Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan

Matthew ALLEN and Rumi SAKAMOTO (eds)

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As the editors of this volume point out, it is a truism that 'Japanese' popular culture has become a significant influence upon the world, particularly since the late 1990s. However, this is not a static and homogenising process of production and consumption. Rather, editors Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto, and scholars Koichi Iwabuchi, Romit Dasgupta, Hugh de Ferranti, Yukako Sunaoshi, T. J. M. Holden, Mark McLelland, Yoshitaka Mōri, Matthew Penney and James E. Roberson, aim with this volume to examine the dynamic and transformative movement of popular cultural ideas, artefacts and practices into and out of Japan as part of the broader processes of cultural globalisation.

This volume is divided into two parts – entitled 'Reconfiguring Japan' and 'Becoming Global'. Using empirical case studies, the contributors to 'Reconfiguring Japan' recognise that Japanese popular culture is becoming an increasingly significant part of cultural globalisation. However, as Koichi Iwabuchi points out in his interesting opening chapter, this does not necessarily indicate successful and influential reception, particularly in Asia. Iwabuchi argues that the role of Japanese popular culture within Asian countries is still frequently underpinned in Japan by a self-Orientalising discourse, one which promotes Japanese/Asian commonalities at the same time as reinforcing alleged Japanese hegemony over Asia. As such, he describes the claims made by some Japanese commentators that the popularity of Japanese culture in, for example, South Korea and Taiwan, demonstrates the displacement of negative historical memories of Japan as, on the whole, fallacious. He concludes that culture may well be a starting point for dialogue between Japan and other Asian countries but cannot be the sole forum for historical reconciliation.

While the spread of Japanese popular culture has been celebrated, it has also been perceived uneasily. Matthew Allen analyses 'Chimpokomon', the 1999 Japan-related episode of *South Park*, the controversial animated television series produced in the United States. In combining parody of the formulaic commodity fetishism of the Japanese-created *Pokemon* phenomenon of the 1990s, contemporary images of Japan as an economic power and historical images of Japan as a threat to Western countries, Allen argues that *South Park*'s producers successfully (if crudely) manipulated

orientalised stereotypes of Japan in the episode to cast the country as a leader in the promotion of, in this case, immoral global consumer ideology.

Outflows of Japanese popular culture are not always viewed warily and, as a number of commentators point out, they have been widely adopted and subjected to creative processes of hybridisation and indigenisation in the global world. For instance, Hugh de Ferranti analyses TaikOz, the Australian *taiko* drumming group which, he suggests, represents a hybrid product of the two-dimensional flow between Australia and Japan of cultural traditions and practices surrounding performance culture. While TaikOz has continued to emphasise its connection with Japan, Japanese popular culture in other forms and forums has occasionally been transfigured in a way that obscures or at least draws into question its origins and identity as 'Japanese'. How, asks Yukako Sunayoshi, can the activities of 'Asian' readers of Japanese manga translated into other languages, and discussed in English in New Zealand, be interpreted? Sometimes, as Romit Dasgupta points out, Japanese popular culture has indeed been deliberately indigenised to the extent that it is repackaged for audiences not as Japanese but rather as, for example, Taiwanese or Korean. In the case of the 1998 Hong Kong film *Bishōnen no Koi*, he suggests, thematic and stylistically Japanese elements can be seen as de-territorialising the film from its Hong Kong origins, or at the very least helping to establish the film as ambiguously 'Asian'.

In 'Becoming Global', the contributors use similar empirical studies to analyse the impact on Japan and, most significantly, the impact on Japanese 'identity', of global cultural flows. Todd Holden, for instance, analyses Japanese coverage of Japanese sports stars who have been successful outside Japan, such as baseballers Nomo Hideo and Suzuki Ichiro, and golfer Miyazato Ai. Similarly Yoshitaka Mōri examines the role of Japanese Neo Pop artist Murakami Takashi in both Japanese and Western art scenes. Rumi Sakamoto, on the other hand, analyses the rise of *ekkyō* or 'border-crossing' literature in Japan published by writers such as American Levy Hideo, Japanese returnee Mizumura Minae, Swiss David Zoppetti and Kaneshiro Kazuki, a second generation Korean in Japan. Such writers, she points out, are both inside and outside and, therefore, are able to use 'Japanese' literature to challenge and critique the myth of an homogeneous 'Japanese' identity. Indeed, as Mark McLelland suggests in his study of the *gei bōi* (gay boy) category in Japan, sexual 'identity' is also the product of hybridising global processes, being neither wholly imported from the West, nor the product of an 'authentic', 'local' residue of 'Japanese' identity. As Matthew Penney shows, author Saotome Katsumoto, too, displays both local and global themes in his anti-war literature. Lastly, James E. Roberson examines Okinawan music, often held up as Japan's contribution to 'world music', and questions what 'Okinawan' is within the context of globalisation.

Standout chapters in this volume include those by Iwabuchi, Allen, Holden and Sakamoto. As the editors acknowledge, there is a wealth of unexplored potential in the themes of popular culture, globalisation and Japan. A full examination of the impact of non-Japanese participation in *sumo*, with the recent success of Mongolian star Asashoryu, for example, only briefly mentioned in Holden's analysis of coverage of Japanese sports stars, would have a fascinating counter-study to his chapter. As such, the publication of some of the existing chapters was perhaps only marginally justified. Moreover, it is unclear why this volume was structured so as to mimic the inside/outside dichotomy view of culture, when the editors insist that this view vastly simplifies the multilateral, layered and complex flows that influence the production and consumption of culture. There are also some simple mistakes, including several references in one chapter to McDonalds, the global fast-food restaurant chain, as 'Macdonald's', an admittedly minor, yet disturbing, error given the volume's claim to expertise in the world of popular culture. Nevertheless, this volume is an interesting addition to Japanese Studies scholarship emanating from scholars in Australia, New Zealand and Japan and one hopes, as do the editors, that research in this rewarding area is ongoing.