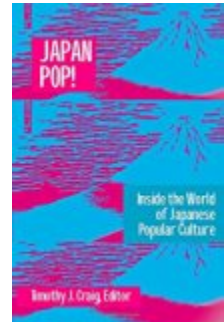


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy Craig, ed. *Japan Pop! Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture*. Armonk, New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. 360 pp. \$58.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0561-0; \$90.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0560-3.

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Timothy Craig's lively, engaging collection arrives at a good time in the academic study in English of Japanese popular culture. It is preceded by two earlier collections, by John Whittier Treat and D. P. Martinez, respectively.[1] It deserves to be followed by many more. Japanese popular culture is at least as inventive and exciting as any in the world. Whether this makes it a fit and proper object for scholarly study by Japanese themselves, however, is another matter. Although courses in popular culture are taught in Japanese universities, academic papers are seldom written; to this day, the subjects of *Japan Pop!*—music, television, film, comics—are scarcely conceivable, for example, at the annual convention of the English Literary Society of Japan, not to mention the ways in which these same subjects are already standard items on the menu of the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in the United States. The whole project of cultural studies has neither been staged in English departments nor taken place in Japan in any way comparable either to its location or its success in the United States or England. I wish Craig's collection had at least considered this state of affairs.[2] Although every one but one of his contributors is an academic, only one teaches in Japan.

Instead, the editor wants to go in another direction entirely. "I have tried to do something that is done far too rarely," he asserts in his introduction, "bridge the gap between the academic and the non-academic worlds" (p. 21). Laudable aim! However, at the University of Victoria conference out of which the present volume emerged, this gap was, alas, everywhere to be seen, and so Craig must restate his aim as creating a book for "anyone at all with an interest in Japan and its popular culture" (p. 22). Like the question of whether such a person is more

likely to be American or Canadian rather than Japanese, the question of whether this person is likely to be a fan rather than a scholar goes begging. To a degree, it is probably just as well. A few of the essays do, I think, manage to bridge the gap. As always, what appears impossible in theory can nonetheless occasionally be realized in practice, provided that the writing is straightforward and the research lightly worn. Mark Wheeler McWilliams on Osamu Tezuka's manga story of Buddha, Jayson Chun on the media representation of the Imperial Family in postwar Japan, and Anne Allison on the international marketing of the famous female manga, *Sailor Moon*, seem to me each fine examples of such practice. But of course one person's practice is another's theory; see the first comment about *Japan Pop!* in the amazon.com notice, where Dominic Al-Badri (editor of the Kansai area's English-only news and entertainment magazine, *Kansai Time Out*) complains that, with a lone exception, the volume has too many footnotes.

How to write about popular culture? If fans such as Al-Badri shriek with horror at the very sight of footnotes at the end of every single one of the essays in *Japan Pop!*, academics will be more quietly (one assumes) pleased. And if theoretically inclined—as in the West the very study of popular culture is—some of these academics will complain just as loudly as Al-Badri at the fact *Japan Pop!* is not academic enough. Certainly this collection appears in striking contrast with the Martinez collection, published just two years earlier. Although *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture* is a shorter book, many of its essays (especially those on television and manga) overlap with those of *Japan Pop!*. The real difference between the two volumes, though, is theory. The very conception of the Martinez volume is resolutely theoretical (its mid-

dle two sections concern gender: “The Male Domain” and “The Female Domain”), as the editor makes clear in her introduction, with footnotes to such luminaries of cultural studies as Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu. On the other hand, the conception of the Craig volume is almost resolutely untheoretical, as the editor makes clear in his introduction, with citations mostly to newspapers and not once to any theorists. Did somebody say gap? Craig is at least openly worried. Martinez is safely aloof.

