

The Impact of Japanese Comics and Animation in Asia

By Ng Wai-ming

Japan is a *manga* (comics) 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 they broadcast Japanese animated series on TV on a daily basis. Different forms of Japanese comics and animation culture, such as comic cafés (*manga kissa*), comic rentals, *dojinshi* (amateurish manga) and *kosupure* (costume play), have penetrated the consumer culture in major Asian cities. Merchandise of Japanese cartoon characters, such as Hello Kitty, Doraemon, *Chibi Marukochan* (*Cute Little Maruko*), *Crayon Shin-chan*, *Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon* (*Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*), *Dragon Ball*, Tarepanda, *Pokémon* and *Digimon* (*Digital Monsters*) 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 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, Pikachu (*Pokémon*), Doraemon, Ultraman and *Final Fantasy*. This article looks at the impact of Japanese comics and animation in Asia, focusing on Asian comics and animation production as well as Asian popular culture and the entertainment industry. Hong Kong and Taiwan, two consumption centers of Japanese comics and animation in Asia, are used as the main examples for analysis. China, Singapore and South Korea are also discussed briefly for comparison.

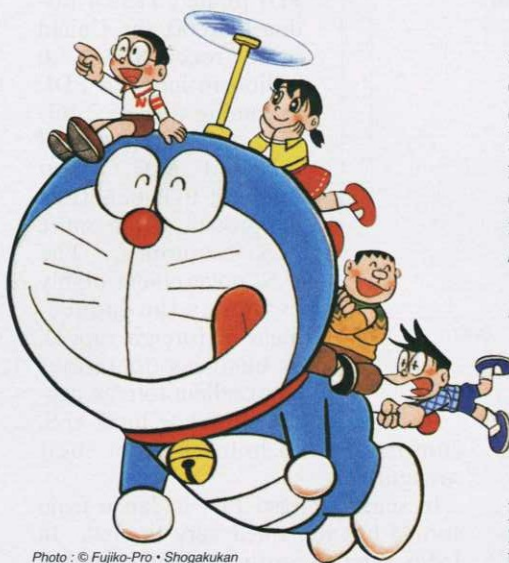


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Doraemon (above) and Anpanman; these characters are also very popular outside Japan

Japanese Impact on Asian Comics and Animation Production

Most Asian comics 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 artists like Huang Yulang and Ma Yingcheng forged the Hong Kong-style *kung fu* comic tradition. Both Huang and Ma incorporated Japanese elements in their *kung fu* comics.

Huang's *Little Rascals* (*Xiao liumang*, 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. The story and drawing style were influenced by Mochizuki Mikiya's *Wild 7*, a popular comic about seven heroes who fight against evil. The main difference between *Little Rascals* and *Wild 7* 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, and in particular his drawing of violent scenes, inspired Huang. In 1975, *Little Rascals* was renamed *School of Dragon and Tiger* (*Longfumen*, 1975-present). In *School of Dragon and Tiger*, Hong Kong martial art heroes, having destroyed Hong Kong gangsters, find new enemies: Japanese *yakuza*, right-wing organizations, samurai and *ninja*. 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 terms of drawing and story lines. Ma was indebted to Ikegami Ryoichi and Matsumori Tadashi for drawing and to Koike Kazuo and Huang for story lines. Ikegami is Ma's favorite comic artist and the realistic and delicate drawing of Asian faces and fighting in Ikegami's *Crying Freeman* and *Otokogumi* (*Men's Group*) have had an impact on *Chinese Hero*. Ma also learned a lot

from Matsumori's *Kenshin (God of Fist)* in drawing fist fighting. Koike, the scriptwriter for Ikegami and Matsumori, is skillful in controlling the pace, creating climaxes and adding a humanistic dimension to fighting stories. Influenced by Koike, Ma draws according to the script, adds humanistic touches, 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 evil Japanese 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, 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 *Dragon Ball* and *The 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 Fighter* and *King of Fighters*. Li is a creative artist who experiments with 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 expressions and plots are inspired by Murakami Haruki's novels.

