

Images of Asia in Japanese Best-selling *Manga*

Susanne Phillipps

Key Words:

popular culture, (business) *manga*, Japan, Hong Kong, Bali, cultural identity, the foreign Other, perceptions of foreignness, Japanese images of Asia, Japanese living abroad, emigration, exoticism, salvation, horror.

1. Acknowledgements

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2. Summary

In this paper, I will analyse three different *manga*, each describing the journey of a Japanese to another Asian country. In all three stories, the trip to Asia facilitates critical reflection upon the moral standards, character and behaviour of the central figure. My aim is to show that the way in which the Asian country is depicted is closely linked to the (different) personal developments of the three protagonists.

The three *manga* discussed here are;

1. *Bokura wa minna ikite iru* (“Hurray, We are Still Alive”) (Isshiki Nobuyuki/Yamamoto Naoki, 1992/93).
2. *Hong Kong wâkingu gâru* (“Hong Kong Working Girl”) (Murata Junko, 1995/96).
3. *Akio kikô Bari* (“Akios Travels to Bali”) (Fukaya Akira, 1995).

The *manga* analysed in this paper present several different lifestyle scenarios and allow us to draw certain conclusions concerning the heroes’ attitudes towards “Asia”: a young employee (*Bokura wa minna ikite iru*) wanting to climb the career ladder experiences the trip abroad as horror; a young woman (*Hong Kong wâkingu gâru*) making her way to foreign shores to escape the patriarchal structures of Japan finds her way and position in life; and a social dropout (*Akio kikô Bari*) fascinated by foreignness experiences it as purely exotic.

3. Introduction

Japanese comics, called *manga*, are one of the most popular types of print media in Japan. *Manga* books, and in particular *manga* magazines are extremely cheap.¹ They account for more than one-third of Japanese printed matter and can provide insight into the way Asian countries are portrayed in Japanese media. *Manga* are designed specifically for different age and interest groups. Depending on the target audience, the terminology, the content of the narratives and the images differ greatly. Due to their popularity, *manga* provide pertinent information about the opinions and interests of their readership, whilst at the same time creating new trends.

Until now, *manga* researchers have been predominantly interested in the export and import of *manga* between Japan and other Asian countries.² As researchers and critics continue to travel through Asia to investigate this field, more publications can be expected.³ The content of these stories, however, in particular the depiction of Asia in Japanese best-selling *manga* has thus far largely been neglected. As *manga* cartoonists often adjust their work to the opinions of their readers, an analysis of *manga* may well provide clues to the Japanese readers’ beliefs and attitudes towards other Asian nations. I will demonstrate how *manga* intended for different target groups highlight very diverse aspects of Asia, which, depending on the target readership, can range from paradise to hell.⁴

4. Images of Asia in Japanese Best-selling *Manga*

It is apparent that up until the 1990s, Japanese did not view other Asian countries as attractive travel destinations. Perhaps Asia appeared too foreign, both culturally and politically as well as in its industrial development. Europe and the USA actually seemed “nearer” than the geographically closer Asian countries. This emotional attitude was reinforced by political treaties, industrial cooperation and of course, the great influence of western popular culture. More recently however, the Japanese have discovered new travel destinations in Asian countries. As a result, it has become far more appealing to go shopping in Seoul than travel to the northern Japanese island of Hokkaidô. In this paper, I will take a closer look at how these countries are depicted in *manga*, in order to determine whether they encourage travel to these countries or concentrate on negative aspects. It is also interesting to consider what picture *manga* gives of everyday life in the various Asian countries or regions.

I will focus on three different *manga*, each describing the journey of a Japanese to another Asian country. In all three stories, the trip to Asia facilitates the critical reflection upon the moral standards, character and behaviour of the central figure. My aim is to show that the way in which the Asian country is depicted is closely linked to the (different) personal developments of the three protagonists.

The three *manga* discussed here are:

1. *Bokura wa minna ikite iru* (“Hurray, we are Still Alive!”): A business *manga* aimed at young men working in a business environment (Isshiki Nobuyuki/Yamamoto Naoki, 1992/93).
2. *Hong Kong wâkingu gâru* (“Hong Kong Working Girl”): A *manga* for young women on the brink of their careers (Murata Junko, 1995/96).
3. *Akio kikô Bari* (“Akios Travels to Bali”): An account of a young man’s travels and experiences (Fukaya Akira, 1995).

