

## Japanese Elements in Hong Kong Comics: History, Art, and Industry

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Japanese comics (*manga*) are extremely popular and influential in Asia. Asian editions of *manga* have dominated the market and many Asian comic artists draw in the Japanese fashion (Ng, 2002:30-33; Ng 2000:44-56). Hong Kong is one of the places in Asia that has developed its own comic tradition. In particular, its *kung fu* (Chinese martial arts) comics are very popular among Chinese readers in Asia. Although Hong Kong comics are quite different from their Japanese counterparts, they have long used *manga* as main references in terms of story and plot, character design as well as drawing. In the making of their Hong Kong-style comics, Hong Kong artists have incorporated Japanese elements in their works. Japanese comics also have an impact on the production and consumption of Hong Kong comics. This article investigates the impact of *manga* on the art and industry of Hong Kong comics from historical and cultural perspectives.

### Japanese Influence on Hong Kong Spy and Sci-fi Comics in the 1960s

Comics became popularized in Hong Kong in the 1960s (Cheng, 1992). Early Hong Kong comic artists were under very strong Chinese influence in style and format. They had limited access to Japanese comics and thus such influence on their works was indirect and superficial. In the late 1960s, some Hong Kong comic artists used pirated Taiwanese editions of Japanese comics and Japanese children's programs (e.g., "Ultraman" and "Astroboy") broadcast on Hong Kong television as references. Inspired by Japanese comics, they began to construct longer stories, use cinematic angles more often, and add Japanese cartoon characters.

The two most popular genres in Hong Kong comics in the 1960s were spy stories and sci-fi adventures about anti-Japanese or anti-gang heroes. *Uncle Cai* (*Caishu* by Xu Quanwen), a story about an anti-Japanese spy, was the best-selling title in the 1960s. It is said that the portrait of Uncle Cai as a spy who used most advanced weapons was inspired by Japanese spy comics and James Bond movies (Wong, 2002:111). Xu Qiang, the younger brother of Xu Quanwen, was also famous for drawing spy comics. His popular works published in the late 1960s (such as *The Mighty Pen* [*Shenbi*] and *The Mighty Dog* [*Shenquan*]) demonstrate a stronger Japanese favor than his brother's.

Like many Japanese comics and children's programs, the protagonist of his works is usually a boy who fights against evil with help from a superhero. Interestingly enough, the superhero in Xu Qiang's comics is the popular Japanese character Ultraman. Hong Kong experienced an "Ultraman" craze in the late 1960s. Ultraman became the most popular children's program on Hong Kong television and some cinemas featured Ultraman movies every weekend morning. In order to boost sales, many Hong Kong comics added Ultraman to their stories. Since the concept of copyright was not established in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the use of popular foreign characters (such as Ultraman, Superman and Batman) was very common.

Like spy comics, many early sci-fi comics in Hong Kong featured Japanese characters. Huang Yulang used Japanese characters in his two popular sci-fi comics, *The Son of Ultraman* (*Chaoren zhi zi*, 1969) and *The Junior Mighty Fighter* (*Xiaomoshen*, 1969). The former was a relatively faithful Hong Kong comic edition of the "Ultraman" television drama, whereas the latter was influenced by Japanese animated series [such as *The Iron Robot* #28 (*Tetsujin 28*, by Yokoyama Mitsuteru)], children's programs, and samurai dramas (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hong Kong comics of the late 1960s frequently used Japanese comic characters

Likewise, Dong Fangyong's *Scientific Robot Boy* (*Kexue xiaojinggang*, 1966) borrows heavily from *Astroboy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*, by Tetsuka Osamu) and *Big Iron Robot* #28 in character design and storyline (Wong, 1999:103). Another sci-fi comic artist, He Rijun, created a number of comics (such as *The Atomic Seven* and *The Space Seven*) about seven heroes fighting evil. This formula was obviously influenced by the Japanese movie, "The Seven Samurai" (1954, by Kurosawa Akira), and the Japanese comic, *The Wild Seven* (1969, by Mochizuki Mikiya).

