

(De)Constructing Identities? Encounters with ‘China’ in Popular Japanese Television Dramas

Prof. Hilaria Gössmann PhD, Griseldis Kirsch MA, University of Trier, Germany

1. Introduction

The history of Japanese television drama is nearly as old as the history of Japanese television itself. Since the first production was aired the same year television emerged there (in 1953), television dramas have been highly successful.¹ Although the influence of American family dramas and movies was enormous, Japanese TV stations – both private and public – soon began producing their own dramas, which over time became more popular than American productions (Hirahara 1991a: 19-20).

Japanese television dramas are roughly divided into television films (*tanpatsu dorama*) and television series (*renzoku dorama*).² Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, both films and series tended to address socially controversial topics such as Japan’s own war history or social problems. Thus, Japanese television dramas are not only ‘pure entertainment’, rather films are praised for their ‘closeness’ to society and are often produced as entries for ‘Art Festivals’ (*geijutsusai*)³ (Hirahara 1994: 46). A survey conducted in the 1980s, however, found that women do not only watch television dramas for entertainment; on the contrary, they use drama as a means to obtain ideas for their own way of living (*Masumedia bunka to josei ni kansuru chôsa kenkyûkai* (ed.) 1986: 109).⁴

Although both the number of television dramas broadcast as well as the ratings sank significantly in the 1980s, the producers and authors of television dramas still endeavored to

¹ The first dramas were mainly live telecasts.

² Television films are produced and broadcast by both NHK (the public Japanese television station) and commercial stations. Unlike American soap operas, Japanese prime time television series are not indefinitely ongoing, but rather aired once a week for about three months. NHK rarely broadcasts prime time series, the NHK Morning Television Novels (*asa no renzoku shôsetsu*), however, are widely popular. They are broadcast weekdays for about six months. For further information on Morning Television Novels, see also Harvey (1998).

³ The ‘Art Festivals’ are sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Education and were first initiated in 1946. The (television) dramas entered are experimental or sophisticated productions. For further information on the ‘Art Festivals’, see Hirahara (1991a).

⁴ Data concerning men and their viewing habits were not collected.

stay ‘close’ to society. Nevertheless, by only showing the life of (urban) middle-class families and virtually every problem that arises in this environment, the perception of what they intended to show remained limited. Society as mirrored in television dramas thus appeared ‘homogeneous’, since minorities and foreigners remained outside their focus. In the search for new topics, however, depictions of unusual love stories portraying couples with extreme age differences or with a disabled partner became *en vogue*. A love story between a Japanese and a non-Japanese Asian was thus just another “new variant” (Gössmann 2003).⁵

Foreigners were definitely a “new variant”, because until 1994, over the course of 40 years of broadcasting history and 15,911 productions, only 87 dramas depicted foreign characters or locations, most of which were Western.⁶ Compared to other countries, Japan appears as a country with relatively few foreigners – less than 2% of the population are of foreign origin. As the number of foreigners in Japan, especially from other Asian countries, began to increase steadily,⁷ the small screen, especially television series, reacted relatively late to this new situation. Whereas the movie industry has been recording a virtual ‘Asia boom’ since the beginning of the 1990s (Schilling 1999: 43), television series did not follow until approximately ten years later. Starting in 2000, series with other Asian characters noticeably increased: between 1954 and 1994, only five series portrayed non-Japanese Asian characters,⁸ between 2000 and 2002, however, seven series with other Asians have been aired.⁹

In the globalizing world, insular Japanese society faces an overwhelming input of ‘new’ foreign elements. Whereas in earlier times the insular character of Japan made it possible to ‘control’ the entering of things foreign to a certain degree, a globalized culture tests these control mechanisms (Antoni 1995: 75). The audience and producers of dramas thus face new challenges in today’s internationalized and global world.¹⁰

⁵ These dramas with characters from other Asian countries are being analyzed within the context of a research project on “Japan’s Orientation towards Asia Respectively Japan’s ‘Return to Asia’ in Literature, Media and Popular Culture” based at the University of Trier and sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the central public funding organization for academic research in Germany. For an introduction to the project, see Gössmann (2002).

