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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of Japanese comic illustrations on children's books in countries in East Asia. It has become increasingly obvious that recent children's books in countries like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, as well as China and Malaysia/Indonesia contain illustrations with some features of the Japanese comic illustrations. This influence is primarily due to Japanese popular culture that pervades not only in comics and the media but also in fashion and pop culture especially among the young in East Asia. This study shows that although Japanese comic illustration has played a role in children's book illustrations, the influence is more obvious in commercially produced books compared to those that tell traditional folk tales, mythology, and legends. These picture books from all countries in East Asia continue to use serious artwork that is ethnically authentic. However, in mass-produced easy readers there is invariably some imitation of Japanese comic illustrations. A small survey of Singapore children shows that young readers are familiar with Japanese pop culture and show positive reading response to books with Japanese comic illustrations. Includes one chart and 21 references. An appendix contains a list of children's picture books from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia, and Singapore. (Author/RS)

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# Japanese Comic Illustrations and Children's Picture/Illustrated

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## Books of East Asia

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### Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Japanese comic illustrations on children's books in some countries in East Asia. It has become increasingly obvious that recent children's books in countries like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore as well as China and Malaysia/Indonesia contain illustrations with some features of the Japanese comic illustrations. This influence is primarily due to Japanese popular culture that pervades not only in comics and the media but also in fashion and pop culture especially among the young in East Asia. This study shows that although Japanese comic illustration has played a role in children's book illustrations, the influence is more obvious in commercially produced books compared to those that tell traditional folk tales, mythology and legends. These picture books from all countries in East Asia continue to use serious art work that is ethnically authentic. But in mass-produced easy readers there is invariably some imitation of Japanese comic illustrations. A small survey with Singapore children shows that young readers are familiar with Japanese pop culture and show positive reading response to books with Japanese comic illustrations.

### Japanese Popular Culture

Japanese popular culture has a phenomenal influence on the lifestyles of East Asians. This is evidenced in the craze for Japanese pop music (J-Pop), youth fashion in dressing and hairstyles, video and computer games, toys (*Hello Kitty*, *Tamagotchi*, *Pokemon*, etc), TV soap operas and animated cartoons (*Astro Boy*, *Slam Dunk*, *Samurai X*), and comic strips. This craze started in recent years though in the last three decades, the pervasiveness of Japanese exports and electronic/automobile merchandise and culture was already felt in the countries of East Asia – Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and the People's Republic of China. Among these countries Taiwan experienced Japanese influence as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it was a Japanese colony. It is noticeable that Japanese influence has a greater impact on the Chinese-speaking communities in East Asia mainly because linguistically, the Japanese language is more accessible to Chinese literates. Also, many of the Japanese popular culture exports are translated or dubbed in Chinese, making it even more accessible to the Chinese communities.

There are various reasons for the craze and addiction to Japanese popular culture. The recent craze for J-Pop among Chinese youths in Singapore for instance, can be attributed to aggressive advertising on Music Television, 24-hour cable television and the use of J-Pop in Japanese soap operas which are hugely popular on local television network. J-Pop artistes are commercially packaged to appeal to the young, and it has become a trend to hype J-Pop stars, their dress and hair fashions. This is a curious behaviour since most Singapore youths are bilingual in Chinese and English, and yet J-Pop with its unintelligible lyrics has swiped most of the hit charts in Singapore. If J-Pop is popular, Japanese comics have an even stronger stake in the popularity of Japanese culture. This is not to say that only Singapore youth are influenced by Japanese comics; it would seem most young people can be influenced

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by any kind of comics (Harvey, 1979) but Japanese comics are more easily identifiable among Asian youth because of the Asian culture.

The popularity of Japanese comics was given a boost in South East Asia when Taiwan and Hong Kong started exporting Japanese comics in Chinese edition in the 90s. A key factor in popularising Japanese comics is the TV. The immensely popular animated cartoons – *Dragonball*, *Astro Boy* and *Slam Dunk* were broadcast from 1989 to 1994. In countries like Singapore, Japanese comics became popular because there is no strong local comic tradition to counterbalance Japanese comics. In addition, Japanese comics have come a long way since the post-war period (Tsunami, 1987) and are affordable; video games such as *Samurai Spirit*, *Street Fighter* and *Pokemon* have an impact on comic reading. A survey in 1999 in Singapore shows that 77% of young Singaporeans aged 13-29 read Japanese comics on a regular basis (Ng, 1999). Although this paper focuses on East Asia it is important to point out that even worldwide, Japanese comic illustrations are becoming increasingly familiar in other nations such as in the US (Houn, 1996). Thus it is noteworthy that Japanese comic art style is reaching global proportions and children, of whatever nationalities, may be identifying with Japanese comic-like characters in illustrated books produced in their own countries.