Girls' comics (*shōjō manga*) also appeared in Hong Kong in the late 1960s. Li Huizhen created a very popular humorous comic for females, *Miss 13 Dots* (*Shisandain*, 1969). Her drawings of big eyes, long legs, and trendy fashion were influenced by Japanese girls' comics. Li was a big fan of *shōjō manga* and fashion dolls by which she was inspired (Wong, 2003).

### Japanese Impact on Hong Kong Kung Fu Comics, 1970s-1980s

Huang Yulang, who achieved some success in sci-fi comics in the late 1960s, became the most dominant figure in the Hong Kong comics industry in the 1970s. Regarded as the "Godfather of Hong Kong Comics," Huang is credited with forging the Hong Kong-style *kung fu* comics which are different from Japanese, American or Chinese comics (Lent, 1999:108-114). His *Little Rascals* (*Siulauman*, 1971-1975) set the model for Hong Kong-style *kung fu* comics. Its story is about a group of seven unemployed youngsters from the bottom of society who use their martial arts to fight against gangsters in different districts of Hong Kong. The rise of *kung fu* comics was triggered by Bruce Lee and the worldwide *kung fu* craze. In terms of storyline and style, it is likely that Huang used Mochizuki Mikiya's *Wild 7* as a major reference. *Wild 7* tells the story of seven young convicts on death row who were released by the government to become special forces to destroy evil organizations. Unlike the *Little Rascals*, *Wild 7* is a James Bond-like story in which people use modern weapons and most of the heroes sacrifice their lives for the cause. Another Mochizuki work, *Secret Detective JA*, also had an impact on Wong's *Little Rascals*. Mochizuki's realistic style, in particular his drawing of violent scenes, inspired Huang (Wong, 1999:21).

In 1975, the Hong Kong government issued the Indecent Publication Law to regulate excessive violence and sex in publications. *Little Rascals* was renamed *School of Dragon and Tiger* (*Longfumen*, 1975-present) to provide it a new start. The background of the story became increasingly internationalized. Having swept out bad elements in Hong Kong, the heroes find Japanese *yakuza* (gangsters), samurai, ninja, and right-wing organizations their new enemies. The "righteous Chinese versus evil Japanese" scenario became the formula for Hong Kong *kung fu* comics. *School of Dragon and Tiger* had been the most popular Hong Kong comic in the late 1970s and early 1980s until the publication of *The Chinese Hero* (*Zhonghua yingxiong*, 1983-present) in 1983 by Ma Yingcheng, another prominent comics master who, along with Huang, defined Hong Kong-style *kung fu* comics.

Ma was the most popular comics artist in Hong Kong in the 1980s. His *Chinese Hero* sold 200,000 copies per issue in its heyday, still the sales record in the history of Hong Kong comics. Following the *kung fu* comic formula set by Huang, the main storyline of *Chinese Hero* is about Chinese martial arts



Figure 2. "Chinese Vs. Japanese" formula in Hong Kong *kung fu* comics

heroes pitted against evil Japanese organizations (Figure 2).