How to explain the striking contrast between these two books? *Japan Pop!* may of course be imagined as coming into existence in response to *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture*, although neither Craig nor any of his contributors mentions the earlier collection at all. Partly the reason has to do with subject matter. Martinez has essays on sumo and karaoke. Just so, the interest of her collection is on older or more established forms of popular culture, which can then be read, or re-read, as (apologies to Al-Badri for a theoretical idiom) contested sites. Therefore, to take a typical example, the relationship between the publishing industry, advertisers, and women’s magazines is pronounced by Keiko Tanaka “complex,” notwithstanding the traditional, subordinate view of women that continues to emerge from the pages of these magazines (p. 127). In comparison, there is nothing on sumo in Craig and only a short, slight essay—the shortest in the book—on karaoke. (However, a chatty discussion by Mark Schilling of Tora-san is included. Compare from Martinez Isolde Standish’s sophisticated, strenuous discussion of Otomo Katsuhiro’s *Akira* which seems to be the product of a wholly different discursive universe about how to regard, much less discuss, film.) Popular culture in Craig has primarily to do with two areas: music and anime. (The reader who reads no Japanese will greatly appreciate the inclusion of no less than two manga stories, one translated into English and the other conceived entirely in English: a bit of Keiji Nakazawa’s classic about the bombing of Hiroshima, *Hadashi no Gen*, or *Barefoot Gen* and a sample “takeoff” of *Sailor Moon* by a Canadian high school student, Yuka Kawada.) Although Martinez includes two essays on the anime, both this area and music, are precisely the ones that *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture* slights, just as much as *Japan Pop!* promotes them.

But why should choice of subjects alone lead to such different treatments in each collection? The reason seems to be the following: of all the areas of popular culture, music and anime are most insistently contemporary—changeable, subject to trends, and an-

swerable to fans. Thus, although the best single essay in *Japan Pop!* may well be E. Taylor Atkins’s “Can Japanese Sing the Blues? ‘Japanese Jazz’ and the Problem of Authenticity,” the most typical essays tend to regard a musical example rather strictly in terms of its most recent developments.[3] That something is changing, in other words, suffices to justify its discussion—perhaps the most irresistible (if not just the easiest) discursive logic propelling the study (academic or no) of all manner of popular cultural phenomena.[4] Thus, James Stanlaw’s interesting consideration of the role of English in “changing roles and voices” (Seiko Matsuda, Yumi Matsutoya) in Japanese popular music, or Hiroshi Aoyagi’s intriguing investigation of how Japanese “pop idols” become points of reference for some larger “Asian-Pacific” identity. Thus also, Eri Izawa’s superficial tour of recent manga, video games, and animated movies in order to discover “the secrets of the Japanese soul,” or Maia Tsurumi’s more searching focus on changing gender roles in the popular manga, *Yukan Club*, by the female artist, Yukari Ichijo.

The best essays in *Japan Pop!*, though, have some historical perspective, and this leads us, in turn, back to theory. Take William Lee’s “From *Sazae-san* to Crayon *Shin-chan*: Family Anime, Social Change, and Nostalgia in Japan.” Merely by citing Marilyn Ivy, Lee at once frames his own discussion of three popular manga, each of which has become a successful television anime, and sharpens his own contention that the three constitute examples whose “ideological message,” as he puts it at one point, concerns “these vanishing structures and traditions that define the essence of Japan and the Japanese” (p. 194). It seems that each of the successive shows—ranging from the appearance of the first, in 1969, to the present—must in a sense treat the present as a kind of resource, either staging the “vanishing” of some putatively more “real” Japan or else, in the third case, using it as the basis for satire. Vanishing appears to be better; the final series is not nearly so popular (or enduring) as the first—*Sazae-san* has been the perennially number-one anime for years on Japanese television. Lee’s conclusion is worth giving in full: “[V]iewers as a whole are drawn more to the ideal than to the real, and...one of the most important functions of popular culture in Japan is not to reflect or examine contemporary society but to provide cultural consumers with a chance to escape the present by identifying with a nostalgic and less troubling past” (p. 202).

