

Introduction to the Panel “Images of Asia in Japanese Mass Media, Popular Culture and Literature”

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1. Summary

This introduction briefly describes the research project *Japan's 'orientation towards Asia' respectively Japan's 'return to Asia' in literature, media and popular culture. A factor in the creation of an 'Asian identity'?* at the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, Germany, whose interim findings are conveyed in the papers of the panel “Images of Asia in Japanese Mass Media, Popular Culture and Literature”. The papers were presented at the 2nd International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS 2), held in Berlin in August 2001. Furthermore, aspects of a certain “Asian boom”, which has been observed in Japan since the mid-1990s, are addressed. Keywords for this development are “Japan’s Return to Asia”, “Asian Identity” and “Nostalgia for Asia”.

2. Research Project on Asian Countries in the Japanese Media

The papers of the panel *Images of Asia in Japanese Mass Media, Popular Culture and Literature* are part of a research project on the topic of *Japan's 'orientation towards*

Asia’ respectively Japan’s ‘return to Asia’ in literature, media and popular culture. A factor in the creation of an ‘Asian identity’? The research project¹ is being conducted at the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, Germany, and is sponsored by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), the central public funding organization for academic research in Germany. It is a component of an interdisciplinary project entitled “Asianisation of Asia?” in which the Departments of Japanese Studies as well as Chinese Studies, Media Studies and Political Science are participating within the scope of the Centre for East Asian Pacific Studies at the University of Trier.

The contribution of Japanese Studies consists of the analysis of literature, media and popular culture since the 1990s. Although the construction of Asia and Asians in literary works, media and popular culture has the potential to substantially influence the opinions of the audience, there is still very little research on the subject conducted, either within Japan or outside of Japan. Two different types of genres are being analysed during this project: On the one hand, fictional genres such as literary works, movies and television series, and on the other, TV documentaries and commercials.

This research project analyses whether the different types of media in Japan present other Asian countries and their populations as something distant and exotic or rather as something familiar. The central question is whether a fundamental change towards an acknowledgment of greater equality among Japan and its Asian neighbours can be observed.

The three papers present case studies concerning the images of Asian countries (not including Japan) and non-Japanese Asians in Japanese mass media, popular culture and literature. The first paper, by Barbara Gatzert, provides an insight into the world of television documentaries on the public broadcaster NHK, the second paper, by Susanne Phillipps, analyses *manga* (Japanese comics), and the final paper, by Kristina Weickgenannt, examines novels. This introduction imparts some background information on these case studies, both about the relationship between media and society as well as the keywords that are of significance within the context of the “Asian boom” occurring in Japan since the mid-1990s.

3. Media and Society

Let us first briefly discuss the relationship between the media and society. It goes without saying that the media reflect trends in society. However, at the same time, the media contribute decisively to the construction of our perception of reality. The media functions

simultaneously as a mirror and a driving force of trends in society. Therefore an analysis of media can tell us a lot about the topics and issues a society is concerned with.

Furthermore, the way the media deal with a certain phenomenon can be very influential. For example, the images of ethnic minorities in the media can contribute to overcoming discrimination in society. Conversely, they can also reinforce existing prejudices.

Barry Lowe (1995, p. 79) comments on the relationship of media and society as follows:

“The issue of whether the media reflect the ideas and values of society or whether they impose their own ideas and values on society is really a chicken-or-the-egg argument. The media are not isolated from the community and therefore many of the attitudes held by media professionals are common to the wider society (...) Media professionals, as part of their production work, are constantly informing themselves about the world. Their output, with its direct access to mass audiences, must therefore play a role in shaping public attitudes towards certain issues, particularly those outside the general public’s direct range of experience”.

Since both the mass media and popular culture aim at reaching a wider audience, there is a limit to what topics might be acceptable. In the words of Canadian media critic Barry Duncan (1989, p. 11):

“Popular culture can be progressive but not radical. It rather follows trends and seldom promotes them.”

This leads us to the following point: If a certain issue is usually neglected by the media and then increasingly appears in the media, it probably indicates that there is growing interest in this topic. Thus we can suggest that, with regards to the theme of our panel, the increasing coverage of “Asian” topics in Japanese media may well indicate a growing interest in Japan’s Asian neighbours. At least the producers of media seem to assume that the audience has a certain interest or that they *should* be interested.

In contrast to producers in the mass media, the writers of so-called “pure” literature (*junbungaku*), which is considered to be “high culture”, do not always have the general public in mind. Instead they write for a specific audience. Therefore the authors have more of an opportunity to be radical and they might become pioneers for new ideas. This might be illustrated by the literary works of Japanese-Korean writers of the first, second and even third generations living in Japan.² These writers deal with topics such as cultural “inbetweenness” and “hybridity”, two themes that are rarely discussed in Japan’s mass media today.

