JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by
Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN
ASIAN STUDIES

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Volume IV
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The Coolness of Japan?

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CONTENTS

VOLUME IV: GLOBALIZING JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE: THE COOLNESS OF JAPAN?

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction to Volume IV: how cool is Japan? 1

PART 1
'Cool Japan' or 'Soft Japan'? 5

70 Japan's gross national cool 7
DOUGLAS MCGRAY

71 "Soft" nationalism and narcissism: Japanese popular culture goes global 18
KOICHI IWABUCHI

72 The pitfall facing the Cool Japan project: the transnational development of the anime industry under the condition of post-Fordism 40
YOSHITAKA MŌRI

73 Cute masquerade and the pimping of Japan 57
LAURA MILLER

74 Japan's quest for "soft power": attraction and limitation 72
PENG ER LAM

75 Contesting soft power: Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia 88
NISSIM KADOSH OTMAZGIN

76 Healing old wounds with manga diplomacy: Japan's wartime mange displayed at China's Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum **117**
ISHIKAWA YOSHIMI, INTERVIEWED BY KONO MICHIKAZU

PART 2
Japanese popular culture and border crossings **127**

2.1 West 129

77 Wink on pink: interpreting Japanese cute as it grabs the global headlines **129**
CHRISTINE R. YANO

78 Portable monsters and commodity cuteness: *Pokémon* as Japan's new global power **137**
ANNE ALLISON

79 "You are not alone!": anime and the globalizing of America **155**
ANDREW C. MCKEVITT

80 Karaoke's coming home: Japan's empty orchestras in the United Kingdom **184**
WILLIAM HOWARD KELLY

81 *Iron Chef* around the world: Japanese food television, soft power, and cultural globalization **213**
GABRIELLA LUKACS

82 Console video games and global corporations: creating a hybrid culture **230**
MIA CONSALVO

83 What race do they represent and does mine have anything to do with it? Perceived racial categories of anime characters **250**
AMY SHIRONG LU

84 Between fan culture and copyright infringement: manga scanlation **271**
HYE-KYUNG LEE

85 Fansubbing anime: insights into the "butterfly effect" of globalisation on audiovisual translation **285**
LUIS PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ

2.2 East 307

86 Odours of mobility: mobile phones and Japanese cute culture in the Asia-Pacific **307**
LARISSA HJORTH

87 Transnational media consumption and cultural identity: young Korean women's cultural appropriation of Japanese TV dramas **326**
LEE DONG-HOO

88 Japanese popular music in Singapore and the hybridization of Asian music **343**
BENJAMIN WAI-MING NG

89 Reconsidering transnational cultural flows of popular music in East Asia: transbordering musicians in Japan and Korea searching for "Asia" **360**
HYUNJOON SHIN

90 Kusanagi Tsuyoshi x Chonangang: transcending Japanese/Korean ethnic boundaries in Japanese popular culture **381**
YUEN SHU MIN

Index 405

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME IV: HOW COOL IS JAPAN?

The rising interest in Japanese popular culture in recent years is largely a result of its ubiquitous presence outside Japan. The visibility of Japanese popular culture is undeniable in the US, Europe and Asia today: *manga*, *anime*, *karaoke* and a number of other popular cultural phenomena have a high-profile presence globally. The essays in this volume represent scholarly efforts to understand this relatively new phenomenon.

We have organised this volume into three parts. Part 1 consists of works that address Japan's 'soft power' thesis and 'Cool Japan' ideology. In the 1990s, at the time of Japan's economic recession, Japanese popular cultural exports increased. One of the earliest pieces that captured this phenomenon was Douglas McGray's essay, which originally appeared in *Foreign Policy* and coined the term 'Japan's gross national cool'. This essay, which is the first in this volume (Chapter 70), marked the beginning of the 'Cool Japan' discourse, as it was picked up by the Japanese government in its effort to consciously promote cultural diplomacy and soft power via popular cultural exports. Despite the frequently optimistic and self-congratulatory Japanese discourse on Cool Japan, scholars have generally been sceptical about the state strategy, as the essays gathered here attest. Iwabuchi (Chapter 71) argues that Japan's discourse of soft nationalism is narcissistic and discounts the complicated nature of transnational cultural flows, as it assumes the 'uniquely Japanese' nature of Japanese popular culture. He cautions against reading the global presence of Japanese popular culture as the sign of Japanese cultural hegemony. What is happening, he suggests, is 'decentring', where origins do not matter much and culturally odourless products circulate transnationally. Globalisation of Japanese popular culture is characterised by 'transnationalist ambivalence' as culture gets hybridised, indigenised, appropriated and so on, thus undermining the state desire to 'nationalise' cultural flow. Mōri's essay (Chapter 72) similarly challenges the Japaneseness of globalising Japanese popular culture via the examination of the transnational production of the animation industry in Japan, China and Korea, over the period since the 1960s. Laura Miller offers an important feminist critique of

Cool Japan ideology (Chapter 73). She points out that Cool Japan ideology is a gendered one that objectifies femininity, narrowly centring on cuteness, and that its emphasis on male *otaku* culture excludes girls' creativity and innovations. She further reminds us that the global embrace of 'cuteness' is also tied to the structure of gender inequality, as it permits the enjoyment of sexist representations, which is a product of male desire and fantasies.