### **Purpose of Study**

The above background information is provided in order to understand why all things Japanese have resulted in a huge following among the young in East Asia. As a result of the craze for Japanese popular culture, and for Japanese comics, there must be a conscious or unconscious need among local publishers of children's books to imitate Japanese comic illustrations for commercial reason. The question is - to what extent has Japanese comic strip illustration been imitated by locally produced children's books? In what ways has Japanese popular culture such as comics affected the publication of local children's books, the national and cultural identity and the reading interests of our children?

This study attempts to find the extent of the influence of Japanese comic strip illustrations on children's picture and illustrated books<sup>1</sup> produced in East Asia – Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia/Indonesia and the People's Republic of China. It briefly examines the characteristics of Japanese comic illustrations in order to compare and contrast these with those of children's picture and illustrated books from the above countries. In addition, it speculates on the reading interest of Singapore children to locally produced books which have to some degree imitated Japanese comic strip illustrations. This last objective has limited implication as it uses only a small sample group and is localised in one country, but it hopes to discern and perhaps understands why and how Japanese comic illustration can influence children's reading preference and examines if the "loss" of national and cultural identity has affected children's reading interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Picture books have more illustrations than texts whereas illustrated children's book is text accompanied by either line drawings at intervals throughout the books, or as page decoration, or chapter headings or tailpieces, or the occasional colour illustrations. (Marshall, 1982:105)

## Characteristics of Japanese comic strip illustrations

Children's picture books and illustrated books written in English (from Singapore), Malay (from Malaysia and Indonesia) and Chinese (from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the People's Republic of China) were examined (see Appendix A – Preview of children's books). Japanese comics, both in Japanese and Chinese, were also sourced. The list is not exhaustive especially those from Taiwan and Hong Kong which are difficult to source as their books still use the old and more complicated form of written Chinese characters whereas those in PR China and Singapore use the simplified form. Assessment is made based on what is available in Singapore and the author's books purchased in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In comparing and contrasting Japanese illustrations with those of East Asia it is essential to find out which particular art style characterises Japanese comic strip illustrations. Frederick Schodt (1993) in his study of *Manga, Manga, Japanese comics*, points out the most striking visual aspect of girls' comics (and other more recent Japanese comics) – the orb-like eyes of the characters. "Heroines are generally drawn with pencil-thin eyebrows, long, full eyelashes, sometimes curly, and eyes the size of window panes. The Japanese believe that the human eye, (the pupils) is a window of the soul"(Schodt,1993: 91). Children, especially, seem to be attracted to cartoon characters with big eyes, and in Japan young girls complain if artists draw them smaller. This liking for round big eyes is attributed to the way Japanese people view, or wish to view themselves. For them, the round eyes feature is a much sought-after commodity because it is more expressive. Such a view may make sense but oriental eyes are seldom oval or goggle in shape. Which seems to suggest that Japanese and non-Japanese readers of Japanese comics consider the comic characters as unrealistic characters. Certainly, comics are fantasy reading for readers worldwide, but unlike the US or UK comics, the characters in Japanese comics do not have to look Japanese or oriental. Furthermore, Japanese comic characters are usually drawn with V-shaped or oval shaped faces, and with square jaws for male protagonists, all with sharp, tilted noses. Since comics are generally printed in only one colour, Japanese women artists have discovered that they can balance the page or differentiate between characters by not inking in their black hair. Often the same character's hair will be inked in one frame, and then only outlined in the next, especially if it is set against a dark background. To the unaccustomed eye a Japanese character may therefore appear to have white or blonde hair, but the fan is never confused. S/he knows it to be black in reality. Acceptance of this technique by both artists and readers has made further mental gymnastics possible (Schodt, 1993: 92).

Cartoonists in Postwar Japan found that a Caucasian look, with dewy, saucer-shaped eyes, was extremely popular among young readers and that the bigger the eyes, the easier it was to depict emotion. Eventually, depicting Japanese people with Caucasian features and large eyes became an established convention; readers internalised the images and demanded them (Schodt, 1996: 61). As a result very little Japanese or oriental feature is seen in Japanese comics; the background, setting and backdrop paraphernalia such as furniture, house, etc have become westernised in look. A penchant for copying western style and fashion grows from the notion that the West is a world of romance, and comics, after all, are a form of popular entertainment.

## **Influence of Japanese comic illustrations in East Asian children's literature**

### ***People's Republic of China***

Among the East Asian children's picture books examined for this study, it appears that animal stories, folk tales and legends, supernatural and classical literature from most East Asian countries are still unaffected by Japanese comic illustrations. Necessarily, to preserve the national and cultural identity of each country, picture books of this genre are refreshingly appealing and authentic. Particularly so are the books from P.R. China.

