Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4328
ISSN Online: 3104-4336
CD ISSN: 3104-4344
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9136

Images of China in Japanese Anime ——A Case Study of Gintama

Tongyi Wang
Hangzhou Normal University, School of International Studies, Hangzhou,311121, China
Email: 15941810168@163.com

How to cite this paper: Wang, T. (2026). Images of China in Japanese Anime ——A Case Study of Gintama. Social Sciences and Humanities, 5(2), 34–42. ISSN Print: 3104-4328, ISSN Online: 3104-4336.
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9136
Published: 2026-09-22

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Abstract

Taking the Japanese anime Gintama as its object of study, this paper uses textual analysis, together with theories of imagology and cultural semiotics, to examine its representations of China and the issues arising from them. The study identifies images of China conveyed through characters such as Kagura, settings such as the Chinatown in Kabukicho, and cultural symbols associated with food and martial arts. It finds that these images are characterized by exaggeration and distortion as well as diversity and complexity. It then analyzes the causes from three perspectives: the creator's knowledge and attitudes, the Japanese cultural context and audience expectations, and the effects of cross-cultural communication. Finally, it discusses the effects of these images on Chinese and Japanese audiences, their significance for cross-cultural exchange, and the broader reflections they invite.

Keywords

Japan; Anime; Images of China

1. Introduction

As an important medium of cross-cultural communication, Japanese anime has long attracted scholarly attention for the ways in which it constructs images of foreign countries. China is both a major cultural neighbor of Japan and its largest overseas market, and a substantial body of research has examined how China is represented in Japanese anime, which symbols are selected, and what communicative effects these representations produce. In Collection, Reshaping, and Reverse Communication: Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements in Japanese Anime, Qian Yueming further argues that Japanese anime treats Chinese elements in a dual manner: on the one hand, it uses cultural proximity to reduce the emotional distance between the work and Chinese audiences; on the other hand, it intensifies a sense of exoticism through processes of othering. This contradiction mirrors the interaction between Chinese and Japanese cultures.

Using Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba as a case study, Zeng Yuxuan's Research on the Cross-Cultural Communication of Japanese Anime from a Semiotic Perspective analyzes how Japanese anime deconstructs and recombines foreign symbols. Rather than simply reproducing cultural symbols, such works lower barriers to cross-cultural understanding by altering the symbols' original meanings. The same logic applies to Chinese elements. Dragon Ball's reworking of Sun Wukong is a typical example. Li Wei notes in Research on the Cross-Cultural Communication of Japanese Anime that although the character originates in Chinese mythology, he is given a new identity as an alien warrior youth. This adaptation preserves cultural recognizability while appealing to the aesthetic preferences of young people worldwide. In Anime and the Construction and Communication of Cultural Images in the New Media Era, Niu Min identifies positive examples such as Cooking Master Boy, which expresses admiration for China through its food culture and effectively stimulates Japanese audiences' interest in traditional Chinese culture. By contrast, the character Lau in Black Butler has generated controversy among Chinese viewers because his excessively sinister and calculating portrayal has been criticized as stereotypical.Through a public-opinion survey, Liu Jian and Chiba Makiko find a significant association between images of China in anime and audiences' overall perceptions of the country. Japanese viewers exposed to works containing positive Chinese elements showed an approximately 23 percent increase in favorable attitudes toward China, whereas negative representations were more likely to reinforce prejudice.

Existing studies therefore provide a theoretical basis for analyzing images of China in Japanese anime, but the distinctive qualities of Gintama leave room for further investigation. Through a systematic analysis of the series, this study seeks to broaden research on the construction of images of the Other and to offer more focused insights into image formation in cross-cultural communication. Gintama combines history, science fiction, and comedy. Its characterization and plotting unite absurdity with concern for social realities. Chinese characters and cultural symbols appear repeatedly, and the series' representations of China both continue conventional understandings and deconstruct or renew them from a modern perspective. The work is therefore a representative and instructive case.

This study primarily employs textual analysis to identify passages and scenes in Gintama related to images of China and to summarize their representational features and symbolic meanings. It addresses three central questions. First, through which characters, settings, and plot elements does Gintama represent China, and which cultural symbols form the core of these representations? Second, are these images based on historical reality, cultural imagination, or contemporary perceptions, and what features and contradictions do they contain? Third, from the perspectives of imagology and cultural semiotics, what cultural

meanings are reflected in the construction of these images? The study draws on imagology and cultural semiotics. Imagology, an important approach in comparative literature and cultural studies, focuses on the mechanisms through which images of the Other are constructed and thus helps explain the cultural meanings attached to China as the Other in Gintama. Cultural semiotics emphasizes the relationship between signifier and signified. It provides a method for analyzing the selection, combination, and meaning of Chinese cultural symbols in the work and thereby reveals the cultural implications behind them.