A more exciting essay is Allison’s on *Sailor Moon*. Her subject is more ambitious: how can the *shojo* culture be

made available to a global market? A pointed comparison is made with the international success of *Go Ranger*, as it was called when first introduced on Japanese television in 1975, before a number of permutations, both in Japan, and eventually in the United States, where it became *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* when introduced in 1993. The show was an instant hit, in the U.S. and subsequently around the world, to some degree, as Allison states, because of a re-tooled “American” look. It is precisely this look, in turn, that was not accomplished with *Sailor Moon* (to continue to refer to it by the first of the anime’s several names). What is the reason for this? Allison concludes thus: [T]he preferred model of superheroism (in both the fantasy and ‘real’ realms) remains strongly masculine in the United States and strongly biased against a female hero, particularly one who behaves in a feminine or girlie manner“ (p. 275). So, despite a good number of American fans, and long-running success in Canada, *Sailor Moon* must be judged finally too “Japanese“ for Americans. (Allison offers a list of three characteristics that make up, to Japanese, the “task force“ cartoon genre, each a peculiar fusion of “real“ and “fantasy“ elements.) In other words, there is a limit to cultural transformation.

The real virtue of *Japan Pop!* is that the essays have been compiled in order to proceed to this limit. Craig’s final section is, “Japanese Culture Abroad.” There is no such category in Martinez. Indeed, her own understanding of the matter is surprisingly no-nonsense: “[I]t makes no sense to call the mass culture of Japan ‘international’ in its character. Parts of it are international and export well, others can only be understood in a Japanese context” (p. 6). There are at least two problems with this assertion. First, it is far too uninquisitive, ignoring, for starters, the “international” depth of many of the most characteristically “Japanese” pop cultural practices. (As many have noted, the premier Japanese cartoon hero, *Tetsuan Atom* (or, “Astro Boy”) was inspired by *Superman*, and as Allison suggests, the very idea of “task force” heroism needs to be understood as a response to Hollywood media fashions of the 50s and 60s.) Secondly, to slight either the “international” composition of Japanese cultural practices or their situation today in some international context is simply to miss the space of the most exciting work in the study of popular culture today.

Suppose we ask, to take another anime example, why the television show based on the wildly popular Japanese cartoon character, *Doraemon* has never been broadcast in the United States? Saya Shiraishi poses exactly this question in another essay, “Doraemon Goes Abroad,” from

Craig’s final section, and her answer leads through a discussion of such things as the importance of Japan’s class system, distinctively Japanese attitudes towards advanced technology, the “image alliance” between Japan and other Asian countries, and the different relationship between adulthood and childhood in Japan and the United States. Shiraishi’s conclusion strikes me as rather lame: “The popularity of Japanese manga and animation does not necessarily mean that the hegemony of American popular culture is being undermined or that the idea of the American way of life has lost its luster” (p. 307). Indeed, the next, and last, essay in the final section by Hiroshi Aoyagi, on the presence of Japanese pop idols in the construction of an “Asian” imaginary, suggests precisely the opposite: the hegemony of American popular culture is being undermined. Furthermore, Craig himself, in his introduction, remarks on how “cerebral” and “adult” the very American cartoon series, *The Simpsons* appears, in comparison with *Doraemon* (p. 14). In any case, though, the larger question concerns the status of popular culture in globalization.

The word is unavoidable. The best essays in *Japan Pop!* demonstrate why its resonance need not be so formidably theoretical, even though we have to look elsewhere, to weightier tomes, in order to study Japan’s place in the regional economy of Asia, much less its position in the world economy.[5] It might of course seem that we need not necessarily see Japan’s popular culture in an “international” context, especially when the example at hand is so modestly, enduringly, and unexceptionally Japanese as, say, *enka* ballads. And yet, in her discussion of them, “The Marketing of Tears,” Christine Yano mentions at the end how, in order to appreciate the ballads, a contrast between “wet” (Eastern, emotional) and “dry” (Western, logical) is often invoked (p. 73). I wish she had begun with this invocation, and, even more, had compared the music to its Western counterparts. Would *enka* then look more Japanese? Less? Or would the whole idea of what is and is not “Japanese” emerge as something more problematic and heterogeneous?