5. Hurray, We are Still Alive!

Author Isshiki Nobuyuki, born in Tôkyô in 1960, works in many different areas of popular culture, including Japanese animation (*anime*), TV, theatre and film production. According to Isshiki (1992-93, vol.1, appendix, no page number), he originally came to the idea for the plot of “Hurray, We are Still Alive!” when dealing with the concept of “a Japanese character who finds it hard to get by in a foreign country”. He actually intended to make a film, but when a sponsor was hard to find, the editor of “Spirits” magazine

suggested that after first making it into a *manga*, backers for a film could easily be found once it was selling well (the film was made in 1993). Isshiki acted as the idea creator, along with *manga* drawer Yamamoto Naoki, who travelled to Bangladesh in search of ideas for illustrations. In “Hurray, We are Still Alive!”, Yamamoto records an array of undesirable living conditions such as poverty, political instability and an unfriendly climate, which he describes as negative stereotypes that he assumes actually apply to Bangladesh (Isshiki, Yamamoto, 1992-93, vol. 2 appendix, no page number).

“Hurray, We are Still Alive” is a black satire using situational comedy, thus allowing the creators to overstep the borders of “political correctness”. In this *manga*, we are confronted with a distorted view of both the Asian country and the “*sarariiman*”, the employees of large Japanese enterprises.

The *manga* describes the adventures of Takahashi, a Japanese employee at Mitsuboshi (sic.), who makes a short business trip to the fictitious country of Tarkistan, located in the Bay of Bengal.⁵ When Takahashi’s departure is delayed several times, he experiences uncomfortable and distressing living conditions, a coup d’état and a resulting civil war. In order to escape, Takahashi, together with other Japanese employees, tries to battle his way through dense jungle to get to the international airport of Tarkistan, where a special plane is has been arranged to take them out. Before leaving the country, Takahashi negotiates the release of a colleague. The man, who has been captured by guerrillas, is freed in exchange for a hastily constructed digital receiver.

The *manga* follows a fairly conventional narrative line: the basic setting is an open plan office in a skyscraper in Japan, a place most of the (predominantly male) readers can relate to. Then, all of a sudden, the hero finds himself in Tarkistan, a new, foreign and dangerous place, with new challenges to overcome. The infrastructure is poorly developed and the climate is tropical and extremely humid. Living in Tarkistan is difficult; tropical rainstorms and floods wash slugs and other small animals into the houses and insect bites cause a constant threat of malaria. The political situation is very unstable; under a strict military dictatorship, coup d’états are a regular occurrence and any criticism of the military can result in a death sentence.

The people of Tarkistan are Muslim and are observed mutilating their children in order to increase their begging potential. They are portrayed as being cunning, devious and deceitful. Symbolically, a jungle lies between the Japanese heroes and their escape via the airport, and they have to cope with leeches, giant moths and snake nests. The fictitious country of Tarkistan embodies all possible horrors of a “foreign place” in terms of climate, culture, politics and society – Tarkistan represents the complete opposite of “civilised” Japan.

It is interesting to note that Tarkistan is situated geographically close to Japan. In contrast, Tezuka Osamu's *manga Guringo* ("Gringo"), which illustrates all the common clichés of what is dangerously foreign, is set in far-away South America.⁶ In both *manga*, the Japanese manage to survive due to their satirically exaggerated virtues. Takahashi, for example, brilliantly pieces together an electronic device to save his colleague from the guerrillas.

However, socially and economically, Japan is held partially responsible for the hopeless situation in Tarkistan, ill-directed humanitarian aid and unfair trading conditions are portrayed as having hindered any industrial evolution.⁷

6. Hong Kong Working girl

The *manga* "Hong Kong Working Girl" by Murata Junko presents a different picture. While the story does include an adventure trip (a departure into a foreign world), contrary to "Hurray, We are Still Alive!" the young Japanese woman, Yamase Tomo; leaves of her own accord. She heads off into a new world to escape the unfavourable economic conditions in mid-1990s Japan. While the *manga* is ostensibly set in Hong Kong, the city is used to represent a Western, not an Asian metropolis. Tomo believes she has no chance of pursuing a meaningful career in Japan during the recession and also feels frustrated and humiliated when constantly judged on the basis of her appearance, rather than her abilities.

