about 80 percent of comics in comic book stores are Japanese. The most popular titles are *Doraemon, Candy Candy*, and *Sailormoon* (Kurasawa, 1998:180-181).

Figure 2. Cover of the Malay edition of *Doraemon*

In the 1990s, the number of comic bookshops has increased tremendously in Singapore, and most of them carry mainly Japanese comics. A standard Singapore comics shop carries about percent of Japanese comics; the remaining 10 percent are comics by Hong Kong, Taiwanese, US or local artists. Some shops carry Japanese comics exclusively, and some also offer very affordable book rentals. For about SD$0.5 to SD$2, a reader can read the comic book at the store or take it home. There are also comic rental shops in Singapore.

In the 1990s, new forms of comics rental—the comic cafe and comic library— were introduced from Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. In 1998, the first comic cafe was founded in Singapore, simply called Comic Cafe and located in Chinatown. It has more than 15,000 comic books, mostly Chinese editions of Japanese manga, as well as some Chinese and English titles, and a very good collection of early pirated copies of comic books by Chuang Yi (Okano, 1999: 2). The first and only comic library, Comics Archive, was opened in January 1999 (Lianhe, 1999: 2); it has a rich collection of 30,000, most of which are Japanese. As the national and

school libraries in Singapore do not carry comics, Comic Cafe and Comics Archive serve as mini comic libraries.

The number of comic bookshops has been mushrooming, and Singapore has at least 44 comic book dealers, many of whom run a number of bookshops. The largest, Comic Connection, has eight shops (Singtel, 1998: 181-182, 282). An average comic shop in Singapore carries about 500 to 2,000 titles of manga; most bookstores and newspaper stands also carry Japanese comics. In 1998, Popular Bookshop, the largest bookstore chain in Singapore, and Commercial Press Bookstore, the largest Chinese outlet, opened a comics corner. Also, the number of Japanese comic books exhibited in the annual Book Fair has been increasing, with Chuang Yi regularly maintaining a large corner to publicize its series.

Japanese comics have also entered campus. In 1998, Temasek Polytechnic organized a Japanese comic fair, and the Department of Japanese Studies at National University of Singapore launched a course on Japanese popular culture, one-third of its contents is devoted to comics. This has become one of the most popular courses in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Some secondary schools, junior colleges, polytechnics, and universities also have comics or *anime* clubs. As students of Southeast Asia are enamored with Japanese comics and cartoons, some politicians and educators in the region have expressed concern, condemning the boom of Japanese comics as a form of cultural imperialism (Bartu, 1992: 185).

In the late 1990s, some Singaporean and Taiwanese artists began to copy the drawing, atmosphere, technique and style of Japanese comics in their own comics. The Japanese influence was apparent at Asiapac, which published a large number of comic books based on Chinese stories and novels in English, and at Chuang Yi, which began to publish some comic books by local artists.

It is, however, wrong to assume that Japanese comics in the region are overwhelming and all-powerful. Regardless of their popularity, they are merely forms of entertainment and do not have a strong impact in Singapore and Southeast Asian politics, society, and culture. But, together with other forms of Japanese popular culture, they do change the perception of Japan among young people in Southeast Asia. Unlike their parents who commonly hold strong anti-Japanese sentiments because of war experiences, new generations in Southeast Asia have a more positive attitude towards Japan. They come to know more about contemporary Japanese society and culture through their reading of Japanese comics. Of course, their understanding is usually superficial and sometimes misleading.

The Characteristics of Japanese Comic Culture in Singapore and Southeast Asia

From a comparative perspective, in this instance, comparing Singapore with Hong Kong and Taiwan, the characteristics of Japanese comic culture in Singapore (and to a larger extent Southeast Asia) can be summarized as follows: