

*Impact of Cultural Intermediaries-  
The spread of Japanese movie to Hong Kong*

Ha Miu Yin Serina, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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## INTRODUCTION

Speaking of Japanese culture, the first thing that popped out will be the cosplay costumes that teenagers wear, the comic books like Doremon, Japanese songs broadcasted on the radio or the horror Japanese movie “Ring”. Japanese culture was deeply rooted into Hong Kong society in the 80s. The emergence of Japanese television program and movie was developed from the significant cultural interaction with Hong Kong and Japan. Many people learned a lot of Japanese culture by watching the Japanese drama and would often have a better knowledge of the Japanese way of life. They started to learn Japanese language, travel to Japan or look for opportunities to work with the Japanese.

This can be traced back to the 1980s, where a group of people had performed their talents and brought the best of this culture to Hong Kong. The mass media was not that well developed by that time, and people rely on newspapers, magazines and the radio to get updated information of the world. These cultural intermediates served as mediators to digest, translate, modify and localize the foreign popular culture for integration into the local entertainment industry. Among them, magazine publishers allowed people to know more about the foreign culture through their articles.

This raised the author’s interest in finding out why this had happened by investigating the processes and methods of different contributors in importing Japanese music to Hong Kong. The contributors came from different sectors, ranging from businessmen to music producers, movie directors and artists. Qualitative researches were made in the form of interviews to facilitate the study. Through interviews, researches on magazines; songs and movies, we would be able to understand how and why they can successfully globalize and localize Japanese products from Japan to Hong Kong.

With the use of magazines, publishers collect and present the latest Japanese entertainment news to the society, allowing people to get to know Japanese music. With the profession in music or movie, producers select and transform suitable Japanese version to local version. Many Japanese songs were adapted for Cantonese use. Japanese singers started to travel to Hong Kong as their first overseas location. Their production in cultural products include manga, CD, fashion, drama, or movies which were highly appraised in the youth world. Agents such as editors of magazines, music producers, film directors or managers of film companies took the chance to go to Japan and look for co-operation with Japanese.

This paper focuses on the emergence of Japanese film - which was a distinctive and valuable creative product in the business development of movie industry in Hong Kong. Japanese film is one of the most distinctive cultural products of Japan. It is well known for its storyboard, production, and reflects the cultural superiority of Japan. Most of the famous directors in Hong Kong were impressed by the Japan film in the 80s and transformed the concept of scenery, character or theme of local film production. Those films received good responses and maintained good sales records. According to Koichi Iwabuchi,

*“What the fast-developing Hong Kong symbolizes for the Japanese is the “energy” and “dream” that Japan has already lost”.*<sup>1</sup>

What are the major changes that had taken place behind the scene? How is this related to social development, globalization and localization? This paper will attempt to foster an understanding for the conditions with the aim to account the role of agents for emerging of Japanese movie within Hong Kong in relation to both culture and business and how it was sustained and developed in the 80s and after.

According to the interview of a writer Yau Suk Ting with Choi Lan, a famous Japanese expert and writer, Choi expressed that working with Japanese movie company was just like working with a business partner:

*“We want to learn the modern technique from working with Japanese, but finally it change to business cooperation only. Both of us only want to work in our own way. From my point of view, it’s better to hire some Japanese artists but work with the local team. I prefer to do it in this way and share the production fee with the Japanese. This benefits both of us in all ways.”*<sup>2</sup>

This is the marketing strategy of Choi as he is one of the earliest groups of Hong Kong people who worked with the Japanese from 70s.

## **JAPANESE CARTOON**

The effect of Japanese comics in Hong Kong comic rentals could be traced back to the 1950s. It became popular from the 1980s, when comic rentals in Hong Kong emerged in large quantity. The number of comic rentals increased from 50 to 200 in the recent years. It mainly targeted young audiences aged around 20- 30 years old. Among them, some are comic teahouses. As people tend to read comics online, comic Internet cafes were created to suit the latest trend.

The whole media environment was not as fragmented in the previous decades with television programs being the primary provider of entertainment. Moreover, the drawing of Japanese cartoon were exquisite and the content were creative with various themes. They included childhood memory, adventure, sports and ghosts, which brought a powerful impact in the monopoly, as there was no local cartoon released during that period. The only place which produced cartoon nearby was Japan. “Dragon ball” was a successful case with a high TV rating. The prevalence of Dragon ball not only swept through Asia, but even propagated to European countries like France and Spain.

According to the “Anime ranking standing 2012” conducted by Oricon, Dragon ball

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<sup>1</sup> Iwabuchi, K.(2002). *Recentring Globalizaiton: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (p. 174). London: Duke University Press

<sup>2</sup> Yau S. T. (2012), Choi lan, *Audio Description of Movie experts of Hong Kong and Japan: We are friends* (pg. 25-29), University Press.

ranked as the number 1 cartoon of all time. Japan was a country which respected about the creative industry, hence Japanese cartoon was able to become well-developed. Japanese cartoon also inspired life-action movies which involved actors and actresses to play the role of cartoon characters.

Doujinshi and costume play (cosplay) were two comic cultures which were developed and spread from Japan. Doujinshi is an amateur comic creation which evolved in Hong Kong since 1980s. The most significant example of Doujinshi will be Comic Alliance which was established in 1985. It is defined as a magazine that includes 10-20 short comic stories.

Cosplay is the short form of costume play. It started from a cultural exhibition in 1993. During the exhibition, one of the Doujinshi groups rented a booth to sell comics and some of the members dressed up as the characters of a comic Legend of the Galactic Heroes to get people's attention. The exhibition held by the Hong Kong Comic Association in 1997 introduced cosplay to the public. Its popular as a sub branch allowed it to split from Doujinshi. Other organizations such as universities started to organize cosplay functions. Nowadays, there are about 4-5 cosplay functions in Hong Kong, each with hundreds of cosplay lovers. People do not only dress as Japanese comic characters but also as Japanese singers, television characters as well as local comic characters.

The most significant comic function will be Comic World, co-organized by S.E and TC Production. All in all, there is a rise in both the organizations of Japanese comics as well as people who participated in Doujinshi. Most of the works are published online. However, collecting comic books consumes time and effort, hence it is not as popular. There are also other activities such as Animation Comic games Hong Kong, which is still very popular these days.

Hayao Miyazaki's movie and Doraemon's movie were popular cartoon movies in the 80s. Doraemon's movies got two series in theatre in total, and Hayao Miyazaki's movies got one in theatre only.

### **“Doraemon” in Hong Kong**

Doraemon was a significant animated film as it was named as the best favourite animation in 80s. It was named as “DingDong” and broadcasted in TVB since 1981.

The rise of this popular culture during that period brought the teenagers to a world of fantasy. Without a doubt Japanese comics and animations introduced certain impacts to Hong Kong movies, TV dramas and music. In the aspect of Hong Kong movies, many Japanese comics were shot as Hong Kong movies, such as “City Hunter”, “Slam-dunk”, “Spirit Warrior”, etc. All these movies received great responses and their box offices were great.

There were actors and technicians from Japan as well as capital for filming. Some of them were brought to cinemas in both Japan and Hong Kong, while others only targeted Hong Kong. Hong Kong directors changed comic names into Chinese names and modified plots to avoid legal issues. Japanese comics also influenced how Hong Kong directors shot films. For example, Mr. Chow Shing Chi's films are comic-like. More and

more people started to get ideas from Japanese comics for new films. Some comics such as “Love and Honesty” and “Firefighter-Daigo of Company” were transformed into TV dramas. Although they have a different Chinese name, people can easily identify them as Japanese comics. In 2001, Taiwan producers filmed “Boys Over Flower” and renamed it as “Meteor Garden”. The drama received great feedback. By then, Hong Kong producers were also planning to get the license of this story from the Japanese.

According to the Director of Hong Kong Film Critics Society Lo Car (2010);

*‘Movie was a major aspect of popular culture and a significant localized culture product of Hong Kong. Since movie industry is the major business development of Hong Kong, it used to reflect the voices of the public and has root linkage with the society’<sup>3</sup>*

Besides getting ideas from comic books, producers also looked into the books. Stories from Murakami Haruki are popular nowadays. One of his famous works, the Norwegian Wood became a movie. From all of the above, it is seen that the uniqueness of Japanese stories has given Hong Kong a new perspective in these recent years.

