

CHINESE-ISH WORLD IN JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY EPIC FANTASIES FOR GIRLS



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the imagination of contemporary Japanese popular texts toward Chinese (or Chinese-ish) culture, focusing on high fantasies. Taking up this imagination for the epic in high fantasies, it reconsiders the notions of history and narrative in this genre related to the image of China, adopting a gender perspective.

Epic literature is a typical example that is related to the “grand narrative” and suffers under the spell of Bakhtin’s dictum: “we encounter the epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated (Bakhtin 1981: 3).” From the gender point of view, epic literature has been considered to be typically a masculine genre, from Homer’s Iliad to Milton’s Paradise Lost, as Bernard Schweizer states: “Both in subject matter and in form, epic may well be the most exclusively gender coded of all literary genres (Schweizer 2006: 1).” Japan was no exception; the heroic tales and war chronicles such as The Tale of Heike were definitely labeled male literature, while the diary-form was considered feminine.

As far as contemporary Japanese literary genres are concerned, however, a desire for the epic still exists, and gender bias seems to affect them as well; a grand saga for boys’ comics and animation (such as Uchū Senkan Yamato (Star Blazers: The Quest for Iscandar) and the Gundam series in the 1970s-80s) and love and friendship for girls (from Candy Candy in the 1970s to Kimi ni Todoke (From Me to You) in the 2000s). On the other hand, it is also intriguing that these genres seem to foster a desire for the epic among girls, especially epics with some Chinese-ish imagination. This paper also clarifies the girls’ yearning for grand history and the characteristics of the works that have been linked with Chinese-ish (and sometimes East Asia-ish) exoticism.

Keywords: Japanese Epic Fantasy, Grand Narrative, Chinese Culture, Gender.

Yū Watase’s *Fushigi Yūgi* (*Fushigi Yūgi: The Mysterious Play*) is a comic series, serialized in a comic magazine for girls, from May 1992 through June 1996. It is a story about two junior high school students, Miaka and Yui, who are transported to the ancient China-like Shisei Koku (Four Right Kingdoms), through a strange book named *The Universe of the Four Gods* in the school library. The worldview of the kingdoms are based on Chinese constellations, and the four symbols and twenty-eight mansions are used in the story as the names of places and people. In Kōnan Kingdom, Miaka becomes the Priestess of Suzaku (Vermillion Bird) whose mission is to gather the seven Celestial Warriors. The story of *Fushigi Yūgi* is rather focused on Miaka’s relationships with her family and friends, including her romance with one of the seven Celestial Warriors, Tamahome. It enjoyed widespread popularity among girls, and the TV animated version was broadcasted from 1995 to 1996.

In 1992, another story inspired by a Chinese-ish worldview appeared in the genre of fantasy novels for young adults. *Jūni Kokuki* (*The Twelve Kingdoms*), written by Fuyumi Ono, was first published in June 1992¹. It is set in the world of the Twelve Kingdoms, where each kingdom possesses a Qilin, a holy creature which embodies the will of Providence and is entrusted with a mission to choose the monarch of the kingdom. Inspired by old Chinese (especially Zhou

¹ *Mashō no Ko* (*The Devilish Child*), which is now known as the “volume 0” of the series was published in September 1991. However, it was not considered as the beginning of the series at the time of its publication.

dynasty) culture and customs, the worldview of this series is Chinese-ish, with mythological creatures such as Qilin and supernatural powers. The on-going series continues as a grand chronicle of the kingdoms, with episodes of various characters in different countries. It was adapted into an animated series from 2002 to 2003.

Considering the animated versions, these works were well-received and seemed to influence the later appearance of several similar Chinese-ish or East Asia-ish stories such as:

Saiunkoku Monogatari (The Story of Saiunkoku, 2006-2008): based on a “light-novel” series written by Sai Yukino from 2003 to 2011. It is a story about a girl in a Chinese-ish fictional world *Saiunkoku*, who tries to be a government official and gets involved in running the state.

Akatsuki no Yona (Yona: The Girl Standing in the Blush of Dawn, 2014-2015): based on a comic created by Mizuho Kusanagi from 2009. The princess of the Kouka Kingdom, Yona, is forced to flee the castle when her father the King was killed by her cousin Soo-Won. Set in a Korean-ish/ East Asia-ish world, Yona fights with her companions to survive, and finally turns out to be the reincarnation of the legendary Red Dragon King Hiryū.