Mainland Chinese illustrations in children's picture books are quintessentially traditional and classical in style, using Chinese brushstrokes and calligraphy (Sibergeld, 1982: 16-30). Brushstrokes vary from light to heavy, mild to vigorous, relaxed to purposeful – to convey mood and atmosphere, emotions and movements, and even the artist's and narrator's attitude towards the story. This form of art work is found in stories of Imperial China - folk tales, mythology and legends - using minimal colour schemes, lines as in calligraphy, and application of wash such as “broken ink” (*po-mo*) and “splashed ink”, all of which are associated with Chinese brush painting. As in classical painting the art employed by children's illustrators such as Cai Yanmian, to name an example, is full of atmospheric vigour and intense expressiveness conveyed with distinctive calligraphic strokes – of swirling, rolling mistiness, adding an element of mysticism, enchantment and etherealness to the tale of *Qu Yuan* (Ho, 1997: 134). Further examples of traditional Chinese painting are seen in the works of Liu Guohuai in the story, “Picturing the bamboo before drawing it” in *A golden millet dream* published by Zhaohua Publishing House (1984), *Tales of Chinese festivals and fables* (1991) and *Bai She Zhuan* (1999). There are a few experimental works with surrealistic and impressionistic art styles and using Western water colour scheme as for example, *White pagoda and red laurel* (1990) and a more surreal art form as in *Dragon's teeth changing in the sky* (1993) (Published in Taiwan but the illustrator is from mainland China). Although this kind of art style may be deemed to have lost the “Chineseness” of art style, it, however, manages to maintain its authenticity, that is, “it does help readers visually perceive the accurate images of the characters and enriching the story with detailed depiction of cultural reality”. (Mo and Shen, 1997: 92). With the opening of China it seems there is a desire for Chinese artists to experiment with other forms of art work. This may not be a bad thing as it allows for creativity and modern-day children of China may not find it odd or disconcerting to see this move away from the typical traditional Chinese art style. However, this kind of art style can be considered as artistic whereas imitating Japanese comic illustration is still not very blatant in Chinese picture books.

In illustrated books the cover illustrations show a distinctive imitative art work – in the appearance of overall cuteness of characters. Fortunately, there are not many of this imitative art (yet) because for this country foreign culture does not have such a huge commercial appeal. Perhaps among the East Asian countries, PR China with its long history of civilisation takes national pride in its culture and is less receptive to foreign influence. However, it may be inevitable that mainland China may go the way of her Chinese neighbours in East Asia in the next decade. Imitating Western animated cartoon drawing is seen in mass-produced children's picture books

especially after the huge success of Disney's *Mulan*, an example of the popularity of Western media for children in China.

Another factor to note is that Chinese comic books have been published since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (see Hegel, 1998). During the era of Mao comic strips productions were emphasised. These were little comic strips for a few cents a copy, targeted at young readers to become familiar with the ideology of the Communist regime. The stories are propagandist in nature but their illustrations are nothing short of mediocre; they are characteristic of the illustrations used in traditional comic strip format of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Eco, 1977).

### *Taiwan and Hong Kong*

Similarly, the Chinese-speaking communities of Taiwan and Hong Kong tend to keep to traditional classical Chinese art work in their children's picture books. However, keeping the national and cultural identity in these children's picture books is incidental. This is because the illustrators commissioned to illustrate these books are from mainland China while the authors are from Taiwan or Hong Kong. This collaboration has successfully produced quality children's picture books which are a visual feast for the eyes because of the use of different artists for different short stories in one volume (Ho, 1997: 134). There are some experimental art works such as psychedelic art, abstract art, surrealism, in Chinese stories of legends, folk tales, mythology but these look rather out of place because of the loss of Chinese features, and subsequently some loss of national and cultural identity. But such productions are seemingly acceptable because they may be considered "quality" books involving many artists and individual creative style. Many of these titles can be found in the Chinese children's section in the National Library and its branches in Singapore.

However, with the strong influence of Japanese popular culture, especially in Taiwan, it is not uncommon to find some children's picture books "looking" more like Japanese comics. Two examples serve to illustrate this observation. First, the famous Chinese classic, *Journey to the West*, has been turned into a story told in the comic format. This production must have been swayed by the popularity and the commercial success of Japanese comics. *Sun Wu Kong*, (1998 edition published in Singapore) the hero of *Journey*, now looks comical with pinball eyes, a Mickey Mouse nose and an over-sized mouth that seems to stretch from ear to ear. The actions depicted are all comical fare, with bubbles to frame in texts, and blotches and cosmic stars to indicate violent action and humour. This is a sharp contrast to the China production of *Monkey subdues white-bone demon* (1979).