Although Hong Kong has a strong comic tradition of its own, it is a newcomer in animation production. Hong Kong has only produced several animated movies and it makes no TV cartoons. Hong Kong animators are learning animation techniques from their Japanese and American counterparts. *Chinese Ghost Story (Xian qian, 1997)* directed by Xu Ke is an example of Hong Kong artists attempting to create their own animated films with help from the Japanese. Promoted 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 broadcasting stations discussed a project to jointly produce a TV 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 Goseki'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*

Photo: © Inoue Takehiko / I.T. Planning, Inc.



The comic edition of *Slam Dunk* by Inoue Takehiko

Eastern Zhou Heroes (Dong Zhou yingxiong chuan, 1990).

Taiwanese animators have only produced a few commercial animated films and TV 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 Shin-chan* and *Chibi Maruko-chan*. *Ah Kuei* will be made into a TV cartoon series, live-action drama serial and animated film. Recently, Taiwanese on-line animators have begun to experiment with 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* (which originated from TV drama scripts) 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 on Japanese influence in order to develop Chinese-style comics and animation. Regard-

Photo: "Dragon Ball" © Bird Studio / SHUEISHA Inc.



Dragon Ball has had a huge impact on creative work in other countries. *Dragon Ball* is scheduled to make its debut in 2004 in a movie by the 20th CENTURY FOX

less of the 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 TV cartoon series, adopts almost 100% of the Japanese-style. Its producer flatly admitted that *Music Up* is the "Chinese edition of *Slam Dunk*."

Chinese animators become familiar with the Japanese style not only by self-study, but also through on-site job training. Thousands of Chinese animators work for the Japanese making Japanese animated TV programs and films 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 TV cartoons and animated films are partially made in China to cut production costs. 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 animated films and programs and thus the 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 *Dragon Ball* and Chen Zhikun's *Potato Republic* (1999) is influenced by Toriyama Akira in style and *Shota no Sushi* in content. Some Singapore comic artists have acknowledged their indebtedness to Japanese comics. The most popular Singapore comic artist, Huang Zhenmeng, said: "The comic artists who have influenced me most are Tezuka Osamu and his

Black Jack and *Mitsume ga Toru* (*Three-Eyed Prince*) 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 performing the uncreative and labor-intensive jobs in animation production. Now, they are confident enough to make their own animations and draw original pictures for Japanese animation. Besides TV 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 Co. and San-X Co. and they are now competing with Japanese products in the Asian market.

Recently, an increasing number of Korean and Japanese artists are working together to make comics and animated films and TV programs. For example, in May 2001, *Comic Bunch*, a Japanese comic magazine published by Shinchosha Co., decided to publish both Japanese and Korean comics. Yang Kyong Il has been working with Hirai Kazumasa to produce a comic, *Shiryogari* (*Zombie Hunter*) in Japan since 2000. In addition to comics, Korean and Japanese animators have collaborated in producing TV cartoon series – e.g., *Alexander* (2000) and *Pata Pata Hikosen no Boken* (*The Adventure in a Flying Ship*, 2002) – and animated films – e.g., *Audition* (2002).

The Japanese Impact on Asian Popular Culture and Entertainment Industry

Japanese comics and animation have a strong impact on Asian popular culture and the entertainment industry, in particular movies and TV dramas. The