4. “Japan’s Return to Asia” and “Asian Identity”

“Taking into consideration that we modern citizens of Asia today live in a time of shared feelings and common concerns, Asia Center has organized this comic exhibition as a canal of communication among our Asian youth for better comprehending and appreciating the circumstances of each other’s societies and daily living” (Japan Foundation, 2000, p. 5).

These introductory remarks in the catalogue of an exhibition on *manga* from various Asian countries by the Japan Foundation Asia Centre in Tokyo are of special interest: Whereas in the Japanese media the word “Asia” often stands for all Asian countries except Japan, here the Japanese are described as “modern citizens of Asia.”

In the 1990s, the relationship between Japan and other Asian countries became a central topic of discussion within Japan. The main question appears to be: Is Japan a Western or an Asian country? (Blechinger and Legewie, 1998, p. 15). Although in the above quote there is no direct mention of anything in terms of an “Asian identity”, the “shared feelings and common concerns” in Asia, however, are taken for granted. At the same time *manga* are seen to be a means of improving communication between youth in Asia.

Since the early 1970s, the popularity of *manga* has spread from Japanese audiences to teenage readers in many other Asian countries. Interestingly, due to political and historical circumstances, most Asian *manga* enthusiasts were unaware of the genre’s Japanese origin. For example, for many decades South Korea imposed a total import ban on Japanese culture. As a result, most *manga* distributed in Korea were unauthorised and often modified versions of Japanese originals.

In the 1990s, import bans on Japanese media products were removed and copyright issues were clarified. Today, official translations of *manga* are distributed throughout Asia under the license of Japanese publishers. *Manga* and *anime* (Japanese animated films) are the basis for the current boom of Japanese culture in Asia. *Manga* and *anime* have expanded their markets not only in the United States and Europe, but especially in various countries in East Asia. Another genre is the Japanese TV drama, which is enjoying great popularity in many other Asian countries as well.³

The boom of Japanese popular culture in other Asian countries is widely discussed in Japan. Newspapers and magazines attract readers with headlines such as “Asia Loves Japan” or “The Youth [in Other Asian Countries] is Longing for Japanese Popular Culture” (Iwabuchi, 2001, p. 1).

But what is the situation within Japan itself? Is Asia in vogue in Japan? Is the Japanese population indeed interested in other Asian countries, their culture and lifestyles? At least some media products seem to suggest that all things Asian are the “latest craze”.

For example, *CREA*, a women’s magazine, published an article in January 2001 with the title: “*Ajia ni koi suru!*” (“Falling in Love with Asia!”). The article features restaurants and shops in major Asian cities. It also contains a guide of 50 Asian style restaurants and interior design shops in Tokyo and Osaka. The magazine propagates an “Asian lifestyle”. Is this just one more trend in lifestyle? Or are we to interpret it as a symptom of a new Japanese orientation towards Asia? In other words, are the phrases “Japans return to Asia” and “Asian identity” not only relevant in the context of economics and politics, but also in everyday life in Japan?

Two places in Japan where the growing presence of other Asian countries is especially evident are bookstores and travel agencies. Books on Asian countries with titles such as *Ajia no hitobito o shiru hon* (Getting to Know About Asian People) and *Motto shiritai Hong Kong* (I Would Like to Know More about Hong Kong) are increasingly being published. Travel agencies offer an abundance of catalogues on Asia. The title of a catalogue for Thailand, for example, combines the Japanese verb *shiritai* (wanting to know) and the name Thailand into “Shiritairando”, obviously a play on words referring specifically to the growing interest in Asia. This pun, in the style of *kakekotoba* in classical Japanese poetry, means “The Land I Want to Get to Know”. However, although more Japanese are travelling to other Asian countries - especially to neighbouring Korea, which is currently in vogue - the media remain among the most important sources of information about these countries.

Research conducted on the images of foreigners in Japanese television confirms that the Asian boom is really quite a new phenomenon in Japan. A study conducted in 1990 by the “Forum for Citizens’ Television” (FCT), found that the majority of foreigners and foreign countries covered on Japanese TV were Western. Furthermore, the FCT determined that television news contained very few reports on Asia. This led the researchers to the conclusion that “Japanese television does not fulfil the claim that Japan should regard itself as a member of Asia” (FCT, 1991, p. 58).⁴ In 1995 and 1996, Barbara Gatzen conducted an extensive analysis of Japanese news shows which produced a similar result (Gatzen, 2001).