In Hong Kong, martial arts stories meant for adults and adolescents (older children also read them since the texts are within the reading ability of any 10-12 year child with a vocabulary of more than 1,500 Chinese characters) have been turned into comic strips, copying much of the features of Japanese samurai warriors, with long flowing hair, covering one eye or half of the face, and a distinctive V-shaped face contour with thin lips, not forgetting the inevitable round eyes and curly eye lashes. The reasons for using the comic format for this genre could be due to the fact that the comic strip format, also called illustrated books, began in Imperial China.

Chinese martial arts stories told in the comic strip format is a very traditional Chinese culture that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hegel, 1998). But these ancient works of art were considered high-brow because of the conciseness of the language in retelling the stories and the traditional Chinese art style that began at this time. Then, the comic strip was considered illustrated book. This art form and style can still be seen in some contemporary publications of ancient tales of martial arts of imperial China. These are by no means easy reading for children; they are sophisticated in literary and linguistic style with imitation of ancient art work as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century (ibid). These Chinese illustrated books are being reprinted but continue to preserve their Chineseness in illustrations and format. An assessment of this genre is made with reference to two titles – *Justice Bao* (1997) and *Thirteenth Sword Maid* (1997) in sword-fighting classical stories set in ancient China but using the conventional art form and style. The vocabulary is difficult as it is rather classical in style and it is concise to the point of fitting the dialogue in the two-line space provided under each illustration. This conciseness assumes readers are quite familiar with the stories and are very literate in classical Chinese language.

However, this high degree of literacy and learnedness of the Chinese classic are not found with more recent martial arts stories from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese knight-errants now look Caucasians, with even blonde hair, blue eyes in coloured comic strips. Publishers of these Chinese martial arts books have, like their Japanese counterparts, assumed that their readers can take these schizophrenic art styles for granted and the convention for cultural mish-mash that is modern Japan. To name a few titles of these comic books for young adults: *The mysterious tender music* (1998) published in Taiwan and *The wandering swordsman* (1994), reprinted in Singapore. A probable reason for imitating the Japanese is the consensus that modern youth regard the old style as too conservative. Another reason is that some Japanese comics have been made into television series and action movies, for example, the TV series *Tie Break* based on *Slam Dunk* and *Storm Riders* the Hong Kong movie and version of the samurai genre in Japanese comics. A recent mega-buck film and a television version of *Wind and Cloud* was recently made based on the comic strip and nowhere does one see any Chinese features on the comic characters. Both television and movie versions are extremely popular in East Asia.

### ***Malaysia and Indonesia***

Among the South East Asian countries, Malaysia and Indonesia continue to produce children's picture books using Malay artwork, mainly inherited from that used in cinema billboards/posters since colonial days (Hamid, 1991). Because they have to be visually attractive from a far distance, the colours in this medium are extremely gaudy, with meticulous details to shading of characters' facial features to highlight expressiveness. The same colour scheme and shading are seen in folklore for children, for example, *Si Bungsu Katak* (1996) and *Samon Yang Bijaksana* (1996). Though rather gaudy and unnecessarily detailed for young children, it has preserved the "uniqueness" of Malay art and culture in the region. It is less elaborate unlike book production of traditional legends and mythology using batik-like style of painting. This style is more popular among Indonesian children's picture books, for e.g., *Mengembara Ke Kaki Langit* (1992). This art style is favoured by artists from Indonesia because of the ethnicity associated with its culture (Achjadi, 1999, van Hout, 2001) while for folk tales for the young reader there is a tendency towards

imitating Western art, as in the series of folk tales called *San Kancil*, which uses water-colour, in almost similar style as the Beatrix Potter illustrations. Like Chinese illustrated books, Malaysia's illustrated books for children, particularly in the cover illustrations, are more Westernised than ethnically Malay, with some bordering on the Japanese comic illustrations. The latter are mostly found in low-cost books, such as *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (1994) published by Penerbitan Pelangi Sdn Bhd. Increasingly, these picture books are becoming more popular than the beautifully crafted batik-style illustrated books because of the mass production and more aggressive advertising. Like other Asian children, Malaysia and Indonesian children watch cartoons with characteristics of Japanese *manga* illustrations. In general, though there is a tendency to imitate Western art, Malay children's books are seemingly more authentically ethnical than the Chinese countries simply because facial features of Malay and Indonesian characters are Caucasian in general though eye and hair colours are dark brown or black. Thus imitating Japanese comic illustrations seems more natural as readers should be able to identify with the characters. This speculation is based on the observation of readers of children's picture books in Singapore which has a multi-racial, multi-cultural society; this is discussed in more detail in the next section.

