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LAYERS OF AESTHETICS AND ETHICS IN
JAPANESE POP CULTURE

MUTUAL IMAGES
ISSUE 7 – AUTUMN 2019

MUTUAL IMAGES

A TRANSCULTURAL RESEARCH JOURNAL

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EDITED BY
MARCO PELLITTERI

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ISSUE 7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial – Layers of aesthetics and ethics in Japanese pop culture MARCO PELLITTERI (Shanghai International Studies University, China)	IX-XVI
---	--------

ARTICLES

<i>Gaijin mangaka</i> : The boundary violating impulse of Japanised “art-comics” ANA MATILDE DE SOUSA (Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal)	3-26
--	------

RESEARCH FILES

Research materials from fieldwork in Japan, 2013 – Vol. 1 MARCO PELLITTERI (Shanghai International Studies University, China).....	29-50
--	-------

REVIEWS

<i>Animated Encounters:</i> <i>Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940-1970s</i> – Daisy yan Du LAURENCE GREEN (SOAS University of London, UK).....	53-56
<i>Osamu Tezuka, el Dios del Manga</i> – Exhibition at the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya ANTONIO LORIGUILLO-LÓPEZ (Universitat Jaume I, Spain).....	57-62

***Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940-1970s* – Daisy Yan DU**

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019, 276 p.

Review by Laurence GREEN | SOAS University of London, UK

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When Jonathan Clements' *Anime: A History* was released in 2013, it felt like a breath of fresh air to the field of anime studies. For years, existing literature on anime – both populist and academic – had invariably focused on either the 'contents' of the medium, the fans viewing it, or both. We were told time and again of anime's capacity for storytelling and visual spectacle, and why it meant so much to fans on the other side of the world from its country of origin – Japan. Clements' study did something different – it situated anime firmly within the real world, part of a clear, systemised process of production and consumption. A product with a clear value attached to it – commercial or otherwise. With this premise in mind, Clements could map out the history of anime across the past one hundred years, not only building on the important work of Marc Steinberg's 'media mix' to describe anime's insatiable capacity for joined up media franchises, but also filling vital gaps in the nebulous blur of anime's early years.

But in the years since the release of Clements book, we have seen a turn once again in the tone of anime scholarship, driven primarily by the work of Thomas Lamarre and his deeply theoretical approach to viewing anime. Put forward in his ambitious *The Anime Machine* (2009), and subsequently built on in *The Anime Ecology* (2018), Lamarre's theories create a different kind of systemisation to that of Clements – one interested in the nature of anime-as-medium itself. Lamarre's description of the 'animetic' quality – the art of the moving image itself – bristles with big terminology: the multiplanar image, the distributive field of vision, exploded projection, modulation. It is meaty stuff, and its complexity may be off-putting to those looking for a more general reader for their Japanese pop culture classes, but it also represents the most concerted effort in the study of anime

right now to prescribe a dedicated critical line of theory for anime-as-art. And so, with the study of Japanese animation very much part of the critical establishment now, so to speak, attention has inevitably begun to turn to the rising star of Japan's neighbours, Korea and China. While Korea has understandably been garnering its fair share of the soft power limelight of late for its impressive pop music chops, China's cultural output and the role it can potentially play in a global market is more of an enigma. Thus, Daisy Yan Du's book *Animated Encounters* and its premise to focus squarely on all things Transnational in Chinese animation offers mouth-watering potential, as does its colourful cover-art and status as the first in the University of Hawaii's new *Asia Pop!* series of studies. In many ways, the book feels like a natural companion piece to Clements' *Anime: A History*, taking a primarily historical methodology, but pairing it with the somewhat denser, more theoretical stylings favoured by the likes of Lamarre.

The core of Du's argument rests on the assertion that transnationality in Chinese animation is nothing new – rather, it was transnational to begin with. The early chapters of the tome give ample space to the troubled history of Japan's colonial occupation of the Manchurian region and the exchange of animation staff between the two countries. Here, the rather dry succession of dates and historically important personas feels like it belongs as much to the history of Japanese animation as it does to a Chinese one – a further nod perhaps, to the inherent transnationality at the heart of Du's thesis. This concept is expressed most clearly in the idea of Manchuria itself as an imagined state rather than a material country, an immaterial existence that persists in the memory to this day. We are asked to consider questions of what it means to possess a 'national' style of animation, and to what degree Chinese animation might 'self-orientalise' itself.

These are exciting, vivid concepts, but one of the continuing frustrations with the book's early movements is that while it feels like it is unearthing a treasure trove of immense value, its tangibility – the sheer spirit and verve of the animation itself – is hard for us to get a true measure of. The plot descriptions offered up are dull, workmanlike affairs, quickly lost between the relentless tides of political history and encyclopaedic procession of key players. That's not to say that a historical approach to the material does it no favours - far from it. Clements' book was a masterclass in conveying the relevancy of historical material through intensely memorable anecdotal flavour, and Du herself finds her knack for it in the book's far more readable latter passages.

Chapter three picks up on the decline of a particularly Soviet influence on animated output and Du returns to the idea of a Chinese 'national style'. One of the most fascinating

engagements with this is the concept of ink-painting in animation – an art so fantastically skilful that the practical how-to of it remains a jealously guarded secret. Du states how the ‘hypervisibility’ of more recent computer-generated efforts to emulate this effect only add to the mystique of the genuine article. Also interesting is the discourse on what purpose exactly animation should serve. Is it a children’s medium, designed purely to serve children and reflect children’s lives on film? We hear of the suspension of fictional filmmaking between 1966 and 1970, as the didactic qualities of Chinese cinema reached their extreme. The most bizarre manifestation of this tight control being the erasure of animals (an extension of Mao’s campaign against unhygienic ‘pests’) from the screen. Du devotes the entirety of her fourth chapter to this fascinating detail, in what is by far the most engaging work in the study.

While the book’s stronger second half does a lot to rebalance the dryness of the early chapters, as a whole, the writing is unfortunately plagued by a number of questionable stylistic quirks. Du repeatedly refers to Osamu Tezuka’s famous production company as ‘Bug Productions’ - a literal translation of the Japanese *Mushi Production* (or *Mushi Pro* for short) that it is usually referred to in almost all anime-centric studies. Likewise, she states that Japanese animation is often ‘reductively’ called anime – whereas this is simply a romanisation of the exact same term the Japanese use to refer to the medium.

Lastly, but by no means least, the paucity of illustrations and artwork contained in the book feels like a real stumbling block. While there were no doubt unavoidable limitations behind this - for example copyright, or simple access to available materials - the book feels all the poorer for the sheer fact that we cannot see what Du expounds so many words simply describing. It is no surprise then that chapter four, with its fantastic spread of visuals from *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland* (1965), feels easily the most vivid. The inconsistency is frustrating, more so because the strength of this final chapter and subsequent afterword leaves the reader (finally) wanting more, precisely at the moment Du brings proceedings to a close.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurence GREEN is a 2nd year PhD Student at SOAS University of London and a recipient of the Meiji Jingu Japanese Studies Research Scholarship and Japan Research Centre Fuwaku Fund. His current research focuses on the use of music within the Japanese animation industry, and his writing has previously been published in both NEO Magazine and the Japan Society Review. He is currently serving as Managing Editor of the journal Japan Forum.