Ma was a big fan of Japanese comics and learned from them in his creation of Hong Kong-style *kung fu* comics. In the last pages of each issue of *Chinese Hero*, he usually introduced techniques and characteristics of his favorite Japanese comics artists. *Chinese Hero*, a work that revolutionized Hong Kong *kung fu* comics in terms of drawing and storyline, was under strong Japanese influence. Ma was indebted to Ikegami Ryoichi (Ma's favorite comics artist) and Matsumori Tadashi for drawing and to Koike Kazuo for story and plot. The realistic and delicate drawing of Asian faces and fighting scenes, as well as the use of colors and shading in Ikegami's *Crying Freeman* and *Men's Gang* (*Otokugumi*), have had an impact on *Chinese Hero*. In his autobiography, Ma expresses his admiration for Ikegami, saying at one point, "When I first joined the comic business, I admired one Japanese comic artist, Ikegami Ryoichi. Many of my works have been under his influence. My wish since my childhood was to shake hand and discuss comics freely with him. I sent almost all my published works to Japan to Ikegami" (Ma, 1990:39, 95). When Ma went to Japan, he visited Ikegami. Another Japanese comics artist who influenced Ma is Matsumori Tadashi, Ikegami's close friend and partner. Ma learned from Matsumori's *Kenshin* (God of Fist), how to draw fist fighting. Ma also admitted that in his early years, he used Matsumori's works as references in constructing a story and drawing the background and action (Ma, 1990:45). In storytelling and character development, Ma was deeply influenced by Koike Kazuo, the scriptwriter for Ikegami and Matsumori and mentor of Hara Tetsuo and Takahashi Rumiko. Koike is skillful in controlling the pace, creating climaxes and adding humanistic and

philosophical dimensions to fighting stories. Because of influences from Koike, Ma had the entire story and details of *Chinese Hero* in mind before he drew, unlike most Hong Kong cartoonists who develop the story while drawing. He even hired a scriptwriter, Liu Dingjian, to help him construct the story and plot. Again imitating Koike, Ma adds humanistic touches to fighting stories and creates a climax at the end of each episode.

Huang and Ma founded two of the largest comics production companies in Hong Kong, namely Dynasty and Jonesy (*Tianxia*), and, with a large number of contracted comics artists under them, have become the main forces in producing *kung fu* comics.

### Japanization of New-Generation Hong Kong Comics, 1990s to Early 2000s

New-generation comics artists in Hong Kong grew up with Japanese *manga* and *anime* and thus, received more Japanese influence than predecessors such as Huang and Ma. Situ Jianqiao and Li Zhida, the two most promising young comics artists in Hong Kong since the 1990s, are indebted to Japanese comics. Situ is perhaps the most Japanese of all young cartoonists in Hong Kong, successfully mixing Japanese sci-fi *manga* with Hong Kong *kung fu* comics. He is a big fan of Japanese sci-fi comics artists, Shiro Masamune (*Ghost in the Shell*) and Yasuhiko Yoshikazu (*Gundam*). In fact, Situ has sent most of his comics to Japan for their comments. Situ creates characters with a cool personality who live in a postmodern, futuristic, anachronistic, or virtual world. Passion and romance are subtly depicted. He said: "I am drawing sci-fi pieces and therefore I do not focus on romance. Perhaps I have been so deeply influenced by the Japanese animation, *Gundam* and as a result my depiction of romance is very subtle" (Xie, 2002:56). Situ's early work, *The Legend of the God of Gambling* (*Dusheng zhuanzi*) borrows heavily from *Dragonball* and *Ultraman* in character design and ideas; its protagonist is a deadringer for the Money King (Son Goku) in *Dragonball*. Like *Dragonball* and *Ultraman*, the protagonist in *The Legend of the God of Gambling* can transform or upgrade himself to a more powerful stage of combat. Situ's most famous works, *Supergod Z: Cyber Weapon* (*Chaoshen Z*, 1993) and *King of Fighters Z* (*Quanhuan Z*, 1996) are adapted from popular Japanese video games, *King of Fighters* and *Street Fighters* (Dai Ajia kyoei domin, 1996:253-254), and his recent works *Heavenly Book of the Six Ways* (*Liudao tianshu*, 1998) and *Legend of the Eight Deities* (*Baxian dao*, since 2001) mix Chinese martial arts stories with Taoist and Buddhist folklores. The latter stories and presentations are inspired by Yasuhiko Yoshikazu's *Gundam* and *Arion*. Influenced by recent Japanese popular comics [like *The Extreme Journey to*

*the West* (*Saiyuki*) and *The Legend of Chinese Deities* (*Fujin engi*)] that turn Chinese classics into modern or surrealistic stories, all Chinese deities in Situ's two works are drawn as modern *bishonen* (beautiful young boys) with slim bodies and trendy fashion.