Here I would like to focus on the protagonist of *The Twelve Kingdoms*, originally the main character of the first volume, *Tsuki no Kage, Kage no Umi (The Shadow of the Moon, The Sea of Shadow)*. One day, a common Japanese high school student, Yōko Nakajima, meets a strange man named Keiki with golden hair and is suddenly attacked by a monstrous bird. After Keiki makes her become possessed by “Hinman,²” she makes full use of the sword and wins an incomprehensible battle against the bird. Keiki and his team take her to another world, the world of the twelve kingdoms. The story follows her development through battles against supernatural creatures and reveals that she is supposed to be the queen of the kingdom of Kei, chosen by its Qilin, Keiki. Although her character was weak in the beginning, always eager to avoid displeasing her family and friends in her life in Japan, Yōko grows gradually in strength and maturity to become a queen who has the confidence of the people of Kei. While the plot also bears an aspect of Bildungsroman, its arather to create the Twelve Kingdoms’ Saga. The stories of the kingdom Tai and En are described in the following episodes: *Kaze no Umi, Meikyū no Kishi (Sea of Wind, Shore of the Labyrinth)*, and *Higashi no Watatsumi, Nishi no Sōkai (Sea God in the East, Vast Sea in the West)*. Yōko’s struggle as the queen of the kingdom Kei is depicted in *Kaze no Banri, Reimei no Sora (A Thousand Miles of Wind, The Sky at Dawn)*.

As stated above, the point of the story is the growth of Yōko, from a timid girl to a confident queen. The daughter of a middle-class family in contemporary Japan, Yōko goes to “an ordinary girls’ high school,” and her parents believe in old-fashioned values. Her reddish hair annoys her mother:

A perfect girl must be neat and clean. Be quiet and obedient. It’s humiliating if people think that you are dressing gaudily to attract their attention. That means they doubt your humanity. (Ono 2012: 15)

She gains strength through her adventures, battling with monsters and gaining wisdom. It is notable that her clothing represents her change. First she wears her school uniform. Then, after being transported to the kingdom and becoming separated from Keiki and his team, she buys male clothes and disguises herself as a boy to throw her pursuers off the track. In this scene, Yōko recalls a pair of blue jeans. When she was in elementary school, she wanted to wear jeans for a school trip to an outdoor obstacle course. However, she was scolded by her father:

- I don’t like a girl who’s dressed like that.
- All the girls wear jeans.
- I don’t like that. It’s shameful for a girl to dress and talk like a boy. I hate that.
- But we will have a competition. I will lose if I wear a skirt.
- A girl does not beat a boy. (Ono 2012: 202)

² In the animated version, Keiki makes Yōko swallow Hinman.

This memory reminds her again of her parents’ creed: “A girl has to be neat, clean and pretty. Be obedient and gentle. It’s okay to be shy and submissive. You don’t have to be smart, nor strong. (Ono 2012: 203)” In the kingdom, she realizes that this creed is not true.

I have to be strong to be safe. I have to use my brain and body to the very limits to survive. (Ono: *ibid.*)

This awakening brings Yōko to a phase beyond that of *Fushigi Yūgi*’s Miaka. Although Miaka also fights with her team/friends, her role is always feminine--- as the priestess, or as the romantic partner of Tamahome. Yōko, on the other hand, dismisses her old ideas planted by her parents and makes her own steps toward adventure. With this emancipation from the feminine gender role, her “heroic” activities with the magic sword that only the true king of Kei can use efficiently make her go through hardships and gain maturity. It reminds us of Schweizer’s argument on the female epic:

Indeed, it seems obvious that women writing epics would be taking up a quasi-androgynous stance by adopting a quintessentially masculine discourse --rather like slipping on a male mask that allows the female to pass into territory previously off-limits to her, in this case the land of heroism, leadership, and epic grandeur. (Schweizer 2006: 4)

By sometimes putting on a male mask, Yōko succeeds to the throne of the kingdom of Kei. She removes the false king Joei with her own hand in the animated series. Yet, we should note that Yōko is not always a fighter in cross-dress; she doesn’t need to be a male figure in her struggles. The plot of this story follows the typical epic, including Yōko’s femininity. We can see in this story the desire to create “another world” where girls are actively involved in making history.

The following fantasies share this desire with *The Twelve Kingdoms*: Shūrei, the heroine of *The Story of Saiunkoku* renders service to her country as a government official and marries the king. Her daughter becomes queen later and attends to government affairs. In *Yona: The Girl Standing in the Blush of Dawn*, the protagonist Yona overcomes hardships to succeed to the throne. In their chronicles, female characters take part naturally in the conduct of state affairs, experiencing “masculine domains” such as politics and fighting. Their authenticity is guaranteed by the will of Providence. (Yōko is chosen by the Qilin, Yona is the reincarnation of the legendary Red Dragon King.)