2. Overview of Gintama and Its Representation of Chinese Elements

Gintama was created by Japanese manga artist Hideaki Sorachi. Its story is set in an alternate Edo period after the invasion of the Amanto. Having forced the shogunate to sign unequal treaties by military means, the Amanto strip the samurai of their privileges, and Edo becomes a chaotic city where aliens and humans live side by side. The protagonist, Gintoki Sakata, runs the Yorozuya with the teenager Shinpachi Shimura and the alien girl Kagura, taking on all kinds of odd jobs. The plot shifts between everyday comic banter and battles connected to the main storyline. It parodies Japanese history while incorporating science fiction, martial arts, absurdity, and other elements. This combination of alternate history and real-world allegory provides considerable flexibility for introducing foreign cultural elements. The Amanto premise, for example, allows cultural symbols from different countries to enter the narrative naturally, while Edo's Chinatown becomes a concentrated setting for Chinese elements.

2.1. Character Images

As Gintama's principal female character, Kagura is the work's most concentrated vehicle for Chinese elements. Her characterization has a dual quality. Racially, she belongs to the extraterrestrial Yato clan, but her cultural symbolism points toward China. A study that examined Chinese elements in character costumes by using gender, character type, and the historical period of costume design as variables found that Manchu-style clothing and hanfu are the Chinese cultural elements most frequently borrowed in Japan, while color and decorative patterns distinguish different character types. In appearance, Kagura usually wears a short red qipao with black knee-high socks and cloth shoes. Her signature double-bun hairstyle is a simplified version of a traditional Chinese hairstyle for young women. The repeated use of recognizable markers such as martial arts, the qipao, and hair buns creates a shared assumption that Chinese people possess these traits. As a prop, she carries an oil-paper umbrella decorated with traditional Chinese patterns. It serves both as a parasol and as a weapon in combat, corresponding to imaginative representations of transformable weapons in

Chinese martial arts. In personality and behavior, she is straightforward and fiery. She speaks with what Japanese audiences perceive as a Chinese accent and is teased by other characters as a China Girl. Her Chinese-style punches and kicks in battle continue the stereotype of the Chinese kung fu girl.

In addition to Kagura, the residents of Gintama's Chinatown are important vehicles for constructing images of China. The Chinatown in Kabukicho is their primary setting, and merchants are the most typical figures. For example, the bun-shop owner in the Kaientai Arc speaks stilted Japanese and looks shrewd while doing accounts, yet distributes food to civilians free of charge during a crisis. The silk merchant in the Ryugu Palace Arc appears calculating and petty but secretly supports samurai who resist Amanto oppression. These characters generally wear magua jackets and melon-skin caps, and their conduct has a distinctly streetwise quality. They conform to the traditional Japanese view of Chinese merchants as astute and pragmatic, yet escape an entirely negative label through acts of kindness at critical moments. The martial artists of Chinatown are also noteworthy. They typically appear as hired fighters or bodyguards. The Dragon and Tiger Squad, which protects public order in Chinatown, uses techniques such as drunken boxing and tai chi and shouts slogans such as Serve the Country with Utmost Loyalty during combat. These details combine symbols of Chinese martial arts with the qualities of loyalty and righteousness associated with Japanese bushido, producing a distinctive image of China.

2.2. Settings and Architecture

Chinese settings in Gintama center on the Chinatown in Kabukicho and recreate features associated with traditional Chinese towns. Architecturally, both sides of the main street are lined with Chinese-style buildings. Shop signs are written in Chinese characters, and red lanterns and Chinese knots hang at the entrances, recalling the appearance of historic water towns in southern China. The settings also serve narrative functions. For example, the alley containing Kagura's home is covered with Chinese-language posters, with Chinese stone lions placed in a corner. The interior of the restaurant in the New Year's Eve Dinner Arc includes traditional square tables and armchairs, recreating a conventional Chinese dining setting. These settings provide a space for Chinese elements while allowing viewers to identify cultural difference quickly through their visual contrast with the streets of Edo.

2.3. Cultural Symbols and Customs

Gintama draws on a wide range of Chinese cultural symbols, including food, martial arts, festivals, and mythology. In relation to food, steamed buns are the most frequently recurring symbol. Kagura often eats meat buns for breakfast, while shops in Chinatown sell variations such as red-bean buns and vegetable

buns. The series even exaggerates the bun into a weapon, using enormous buns to strike enemies. Lanzhou noodles, mapo tofu, tanghulu, and other foods also communicate aspects of Chinese culinary culture.