Photo : © CL-KO

MashiMaro, a character created on-line by Korean animators

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*, *Kujaku-o* (*Peacock King*), *Dr. Kumahige*, *Sign wa V* (*Sign is V*), *GTO* (*Great Teacher Onizuka*), *Black Jack*, *Tekken* (*Iron Fist*), *Street Fighter*, *Kindaichi-Shonen no Jikenbo* (*Young Kindaichi Files*), *Koroshiya Ichi* (*Killer Ichi*) and *Initial D*. Works like *City Hunter*, *Peacock King*, *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 copyrights when they adapt Japanese comics into Hong Kong movies. They can do so because they use Chinese translated titles and not the original Japanese titles. For example, *GTO* becomes *Hot-Tempered Teacher* (*Mala jiaoshi*). Japanese artists and companies only own the copyrights of Japanese titles and not the 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 the protagonists into Chinese. In addition, some Hong Kong movies adopt names from the Chinese translated titles of popular Japanese comics and animated series, such as *Macross*, *Touch*, and *Yuke!* *Inachu Takkyubu* (*Let's Go! Inachu Ping-Pong Club*), although their stories have nothing to do with the associated Japanese works. Japanese comics and animation influence the content of Hong Kong movies. For example, a number of Hong Kong movies about cooking competitions have been produced in recent years. They are

Photo: © Yoko Kamio / SHUEISHA Inc.



Hana yori Dango (top) and *Yamada Taro Monogatari* (right) were adapted into popular Taiwanese television drama serials

Photo: © Ai MORINAGA / KADOKAWA SHOTEN



strong in TV dramas. In the late 1990s, *Meitantei Conan* (*Conan the Boy Detective*) was made into Taiwanese TV dramas. In 2001, *Meteor Garden* (*Hana yori Dango*), a Taiwanese drama based on a *shojo manga* (girls' comic), creat-

ed a commotion in Taiwan. Its four handsome actors, F4 (Flowers Four), have become national icons. *Meteor Garden* has preserved many Japanese elements to the extent that even the names of the main characters are Japanized. In early 2002, a Taiwanese TV drama serial based on the Japanese comic *Yamada Taro Monogatari* was also well-received. Due to their overwhelming success, at least six Taiwanese dramas based on Japanese shojo manga will be made in 2002 and 2003. These will help to create a boom of Japanized dramas in Taiwan.

In China, 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 *Asunaro Hakusho* (*Asunaro White Paper*). 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 animated films and TV programs, 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 the 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 for 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 animated films and programs 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 animated films and programs has come to a standstill in Japan. Knowing more about Asian comics and animated films and programs can generate artistic inspiration and business opportunities. In the age of cultural globalization, collaboration between Japan and Asia in producing comics and animated films and programs 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 a market. Both Japan and Asia will benefit from this kind of transnational cultural interaction and cooperation.

JTI

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inspired by Japanese comics and animated series about Japanese cuisine, such as *Mr. Ajikko*, *Shota no Sushi*, *Food Fight*, *Oishii Kankei* (*Delicious Relation*) and *Chuka Ichiban* (*Chinese Cuisine as Number One*). Humorous elements and expressions in Japanese comics and animated series, such as nose bleeding when guys get sexually excited and falling on the ground when people are surprised, have become clichés in Hong Kong comedies.

Some Japanese comics and animated series, such as *Ai to Makoto* (*Love and Sincerity*) and *Megumi no Daigo* (*Fire Fighter Daigo*), have been adapted into Hong Kong TV drama series. Although the titles, settings, characters and stories have been revised, people who are familiar with Japanese manga can tell right away that they are Hong Kong 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 TV cartoons, including *Doraemon*, *Angel Queen*, *Alps no Shojo Heidi* (*Heidi - A Girl of the Alps*), *Dr. Slump*, *Gegege no Kitaro* (*Spooky Kitaro*), *Ninja Hattori-kun* (*Hattori The Ninja*), *Soreyuke!* *Anpanman*, *Ikkyusan*, *Chibi Marukochan*, *Card Captor Sakura* (*Cardcaptors*) and *Digimon*. Some of these Cantonese covers have been very popular. In recent years, Hong Kong singers also perform Cantonese covers of theme songs for Japanese animated films, such as *Doraemon*, *Pokémon* and *Digimon*.

In Taiwan, the influence of Japanese comics and animation is particularly