### **Master of Animation - Miyazaki Hayao**

Another important element of Hong Kong cinematography came from Japanese animation. In the animation industry, Miyazaki Hayao was one of the most important people. Although Miyazaki Hayao decided to retire at the age of 73 years old, all his works were considered as a piece of art. Some of his animations were Castle in the Sky and My Neighbor Totoro. Besides all those academic awards, Miyazaki Hayao’s animations allowed him to rank as 100 best animations at all time in audience poll.

The success of his Japanese animation encouraged the development of animation culture in Hong Kong. Japanese animations are still popular in Hong Kong nowadays. The introduction of Japanese movies influenced Hong Kong movie styles after the 70s. It contributed to the film diversification of Hong Kong, and gave an alternative to historical movies. In addition, Japanese movies affected the local lifestyles and culture. People started to learn what the actors ate and wore from the films. Thus the animation culture introduced by Japanese movies successfully became a new culture in Hong Kong.

### **The influential Japanese TV drama and Movie in Hong Kong**

The emergence of Japanese films and television programmes as a popular form of mass entertainment has been a significant factor in the cultural interaction between Hong Kong and Japan in the last 25 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Lingnan University, (2010) , Hong Kong Movie and Society: From 1960 to 1990 , *Hong Kong Stories in the Movie*, (p.26-28) Hong Kong Education Publishing Company.

When we look backward to study the history of Japanese movie in Hong Kong, we can trace back to the 70s. There were lots of movies about love and action. The unique and self –superior customs were often mentioned in the movie. One example is Yakusho Kouji ; “Higurasi-no Ki” (Story of a higurashi cicada) It is about the story of a 'bushi' who wanted to commit seppuku after compiling the genealogy of the family in 10 years and the other young bushi who was told to keep an eye on him for the last 3 years.

This kind of movie was famous for its fighting style and the ideas of “bushido”, which was an idea about how should samurai treats them. These types of ideas and the way of making movies influenced Hong Kong directors. The action movie of Bruce Lee “Fist of Fury” reflected Japanese styled movies. This could be seen from the clothes which Bruce wore, the scene and the way of how he screamed. The director utilized a Japanese theme for the fighting scenes in the movie. The Japanese action movies affected the Hong Kong movie industry after the 70s. Many directors were influenced by Japanese movie culture and put the ideas in their own production. Japanese movies thus created a starting point for the change of the movies style of Hong Kong and Asia.

In recent years, many Japanese films were recognized and praised in the Hong Kong International Film Festival presented by the Urban Council. There were lots of Japanese films which promoted the appreciation of Japanese culture through the introduction of excellent quality and story-boards. There are many good directors like Yamamoto, Maruse, Ichikawa, etc. They have already built up their status in the field and were being recognized. According to Chen, Darwin (1987):

*“Hong Kong has also had the opportunity of seeing several comedy films depicting the everyday life of ordinary Japanese people, such as the Tora San series. The success of these films indicates an interest among Hong Kong audiences in learning more about the life-style of the common people in Japan. Such films not only provide good entertainment, but are also effective in improving our understanding of Japan.”<sup>4</sup>*

This was a good chance for the local filmmakers to learn how the Japanese managed the production. Their job allocation was very clear and systematic. They possessed a very good research team and administrative team to handle the copyright and most of all, the structure was usually based on a real story, which often emotionally moved the audience.