Then, why do these fantasies choose the Chinese-ish settings? Let us examine the significance and the effects of these settings.

Perennial favorites in Japan, Chinese historical texts and novels such as *Sanguozhi* (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*) and *Hsi-yu Chi* (*Journey to the West*) have been adapted for animation since the 1960s.

Records of the Three Kingdoms was very popular in its novelized form in Japan, written by Eiji Yoshikawa from 1939 to 1943. Based on this novel, Mitsuteru Yokoyama created his comic book version from 1971 to 1986, which also won the hearts of readers. More or less influenced by Yoshikawa and Yokoyama’s works, the animations were released beginning in the 1980s, in 1985 and 1991. Considering its popularity, we should also mention the puppet play version which was broadcast by the state-run station from 1982 to 1984.

Journey to the West was adapted for animation earlier. Based on Osamu Tezuka’s comic *Boku no Son Gokū* (*My Monkey King*, 1952-1959), an animated movie was created in 1960 and won the special prize in the Venice Film Festival. The serialized TV show appeared in 1967, with the title *Gokū no Daibouken* (*The Great Adventure of the Monkey King*). Emphasizing the comical side of the story, this animated series attracted a young audience and became popular.

There is no doubt that these animations created from Chinese canonical works fostered the Chinese-ish imagination of the subsequent works. Their spectacular historical stories with imposing characters stimulated an adventurous spirit and a longing for heroes in their readers. Colored by the exoticism and stereotypes of Chinese history that evoke a grandiose impact, these works inspired Japanese fantasy worlds.

From the gender perspective, it is also notable that *The Great Adventure of the Monkey King* added a girl character to the party of Xuanzang. This girl, named Tatsuko (Dragon Girl), plays an active role in the party, and became the prototype of the following Chinese “tomboys” in Japanese pop-texts. Regarding the brisk image of Chinese girls, Japanese readers have also found “strong women” in Chinese classic literature. Taijun Takeda, a novelist who was considered to be an authority on Chinese literature in post-war Japan, often referred to this type of women in Chinese literature:

There is a word “lihai (厉害)” in Chinese. It means strong and extreme, qualifying someone as talented and capable. [...] The tragedy of *Hong Lou Meng (Dream of the Red Chamber)* is a genuine immortal tragedy, not only because it has a pathos in the disappearing of gentle and beautiful boys and girls, but because it also has human depth and development with such *lihais* as the poignant Wang Xifeng and the strong You Sanjie. [...] We love the talent of Ms. Qiu Jin and Wu Zetian because we sympathize with the certain power of their intensity. (Takeda 1972: 21-22)

In a magazine dialogue between Takeda and a scholar of Chinese literature, Minoru Takeuchi in 1974, Takeuchi mentions these “intense” female figures:

Takeuchi: [...] Chinese women are special. We can find this type in your works such as “The King and Beautiful Princesses of Different Races” and “The Quick-witted and the Beautiful.” These female figures are in the tradition of Chinese literature, older than *Shui Hu Zhuan (Water Margin)*. Although they call them *Pofu (泼妇)* in Chinese, we can’t find a good translation in Japanese. Neither “Bitch (あばずれ)” nor “Poison woman (毒婦)” Accurately describe these figures. (Takeda 1979:224-225)

In addition, kung fu movies became very popular in Japan in the 1970s, with the big hit of *Enter the Dragon* (1973), starring Bruce Lee. These images might also have influenced Japanese popular texts.

An active and powerful fighting girl with a double top knot emerged again in comic books and fighting games in the middle of the 1980s. Tsun Tsururin appeared in Akira Toriyama’s *Dr. Slump* (vol.10) in 1983. Toriyama recalls later that the concept of Tsun family was adapted from kung fu movies (Toriyama 2007).

Yie Ar Kung-Fu, an arcade game by Konami released in 1985, had a girl fighter Lang, with pink duangua and a double top knot. Her appearance is undoubtedly the grown-up (and sexy) version of Tatsuko. The image of Lang influenced the popular game series, *Street Fighter* from 1991, and gave birth to Chun-Li (Capcom 2012:432). Blending together these characters, this stereotyped image has also been inherited by characters in popular comic books, such as Shampoo in Rumiko Takahashi’s *Ranma 1/2* (vol.4-, 1988). Miaka of *Fushigi Yūgi* is another descendant of this Chinese-ish girl.