⁶ This data is based on the statistical analysis of *Terebi dorama zenshi 1954-1994*. (A Complete History of Japanese Television Drama 1954-1994) (Tokyo News Mook (ed.) 1994). This book lists every drama aired in the history of Japanese television drama, along with a short overview of the contents.

⁷ Surpassed only by the Koreans, the Chinese, with about 380,000 people, constitute the second largest group of foreigners in Japan. For an English language overview of the origin of foreigners in Japan, see <<http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/zuhyou/b0215000.xls>>. For an overview on the role of other Asians in Japan, see e.g. Komai (1995), Weiner (ed.) (1997), Okuda and Tajima (1998) as well as Douglass and Roberts (eds.) (2000).

⁸ This data is also based on the empirical analysis of Tokyo News Mook (ed.) (1994).

⁹ This data is based on our own research conducted in conjunction with the above-mentioned research project.

¹⁰ For an overview of Japan’s dealing with the ‘Other’, see Antoni (1995).

Here, the question of Japanese ‘identity’ becomes important. Iwabuchi Kôichi¹¹ argues that “Japan’s modern national identity has [...] always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between ‘Asia’, ‘the West,’ and ‘Japan’” (Iwabuchi 2002: 7). As a country with comparatively few foreigners, the Japanese constructed their post-war national identity in line with (urban) middle-class families and therefore appeared to be ‘homogeneous’, as was also mirrored in television dramas. Along with this came a strong feeling of ‘uniqueness’ that no other country in the world was like Japan (Léveillé und Nuttall 1998: 83et seq. and Iwabuchi 2002: 6). This “unique, supposedly homogeneous national identity” (Iwabuchi 2002: 7), is now being questioned in dramas depicting other Asian characters interacting with Japan, because the popular genre of television drama now, for the first time in its history, truly faces the vision of a more heterogeneous society within Japan.

Since the ‘Asia boom’ in television dramas has thus far primarily concentrated on Korea and China, and research on the significance of Korean characters has already been conducted¹², this paper will focus on dramas depicting ‘China’. The questions relevant to the following analysis therefore include: How do the Japanese and Chinese characters interact? Are their different nationalities important to the plot? Do these dramas have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of Japan’s Asian neighbors? And finally, is the question of a common Asian identity addressed?

To allow a better comprehension of the dramas, a short description of Japan’s (complicated) relations with its Asian neighbors (with a focus on China) shall be provided, as will an overview of the common patterns underlying the construction of ‘Asia’ in Japanese media.

2. Japan’s Position in Asia

The relationship between Japan and its Asian neighbors has been “harmonious and mutually beneficial at times, and antagonistic and conflictive at other times” (Hilpert and Haak 2002b: 2). Starting from the sixth century A.C., Chinese culture and thought had a deep and decisive influence on Japan. However, Western colonial powers and the following Westernization of Japan at the end of the nineteenth century put an end to this (Masuda 1995: 6). Not to be colonized itself, Japan forced its modernization and subsequently opened itself up to the West. Consequently, Japan developed a sense of superiority towards its Asian neighbors,

¹¹ Japanese names are used in the Japanese fashion, with the surname first and the Christian name last.

which led to Japan's recent role of aggressor and colonizer in Asia. In creating an 'Asian' colonial empire, the "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" – in which most (South) East Asian nations were to thrive under Japanese guidance, Japan did in fact turn away from the West.

After the Second World War, the gap between Japan and Asia (mainly China and Korea) widened as Japan, for the second time in its history, re-oriented itself towards the West. Asia, particularly the People's Republic of China, remained outside of Japanese post-war political engagement. Japan's insufficient apology and recompensation for atrocities committed during colonial times continued to strain the relationship between Japan and its closest neighbors (Hilpert and Haak 2002b: 3).