Similar to movies, the audience can gain a better understanding of Japanese lifestyle from watching the Japanese drama. There were many Japanese drama for young audience which were very popular. These programmes ranged from youth series revolving around various sports such as swimming, judo and tennis shown some years ago, to drama series such as “Oshin” and “Hane Conma” seen more recently. The first TV drama series produced by TVB were broadcasted in 1968. As described by Dr. Chung King Fei ,

*“RTV (Rediffusion Television) started to broadcast American Drama “Batman” and crime drama “The untouchable”, TVB also started to buy a series of Japanese sports*

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<sup>4</sup> Chen, Darwin (1987), Japanese Films and Television Programmes in Hong Kong, *Hong Kong and Japan Cultural and Economic Interactions, 1845-1987*.(p. 385) Japan Society of Hong Kong.

drama like 'Young dynamic'), 'The Swim Hero'), Judo Saga). Those were very popular Japanese drama at that time"<sup>5</sup>

Other Japanese television programmes that have made an impact in Hong Kong include singing contests and musical programmes through which popular singers in Japan became stars in Hong Kong as well. Cartoon series from Japan have been seen regularly on television screens in Hong Kong and the more successful ones were dramatic fantasies which appealed to both children and adults, e.g. "Dr. Slump", "Ikkusan" and "The Song of Tentomushi", etc. Some of them have proved so popular that a whole industry of magazine, toy and cassette recordings has been spawned around these cartoon characters.

### **Remarkable Japanese Movie in Hong Kong in 80's**

However, the great success of Japanese movies in Hong Kong is not only appeared in recent years. After the 80s, it was the great changing point of Hong Kong. Hong Kong's movies started to move from ancient themed movies to normal movies.

Lots of movie directors were influenced by the western and Japanese movies and they brought new ideas on the production of the movie. According to Lo (2013):

*"It also represents an alternative modernity and a certain openness that Japan has never achieved."*<sup>6</sup>

Not only was movie production in Hong Kong affected by Japanese movies. The local cultures were also affected. The living style of Japanese passed to Hong Kong through different movies from Japan. For example, the wearing style of Japanese pop star at the movies passed to Hong Kong pop star. In the 90s, Japanese pop star loved to wear jewelry. Hong Kong pop stars copied their fashion style after that. It brought along a new fashion style to the local Hong Kong people. The pop culture was also easily affected by the Japanese movies.

As mentioned, "Kimurake no hitobito" which was directed by Yojiro Takita showed at Wan Chai Cityline for 524 days in 1990, which broke Hong Kong movie record of "The longest-showed movie in cinema" ever in history, with more than 10 million HKD box office.

"Shall we dance" which was published in 1997 was also one of the legends. It won all of the awards in Japan academy prize, including best actress and actors, best picture and best director, it demonstrated that Japanese movies have already reached the world standard, instead of relying on superficial devices such as claptraps, music and eye catching scenes rather than the content itself.

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<sup>5</sup> N.Y Lau (2003), *The booming of TV Drama*, The 75th Hong Kong Broadcasting Special- From 1928 (p. 52). RTHK

<sup>6</sup> Kwai-cheung Lo (2013). Erasing China in Japan's "Hong Kong Films" in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese cinema*. (p. 214) Oxford University Press.

When talking about Japanese movies, horror movie is a suitable representation. The horror movie "The Ring" published in 1998, directed by Hideo Nakata, ranked as the 100 best films of world cinema in 2010 and was translated into different languages, spreading Japanese style horror to the world. This reinforced the status of Japanese movie in the industry. Most of the people at that time would have heard of the name before. In addition it built an image of a ghost of "Satako". This created a deep impression to a lot of teenagers. The horror movies of Japan created an important pop culture in Hong Kong.

In 2009, a Japanese Movie finally won the "The Best Foreign Language Film" for the first time. All the Oscar award judges agreed that "Departures" described the daily work of traditional morticians accurately, present a solemn Japanese funeral ceremony to audience, not in a scary way and reflect the art of death. In 2013, "The Great Passage" represents Japan to compete "The Best Foreign Language Film", since this movie reinforced the idea that Japanese insist on every single details, scrupulous about every details and use "fashionable wording" to present the dilemma in fast changing society.

The theme of the movie is to understand and respect death. Through the arrangement of the main character taking up the job of being a funeral director, producers are able to show the discrimination of the society towards certain occupations. The main character works for the funeral parlor, allowing them to pass away peacefully. The respect to the death reflects the naïve and prejudice of the living. Being a funeral director helps the main character accept the death of his father and the absence of his wife. He then knew the meaning of death.

