

Mutual
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JAPANESE POP CULTURES IN EUROPE TODAY:
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, MEDIATED
NOTIONS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

MUTUAL IMAGES

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A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

FOUNDED BY

AUORE YAMAGATA-MONTOYA, MAXIME DANESIN & MARCO PELLITTERI

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JAPANESE POP CULTURES IN EUROPE TODAY:
ECONOMIC CHALLENGES, MEDIATED
NOTIONS, FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI

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***The End of Cool Japan:
Ethical, Legal, and Cultural challenges to Japanese
Popular Culture – Mark MacLelland***

New York: Routledge, 2017, 240 p.

Review by Simon TURNER | Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, University of East Anglia, UK

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In 2002, Douglas McGray published an article in *Foreign Policy* discussing Japan's status as a soft power superpower, including its use of popular culture. Much attention has since been paid to Japanese cultural and creative industries ranging from examinations of anime, manga, pop music, street fashion, and film, to name but a few. Today, access to Japanese popular culture has only increased with innumerable anime and manga series available (illegally) online through fan sites. With increased access and proliferation has come increased concern. Legal cases related to inappropriate examples of Japanese popular culture have emerged in the West and, within the world of journalism in particular, a critical eye has continued to question and probe any perceived inappropriateness within the output of Japanese creative industries. *The End of Cool Japan* (2017), a collection of essays edited by Mark McLelland, takes this curiosity as its basis and offers readers a seminal and outstanding examination into the problematic aspects of researching, studying, and teaching topics related to Japanese popular culture today. It brings

together researchers working in this increasingly important area of exploration crossing disciplinary boundaries.

In a thoroughly detailed introduction, acting as chapter one, McLelland highlights the conflict between academia and journalism in studies related to Japanese popular culture (p.2). He highlights what has long since become a sensationalist approach found within a great deal of popular press that seeks to stress any exceptionalism or uniqueness of Japanese culture. Readers are presented with an overview of Japanese studies in the West that discusses the lack of attention paid to Japanese popular culture which has been remedied in recent years with more Japanese Studies departments beginning to offer more courses examining the topic. As McLelland states, students and teaching professionals of Japanese Studies have a bounty of potential material to examine. This, however, becomes problematic because when popular culture digitally crosses geographic borders it enters new socio-legal contexts with McLelland citing several legal cases related to indecent and/or prohibited images of children. Therefore, as the title explains, the book examines the ethical, legal, and cultural challenges that face students, researchers, and the general public when engaging with Japanese popular culture.

The book presents readers with two themes. The first, covered by chapters two to seven, provides examinations of Cool Japan outside of East Asia, particularly North America in the United States and Canada. The second examines flows of Cool Japan within and throughout East Asia. There are mentions made of other locations, however the overall applications of the book's ideas and examinations are made to North America and East Asia.

In chapters two and three, Alisa Freedman and Laura Miller, respectively, discuss the increased access and availability of Japanese popular culture in the West, paying attention to the contentions and conflict that this greater availability of Japanese popular culture can create. Freedman, for example, examines the multi-modal series *Death Note* which ran originally as a manga series but which has since seen numerous adaptations across multiple platforms including anime, film, video game, and novelisation. Freedman's essay is a strong example of how international Japanese popular culture has become. Miller discusses the increased use of Japanese popular culture by examining the problems that arise in educational settings where students, who have grown up with access to Japanese popular culture on a daily basis, may be unable or unwilling to critically examine Japanese texts that have been a part of their everyday media consumption. These two chapters construct a frame for the following chapters of the book that examine the ethical, legal, and cultural challenges that increased access to Japanese popular culture can create for students, academics, and researchers in general. In chapter three, Kirsten Cather gives an in-depth, detailed example of challenges that can arrive by taking Japanese popular culture as a serious topic of research. In her chapter, the manga *Misshitsu (Honey Room)* is introduced. In 2014, this manga was the first to be prosecuted in Japan successfully on obscenity charges and is thus, according to Cather, unlikely to be used in a classroom for the ethical and legal issues raised. Nonetheless, Cather offers a nuanced argument that texts such as *Misshitsu* which are officially deemed 'obscene' may force audiences and researchers to ask difficult questions regarding sexuality in particular. Nonetheless, whilst Cather correctly argues that

we should not ignore such texts because they can encourage us to investigate a variety of social and cultural topics that may otherwise be ignored, the following three chapters tell us how, in many cases, this can be extremely logistically difficult, if not impossible in a Western/North American context.