### *Singapore*

Singapore children's literature can be considered to be in the infancy stage as imported English books are so easily available and accessible and Singapore readers are bilingual. There is, therefore, less concern to produce its own Singapore children's literature. Also, there is seemingly a less demand for fiction as fiction reading is undervalued by many parents. (Khoo 1991). However, what it has published which can be considered quality fiction are few and far in between. Chief among these is Jessie Wee's *Mooty* series (1990) about a domestic mouse and its adventures. The illustrations take on an international look, since a Singapore mouse is no less different from others from other parts of the world. It can be compared to the famous Malaysian folk tale of *San Kancil*, (1992) a cunning mousedeer. Follow-up books by Jessie Wee – *A Friend in Need* (1992) and *A home in the sky* (1992), with illustrations by Lee Kowling – strive to produce a local flavour in the illustrations. Other than these, Singapore's children's picture and illustrated books are unabashedly imitative of Japanese comic illustrations or animated cartoons. Heinemann Asia publishers have produced a series of books, an adventure of children in its *Spider series*. Similarly, Bookworm publishers have produced books in the same genre – *Bookworm short stories* - with such artwork features: brown hair (hair not inked in black), goggle eyes, stumpy legs, sometimes platform shoes and a stocky physique for a "cute" effect.

Though the illustrations in these books are Japanese imitations the characters in these Singapore children's picture and illustrated books sometimes can look Singaporeans as Singapore is a multiracial society. Sharp western facial features are quite noticeable among Malay, Indian and Eurasian characters. Therefore, among the East Asia countries, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia can have Caucasian facial features in the characters of children's picture and illustrated books. The only fault is that the artists and probably the publishers, forget or possibly ignore, the more oriental features for the Chinese characters in the story.

Generally, the current trend in children's books production in Singapore is veering towards imitating the huge commercial success of Japanese comics and Japanese toy merchandise for children. Getting on the bandwagon of using Japanese comic illustrations are Bookworm publishers for English books, Newton and SNP publishers for Chinese language children's books. Even in folk tales in children's picture books, SNP book illustrations have begun taking on the characteristic facial features of Japanese comic characters. In *The eight immortals*, (2000) the hero is drawn with a short squat face with huge almond eyes and somewhat disproportionate limbs to the physical build. Similarly, Newton production of *36 tales of filial piety* (*Shan Xi Wen Bei*, 1999) uses Disney-like illustrations but the facial features of the protagonists are Japanese comic look-alikes. It is noticeable that goggle-eyes, highlighted by white patches of the pupils that give it its expressiveness, and the curly impossibly long eye lashes are certainly not representative of oriental features; rather, they reflect the wish-fulfilment of the oriental desire for Caucasian features. Perhaps using such an art form or style is based on the belief that Singaporeans, like Japanese, have this mentality that "West is best", as seen in the local fashion scene using Caucasian models to sell (Tee, 2000). The explanation for this preference is not because of a colonial hangover but a pragmatic business move.

### **Japanese influence and local publications**

There is the rub – money. Publishers in countries like Singapore have to compete hard with imported books from the US and UK and they have little incentive to produce children's books that bump up their production costs by employing good artists for the books illustrations. Besides, unless one does aggressive advertising, local children's books do not sell well (Ho, L, 1993). Therefore, it is likely that local publishers in Singapore, for example, will continue to use inexpensive artists who are good imitators of Japanese comic illustrations to "sell" their children's books until the time comes when Japanese popular culture no longer becomes the norm of trend-setting for the young. But at the moment it looks as if Japanese popular culture will continue to set a precedent for a cultural fashion in East Asia. Witness the recent craze for *Hello Kitty* dolls in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia and the current craze for *Pokemon*.

In general, the constant battering of Japanese toy merchandise as well as the television media has left not one East Asian country untouched by the commercial "power" of Japanese toy merchandise for the young. Only two East Asian countries have the prerogative to feature Caucasian features in illustrated books for children – Malaysia and Indonesia. This is because books written in the Malay and Bahasa language and have only Malay/ Indonesian characters who have Caucasian features if not Caucasian stature or colouring. Therefore, imitativeness of Japanese art is less obvious. This will not be true with Malaysian and Singapore stories that have a multi-racial cast. But mostly, the illustrated books from all East Asia contain illustrations imitative of the Japanese, while picture books of classical tales of folklore, mythology and legends remain authentically ethnic, preserving the national and cultural identity.

## Children's reading interests

This phenomenal Japanese appeal could have a direct influence on children's reading. Firstly, there is a loss of national and cultural identity with the characters with Caucasian facial features. There is a mismatch of local traditional story, setting and theme with characters who do not look ethnically familiar; thus, the reader's sense of identity may be distanced. To find out children's response to authentic and imitative illustrations, a small survey with 23 children aged from 5 to 10 (14 boys and 9 girls) was conducted. This small-scale survey was more concerned with finding out "what children think and feel in normal circumstances" (Berridge 1980:21) and treating the stimulus materials in real-life context, and the children in their natural setting. Necessarily, this kind of response is subjective as it will vary from individual child to individual child, depending on their exposure to commercial art and traditional art in children's picture books and/or other media, such as television and video games. But such a research is more relevant as it has important inter-textual and autobiographical connections (Cox, 1989). Despite these limitations, this survey hopes to garner some response of young children to picture books illustrations produced locally. The response could indicate if a loss of cultural identity influences their reading preference.