Li Zhida is perhaps the most creative Hong Kong comics artist in recent years. His style is unique; unlike other Hong Kong comic artists, he usually draws in black and white. Inspired by Japanese comics and novels, Li's work is a combination of Otomo Katsuhiro's drawings and post-modern feel, Mochizuki Minetaro's and Murakami Haruki's imaginative, unconventional and discursive plots, and Maruo Suehiro's sense of craziness.

While Situ and Li have skillfully incorporated Japanese elements into their works, not a few Hong Kong comic artists copy from popular Japanese comics. For example, a considerable number of Hong Kong comics about car racing (e.g., *GT Racing*), soccer (e.g., *Monk Soccer*) and yoyo (e.g., *The King of Yoyo* and *The Star of Yoyo*) published since 2000 are modified from the best-selling Japanese *manga*, *Initial D*, *Captain Tsubasa* and *Beyblade*, respectively. Hot Japanese video games are particularly popular for adaptation. The two fighting games, *Street Fighters* and *King of Fighters*, have evolved into more than ten comics in Hong Kong in the past few years, some of which have acquired the copyrights from Japan. Other Japanese games such as *Biohazard* and *Gouki* also have been adapted to Hong Kong comics (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Hong Kong comics adapted from Japanese video games

With the decline of Hong Kong comics (in particular the *kung fu* genre) since the mid-1990s, cartoonists have experimented with new genres, such as *shōjō* (girls') (e.g., *Feel 100%*), erotic (e.g., *Haunted Nightclub*), and



scatological (e.g., *Goal! Invincible!*). *Manga* are strong in these genres and naturally have become the models for Hong Kong artists (Figure 4).



Figure 4. New genres in Hong Kong comics

Many Japanese methods of drawing and presentation have become clichés in Hong Kong comics. First, balloons are used for dialogue, different shapes showing the loudness and the emotion of the speaker. A round and smooth balloon represents a peaceful mind, whereas an angled balloon implies that the speaker is excited or angry. Second, the tendency of the size of the protagonist suddenly becoming small and distorted (such as big head and small body), a technique used for humorous effects, the so-called “cute version or Q version.” Third, the use of sound to depict activities and emotions. *Katakana* is used for sounds in Japanese comics, whereas a single Chinese character or sometimes an English pronunciation is often used in Hong Kong comics. Fourth, in drawing the facial expression, Japanese methods are applied, such as using a few drops of sweat on one's face to express anxiety and black lines on the head to show embarrassment.

### Japanese Impact on Hong Kong Comics Industry and Culture

Elements of *manga* penetrate different forms of the comics industry of Hong Kong, strong in character goods and comics rental and publication.

Japanese cartoon characters are extremely popular, many Hong Kong companies acquiring their copyright from Japan to use with their products. For example, Maxim's Cakes and Bakery uses Hello Kitty; its rival, Saint Honore Cake Shop, uses Sailormoon and Digimon. The success of Japanese character goods companies, such as Sanrio and San-X, has stimulated Hong Kong businessmen to establish their own brands, among them, McMug, Pork Chop and Friends, Kawaii Tenkoku (Lovely Paradise), and Codebar. To a

certain extent, they are all under Japanese influence. For example, Kawaii Tenkoku sees Sanrio as its model and presents itself as a Japanese company. In addition to the Japanized company name, the characters created by Kawaii Tenkoku carry Japanese names and designs. No wonder some people mistake it for a Japanese company (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The logo of Kawaii Tenkoku and two of its popular characters

Japanese influence is very evident in the publication of Hong Kong comics. Hong Kong comics are usually published once a week, about 30-40 pages printed colorfully on B5 size paper. In recent years, however, some Hong Kong comics have adopted the Japanese comic book format, published once a month with about 200 pages black and white on B6 size paper (about half the size of B5 paper). For example, Freeman Publisher publishes most of its comics in the Japanese format. Many other publishers use the Japanese format in the publication of special collectors' editions of Hong Kong comics.