However, Japan's interest in Asia began to grow steadily. Not only was Japan faced by modernizing and industrializing nations when the country itself was stuck in a deep recession, Japan had also to reorient itself in the new world order after the end of the Cold War. A 'return to Asia', which had been neglected throughout most of Japan's post-war history, and which was (and still is) considered 'distinct' from Japan, was one of the new options. It is widely argued in Japan that Japan and Asia share common traditions and values; a 'return' and the creation of an 'Asian identity' is therefore considered a necessity (Ômae 1994: 89). Trade relations with China and other Asian countries continue to gain importance for the Japanese economy, and the West no longer stands unrivalled.

However, many problematic issues remain embedded within multilateral intra-Asian relationships. These include the other Asian countries' deep distrust in the motives underlying Japan's more engaged policy towards Asia, which has been voiced most strongly by China and South Korea, and Japan's persisting problems in dealing with its recent past. Although 2002 was declared the "Year of the Japanese-Korean Exchange" (*2002nen nichikan kokumin kôryû nen*¹³) as well as "Year of the 30th Anniversary of the Normalization of Japan-China Relations" (*Nitchû hôkô seijôka 30shûnen kinen 'Nihonnen' 'Chûgokunen'*¹⁴), and despite the many cultural exchanges that have indeed been made,¹⁵ problems arising from Japan's past still have to be overcome.¹⁶

¹² See Gatzen and Gössmann (2003) and Gössmann (2003) as well as Iwata-Weickgenannt (2003).

¹³ See Asahi Shinbun (International Satellite Edition) (January 22, 2002: 26).

¹⁴ See <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/index.html>>, accessed March 7, 2003

¹⁵ For information on the exchange program during the "Year of the 30th Anniversary of the Normalization of Japan-China Relations", see *Gaikô fôramu* 171 (October 2002).

¹⁶ For an overview of China-Japan political and economical relations, see e.g. Masuda and Hatano (eds.) (1995), Hook et al. (2001) and Hilpert and Haak (eds.) (2002a).

3. *The Significance of the Media in Japan-China Relations*

Against this background, the media, especially television, can play an important role in the understanding between Japan and China. According to a survey by the NHK Broadcasting Research Institute, more than 70% of the interviewees stated that they would gather information on China and Korea from TV programs (Hara and Shioda 2000a: 8 and 2000b: 6).¹⁷ Although the import of other Asian popular products to Japan is far less than in the reverse direction, “Asian Stars” such as Faye Wong, Vivian Xu and even Ekin Chen enjoy great popularity in Japan (Iwabuchi 2002: 2; 207).

The acceptance of Asian topics and artifacts has risen continuously since the 1990s. Yet the ‘Asia boom’, although manifesting itself in popular culture as well as in literature and daily life, has still not helped overcome negative stereotypes. Images of China and Korea remain negatively connoted. Only about 2% of interviewees in the aforementioned opinion poll considered China and Korea to be “clean countries” (Korea 1.3%, China 2.5%). Korea and China were also considered “gloomy” (Korea 17.7%, China 23.1%) as well as “exclusive” (Korea 21.8%, China 32.3%) (Hara and Shioda 2000a: 9, 12; Hara and Shioda 2000b: 11, 14). Here, the role of Japanese television, with popular dramas in the lead, becomes vital as the images that Japanese domestic media construct of other Asian countries remain the most prominent means of information.¹⁸

4. *Encounters with the ‘Asian Other’ in Japanese Media*

According to German Media Researcher Werner Faulstich, in international movies, ‘the Other’ tends to be constructed along the three patterns of “exoticism” “salvation” and “horror”. Whereas “exoticism” depicts the ‘Other’ as “the unknown to be discovered” (Faulstich 1996: 414, English translation by the authors), “salvation” describes the ‘Other’ as something to be desired, therefore providing salvation (Faulstich 1996: 417). The pattern of

¹⁷ The opinion survey was conducted in 1999 and published in two parts in Japanese (Hara and Shioda 2000b and 2000c) as well as in a slightly condensed version in English (Hara and Shioda 2000a).

¹⁸ For more on the images of Asia in Japanese television documentaries, see Gatzen (2002), in documentaries and dramas, see Gatzen and Gössmann (2003), and in dramas, see Gössmann (2003) and Iwata-Weickgenannt (2003).