3 sets of picture books were shown to the children who were asked which picture they like in each set and perhaps give a reason. One set is the story of *Journey to the West* with one book drawn in the classical Chinese art style (*Monkey subdues white bone demon*, 1979) and the other, the Taiwanese comic version (*Sun Wu Kong* (1998). The second set, of two books, were folk tales (*The eight immortals*, 2000, *Shan Xi Wen Bei*, 1999) but produced in Singapore, both having Japanese comic-like illustrations. The third set consists of a *Pokemon* book (1999) and the other the adventure type stories produced by local publisher Bookworm (1993). The response is tabulated below:

		Boys Like	Girls Likes	Negative response	Comments
Set One	Monkey King	4	2	9	Characters are like enemies. Like the action and movement
	Monkey King (Comic)	6	4		Cute, pretty
Set 2	8 Immortals	5	3		Colour quite nice. Beautiful
	Shan Xi Wen Bin	7	5		Half cartoon and half real life. I like it because there is a horse
Set 3	Pokemon	8	3		I like Pokemon. Picture is exciting but also scary
	Bookworm	3	4		Interesting because of the bright colours

The number in each column under Boys and Girls does not correspond to the total number of respondents as the children were free to answer or not to answer. The findings show that in Set One, the comic illustration was preferred as the monkey king looks so “cute” compared to the other classical illustration. However, one discerning boy thought the classical illustration was better because there seems to be more “action”, which was interpreted as “lively”. The “action” comes from the martial arts displayed by the monkey king as he fights a demoness, and the intensity of his concentration as well as his agility and swiftness is clearly seen. This finding concurs with that of Amy Spaulding who studied specific comic-traits in picture books and found they were characterised by a dramatic nature (Spaulding 1984). On the other hand, the comic strip book shows the monkey king to be more of a clownish character, with comical expressions and physique. This was preferred despite the more muted colour tones in contrast to the classical illustration which uses animated cartoon colour combinations. It appears that Singapore children identify with “characters” they watch on TV cartoons rather than with authentic ethnic characters.

In Set Two most children like the colour of both books which is quite gaudy; this shows that artistic work such as Chinese calligraphic brushstrokes are not appreciated by the very young. None of the children said anything about the huge goggle eyes nor the oversize heads of the child protagonists, disproportionate to the body. This kind of illustration is much hyped from Japanese comic illustrations and though the children interviewed may not have read any Japanese comics, they did not seem it strange that the pictures of the heroes do not look realistic. This shows that children are so used to contortions of facial and body features in their toys and perhaps video games that such pictures are considered normal, and this is the reason for liking them. In Set Three, the *Pokemon* book was the favourite, clearly influenced by the TV programme and all the toys and paraphernalia associated with it whereas the Bookworm book pales in comparison. Familiarity does not breed contempt; rather it reinforces its appeal.

We can assume that Singapore children will read picture books as fantasy tales, as wish-fulfilment rather than as realistic fiction, like their counterparts in Taiwan and Hong Kong who probably read stories in the same way as Japanese readers of comics. This could be the factor that influences the mindset of publishers in Singapore who produce English children’s picture books and/or illustrated books and who think that the children read their books as fantasy and wish-fulfilment. Since they are only small-time entrepreneurs it makes practical sense to go along with the current trend for all things Japanese. Fortunately, the need to imitate Japanese art in children’s books in Singapore is confined mainly to regular publications of short stories in one volume.

Is there any harm in copying Japanese comic illustrations in children’s books? This may not be a bad thing, if we consider the fact that children in the 60s and 70s who had no other reading choice, were enthusiastic readers of the Enid Blyton books. It was not repercussive because children read for language acquisition and learned to identify with the characters even though the protagonists were English children. Those who are against our children reading a foreign fiction with foreign protagonists may argue that locally produced children’s books have local setting, characterisation, story, theme, background, and so on, and it is not likely our children will read these in the same way as they would read a Famous Five adventure. They will have a greater