These are the sorts of questions, it seems both to me and, I believe, to many of Craig’s contributors, that global culture asks of us—whether in our guise as scholars or simply as fans. Globalization may or may not succeed in further eroding or transforming the cultural specificity of each nation state. But it will alter our comprehension of culture, conceived of in strict, bounded, impermeable national terms. Indeed, globalization already has. How else explain—to take random example from *Japan Pop!*—the appearance of English lyrics in all man-

ner of pop songs written and sung by Japanese women, or the presence of Disney films in Tezuka's manga, *Budha*, or a character such as the son of the Swedish ambassador (one-quarter Japanese and three-quarters Swedish) in the manga, *Yukan Club*? The best thing about both Craig's generous sampling as well as his creative editing of some of the best recent writing about Japanese popular culture is that he is aware of the many implications of globalization, without being theoretically overbearing about it. And of course arguably the best thing about Japanese popular culture itself may be that so much of it already constitutes such a varied expression of a globalized imaginary. Meanwhile, less arguably, one of the worst things about the strictures of English departments in Japan, not to say those of disciplinary formations in the whole Japanese academy, is that they continue either to inhibit or even forbid study of the very subject of popular culture.

Notes

[1]. See John Whittier Treat, ed., *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996) and D.P. Martinez, ed., *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture. Gender, Shifting Boundaries, and Global Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Although more sociological in conception, another collection might be included in this regard: Joseph Tobin, ed., *Re-made in Japan. Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). Less scholarly in orientation (and less available) are two other surveys: Mark Schilling, ed., *Encyclopedia of Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Weatherhill, 1997), and Satoru Fujii, ed., *Japan Edge: The Insider's Guide to Japanese Popular Culture* (Cadence, 1999). Finally, an important early reference book deserves mention: Richard Gid Powers and Hidetoshi Kato, eds., *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1989).

[2]. The reasons for this difference lie for the most part outside the scope this review. One might begin, though, with the fact that there is no proper Japanese word to correspond to the word, "popular," in English. See Kato's important note in Powers and Kato, *Handbook*, pp. xvi-xvii. His concluding statement is, I believe, true enough to this day: "[P]opular culture or *taishu*

bunka has never been taught as an independent discipline simply because the material is already interwoven into the various appropriate areas of the humanities" (xvii). Hence, for example, a Japanese colleague's outraged remark a couple of years ago, on the occasion of the exit examination of a M.A. candidate, who had written under my direction a thesis on the figure of the geisha in six post-WWII American films: "This is sociology, not literature!"

[3]. Atkins studies a form in order to conclude that it has not changed. The production and performance of jazz by Japanese musicians remains lodged in "race thinking": powerful, socially constructed beliefs in national character and in racial or ethnic 'ownership' of culture" (p. 50). Specifically, the beliefs are that jazz can only be the product of black experience, while Japan, in any case, can only imitate rather than create. Atkins's contribution has been subsequently expanded into a just-published book, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2002).

[4]. I do not mean to disparage a wide assortment of good work, even in English, which, although not exactly academic, may be no less scholarly for all that. For example, Frederik Schodt's *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley. Stone Bridge Press, 1996) is often cited, and constitutes a particularly compelling combination of introduction, survey, discussion, and guide to a pop cultural practice.

[5]. On Japanese cultural production in regional terms, see Leo Ching, "Globalizing the Regional, Regionalizing the Global: Mass Culture and Asianism in the Age of Late Capital," in Arjun Appaduri, ed. *Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001): 279-306. For perhaps the best place to find a theorization about the larger matter of cultural "flows" across various global "scapes," see Appaduri, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Finally, for the "classic" statement concerning Japan's distinctive identity in the global economy (its genius for religious syncretism minimizes foreign "contamination" while at the same time impelling Japan to assume an inherent globalizing role), see Roland Robertson, *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

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