“horror” portrays the ‘Other’ as “sinister, threatening, or even frightening” (Faulstich 1996: 418, English translation by the authors). These constructions could also be found in Japanese television dramas and other popular genres.¹⁹ Whereas in older productions, images of “exoticism” and “horror” seemed to dominate, recent productions stress the image of “salvation”, in the sense of nostalgia for ‘Asian modernizing energy’ (Gatzen and Gössmann 2003, Gössmann 2003). According to Iwabuchi Kôichi “modernizing Asian nations are nostalgically seen to embody a social vigor and optimism for the future that Japan allegedly is losing or has lost” (Iwabuchi 2002: 159). Therefore, other Asian countries in Japanese media tend to be depicted as backwards and more traditionally oriented than Japan. A temporal lag, however, is innate to these images. By identifying with ‘Asia’ and its energy, Japan believes it will once again regain itself and its own energy (Iwabuchi 2002: 22 and 176 et seq.).

Correspondingly, non-Japanese Asian characters tend to be depicted along certain patterns:

1. Japanese are constructed as individualist and ‘modern’ in contrast to family-oriented and thus ‘traditional’ ‘Asian’ characters.
2. The ‘Asian’ characters, with their energy and vitality, serve as role models or even saviors to the lethargic, unmotivated Japanese.
3. Both Japanese and ‘Asian’ characters are united by their common (often creative) dream that sometimes only becomes evident for the Japanese through contact with other Asians.²⁰

This dream can be of a personal nature, but if the character comes from another Asian country, his or her dream is often related to the ‘modernization’ of their countries, therefore this dream is also referred to as the ‘Asian Dream’ of common modernization and industrialization.²¹ Here again, the energetic and optimistic worldview of characters from other Asian countries gains importance, since the energy and vitality they have is necessary for fulfilling this ‘dream’.

Between 2000-2003, at least six dramas with Chinese or Taiwanese characters were broadcast, three of which were series. Since ‘creativity’ and ‘fashion design’ often serve as

¹⁹ See Gössmann, Jaschke and Mrugalla (1998) as well as Gössmann (2003). Another example of “exoticism”, “salvation” and “horror” in Japanese popular culture is mentioned in Phillipps (2002).

²⁰ See Gatzen and Gössmann (2003), Gössmann (2003) and Iwata-Weickgenannt (2003).

²¹ The dream of modernization of other Asian countries is one of the topics addressed in the 1996 television series *Doku*, in which the protagonist leaves Vietnam for Japan in order to study architecture and build skyscrapers in his country. See also Gössmann, Jaschke and Mrugalla (1998) and Iwabuchi (2002: 178-179).

the background for dramas with non-Japanese Asian characters, the two examples selected for this analysis both deal with these topics in the broadest sense. *False Love (Uso koi)* is a series and *Fan of a Hong Kong Star (Honkon myôjômei)* a television film. They were also chosen because one portrays an encounter with ‘China’ in ‘Japan’ and the other with ‘Japan’ in ‘China’.

5. A Chinese Woman in Japan – Fuji TV’s ‘False Love’ and the Vision of a Multicultural Society

The series *False Love (Uso koi)*, which was broadcast on the Fuji TV commercial network between July and September, 2001, comprised eleven episodes. It deals with the triangular love story between Japanese photographer Suzukake Akira (Nakai Kiichi), his Japanese fiancée Sugino Emi (Nakama Yukie) and Chinese fashion designer Faye Lin (Faye Wong).²²

At his wedding ceremony, Akira discovers that he is already married to Faye, a Chinese woman whom he has never heard of before. Faye has obviously stolen his family register and entered herself as his wife.²³ Unwilling to hurt Emi, he conceals what has happened and pretends to marry her. Akira endeavors to find Faye and ask her for a divorce, but Faye still insists on needing the marriage to obtain a visa and finally fulfill her dream of becoming an apprentice to a famous Japanese fashion designer.