sense of identity and empathy. This line of thinking may not always be accurate nowadays. For instance, in Singapore, because most of the local stories written in English are rather imitative of Enid Blyton's stories in characterisation and plot, our children do not have to do a mental switch from identifying with a Singapore character or an English character. A lot of fictitious Singapore characters, whether Chinese, Indians, Malays or Eurasians "talk" like American or English speakers; the only difference is that some characters are drawn wearing the national dress and the names of places are local though generally most characters have Christian names (using Christian names is a very common practice among Chinese Singaporeans). These features are seen in the *Spider series* produced by Heinemann Asia and *Bookworm short stories* produced by Bookworm Consultants. Therefore, for our children reading an illustrated book with cartoon/Japanese-like illustrations, what is important is the story, that they become involved with the characters, their actions, thoughts and experience. Illustrations may enhance and complement the text as in picture books, but generally, black and white illustrations with minimal details do not detract or distract the child reader from the story. From a previous study (Ho, 1993) this may be the philosophy behind most of Singapore's local publishers of children's books, such as Bookworm and EPB when they use cartoon-like illustrations.

Finally, it might be true that less able readers prefer short stories that have a lot of comic-like illustrations that aid their reading comprehension. Comic illustrations have certain value such as aesthetic value (Harvey, 1979) and because it is comic strip it has the poetic license to use any kind of artistic style to "tell" the story but with serious fiction such an unconventional style is not suitable. This is seen in the above mentioned Chinese classic tale, *Sun Wu Kong*, the comic strip format looking more "lively" because of its action scenes in each frame. Obviously the comic strip format here seems to work better than the normal picture book because the story revolves around martial arts action in suppressing the demons and evil spirits by the hero, the monkey king. Using this format is obviously a ploy to encourage the non-readers who prefer looking at pictures but at the same time encourage the readers to read the text, however little there is. A local publisher, Asiapac has produced a series of comics on classical Chinese literature translated into English about two decades ago and is still producing and exporting them to overseas market. An example, *Strange tales of Liaozhai* (1990) shows that the illustration though not exactly imitative of Japanese comics does veer towards the "cuteness" of comic art.

## Conclusion

In summary, commercially-motivated publications in East Asia lean more towards the Japanese comic strip illustrations. This is inevitable due to the "invasion" of Japanese popular culture in East Asia. This is evidenced in countries that have no strong foundation in children's literature, for instance, Singapore, which lacks children's authors and illustrators in both English and Chinese editions of children's literature. Malaysia and Indonesia are better advantaged as these countries have a larger pool of artists and children's authors in its native language. Taiwan, Hong Kong and in particular, mainland China have pools of talents to boost their children's literature. Alternatively, when one country lacks one talent it can collaborate with another to produce excellent children's literature. This practice of collaboration is seen in quality children's picture books from Taiwan and mainland China. This collaboration could

be the future directions for other countries, for example, between Malaysia and Singapore. However, the incentive to do this will rest with the demands from readers.

So far, there is not much public debate, for example, in Singapore, on the difference between locally produced books and imported books and the need for better quality fiction for our children. Much of this apathy must lie with the easy accessibility of good books in the public libraries. Thus quality fiction written in Chinese from PR China is also available from Taiwan and Hong Kong while fiction written in Bahasa Indonesia (which is mainstream Malay language) comes from Indonesia, and lastly, English fiction from the UK and US. This may be the reason why there is not enough lobbying to preserve national and cultural identity in Singapore's books for children. In addition, it can be argued that quality fiction in any of the East Asian countries has preserved national and cultural identity and that pulp fiction because of their commercialism can cash in on a foreign culture that appeals to masses.

In Singapore, the National Library and its branches are located in neighbourhood housing estates to serve most users. The variety of children's literature written in English and Chinese is unsurpassed in their collection. Not only in the public libraries but also in mega book stores such as Borders and Kinokuniya is there a wide range of children's literature in English and Chinese. In addition, there is so much variety to choose from book exhibitions, held once a year. It is no wonder, that while poor quality fiction for children is flooding the shelves in bookstores, there is no panic yet that our children will become "retarded" in their reading development.

This study was confined to a survey of children's picture books and imitative Japanese comic illustrations. It asked a few children on their reading interests but a more extensive study needs to be conducted. For the present the "invasion" Japanese popular culture has to be acknowledged but as we become more globalised it is inevitable that the influence of other cultures will take hold, whether we like it or not. The consolation is that such an influence need not necessarily be bad and that it is a passing phase especially where the young are concerned. Sometimes, adults overlook the fact that a balance of reading diet of good and bad fiction may be good for our children, whether they are reading to identify or to fantasise.

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## **Appendix A Preview of Illustrations in Children's Picture Books**

### **PR China**

- Bu Gu (1990). *White pagoda and red laurel*. Illustrated by Wang Xiaoming. Hangzhou, China: Zhejiang Children's Book Publisher.
- Chen Yonghui (1994). *Folk tales of China*. Illustrated by Wu Shanming. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Province Publisher.
- Hsu Kwangjung (1979). *Monkey Subdues White Bone Demon*. Illustrated by Chang Hung Tsen. Liaoning: Liaoning Art Publishing House.