She explains to her parents, who do not approve of her leaving, that it would take "only four hours by plane! Less time than travelling on the *shinkansen* to Kyûshû" (Murata, 1995/96, vol. 1, p. 13). Tomo goes on to argue that "even though we are close to the 21st century, Japan still remains a male-dominated society (*otoko shakai*)" (Murata, 1995/96, vol. 1, p. 3). She is amazed that young women do not focus their energies on fighting against this discrimination (Murata, 1995/96, vol. 1, p. 13).

"Hong Kong Working Girl" is not an exaggerated satire, but rather a more serious *manga* for young women. The female cartoonist creates a realistic location and the story contains much relevant and accurate information about a stay abroad.⁸ Tomo is a young woman of high self esteem who nevertheless arrives in Hong Kong unprepared and naive about what living there involves. Luckily, she receives the enthusiastic help of an older Japanese woman who provides her with a place to stay and helps her find a job in a designer's studio.

Tomo works hard to prove herself; she learns the local language and works overtime. Despite the odd bout of homesickness, she thoroughly enjoys Hong Kong and describes its atmosphere, sceneries and smells.

The heroine is rewarded and finally given more challenging work. This point is made to contrast the more conservative work practices of large Japanese firms who prejudice “office ladies” and only assign them menial tasks. Hong Kong is represented by the innovative designer’s studio which employs a smaller group of people and is therefore able to respond to their individual talents.

Japanese characters are described as repulsive in appearance. In a crucial meal scene, the Japanese businessmen pay no attention to Chinese table manners and only eat imported Japanese food. They generally misbehave, making rude stereotypical comments about Hong Kong which then results in an argument. When the Japanese client asks Tomo why she would rather live and work in Hong Kong she replies “not to have to work with a boss like you” (Murata, 1995/96, vol. 2, p. 123).

In “Hong Kong Working Girl”, the main motivation for leaving Japan is the rejection of Japanese working conditions and the search for fulfilling, challenging work. The young protagonist Tomo finds this in Hong Kong, while Japan remains a place where she will be restricted and judged according to fixed role patterns. The ability of young Japanese women to adapt to foreign surroundings, as represented in this *manga*, has been illustrated by Karen Kelsky.⁹ There is a great difference in the attitude between this story and the one in “Hurray, We are Still Alive!” (mostly read by young men), which reflects a deep fear of being sent to some kind of remote or unattractive setting where the character will suffer and be broken.

7. Akios Travels to Bali

“Akios Travels to Bali” is a *manga* strongly influenced by autobiographical incidence: the protagonist’s name Akio is only a slight modification of the cartoonist’s name, Akira. Both are also of the same age and are talented at drawing. The story opens with the statement that Akio is in love with a woman, but that he cannot communicate with her due to language differences. This is symbolic of Akio’s feeling about Bali: he finds it an awesome and fascinating place, but he cannot speak Balinese and is thus unable to communicate with the locals.

For several weeks, Akio stays with a Balinese family where he manages to get along by relying on only a few Balinese words, spending most of his time playing with the children, exploring the neighbourhood on his motorbike and watching cockfights. The

only information Akio gets about Bali comes from Japanese people who have settled there and the few Balinese that speak English.

Central themes of this *manga* are Akio's inability to speak the local language, his focus on visual impressions and his many speculations when he falls in love with the waitress with whom he cannot communicate. Akio goes to the restaurant each day, trying to find out more about her. He finally learns that her name is Amaria and he spends his time hoping for a smile or some other kind of contact. Akio is worried that Amaria might be married and is devastated when he sees her nursing a child. Although he discovers that she is in fact not married, his dreams are nevertheless shattered until he slowly gets used to the idea that she has a child. The *manga* has an open ending: Akio goes back to Japan, but has serious plans of returning and marrying Amaria.

Akio is ready to commit himself to the "foreign Other", but his inability to communicate makes it difficult for him to fully grasp the seemingly "strange and exotic country".