In its treatment of martial arts and festivals, the series preserves a traditional core while adapting it for comedy. Kagura's Yato-style boxing incorporates techniques from Chinese martial arts. Tai chi displays the principle of overcoming hardness with softness but is also mocked as exercise for older people. Festival scenes fully present customs such as posting Spring Festival couplets, setting off firecrackers, and receiving red envelopes from elders, while adding comic twists. Gintoki, for example, pretends to offer New Year greetings in order to obtain a red envelope, and Kagura develops an upset stomach after eating too many dumplings.

The use of mythological and cultural symbols is even more inventive. Sun Wukong, a representative figure in Chinese mythology, is reimagined as a reclusive deity addicted to video games, and his golden cudgel becomes a game controller, although core features such as his fiery eyes and seventy-two transformations are retained. The Water Margin story of Wu Song fighting the tiger is adapted into Gintoki fighting a giant cat. This transformation pays homage to the source while fitting Gintama's absurdist style. It allows viewers to experience novelty through familiar symbols while preserving enough of their central features to keep them culturally recognizable.

3. Characteristics and Causes of the Construction of Images of China in Gintama

3.1. Characteristics：Exaggeration and Distortion

The anime constructs Chinese characters and cultural elements through exaggeration, including extreme portrayals of personality and simplified or playful treatments of cultural customs. Although this technique makes the story more entertaining, it can also lead to misunderstandings of the culture being represented. Kagura, for example, is portrayed as exceptionally direct and forthright and sometimes as reckless. While this extreme characterization accords with her identity as a member of the Yato clan, it may also encourage audiences to form a one-sided understanding of Chinese personalities.

3.2. Characteristics：Diversity and Complexity

Images of China in Gintama are not uniform. They include positive portrayals as well as negative or humorous ones, reflecting the creator's multifaceted understanding of Chinese culture. This diversity and complexity appear not only in characterization but also in the presentation of cultural elements. Depictions of traditional Chinese festivals, for example, include both warm scenes of family reunion and comic misunderstandings or conflicts. During Spring Festival celebrations, Kagura and her

companions observe traditional customs such as posting couplets and setting off firecrackers, but misunderstandings also generate humor. Kagura treats firecrackers as fireworks, for example, causing a minor commotion. This varied mode of representation both adds humor to the narrative and communicates the richness of Chinese culture.

3.3. Causes：The Creator's Knowledge and Attitudes

As the creator of Gintama, Hideaki Sorachi substantially shapes the work's images of China through his knowledge of and attitudes toward Chinese culture. Available materials suggest that his understanding of China may derive primarily from Japanese popular culture, historical books, and personal travel experiences. It contains positive dimensions but also clear limitations. He shows considerable interest in traditional Chinese festivals and martial arts and depicts them vividly. However, the absence of sustained fieldwork and cultural research also allows stereotypes to enter the work. His portrayal of some Chinese merchants as crafty, for instance, may reflect conventional Japanese stereotypes of Chinese merchants.

3.4. Causes：The Japanese Cultural Context and Audience Expectations

Japanese culture is marked by curiosity about and receptiveness to foreign cultures, while Japanese anime audiences seek entertaining and novel elements. Together, these factors encourage the construction of the kinds of Chinese images found in Gintama. In Japan, elements such as kung fu, pandas, and traditional festivals have become part of popular culture and are widely enjoyed. Sorachi therefore deliberately incorporated such elements into Gintama to meet audience expectations. Kagura's Chinese background and Chinese-style clothing, for example, lend her an air of mystery while satisfying Japanese viewers' imaginings of Chinese culture. Japanese audiences' enthusiasm for comedy and tsukkomi-style repartee also encourages the exaggeration and distortion of Chinese images to make the story more entertaining. Japan has a belief in the supremacy of strength that takes on a utilitarian quality in practice. In its approach to foreign cultures, it tends to appropriate what is useful, places national interests first, and evaluates cultural elements according to whether they serve existing needs. This outlook has also influenced Japanese studies of China.

3.5. Causes：The Influence of Cross-Cultural Communication

Against the background of globalization, the state of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange and distortions in the circulation of information have also affected Gintama's construction of China. The internet has greatly increased the speed and reach of communication, but it has also produced fragmented and one-sided information. During the creative process, Sorachi may have been influenced by incomplete online accounts of Chinese culture, leading him to simplify or treat images of China playfully.