### **Agent behind movie: Chan Hing-Ka**

Many director or scriptwriters of the movie industry like to use the Japanese drama theme song to highlight their scene in the golden days. And with the proper use of Japanese culture, song, actor, theme inside the scene, most of the movie make a big noise and sales in the market.

An interview with a famous Hong Kong director Chan Hing-Ka was conducted. He was named as "Ah Foon" in the field and was a famous writer and a director in the 80s. He won the best script writer in the Hong Kong Film Award in 1999.

According to Chan, many movie director were impressed by the Japanese drama and movie since the end of 70s. The hit Japanese drama "Watashitachi no Tabi"(Our trip) produced by Nippon Television Network Corporation broadcasted in 1975 and was voiced over by Cantonese and broadcasted in TVB in 1976. This movie was about 3 young Japanese teenagers on how they faced the challenge and ran for their goal. The theme song was sang by Nakamura Masatoshi and the Chinese version was sang by Roman Tam with the same name of the Chinese drama title "Better Tomorrow". The Chinese version was very popular and was on the top one for 24 weeks in various pop chart.



Another director Ann Hui reflected her interest of Japan culture in her movie too. One of the movies “Boat people” directed by her which shown in theatres in 1982, was her best sales movie in the eighties. The film stars George Lam, Andy Lau, Cora Miao, and Season Ma. The movie won may awards including Best Picture, Best Director, Best New Performer, Best Screenplay, and Best Art Direction at the second Hong Kong Film Award in 1983. It was also screened out of competition at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival and ranked as 8<sup>th</sup> in the list of 103 best Chinese-language films in the past 100 years at the 24th Hong Kong Film Awards in 2005. The film focused on a Japanese photojournalist who returns to Vietnam to report about life after the war. Boat People was the last film in Hui’s “Vietnam trilogy”. It recounts the plight of the Vietnamese people after the communist takeover following the Fall of Saigon ending the Vietnam War.

One of the reasons why Ann was so impressed by the Japanese culture was because her mother is a Japanese. Talking about her friend Ann Hui, Elsa Lo, the scriptwriter of Ann’s 2010 movie “All about love” says:

*“Ann was influenced by the Japanese style of movie culture that she preferred to choose actor or actress with special character instead of camera face. That was the general practice of Japanese director in art film.”*

For Hing Kar, he can still recall the famous TV drama like “Story of Shun” and “101 proposal” and was inspired by the romantic scene and the dramatic flow of Japanese drama. Therefore, when he wrote script for 2<sup>nd</sup> La Brassiere (2001) “Brief Encounter in Shinjuku” (1990) “Okinawa Rendezvous” (2000) and “Good Times Bed Times”(2003), he added lots of Japanese mood in his films.

### **Golden scene – Winnie Tsang**

An interview with Winnie Tsang, the CEO and Chairman of Golden Scene Limited was conducted. As a producer, she recalled once she received the movie “Ring” from a Japanese agent. She watched the movie with her co-workers after work and they felt so scary by the atmosphere of the movie and this was the first successful scary movie she bought for her company. After that, she bought a Japanese movie call “Quill” and the response was also good. Another movie “Yen family” was a miracle to her too. This movie was so funny and the script was interesting. However, many cinemas didn't want this film shown on their cinema and finally MCL cinema felt interested in it.

As there weren't much foreign language film in 1980s and Hong Kong audience didn't have have many choices and that makes the promoter much easily to promote a film. According to her : “In 80s, we thought Japan was trendy. Nowadays, Japanese culture is replaced by Korea, which is prevalent in Hong Kong.”

### **Conclusion**

According to the Hesmondhalgh (2002) about the relation of creativity and commerce,

*"The tendency of creative managers to push symbol creators in the direction of genre formatting in order to facilitate marketing and publicity for a particular audience. Genre can be a productive constraint, allowing for creativity and imagination within a certain set of boundaries and enhanced understanding between audiences and producers."*

There were positive effects for creative products like movie in this chapter versus commerce, agents like those directors; and Winnie Tsang; initiating the Japanese culture to the local movie industry as well as to proliferate the status of Japanese movie with outstanding sales record and public interest.