Various forms of Japanese comics culture, such as book rental, *dojinshi* (amateur comics) and cosplay (costume play or dressing up like comics characters), have also been introduced to Hong Kong. Comics rental business emerged in the 1980s and now Hong Kong has more than 200 comics rental shops, carrying mostly Japanese comics. Some of these are comics cafes (where customers can have a drink while reading their comics) and comics internet bars (where customers can read comics on the web or engage in on-line entertainment). *Dojinshi* and cosplay appeared in Hong Kong in the 1980s and early 1990s, respectively, and have become popular activities among comics lovers. Every year, hundreds of *dojinshi* artists and cosplayers participate in comics conventions and festivals such as Comic World (twice a year by SE Co. Ltd, a Japanese company) and Comic Market (annually by the Hong Kong Comics Association). Most universities in Hong Kong have comics groups to promote *dojinshi* and cosplay. Like Japanese publishers, Hong Kong publishers also look for talents in *dojinshi*. For example, Sun Junwei, a rising star in Hong Kong comics, was discovered in *dojinshi* by Citicomics, the largest comics publisher in Hong Kong. He was even sent to Japan for training before his debut.

## Conclusion

This study shows that Hong Kong comics are not immune to Japanese influence. In fact, the history, art, industry, and culture of Hong Kong comics have all been under the spell of the Japanese. Instead of blindly copying from Japanese comics, most Hong Kong comic book artists skillfully and selectively incorporate some Japanese elements into their works, such elements enriching, but not replacing, local aspects. Hong Kong comics still have much to learn from the Japanese. In particular, when Hong Kong artists want to draw something beyond the *kung fu* genre, Japanese comics provide valuable references. Heretoforth, the relationship between Japanese and Hong Kong comics has been largely one-way traffic. But, more interactions and even collaborations can be expected. In recent years, works of several Hong Kong comics artists have drawn the attention of the Japanese. For example, Li Zhiqing, Li Zhida, and Situ Jianqian were invited to publish their works in Japan. Li Zhiqing's application of traditional Chinese ink painting techniques is particularly well received in Japan. His *Sanguozhi* (Legend of the Three Kingdoms, 1992), jointly published by Citicomics in Hong Kong and Scholars in Japan, is the first Hong Kong-Japan comics collaboration. Famous Japanese comic scriptwriter, Terashima Yu, provides the story and plot for *Sanguozhi*, which has been a huge business success in both Japan and Hong Kong (Figure 6). Li has also been commissioned to draw the jackets and illustrations for comics and novels in Japan.

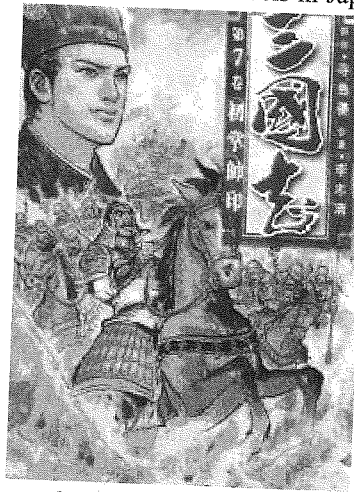


Figure 6. *Sanguozhi*, a work of Hong Kong-Japan collaboration

Such collaboration benefits both parties and generates new ideas, techniques, and business opportunities. Nowadays, the Japanese comics industry is at a crossroad, in need of stimulation and innovation. Perhaps the

Japanese can find inspiration from foreign comics, and should more Hong Kong comics be introduced to Japan, one day we will be able to talk about Hong Kong elements in Japanese comics.

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