Akira, an artist himself who had to put his dream of photographing sunsets on hold and do commercial camera work in order to make ends meet as a husband, understands her motives better than he would actually admit. The fashion designer, however, continues to take advantage of Faye’s talent by stealing her designs and still refuses to give Faye a job with

²² For more on this drama, see also Gatzen and Gössmann (2003).

²³ Japanese couples wanting to get married only need to fill out a form. Theoretically, these forms are handed out freely and couples do not have to appear personally to sign and stamp it. Since Akira had obviously already signed the form, and with Emi’s signature and stamp still missing, Faye could ask for the form and the family register without anyone noticing that she was not his real fiancée. The drama, however, omits the fact that Faye

which she could apply for a work visa. She thus has to keep Akira waiting for his divorce. In the course of the drama, Akira and Faye eventually fall in love, but Akira does not want to leave his ‘wife’ Emi, who has a great talent for Western-style flower arrangement. Encouraged by Akira, she opens her own studio and hires Faye, so that she can finally get a work visa and give Akira his divorce.

Interestingly, Faye, who is depicted as selfish and stubborn at first, proves to be a real altruist: she helps Emi in the success of her studio and nearly sacrifices her own dream. When her first collection is to be presented in Paris, she almost misses her flight because she wants to help Emi finish her first important job. When Akira confronts her with this, she admits that she wants to return his favor (*ongaeshi*²⁴). Akira nevertheless reminds her of her own dream and she leaves for Paris.

The ‘happy end’, however, approaches as Emi finds out about Faye and Akira, leaves him so that he is finally free to be with Faye and pursue his dream of photographing sunsets. Faye returns prematurely from Paris because she is unable to find inspiration there, but Akira helps her once again. He encourages her to continue drawing designs and he himself plans to present her show on the Internet.

Faye’s show is a great success and she publicly confesses her love for Akira, but he has already gone to the mountains to photograph the evening sun, where Faye finds him. The happy end is therefore achieved on both a personal and professional level.

The depiction of Faye is especially important in light of the common prejudices held towards Chinese in Japan. Since, according to the NHK survey, Chinese are not considered to be “trustworthy” – only 2.0% assigned them this characteristic (Hara and Shioda 2000b: 14) – Faye appears to be acting in line with this stereotype. She gets Akira into trouble, so that he has to continually lie to Emi to save their ‘marriage’. Although at first glance, Faye seems to be selfish and certainly untrustworthy, she is still a sympathetic character. Her qualities become visible when she unselfishly retrieves Akira’s cameras, which had been stolen by the Chinese Mafia, and helps Emi in her studio at the cost of presenting her own collection.

Faye, however, does not entirely follow the above-mentioned pattern. Neither is she portrayed as being traditional or reflecting an ‘image’ of Japan’s past, nor does she appear to be pre-modern. She is optimistic towards the future and hopes her dream will come true. Even

is a foreigner and therefore should have encountered more problems in asking for Akira’s family register than the plot yields.

²⁴ Faye uses the Japanese term *ongaeshi*, which has a much stronger and more symbolic meaning than just ‘to return a favor’.

though she inspires Akira with her optimism, she needs him to show her how to hold on to her dreams. Therefore, a ‘healing experience’ can be found on a mutual basis.

Although it is mentioned that Faye is ‘Chinese’, she is really not emphasized as being ‘Chinese’. Whereas the Chinese Mafia, although only playing a minor role, is stereotypically depicted, either dressed in Mao-style jackets or having no hair but long moustaches, Faye, however, rarely wears typical Chinese clothes. Her cultural background is hardly even mentioned, instead the plot focuses on the development of the love story and her progress in becoming a top designer. Except for the first episode, when it is obviously to be made clear, that she is Chinese, she barely speaks Chinese, but rather English – neither of which Akira is really able to understand. When Akira, who sincerely wants to help Faye obtain a visa, ‘offers’ her a fake marriage with a friend who is fluent in Chinese, knows more about China than Akira and would therefore be more ‘suitable’ for her, Faye declines and answers: “If it isn’t you, it’s no one” (episode 2). The reason for this reaction lies in the fact that both Faye and Akira are artists: Faye has discovered one of Akira’s photographs of the setting sun and is inspired by its beautiful colors. Akira, on the other hand, is fascinated by Faye’s beauty as well as her naturalness and energy. One scene in episode 7 reveals Faye’s impact on Akira, who had actually intended to photograph the sunset and then suddenly finds himself, to his own surprise, taking pictures of her instead. Their mutual understanding and inspiration as artists is thus far more important than language as a means of communication.