According to the research group ‘International Television Flow Project’ (ITFP), there was still very little coverage of Asia on Japanese television in 1999, the only exception being China. The study also found a tendency toward a distorted image of Korea, with too much focus on negative news, such as student protests or strikes and anti-Japanese demonstrations (Kawatake, 2000, p. 104).

On Japanese television, the topic of Japanese war crimes in Asia is neglected on the whole. This became particularly obvious during the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal which was held in Tokyo in December 2000 and organized by women from several Asian countries, including Japan. Although this would have been an opportunity to demonstrate an example of Asian solidarity, there was almost no coverage of this tribunal in any program, no matter the channel. The public television network NHK eventually aired a heavily censored documentary on this tribunal which caused a major controversy.

As a general tendency, however, there is an increasing presence of Asian countries in the media, in particular on NHK. As described in Barbara Gatzzen's paper, NHK now has regular weekly programs on Asia. In the field of fictional TV shows, the increase of Asian characters is a very recent phenomenon. Japanese cinema saw the beginning of an Asian boom as early as the 1990s. In contrast, until very recently, Japanese television dramas rarely featured foreigners. Although this genre claims to provide a "realistic depiction of society" it did not present the large number of foreigners living in Japan, including second or third generation Japanese-Koreans. Thus Japanese TV drama reproduced the myth of Japanese homogeneity of the Japanese population.

However, from January to March 2001, NHK aired a TV drama series featuring the love story of a young Japanese man and a female Korean singer. In the summer of 2001, the private network Fuji terebi broadcasted two television drama series with Asians actresses in leading roles, one a Korean and the other Chinese; and in autumn, the private channel Nihon terebi aired a drama featuring a young woman with a Japanese father and a Taiwanese mother. In summary, we can now find a larger number of non-Japanese Asians on Japanese TV.⁵ In particular, the appearance of Korean figures has to be seen in conjunction with an increased presence of Korea in the Japanese media as the 2002 Soccer World Cup (2002 FIFA World Cup Korea Japan), hosted jointly by Japan and Korea, approaches.

A propensity towards Korea also reveals itself in the higher level of recognition now being granted Japanese-Korean authors. For example, since 1989, three authors of Korean origin were awarded the Akutagawa Prize, the most prestigious Japanese prize for "pure literature".⁶

While in Japanese mass media and popular culture the presentation of other Asian countries and Asian people appears to be quite a recent phenomenon, Japanese literature dealt much earlier with the theme of Asia. A recent example is the novel *Fukai kawa* (Deep River) by Endô Shûsaku, which was also made into a movie. Irmela Hijiya-

Kirschnerreit interprets this novel as a “veritable compendium for the return to Asia” (Hijiya-Kirschnerreit 1996, p. 22).⁷

5. Nostalgia for Asia

Alois Hahn (1998, p. 171-172), a German sociologist at the University of Trier, points to the ambivalent nature of the concept of foreignness, which is defined by two extremes: “fascination” and “threat”. This ambivalence is also apparent in the way foreigners or foreign cultures tend to be depicted in popular movies which, according to media researcher Werner Faulstich (1996, p. 415), can be characterised as either “exoticism, salvation or horror”.

As S. Phillips’ paper on *manga* maintains, we can find these patterns in the attitude that the Japanese media has towards other Asian countries. Whereas in former times, Asia often appeared as “horror” or as “the exotic Other” today, the concept of finding salvation through other Asian countries and/or representatives of these countries is increasingly becoming the focus of attention. This anticipation of salvation lays the basis for the feeling of “nostalgia for Asia”. This concept of “nostalgia” is typical of people from industrialized nations. They yearn to re-discover in a foreign country what they think their own culture has lost (Holzbrecher, 1997, p. 102) Iwabuchi Koichi (1999, p. 220) comments on this “nostalgia for Asia”:

“(…) in the mid -1990s (…) modernising Asian nations are nostalgically seen to embody a social vigour and optimism for the future which Japan is allegedly losing or has lost.”

The discourse on Asia and Asians is based on the presumed *energy* and *vitality* of Asians and on an “Asian Dream” which is related to the modernisation of these countries. In the TV drama *Doku* (1996)⁸, the vitality of the Vietnamese student Doku who comes to Japan to study is, as Iwabuchi (1999, p. 245) writes, “at once Japan’s vanishing present and desired future. Precisely because they are not quite modern, Vietnamese are energetic and can afford a dream of a bright future”: Doku wants to study architecture in Japan in order to build bridges and skyscrapers in his own country. This is highlighted by the catch phrase of the drama: *Ajia no yume wa kitto kanau* (Asian dreams will come true).