Thus, Japanese pop-texts have created a stereotype of Chinese (-ish) girl; an active and strong girl, wearing duangua or cheongsam, with double top knot hair. An article of Sohu.com news (搜狐), carried an article on these images of Chinese girls in Japanese popular culture on October 20 2016: “Why are all the Chinese girls in Japanese anime cheongsam and bun head?”, and pointed out the influence of a Taiwanese movie, *Jiang Shi Xiao Zi (殭屍小子 Hello Dracula, 1986)*. It was broadcasted in Japanese TV in 1987 and caught on with Japanese audiences. As the article refers to “a Chinese house in a Hollywood movie, always decorated with a dragon,” the Japanese stereotype of Chinese-ish girls is no more than another biased assumption, sometimes still connected to political and sexual imperialism.

The fantastic works we have examined have to be located in this context. It is undeniable that they are actually a kind of cultural appropriation. Yet, it should be also noted that this stereotype fostered Japanese girls’ yearning for grand history. It is intriguing that Western settings could not serve the imagination that girls can take important roles in these grand, adventurous

stories, although Japanese girls’ culture has been always mostly influenced by Western culture. We certainly have some important works with fighting heroines in European settings, such as Osamu Tezuka’s *Ribon no Kishi (Princess Knight)*, 1953, animated series in 1967) and Riyoko Ikeda’s *Versailles no Bara (The Rose of Versailles)*, 1972, animated series in 1979). Nevertheless, we observe that the protagonists, Princess Sapphire and Oscar François de Jarjayes always fight as males, as they must pretend to be boys in patriarchal societies (to be eligible to inherit the throne or to follow her father the Count as Captain of the Royal Guard).

Sapphire seems to switch her gender with her dressing: Princess Sapphire makes a flower wreath for her mother, but when the need arises, she changes herself into Prince Sapphire and leaves to attend the troop review, tossing around the wreath. This scene reveals that the world of fiction is very strict about gender roles and the expected behaviors of the both sexes, just as it was in 1960s Japan. That’s why the failure of the tricks of Sir Nylon amused the readers, and Sapphire turns into “the girl with the flaxen hair” to nurse Prince Charming. Although she is depicted as a master fencer, she loses her strength when she becomes “feminine” (once because of the flute of the angel Tink, once more because Tink takes the boy’s heart from her), and is scared of battle. While the cross-dressed Oscar plays an active part in French history during the Revolution, it is notable from some scenes that this work reinforces gender norms. For example, when she falls for Hans Axel von Fersen, she wears a robe for the ball and stays quiet, and when she becomes incapable of battle after the death of her beloved, André Grandier, she blames her “femininity”.

By comparing these two figures, we see some common points. They cross gender norms only when they cross-dress. This form of existence doesn’t seriously threaten the heterosexual, male-oriented Japanese society, just as the Takarazuka Revue, the all-female musical theatre company, does not. In Japanese (especially girls’) fantasy, Western settings definitely continue to be related to princess stories and happy endings with “Prince Charming” including *Princess Knight*. A Western princess was a symbol of ideal femininity, someone who just waits for her prince to take her to his castle, marry him and “live happily ever after.” This structure has been repeatedly introduced in girls’ comics and animation, often set in some Western place.

Under these circumstances, the fantasy and desire to create “another world” where girls are actively involved in making history chose this Chinese-ish or East Asia-ish worldview. It might be an interesting coincidence that Disney’s adaptation of a Chinese legend to their “princess stories” was *Mulan* (1998), a story about a girl who masquerades as a boy and joins the army. Moreover, Chinese-ish clothes serve to dissolve gender differences, as far as appearance is concerned, whereas Japanese or Western clothes accentuate gender differentiation. Here, the definition of gender roles in real Chinese society doesn’t matter at all. Although we have some knowledge about the traditional androcentrism of the patriarchal society in China, the Chinese-ish imaginary land turns out to be an ideal stage for a girls’ epic fantasy.

To conclude this investigation, I would like to return to the question of narrative. These cases of Chinese-ish, or East Asia-ish high fantasies are obviously not for the “grand narrative,” as they focus on the female point of view. The desire for the epic in these stories rather reveals that contemporary epics are to be collected in diverse narratives. It shows the reduction of the diverse “our narratives” to the entertainment sphere on one hand, but each narrative is still attempting to recreate and renarrate history from its own point of view.

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