Faye lives in an apartment building where only foreigners reside and which is presented as a microcosm of a multicultural world.²⁵ The foreigners living there are friends who, regardless of their different origins, help out one another. Although no Japanese lives there at the beginning of the series, Japanese are not necessarily excluded from this world. Again, inside the apartment building as well, cultural differences are insignificant. Interestingly, the nationalities of the people in the apartment building are never even mentioned. When Akira helps Faye to attain success, her friends in the apartment building and Emi are the ones who model her clothes. It appears that the vision of a multicultural society as portrayed in this drama means reaching mutual understanding and friendship regardless of different origins: the cause – the fulfillment of Faye’s dream – unites all nationalities.

²⁵ The apartment house as shown in *False Love* strongly resembles the apartment house in the 1989 movie *World Apartment Horror* (for information on the original comic (*manga*), see Pollack 2000). But unlike the movie, in which only people of other Asian countries reside in an old apartment building because no Japanese will have them near his/her own residence, the apartment building in *False Love* shows a greater variety: besides two Chinese, it also houses two foreigners from Western countries, apparently Americans, one probably African-American-Japanese, and two Southeast Asians.

It is not only the vision of a multicultural society that makes *False Love* an exceptional drama, but that, in contrast to other productions, *False Love* also exhibits a happy end between the Chinese and the Japanese protagonist. The trend of unusual love stories in dramas did not always mean a happy end for the protagonists. Sometimes, the Japanese or non-Japanese character even had to die before their love could be fulfilled. In those cases, the contact with the deceased protagonist usually changed the surviving character, or even healed him.²⁶ Nevertheless, in this drama, a happy end is also achieved on a personal level, and even more extraordinarily, the Japanese female protagonist lets her ‘husband’ go free to be with the Chinese character.

How is such a ‘revolutionary’ happy end made possible? Since differences are never stressed throughout the plot, they do not need to be overcome. The characterization of both Akira and Faye ignores their national and cultural identities, instead focusing on their accomplishments as artists – they have reached a mutual understanding defying boundaries and differences. Their national identities are thus deconstructed in favor of the construction of an identity as ‘artists’. The question of a specific ‘Asian identity’, however, is not raised. The multicultural society portrayed here applies to any country, but only if and when differences are made irrelevant and thus totally negated.

6. *Japanese Women in China – TV Tōkyō’s ‘Fan of a Hong Kong Star’ and the Question of a Common Asian Identity*

A two-hour television film broadcast by commercial network TV Tōkyō, *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* (*Honkon myōjōmei*, August 2002) was written by scriptwriter Yamada Taichi, who became famous for his socially critical dramas at the end of the 1970s.²⁷ *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* was produced as an entry for the 2002 ‘Art Festival’ (*geijutsusai*) and broadcast as a ‘Yamada Taichi Special’, therefore underscoring the popularity of the scriptwriter and the high expectations regarding its contents.²⁸ Unlike *False Love*, the encounter with the Other does not take place in Japan, as the protagonist in *Fan of a Hong Kong Star*, Kudō Satomi

²⁶ For example, in *Highest Love* (*Shijō no koi*, NHK 2002), the Korean protagonist sacrifices herself to rescue the Japanese protagonist’s little daughter. Due to her sacrifice, the Japanese character realizes that life is not so bad after all. For more on this drama, see Iwata-Weickgenannt (2003).

²⁷ For further information on the significance of Yamada Taichi in the development of Japanese television drama, see Hirahara (1991b), (1994) and (1998).