4. Impacts Significance and Reflection

4.1. Impact on Japanese Audiences

Images of China in Gintama influence Japanese people's perceptions in several ways. On the one hand, they deepen viewers' knowledge of certain Chinese cultural elements. Kagura, for example, gives Japanese viewers a more immediate impression of traditional Chinese festivals, martial arts, and food culture. On the other hand, exaggerated or one-sided images may also produce misunderstandings or stereotypes. Some Japanese viewers may form mistaken impressions of Chinese merchants because of how they are depicted in the anime.

4.2. Impact on Chinese Audiences

Chinese viewers respond to Gintama's images of China in different ways. Some consider the images inaccurate but still find that they encourage renewed reflection on their own culture. Kagura's association with traditional Chinese festivals, for example, may prompt Chinese viewers to reconsider the cultural meanings of those festivals. Others are dissatisfied with the one-sided nature of the images and believe that they distort the essence of Chinese culture. Overall, Gintama's representations of China have promoted Sino-Japanese cultural exchange to some extent, but they have also created challenges.

4.3. Significance for Cross-Cultural Exchange

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, Gintama's images of China play a role in promoting cultural exchange between China and Japan. Through the popular cultural form of anime, the series circulates Chinese cultural elements in Japan and around the world, enabling more people to encounter Chinese culture. Yet this form of communication also has limitations. The creator's limited knowledge of Chinese culture and distortions in the flow of information produce one-sided and stereotypical images of China. A continuing question for cross-cultural exchange is therefore how cultural products such as anime can construct and communicate more accurate and comprehensive national images. Several new policies should be introduced to support the anime industry, strengthen copyright administration, and promote the creation of original content. The development of a complete industrial chain and its subsequent expansion should also be encouraged. The Chinese market should become more international and increase its cultural exports. Regulation and funding should be managed more rigorously to ensure the production of higher-quality works and thereby create a brighter future for the anime industry. Chinese anime needs a cultural core. An animated work becomes valuable when it can communicate a cultural impression.

4.4. Deeper Reflections on Cross-Cultural Communication

Gintama's creative practice reveals a general dilemma in constructing images of the

Other. Even when creators consciously seek diverse representations, they still struggle to escape the limitations of their own cultural contexts. Sorachi's understanding of Chinese culture essentially reflects Japanese society's selective reception of China. It favors easily visualized symbols such as martial arts and food while engaging only minimally with the diversity of modern Chinese society, resulting in one-sided representations. Cross-cultural creators therefore need deeper field research rather than reliance on documentary materials or established impressions.

For Chinese culture to go global, cultural differences must be addressed and cultural adaptation completed; otherwise, animated works may fail to take root in local contexts. Because Japanese anime has considerable global influence, positive Chinese characters or Chinese cultural elements in Japanese anime can be used as an outer form. In light of how audiences in a particular country or region receive Japanese anime, locally recognizable and approachable cultural elements or character images can be selected and incorporated into Chinese animated works through secondary creation. This softer and more efficient approach can open channels for international communication and promote outstanding Chinese culture. Gintama also demonstrates that cultural communication must avoid the mere accumulation of symbols. Familiar narrative patterns can carry Chinese cultural elements for overseas audiences so that dumplings function not only as symbols of food but also as emotional vehicles for family reunion, and martial arts function not merely as combat techniques but also as metaphors for personal growth. In this way, fixed assumptions can be broken and genuine understanding and empathy made possible.

5. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of images of China in Gintama, this study has revealed the Japanese creator's knowledge of and attitudes toward Chinese culture and the possible effects of these representations on Sino-Japanese cultural exchange. It finds that the series' images of China are characterized by exaggeration and distortion as well as diversity and complexity. They are shaped mainly by the creator's knowledge and attitudes, the Japanese cultural context and audience expectations, and the influence of cross-cultural communication. These representations affect both Japanese and Chinese audiences in multiple ways, producing positive as well as negative consequences.

Although this study identifies several characteristics and effects of the images of China in Gintama, it also has limitations. The sample is restricted to a single work and therefore cannot encompass images of China in other Japanese anime. In addition, the research relies primarily on textual analysis and lacks an in-depth investigation of audience responses. Future studies could broaden the scope by comparing representations of China across different Japanese anime and combining

textual analysis with questionnaires, interviews, and other methods to examine how Japanese and Chinese audiences perceive and respond to these images. Research could also investigate, from the perspectives of cultural policy and communication strategy, how cultural products such as anime might construct and communicate more accurate and comprehensive national images and promote deeper cultural exchange between China and Japan.

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