The next set of essays is concerned with the presence and meaning of Japanese pop culture in countries Japan invaded and/or colonised in the past. Lam argues (Chapter 74) that despite the attractiveness of Japanese popular culture and the Japanese government's cultural diplomacy effort, Japan's 'image problem' will continue because of the longstanding historical issues in East Asia. Otmazgin's study of the Japanese popular culture industries in East Asia shows how they shape local markets and disseminate new images of Japan (Chapter 75). While noting that consumption is more complicated than production and distribution, he does suggest that young people in East Asia are developing a new sympathetic perception of Japan and that the shared experience of popular culture may promote a dialogue between Japanese and other East Asian people. One example of such a possibility is captured in 'Healing old wounds with manga diplomacy', an interview with Ishikawa Yoshimi (Chapter 76). Ishikawa, after some initial difficulties, organised a successful exhibition of Japanese *manga* artists' experience of the war at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall ('My August 15', 2009–10). His chronicle of this exhibition lets us glimpse a possibility of different aspects of on-the-ground soft power, despite multiple problems with the discourse of 'soft power' as narcissism, nationalism, anti-feminism and so on.

Overall, while the possibility of popular cultural 'diplomacy' is not totally rejected, scholars have stressed the spontaneous transnational and fluid movements of culture that often escape the state's control. Globalisation of culture involves multiple levels, agencies and practices, and is contingent on local contexts and interpretation/articulation. Of central importance to the study of globalising Japanese popular culture, therefore, are empirical studies that closely look at the specific workings of such complex cultural flows. The rest of this volume provides closer examination of specific interactions, first in the West, then in Asia.

In the 'West' section (Part 2.1), Yano and Allison look at two of the global icons of Japanese cuteness, *Hello Kitty* (Yano) and *Pokémon* (Allison). Yano (Chapter 77) focuses on the global popularity of *Hello Kitty* and Japanese cuteness. While she recognises its link with infantilised, sexualised and 'born out of passivity' Japanese femininity, her focus is in Kitty's 'subversive playfulness'. For Yano, Kitty is a benign but powerful symbol of new Japan, an icon of playful sexuality, a logo, and it can even be an open canvas for hyperviolence. And, ultimately, it is a profitable corporate strategy of Sanrio. Allison (Chapter 78), also emphasising the 'commodity' aspect of *Pokémon*, argues that *Pokémon*'s success overseas has to do with its 'commodity cuteness'

– that is, marketing and packaging of Japan cuteness in a 'hyper-consumerist' (digital, portable and multi-media) form. And Japaneseness matters here, as *Pokémon*'s marketing strategy involved conscious imprinting of Japaneseness.

The next four essays examine specific instances of Japanese popular culture in North America and the UK: *anime* in America (Mckevitt, Chapter 79), *karaoke* in the UK (Kelly, Chapter 80), *Iron Chef*, a TV programme, in North America (Lukacs, Chapter 81) and the computer games industry in the US (Consalvo, Chapter 82). Collectively they challenge the model of unidirectional cultural transmission from the West and the rest that reflects the hierarchical relations between the two, and reveal the complexity of the concrete process of hybridisation, glocalisation and cross-national development of content, style and meaning production around 'Japanese' popular culture. They imply that the ubiquitous presence of Japanese popular culture globally may not be about Japan's power, and that we may need to look at how Japanese popular culture is interacting and intersecting with local industry and consumers. Amy Shirong Lu (Chapter 83) analyses how racial characteristics of *anime* characters are perceived by global audiences, and discovers that characters that are intended to be 'Asian' characters are often seen as 'Caucasian' by Caucasian audiences (mostly from the USA). She suggests that part of the reason for the success of Japanese animation may be because of this relative 'odourlessness'.

The next three essays are concerned with fan activities. Hye-Kyung Lee (Chapter 84) looks at fan culture and informal distribution networks surrounding *manga* scanlation and points out the conflict between globalisation and nationally focused law, while Luis Pérez González (Chapter 85) looks at the issue of fansubbing from the perspective of translation studies. With the proliferation of the internet such fan activities are becoming increasingly relevant to the global popularity of Japanese popular culture.

The rest of the essays concern Japanese popular culture in Asia (Part 2.2). In a variety of ways, they, too, examine the localisation, appropriation, transformation and hybridisation of Japanese popular culture. While the historical power hierarchy between Japan and other nations in Asia provides a context for these studies, what emerges is far from a simplistic thesis of Japanese cultural imperialism or colonialism.

Hjorth (Chapter 86) looks at 'cute customisation' as a means of personalising and humanising technology in Asia and argues that there is not just a single version of Japanese cuteness, but many forms, thus adding to Allison and Yano's essays on cuteness. Dong-Hoo Lee (Chapter 87) looks at how young Korean women have appropriated Japanese TV dramas to fit them to their own needs of negotiating gender norms and identities in Korea. Ng's essay on J-pop in Singapore (Chapter 88) demonstrates that the J-pop boom in Singapore was a result of multiple elements, including the role of Hong Kong and Taiwan as the largest redistribution centres of J-pop in Asia, piracy, television, radio, as well as electronic and print media. Therefore, he argues,

it would be too simplistic to see Japanisation and hybridisation of Singaporean music culture purely as a form of cultural colonialism. Rather, it should be understood as a part of transnational cultural flows of Asian music. Hyunjoon Shin also calls for the framework of 'trans-Asia cultural traffic' within the Asian region in place of a West/non-West framework (Chapter 89). By examining the interactions between two 'transbordering' migrant musicians in Japan and Korea, her essay argues that postcolonial power relations between Japan and Korea are complex, and draws our attention to the formation of new imaginations of Asia beyond national boundaries. Shu Min Yuen (Chapter 90) looks at Kusanagi Tsuyoshi, a member of Japanese boy band SMAP, and his Korean alter ego, Chonangang, and argues that he has challenged essentialist understanding of ethnic identity by mixing both Japaneseness and Koreanness in his performances. Kusanagi/Chonangang transcends national and cultural borders between Japan and Korea and has had a positive impact on Japan–Korea relations.