However, the boom of Korean culture prohibited the golden days of Japanese movie in the industry. As Korean critic Suen, Patrick ( 2013) says:

*" Korean culture was like Taiwan style, which was not popular in the youth world in the 80's while Japan culture was very popular in vice versa. However, Korean culture started to inbound here for 10 years. Korean drama and movie were well accepted by the fans on 98 onwards. The Korean movie was mainstream in Korea, while being introduced through an agent (On Lok Movie company) and published in Hong Kong, everything make a big change. The "My Sassy Girl" series were the most popular movie and significantly foster the Korean popular culture to Hong Kong."*

*"The reason may be due to the aging image of Japan while Korea represent young and new to the market." According to Patrick, Korean people knew the act of communication to the world. Most of them spoke English and easily work with foreigners while Japanese still stay their own way and need translator when they went aboard. Nowadays most of the Japanese fans are 30 years of age or more while the Korean one are much younger in comparison. It is much difficult to draw attention for the youth to follow the Japanese culture since they like to look at the young and new style of Korean idol."*

Korea received a lot of support by the government but Japan was also hesitant in working with foreigners. Korean did not mind to appraise the others while Japanese always put themselves in a higher position. Korean artists were very eager to communicate with the press in English while Japan artists were not willing to speak even they can. Korean artists were impressed by western culture and loved to travel to other places and adapt their lives while Japanese chose to travel and work within Japan area and are proud of their own customs and culture.

Both Patrick and "On Lok" movie companies were agents that promoted the Korean culture in Hong Kong. Once this came to effect, the Japanese movie faced a big change. They were swayed by the agent's stance and their agreement on the fact that this could be a positive effect for Hong Kong as an international centre and as it accepted all different cultures in different ways.

### **Business to culture and vice versa**

Through Winnie Tsang, the unique and distinctive characteristics of Japanese culture was

brought out. For example, Japanese films have unique genres such as horror films and cartoons, which are genres that Hong Kong producers have never tried. People are attracted to new ideas, so if these new ideas can be imported to Hong Kong, people will be interested in them.

In the eyes of producers, they are the ones who can bring quality entertainment to the general public. Japanese films have the potential to do so, therefore they decided to invest in Japanese films. Winnie Tsang's case proves that horror films and cartoons brought a new wave of interest to the society of Hong Kong. Economically, agents importing films from overseas will look for films that are capable to make a profit. Furthermore, the film impacts culturally, as quality films bring a greater impact to the general public, thus allowing them to know about the cultural background of those films.

Japanese people are very dedicated to their work, which produces good quality productions. Agents may not know how to speak Japanese, but are willing to try if they can bring back quality work to Hong Kong. The excellent performance of the Japanese, which attracted different agents, is what Hong Kong should learn from. With the co-operation of Hong Kong and Japanese people, these excellent works can be introduced to more people. Both the work of Japanese production teams and the insights of Hong Kong agents should be appreciated.

The reason why Japanese culture can be exported to Hong Kong and other places successfully does not only depend on the effort of agents in different places but also the quality of the Japanese production team. In the 80s, the Japanese gained the insight and ideas in ensuring that everything is running as efficiently as possible. This ranged from business culture and media to technology. It is seen that whenever people wanted to develop in a certain aspect, Japan will be on the list as one of the places they would like to observe from. Government officials study how the Japan economy works, businessmen wanted to learn how the Japanese control product quality. In addition, manga writers will observe how the Japanese produce comics and people will go to Japan to learn management skills and observe what the latest fashion is. Agents from different countries also recognized the potential of Japanese cultural productions and often transformed them for use in other places such as Hong Kong. To globalize a cultural product, a valuable culture should appear before agents do.

From the above animations and movies examples from Japan, from 1950s' till now, the great impact and the effect of Japanese culture can be demonstrated. Japanese animators and moviemakers created a unique trend which many youngsters deemed as trendy and fashionable.. Although Korean culture is widespread in the recent years, Japanese culture still remains as an irreplaceable part of our local identity.

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Contact e mail: [sweedie818@yahoo.com.hk](mailto:sweedie818@yahoo.com.hk)