In chapter five, Sharalyn Orbaugh examines the legal and ethical issues that are invoked when utilising Japanese popular culture in higher education in Canada. Canada, as it is discussed, has strict and far-reaching legislation regarding obscenity and pornography, particularly child pornography, which means that a great deal of material that Orbaugh, or other educators and researchers in Canada might use, would, in effect, be breaking the law, thus criminalising both educators and potentially students. Patrick Galbraith also gives an example of the difficulty in studying the genre of *lolicon* (Lolita complex) which many are unwilling to discuss for fear of being labelled a deviant through association with a genre that depicts characters many might argue are 'underage'. This kind of stigma, as Galbraith argues, closes down the topic of representation in Japanese popular culture and forecloses any nuanced understanding of the genre resulting in the continued labelling of Japanese popular culture as something odd, strange, or perhaps unduly interested in images of young female, or male, characters. These two chapters, and indeed this first theme of the book, are well contextualised with the inclusion of Adam Stapleton's chapter that approaches the topic of legislation related to 'contentious images of children' in the West. Stapleton outlines how, in the West, there has been a trend of increasingly strict legalisation related to obscenity, indecency, and images of children that, instead of protecting children, in fact closes

off any form of discussion or debate on the topic, meaning that any nuanced understanding of either Japanese popular culture or actual abuse of children lacks attention and in fact may cause more harm instead of offering any actual protection.

The second theme of the book, which shifts attention away from a North American contextualisation, begins in chapter eight with Ling Yang and Yanrui Xu's study regarding reception of BL (Boys' Love) manga in mainland China. The focus of this chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book which highlights instances of conflict between domestic cultures and the imported Japanese popular culture in terms of socio-historical relations between different countries and Japan, as opposed to issues of child pornography and legislation related to obscenity. Yang and Xu's chapter, for example, discusses how mainland Chinese fans of BL manga make a distinction between 'cool' cultural Japan and 'bad' political Japan, highlighting how fans, whilst enjoying and consuming Japanese popular culture, are still aware of fraught contemporary and historical relations between China and Japan.

Similarly, Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto, in chapter nine, and Kristine Michelle Santos and Febriani Sihombing in chapter ten offer similar perspectives. Bauwens-Sugimoto, taking BL fandom as the case-study for her chapter, discusses the conflict that fans can face between consumption of a genre that depicts male homosexuality and their personal religious beliefs including Catholicism in the Philippines and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia. Despite any conflict, however, Bauwens-Sugimoto shows how fans consume a genre that may conflict with their religious beliefs in a "creative tension" (p. 24) and how fans activities may actually be hidden by assumptions made about their gender and religion,

with few expecting religiously conservative females in Southeast countries to read a genre focussing on male homosexuality. Santos and Sihombing also take Southeast Asia as their geographic focus and examine tensions between imported Japanese popular culture and domestic industries. The authors highlight how domestic industries take issue with Japanese popular culture, which is seen as destroying local production. Like Yang and Xu's chapter on mainland China, the tension is based on troubled historical relations between Japan and some Southeast Asian nations because, as the authors highlight, US comics are not targeted even though the Indonesian and Filipino comics that are examined are themselves already hybrid forms of local and US styles.

This edited collection is based on excellent and increasingly important research within Japanese Studies which must continue to take an international approach towards issues of popular culture emanating from Japan. There are well researched and documented accounts of cases of transnational flows of Japanese popular culture in North America and Southeast Asia. In particular, the collected chapters show how studying Japanese popular culture is not always a straightforward endeavour, with students, researchers, educators, and publishers often facing the ethical, legal, and cultural challenges as have been described in the book. The book advances understanding of Japanese popular culture as a key form of contemporary Japanese cultural heritage from an international perspective. Particularly in the West, where Japanese popular culture is ignored or derided with stark irreverence, this book offers a clear insight into challenges that scholars have and may face when attempting serious study of the topic. We should not ignore the increasingly transnational nature of Japanese popular culture and, although we can locate the

Japanese origins of media such as anime and manga, it is becoming ever more difficult to isolate its production and fandom to the Japanese archipelago and as popular culture travels across geographic borders it enters new socio-cultural contexts to which it must adapt or, ultimately, be lost. Therefore, the book remedies a gap in the literature by examining Japanese popular culture and its current international reception and study whilst simultaneously paying attention to its contextual position in different countries and contexts. Overall, this is an excellent piece of literature which offers a nuanced perspective on contemporary international Japanese popular culture from which scholars, students, and the public can learn a great deal.

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Simon TURNER has completed his PhD at Birkbeck College, University of London (England), in Cultural Studies, with his thesis that utilised a digital ethnographic approach to a Boys' Love manga fan site. His thesis received The John Crump Studentship award from The British Association for Japanese Studies.