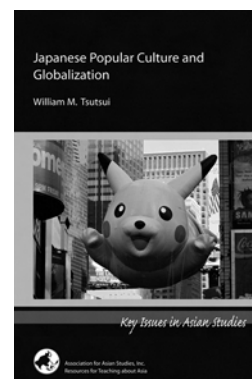


Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization *A Brief Interview with William M. Tsutsui*



William M. Tsutsui is Professor of History and Dean of Dedman College of Humanities and Sciences at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Previously he taught for seventeen years at the University of Kansas. He is the author or editor of six books, including *Manufacturing Ideology: Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1998) and *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Professor Tsutsui's most recent publication is the *Key Issues in Asian Studies* booklet, *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* and in this interview Tsutsui ad-



resses aspects of his latest work. He was awarded the 2000 John Whitney Hall Prize of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) and the 2005 William Rockhill Nelson Award for non-fiction. He currently serves as chair of the AAS Northeast Asia Council. His ongoing research projects focus on the environmental history of Japan during World War II and the cultural history of the phrase “Made in Japan.”

Lucien: *Bill, you are the expert, but all of us who study Japan realize there are many young people who are avid fans of that nation's popular culture. What is your take on why Japanese popular culture has become such a global phenomenon?*

Bill Tsutsui: Japanese mass entertainment products—from giant monster movies to *sudoku* number puzzles, animated serials, and *Hello Kitty* character goods—have become commonplace in the international pop culture landscape. As with any question worth asking, there is no simple answer to why Japanese pop has gone global. We need to consider a variety of factors in trying to understand why *Godzilla* is a worldwide icon, why manga is a 200 million dollar a year industry in the United States, and why, as early as 1990, Super Mario had become a more recognizable figure to American children than Mickey Mouse.

I am a historian by training so, needless to say, I am inclined toward historical interpretations of the global appeal of Japanese popular culture. Although the international ubiquity of anime, sushi, and karaoke might seem like a recent development to many of us, Japanese pop exports have a long heritage in the United States. From the release of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (a heavily edited version of the giant monster classic *Gojira*) in American theaters in 1956, a steady stream of entertainment products from Japan made their way across the Pa-

cific. In the wake of B movies came animation—*Astro Boy*, *Gigantor*—in the 1960s, and a wide range of other Japanese television serials—*Speed Racer*, *Ultraman*, *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*—in the subsequent decades. Japan, I would argue, became a part of the American pop culture universe almost without anyone noticing it, and the familiarity of these imported animated and cinematic styles—big-eyed cartoon characters, rampaging monsters, robots and cyborgs—prepared American audiences for the waves of Japanese entertainment products that would arrive from the 1980s on.

Many commentators have stressed the distinctive qualities of Japanese pop products in seeking to explain what the journalist Douglas McGray has called Japan's “gross national cool.” The sophisticated graphic qualities of Japanese forms like manga and anime have been an important factor in capturing worldwide audiences, as have their sheer creativity, thematic diversity, and insistent difference from Western popular culture conventions. There is an appealingly subversive edge to Japanese pop, which often rejects the happy endings and sunny optimism of Hollywood in favor of darker, more complex, and morally ambiguous narratives. In short, many young consumers around the world have embraced Japanese entertainment products because they are visually exciting and refreshingly unpredictable.

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Of course, the very concept of “Japanese” popular culture is complicated by the global economy. Japanese products like Pokémon are “localized” for the specific demands of markets (and cultures) internationally. Artists throughout Asia and in the West have been inspired by, and emulated, the graphic styles of manga and anime. And can one confidently say a video game is “Japanese” if it was conceived in Kyoto, animated in Seoul, manufactured in Shanghai, and sold in Texas or Timbuktu?

Lucien: *In what courses do you see the booklet having the most applicability? Do you think it has possibilities for high school teachers and students?*

Bill Tsutsui: Popular culture is a wonderful way to introduce students to Japan, so I tried to make the booklet applicable to as wide a range of courses as possible. I plan to use it in my own survey classes on East Asian and Japanese history. I also think it would be a great fit in an “Eastern civilizations” course, especially as such offerings often slight contemporary culture in favor of the “great books” of the Chinese and Japanese traditions. Instructors in introductory courses on Japanese anthropology, literature, art history, and film studies might also find the volume useful as a supplement to existing textbooks.

I have long been active in efforts to promote Asian studies at the K-12 level, especially through the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA). Given the importance of East Asia in the twenty-first-century world, we can't wait until college to fire up student interest in Japan, China, and Korea. Pop culture can be a very effective hook for getting kids, in high school or even earlier, drawn into the study of Japanese history, society, and contemporary affairs. I think the booklet has a lot of potential in K-12 settings, either as a classroom text in high schools or as a background resource for teachers at all levels.

Lucien: *What did you learn as you developed this work of pedagogical scholarship intended for broad audiences?*

Bill Tsutsui: I have written for general audiences before (*Godzilla on My Mind*, as the title suggests, was hardly your typical academic book), but I had not previously done a classroom text. In writing for students, I found myself even more obsessed than usual with clarity of expression and lucidity of organization. The short length of the booklet forced me to be economical with detail (I would have loved to include more on topics such as karaoke and video games) and to keep the narrative moving briskly. I hope I hit the right balance and came up with something that will be engaging for students as well as substantive enough for instructors.

One of the real challenges in teaching Japanese popular culture is the diversity of backgrounds that students bring to the subject. Committed fans (known as *otaku* in both America and Japan) might have an encyclopedic knowledge of anime or manga while other students might well find *Naruto* and *Super Mario* as unfamiliar as *Amaterasu* and Emperor Hirohito. I tried to pitch the booklet for a broad readership: hardcore otaku will discover historical perspectives and theoretical frameworks to enrich their enjoyment of Japanese pop, while students with no background in Asian studies will, I hope, appreciate the volume as a wide-ranging and accessible introduction to “Cool Japan.”

Lucien: *Thanks for the interview, Bill. Readers can learn more about popular culture in Japan and otaku in Bill's article in the winter 2008 issue of EAA, entitled “Nerd Nation: Otaku and Youth Subcultures in Contemporary Japan.”* ■