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- Mingtian Publishing House (1988). *Folk tales of Ancient China*. Illustrated by Various artists. Shangdong, China: Mingtian Publishing House
- Mo Wen (1991). *Legends and mythology*. Illustrated by Yu Shui. Zhejiang Hangzhou, China: Children's Books Publisher.
- Sha Tiejun (1991). *The legend of Qu Yuan*. Illustrated by Cai Yanmian. Hubei: Hebei: Children's Book Publisher.
- ShiYukun (1997). *Justice Bao*. Hunan, China: Chen Guang Publishing House.
- Xing Wei (1991). *Tales of Chinese festivals and fables*. Illustrated by Xin Hejiang. Hebei: Hebei Children's Books Publisher.
- Wen Kang (1997). *Thirteenth Sword Maid*. Hunan, China: Chen Guang Publishing House.
- Xing Wei.(1992). *Tales of Chinese festivals and fables*. Illustrated by Xin Hejiang. Hebei: Hebei Children's Book Publisher.
- Zhaohua Publishing House (1984). *A golden millet dream*. Beijing: Zhaohua Publishing House.

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- Akaishi Michiyo (1998). *The mysterious tender music*. Taiwan: Taran Publications.
- Hao Kuangcai (1993). *Seven Chinese brothers*. Illustrated by Wang Jiazhu. Hong Kong: Xin Ya Publishing House.
- Nobuhiro Watsuki (1994). *The wandering swordman*. Taiwan/Singapore: Chuanyi Publishing House.
- Wang Xuan Yi (2002) *Looking for Na Ge*. Illustrated by Zhang Shiming. Taiwan: Ta Chien Publishing Co.
- Wang Xuan Yi (2002) *Golden melon and Silver Pea*. Illustrated by Zhang Shiming. Taiwan: Ta Chien Publishing Co.
- Wang Xuan Yi (2002). *Ban Qiao San Niangzi*. Illustrated by Zhang Shiming. Taiwan: Ta Chien Publishing Co.
- Zhuang Zhenpeng (1993). *Dragon's teeth in the sky*. Illustrated by Ah Xing. Taipei: Yuan-lou Publishing Co.
- Xiao Yewen (1993). *Fire child*. Illustrated by Mao Shuixian. Hong Kong: Xin Ya Publishing Company.
- Zhang Lingling (1993). *Mouse takes a bride*. Illustrated by Liu Zonghui. Hong Kong: Xin Ya Publishing House.
- Zhuang Zhanpeng (1993). *The horse-carved qing*. Illustrated by Ah Xing. Hong Kong: Xin Ya Publishing House.
- Zhou Huizhu (2000). *Fool-headed Ah Fu*. Taipei: Fo-guang Productions.

#### **Malaysia and Indonesia**

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- Amer Hj Mat Som (1995). *Anak Buluh Betung*. Illustrated by Mansoor. Kuala Lumpur: Tulus Pelita Sdn Bhd.
- Amin Minhad (1992). *Kumpulan Cerita Sang Kancil*. Illustrated by Sharifah Khadijah

- Jamal. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Dayang Hafsa Ismail (1990). *Si Pengail Dengan Ikan Ajaib*. Brunei: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Lim, Gregory (1994). *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Illustrated by Siew Lai Kean. Johor, Malaysia.: Penerbitan Pelangi Sdn Bhd:
- Murti Bunanata (1996). *Si Bungsu Katak*. Illustrated by Denny A. Djoenaid. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
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- Ooi, P (1990). *The daredevils of Lagoon View*. Singapore: Graham Brash Pte Ltd.
- Pu Songling (1990). *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*. Edited and illustrated by Tsai Chih Chung. Translated by Tang Nguok Kiong. Singapore: Asiapac
- Newton Publications (1988). *Sun Wu Kong*. Singapore: Newton Publications.
- Newton Publications (1998). *Hua Mulan*. Illustrated by Chang Wei. Singapore: Newton Publications Pte Ltd
- Nobuhiro Watsuki (1994). *The wandering swordman*. Singapore: Quantum Resources.
- Toshihino Ono (2000). *Pokemon : The Electric Tale of Pichaku*. Singapore: Chuang Yi Publishing Pte Ltd.
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Federal Publication Pte Ltd

Wee, J (1989). *Grandpa' s remedy*. Singapore: Gemma Books.

Wee, J (1990). *Match of the year* (Spider series). Singapore: Heinemann Asia.

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Wee, J (1992). *A friend in need*. Illustrated by Lee Kowling. Singapore: Landmark



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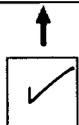
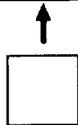
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