This “Asian Dream” and the energy that is ascribed to people from other Asian countries appears to be a key concept in the construction of Asia in Japan since the mid 1990s. In my interview with the producer of the NHK documentary *Shin Ajia hakken* (Meeting a New Asia) in March 2000, he told me that he does not want to deal with politics and

economics. He prefers to send young reporters to various Asian countries to report on daily life, the feelings of young people and their “Asian Dreams”.

Concerning the image of Asia depicted in the Japanese media, it can be stated that other Asian countries are primarily represented by young people. This is not only true of the documentary programs on Asia analysed by Barbara Gatzen, which, in confirming the statement above, intentionally direct their focus on young people, but also of fictional Japanese television, such as TV series as well as commercials. This is also evidenced by the three examples of *manga* presented in Susanne Phillipps’ paper, which tell the story of young people travelling in foreign Asian countries and the very different experiences they have there. The works of Japanese-Korean author Yû Miri also portray the image of a younger generation.

Undisputedly, it is also characteristic of media as a whole, not only in Japan, to centre on the younger generation. However, with respect to the topic of Asia, it bears special significance. It is without a doubt that focussing on the younger generation allows the issue of World War II to be omitted, thus enabling encounters with other Asian countries to be as uninhibited as possible. This apparently seems to be a common ground in the construction of “Asia” in Japan since the end of the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the case studies in the papers of the panel show that the image of other Asian countries depicted in the media is by no means homogeneous. The main question posed at the onset of this project, whether the different types of media in Japan present other Asian countries and their populations as something distant and exotic or rather as something familiar, cannot be given a sweeping, generalised answer. Within the scope of the research project, the construction of Asia in Japanese media will therefore continue to be analysed by means of various case studies. The objective is to examine whether the “Asian boom” taking place since the end of the 1990s is just one of many fashionable trends or whether an actual paradigm change in regards to the role of Asia in Japanese media, popular culture and literature can be observed.

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Hilaria Gössmann majored in Japanese Studies and German Literature and received her PhD from the University of Trier in 1992. She held a research position at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo from 1992 to 1995. Since 1995, she has been a professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, Germany. The focus of her research is on gender and interculturality in modern Japanese literature and TV dramas. She has edited a Japanese book (together with Muramatsu Yasuko) on the construction of gender in Japanese and German media (*Media ga tsukuru gendâ. Nichidoku no danjo - kazokuzô*, Tôkyô, Shinyôsha 1998).

¹ With the exception of Ulrike Wöhr, the commentator, all authors of these papers are members of this research project.

² In accordance with the other panel members, the term *zainichi* is rendered as "Japanese-Korean" rather than "Korean-Japanese." Our reasons for this choice are that most of the *zainichi* are not "naturalized," that is they are not Japanese nationals (different from, e.g., Korean-Americans who are usually American citizens). To use the term Korean-Japanese, we felt, was to ignore this status which is partly due to the

immense difficulties facing those who apply for Japanese nationality, but also involves questions of ethnic identity.

³ For more on the role of Japanese television series in Taiwan, see Iwabuchi, 2001, pp. 189-239.

⁴ In TV commercials, an overwhelming dominance of “Caucasians” was detected. This is particularly true in the case of TV commercials: 84% of the foreign figures were “Caucasians” and only 7 % “African or Afro-American” and 7 % “Asians other than Japanese” (FCT, 1991, p. 58). In addition, later research on commercials found no fundamental changes in the dominance of “Caucasian” characters (Hagiwara 1994, p. 29).

⁵ See Gatzert and Gössmann (forthcoming) for an analysis of these dramas and the regular weekly programs on Asia.

⁶ The Akutagawa Prize was awarded to Yi Yang(-chi) in 1989, to Yû Miri in 1997 and to Gen Getsu in 1999. It can be regarded as characteristic of the younger generation of these authors that their works show us a world in which questions of identity are not solely fixated on nationality. This might be one reason for the recent success of their works.

⁷ For more on this work, see also Gebhardt’s review, 1997, p. 21, in which the travel of the Japanese to India is rightly described as a “healing journey”. Many modern authors visited other Asian countries, as is described in the book *The Asian Experience of Authors* (Ashiya, 1992).

⁸ “Doku” is a very interesting TV drama serial because it can be interpreted as an allegory of Japan’s relationship to other Asian countries project (Gössmann, Jaschke and Mrugalla, 1998).