²⁸ For further information in Japanese on the drama, see <<http://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/myojo/midokoro.html>>, accessed February 28, 2003.

(Yakushimaru Hiroko), frequently travels to Hong Kong. Indeed, more than half of the drama is set in Hong Kong.

While working as a Marketing Director for Asia in the Japanese branch of a French shoe label, Satomi establishes contact with a young female Chinese designer, whom she frequently meets in Hong Kong. Satomi has ascertained that French shoes are nice and pretty, but lack inspiration and imagination. She then discovers exactly these qualities in the sketches of the young Chinese designer, who Satomi therefore tries to promote. However, her company's policy, which states that shoes are to be produced in China and designs created in France, prevents her from openly endorsing the designer. Satomi does not concede to this policy, however, and continues to meet the young Chinese woman. Here, a crush on Hong Kong Chinese singer and actor Ekin Chen²⁹ serves as a front for her frequent flights to Hong Kong.

In the end, a detective following her observes that Satomi is still meeting the young designer and she is consequently fired. It seems as though she has to abandon her dream of creating "Asian shoes for Asia" under the French label, but the drama ends with Satomi's aspirations of establishing her own brand; together with the creativity of the Chinese designer and her own experience in shoe marketing, she is finally able to make her dream come true.

Like Faye in *False Love*, the Chinese character is presented as being an inspiration to the Japanese, but in this drama, the inspiration is more or less asymmetrical. 'China' has innovative energy, but 'Japan' has entrepreneurial skills, the depiction of 'modernizing China' is still lacking. In a way, this drama seems to more positively convey the notion of Japan and China being dependent on each other in the sense that Japan has the 'international competence', whereas China can provide cheap labor (Hilpert 2002: 33).

Seemingly contradictory, though, the drama is set in Hong Kong, a city far from 'yet to modernize'. Nevertheless, in Japanese popular culture, "the modern-ness of Hong Kong is still marked by a sense of not-quite" (Iwabuchi 2002: 189), so the contradictory depiction of modernizing energy found in an already 'modern' city still fits the common pattern. Hong Kong, however, is the place where the Japanese women – Satomi meets two other female Japanese fans of Ekin Chen during one of her trips and they become friends – experience a sort of freedom they do not have in Japan.³⁰

Although the flow of popular culture between Hong Kong and Japan can still be called asymmetrical, since a smaller number of productions from Hong Kong enter the Japanese

²⁹ Ekin Chen, although present throughout the drama, only has a few scenes in which he plays himself.

³⁰ This theme is also found in Murata Junko's (1995/6) comic (*manga*) *Honkon wâkingu gâru* (Hong Kong Working Girl). For more on this *manga*, see also Phillipps (2002).

market than vice versa, fans of Hong Kong stars can also be found in Japan. As Iwabuchi Kôichi found out during his research, Japanese fans of Hong Kong stars use their fandom as a means of expressing their own dissatisfaction with the Japanese society (Iwabuchi 2002: 191), and are therefore able to experience a certain kind of freedom. Thus, crushes on Hong Kong stars who are considered to be more international than Japanese, since they are promoted throughout Asia, are considered more cosmopolitan. Fans thus become interested in Hong Kong culture and may even begin to learn Cantonese. (Iwabuchi 2002: 193-4). As presented in this drama, Japanese fans of Hong Kong stars are usually well in their thirties, therefore comparatively 'old', and are reluctant to share their passion with others for fear of being found 'odd' (Iwabuchi 2002: 187).

Yamada Taichi therefore does not only seem to go to bat for Japanese fans of Hong Kong stars, since his characters are designed precisely in line with Iwabuchi's analysis, but also goes one step further. Hong Kong is not only presented as the place where the three women are free to live out their crushes, it is also a place where Japanese popular culture coexists with 'Asian' popular culture. Although the influence of Japanese consumer goods in Hong Kong is great (Iwabuchi 2002: 207, Moeran 2000: 25), in *Fan of a Hong Kong Star*, the two popular cultures exist on equal terms, without any of the criticism towards the 'Japanese cultural imperialism' that is often lamented by other Asian nations. This drama thus propagates the vision of a common 'Asian' popular culture, with Hong Kong popular culture entering Japan as well as Japanese popular culture entering Asia.