8. Conclusion

Since the three *manga* were written for distinctly different target groups, their narrative styles and plots naturally differ. But they do have one thing in common: the Japanese protagonist travels to an Asian country, where he or she meets with unknown challenges. Obviously, Asia and the "Asian element" can be adapted and used in *manga* for any interest group. The stereotypical relationships often found in *manga* are developed between Japanese and non-Japanese characters in accordance with target audiences interests and expectations. These relationships often reflect the feelings, misunderstandings or tensions that arise between Japanese people and their foreign counterparts, emphasising the strict genre patterns to be followed in Japanese *manga*. *Manga* aim at a huge target group, a readership that is looking for entertainment and only incidentally comes across the topic of "Asia". In contrast to informational and educational *manga*, fictional *manga* aims to incorporate suspense and entertainment into an anticipated narrative. Primarily on a graphical and content level, it is possible for the cartoonist to develop innovative ideas and integrate instructive or moral themes. The question remains whether this is a useful way to enhance awareness of other places, people and cultures.

The *manga* analysed up to now present several different lifestyle scenarios and allow us to draw certain conclusions about the heroes' attitudes towards "Asia": the young employee wanting to climb the career ladder experiences the trip abroad as horror; the young woman making her way to foreign shores to escape the patriarchal structures of

Japan finds her way and position in life; and the young dropout fascinated by foreignness experiences it as purely exotic.

These three perceptions of foreignness are in agreement with media researcher Werner Faulstich (1996), who describes common concepts of foreignness in popular movies as “exoticism, salvation and horror”.

Asia is clearly not perceived as a homogeneous whole, but as a conglomeration of several regions, having reached different levels of development and characterised by certain stereotypes. It is interesting to note that none of the *manga* discussed in this paper induce any sense of closeness to other Asian countries. For the protagonists, leaving Japan and going “abroad” involves great effort. Each country is typified by clichés seemingly similar to those commonly prevailing in Europe and the United States. Asian countries evoke emotions of varying intensity, which according to their respective connotations, provide the “exotic”, “salvation” and “horror”.

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About the Author:

Susanne Phillipps was born in 1968. She majored in Japanese Studies and Linguistic Studies in Frankfurt (Main) and Berlin, and received her MA in 1995. From 1995-97, she was a Research Fellow at the Free University of Berlin. In 2000, she completed her PhD on Tezuka Osamu, the most famous *manga* artist of Japan. From August 2000 to July 2001, she held the position of Research Fellow at the University of Trier.

¹ For further data on publishing figures, see: Schodt, 1996, pp. 19-21.

² See Allison, 2000; Aoyagi, 2000; Ishii, 1990; Shiraishi, 2000, and *Asia in Comics*, a catalogue for an exhibition of the same title sponsored and organized by The Japan Foundation Asia Center with the assistance of Kawasaki City Museum. The catalogue contains *manga* by 11 artists from China, Hong Kong, Korea and Japan on the theme 'Where are we going?'. Several articles provide information on comic exchanges between Asia and Japan, and on the history of the Chinese, Hong Kong and Korean comics scenes.

³ For example, Hosogaya Atsushi, the curator of the manga division of the Kawasaki City Museum, an expert on Chinese culture who has organized expositions of Chinese and Taiwanese comics, and Natsume

Fusanosuke who is currently travelling to other Asian countries to investigate the comic scene (publisher, title/target group/contents of magazines) there.

⁴ This paper is an edited version of Phillipps, 2001.

⁵ Most likely, this setting was chosen for reasons of “political correctness” since real countries could not be so negatively depicted.

⁶ *Gringo* is a term South-Americans pejoratively use to refer to foreigners. The *manga* “Gringo” was first published as a series between 1987 and 1989. For further parallels in narrative and story line, see Phillipps, 2000, pp. 297-302).

⁷ An example hereof is that the Tarkistanis, in need of a well, get a bridge built instead, since the Japanese humanitarian aid organisation prefers to invest the money into a long term project than in a short term one such as well drilling. That the bridge will be used mainly for military purposes rather than for humanitarian ones only stresses the immoral act of hidden economic subvention for the Japanese company.

⁸ Actually, the cartoonist Murata Junko has had more extensive experience in living in Hong Kong than she made explicit in her *manga*. In conjunction with *Hong Kong Working Girl*, she published a guideline for young women wanting to emigrate to Hong Kong (Murata, 1997).

⁹ Kelsky, 1996, p. 3, about Japanese women in Japan, who search for workplaces in order to find a niche in the job market: “Japanese women gain opportunities for advancement and professional achievement in competition against Japanese men, and even monopolise a whole alternative international niche for interpreters, translators, bicultural and bilingual consultants, participants in non-governmental organizations, and other facilitators of Japan’s business, media, artistic, and cultural relations with the outside world.”