculture among some groups of young people. Japanese comics (*manga* in Japanese) have become extremely popular in many Asian nations in the 1990s. They are translated into different Asian languages. Taiwan and Hong Kong are the major exporters and consumers of Chinese editions of Japanese comics. Malaysia, China, and Singapore also produce some Chinese editions of Japanese comics, but they are mainly for local sales and distribution.

This study uses Singapore and Malaysia, the two centers of Japanese comic culture in Southeast Asia, as the main examples to demonstrate the popularization and characteristics of Japanese comics in Southeast Asia from a comparative perspective. The two centers of Japanese comic culture in East Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, are used for comparison. This article consists of two parts: Part one outlines the development of Japanese comics in Singapore and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, and the second part pinpoints some characteristics of Japanese comics in Singapore and Southeast Asia, focusing on the issues in popularization, localization, and their implications.

The Popularization of Japanese Comics in Singapore and Southeast Asia

Until the early 1980s, very few people in Singapore and Southeast Asia read Japanese comics. They were only introduced to Singapore and Malaysia on a larger scale in the early 1980s, thanks to the arrival of pirated Chinese editions from Taiwan and the broadcasting of Japanese animated series on local TV stations. During the early 1980s, Japanese publishers were not strict in checking piracy overseas and did not sell copyrights to Asian publishers, and most Asian nations did not establish