Along with the presentation of a shared popular culture, the film very subtly addresses the question of a common identity as 'Asians'. Like in *False Love*, not only are differences made irrelevant, but the drama also presents Japanese characters who are fluent in Cantonese and sincerely interested in the other country on the one hand, as well as people in Hong Kong who welcome them with open arms on the other hand.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Japan and Hong Kong is not entirely equal, as the portrayals of Satomi, her Japanese boss and the Chinese designer reveals. Her boss, along with the Western shoe company, prefers to 'exploit' China's working force and cheap labor while ignoring any artistic skills; for Satomi, however, inspiration may derive from China but seemingly needs Japan's international expertise to promote it. This is only possible, however, when Japan detaches itself from an overly strong Western influence – in this drama, represented by the policy of the French shoe label. Only then, as Satomi does when she is finally fired, are 'Japan' and 'China' together able to create something new.

Fan of a Hong Kong Star hence presents the vision of an ‘Asia’ united by a common popular culture and creative dream. The three Japanese women, with Satomi and her ‘Asian’ vision in the lead, are presented as being citizens of ‘Asia’ rather than being Japanese. Yet, even though *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* presents a definitely positive vision of an ‘Asian identity’, a slightly bitter aftertaste remains since this vision of ‘Asia’ is not achieved on equal terms.

7. Conclusion

In both *False Love* and *Fan of a Hong Kong Star*, the characters interact in a very natural way, regardless of their different origins. Problems polluting bilateral political relationships, such as Japan’s way of dealing with its past, are entirely neglected. The characters mostly meet on an equal basis and share a common – often creative – ‘dream’. Yet, this mutual understanding is only achieved by negating any cultural differences and distinctions. This is achieved in that Faye in *False Love* seems to be entirely robbed of her ‘Chinese-ness’ by having her speak virtually only English. On the other hand, she thus appears less ‘traditional’ or less an ‘image of Japan’s past’, making her depiction less nostalgically distorted. She seems to be ‘modern’ and less ‘Asian’, but is still able to embody the ‘Asian’ vigor and energy. In this regard, she does not exactly correspond to the usual patterns underlying the depiction of Asian characters. ‘China’ in *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* is not explicitly marked as ‘traditional’ since it is set in Hong Kong. Yet the Chinese characters are still portrayed as being energetic and vigorous. The shared (creative) dream, however, remains vital to both dramas.

By negating differences, national and cultural identities are made irrelevant and accordingly, their importance to the plot is reduced to a certain degree. The differences to be overcome in both *False Love* and *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* are not related to different cultural backgrounds, but are, respectively, of a personal or economic nature.

Multicultural society as presented in *False Love* comprises all possible nations and skin colors – differences do not matter. *Fan of a Hong Kong Star* does not go this far and rather creates the idea of a multicultural, yet exclusively ‘Asian’ society in which the ‘West’ only hinders real cooperation and understanding. This idea is also implicitly present in *False Love*, in which Faye needs her ‘Asian’ surroundings to become inspired and therefore returns from France.

Whereas in *False Love*, national identities are deconstructed in favor of the construction of an ‘identity’ as artists or even residents in the respective apartment building, the question of the construction of an ‘Asian identity’ for Japan is definitely more positively responded to in *Fan of a Hong Kong Star*. Considering the important role the media play in Japan concerning information on other Asian countries, these dramas ambiguously contribute to a better understanding of Japan’s Asian neighbors and the construction of its identity. While the ‘Asian’ characters are presented as ‘you and I’, therefore being close to and not alien to Japanese audiences, the idea that other Asians are not entirely different can in fact exert a positive influence. Yet on the other hand, the omission of any cultural distinction and the rather idealized interaction between Japan and ‘Asia’ will be an obstacle on the way to a definitely better understanding and the construction of more realistic images of other Asian countries.

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