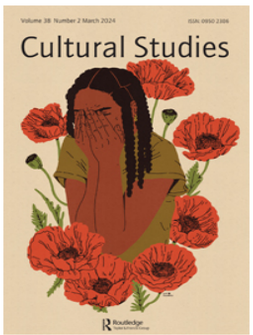


Cultural Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcus20

# Artificial flavors: nostalgia and the shifting landscapes of production in Sino-Japanese animation

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**To cite this article:** Reijiro Aoyama & Royce Ng (2024) Artificial flavors: nostalgia and the shifting landscapes of production in Sino-Japanese animation, Cultural Studies, 38:2, 245-272, DOI: 10.1080/09502386.2022.2103164

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2103164

Published online: 25 Jul 2022.

CULTURAL STUDIES
2024, VOL. 38, NO. 2, 245–272
https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2103164

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Artificial flavors: nostalgia and the shifting landscapes of production in Sino-Japanese animation

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**ABSTRACT**

Anime-style films have been produced within East Asia for many years by relying on a cross-border production network dominated by studios in Japan. In this production model, Japanese studios provide source material and creative development, while manual work is outsourced to animators in neighbouring countries. With China's growing influence within the region's creative economy, however, more transnationally co-produced animations are based on Chinese source material, offering a promise of enhanced cultural exchange while challenging received frameworks of knowledge and production in the region's animation industry. This article examines how Japanese animation studios construct China as a nostalgic place by analyzing the use of nostalgia-driven narrative conventions in *Flavours of Youth*, a 2018 Sino-Japanese co-produced animation. The screen imaginaries yielded by such co-operative productions are contained within a familiar convention couched in an artistic language influenced by Japan's centrality in the anime production network. This results in a visual rhetoric that transforms the uneven landscape of China's transitions into a homogenous animation product.

By outlining the theoretical terms of nostalgic representation expressed as sentiment: nostalgia as *mood*, and style: nostalgia as *mode*, we examine the way *Flavours of Youth* frames the interplay of the two nostalgic methods as a metacommentary on China's modernization process vis-à-vis Japan. The creative process involved in reconfiguring China's developmental transitions through anime conventions of 'nostalgia machines' creates a friction between the parasitic nostalgic form and the cultural host it attaches itself to, collapsing the film's potential for reflection on the contemporary realities of a shared Asian experience. We argue that the transnationally constructed, disembedded – and therefore artificial – nostalgia found in the film is a symptom of Japan's continuing ambivalence towards China manifested in the anime industry's overreliance on codified styles over shared engagement with the alternative cultural contexts of its Asian neighbours.

**KEYWORDS** China; Japan; animation; nostalgia; transnational co-production; Makoto Shinkai

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## Introduction

In April 2018 the governments of China and Japan signed a film co-production treaty 'to enhance exchanges of filmmakers between the two countries and to expand film co-production' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2018, art. 1). On a practical level such treaties allow greater access to official subsidies and potential audiences, while also representing a promise of enhanced cultural links and exchange of creative ideas between the partners. For China, whose film exports have fallen short of expectations, such treaties offer opportunities to break into international markets. For Japan, where film production and distribution have stalled domestically in the last few years, the treaty could have far-reaching repercussions. Its potential impact could be felt particularly strong by the animation industry in which Japan has traditionally been a dominant force. With recent locally-made commercial successes such as *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016), which has been compared to the anime of Studio Ghibli, and *Nezha* (2019) – both films inspired by Chinese folkloric fantasies – China has proven its aspiration to become both a creator and consumer of high-quality animation content and made the possibility of developing new transnational co-production environments appear promising. This paper analyzes the narrative strategies utilized in *Flavours of Youth*, the first co-produced animated film released since the signing of the agreement, to question the promises attached to transnational Sino-Japanese co-productions. *Flavours of Youth* is a three-part film co-produced by Makoto Shinkai's CoMix Wave Films in Japan and Li Haoling's Haoliners Animation League in China. It was partly financed and distributed by the US online streaming media platform Netflix and deliberately marketed to an international audience. The film is ostensibly a remake of Shinkai's 2007 film *5 Centimeters per Second*, also a three-part film dealing with similar themes of memory, loss and human relationships. *Flavours of Youth* transports the location of the stories from Japan to China and instead of following two characters across three different stories, features three self-contained narratives each with a different cast of characters located in a different Chinese city. Chapter 1 'The Rice Noodles' and 2 'Love in Shanghai' were written in China, animated in Japan and directed by Li and Jiaoshou Yi Xiaoxing, respectively. Chapter 2 'A Little Fashion Show', written and directed by Yoshitaka Takeuchi, was entirely produced in Japan. The film has an overtly nostalgic tone and is largely set in the past through flashback scenes which depict the memories of the main characters, except for the second chapter which is entirely set in the present. Each of the three stories focuses on a particular object, place or relationship which becomes a symbol of lost cultural identity in the aftermath of rapid modern development.

The nostalgic tone of the film could be seen to fit into the *iyashikei* genre of anime, a term which roughly translates as 'healing', that features soothing

narratives and a nostalgic, melancholic sense of harmony that focuses on the smaller pleasures of life, spiritual development and human relationships (Roquet 2009).[1] The characters in *iyashikei* anime often come to terms with historical change and personal crises by mediating them through reflective nostalgia, transmuting loneliness and emotional anxiety into sentimental meditations on the inexorable passage of time (Noh 2017). It would be easy to analyze *Flavours of Youth* at face value as a simple allegory for the dramatic social, cultural and economic shifts that have taken place in China since the early 1980s. In this reading, the film's adoption of the *iyashikei* genre could be ascribed to the lucrative commercial appeal of nostalgia harnessed to express a universal elegiac response towards Asia's modernization project. However, the reading of *Flavours of Youth* through the prism of *iyashikei* genre conventions is complicated by several factors.

The last several decades of rapid development have spurred a growing interest in the recent past in East Asia, leading to a 'nostalgic boom' that was readily picked up by the region's creative industries (Hillenbrand 2010). The glut of commodified, malleable nostalgia that sprang from this trend has been variously criticized as lacking historical credibility, not borne out of personal recollection and a retreat from the troubled present. Despite the many labels given to nostalgia depending on the temporal and spatial contexts in which it is analyzed, its affective potential to facilitate reckoning with past traumas and transformations seems to hold true across national borders. If the deployment of the nostalgic language of *iyashikei* is designed to exploit these synergies of marketability and emotional process in a shared regional space, does the narrative style of *Flavours of Youth* work as a credible remembering mechanism in an intertextual Sino-Japanese cultural milieu? Can the mediating powers of nostalgia draw out the multifarious flavours of the region's modernities in a way that speaks to the film's transnational audience? If we consider the animated film's use of nostalgia as an emotional and economic response to the region's anxieties, what metaphors does it serve to produce about the countries and industries involved? Finally, can such cross-pollinated productions of the past trigger a new wave of representations of personal and/or collective memories in the region's cultural space?

The present article looks at these questions by analyzing nostalgia in *Flavours of Youth* as a narrative style whose component parts, when viewed through the aesthetic conventions of Japanese anime, generate a sense of vague disconnect between the film's subject matter and its visual form. If we consider this disconnect in theoretical terms of representation, the aesthetic emotion of the film conforms to the conventions of Svetlana Boym's (2001) 'restorative' nostalgia, while the substitution of 'genuine' remembrance based in embodied experience with a meticulous, but ultimately artificial, construction of China's past, recalls Jameson's (1991) corrupted

memories of postmodern nostalgia. We thus examine the interplay of nostalgic representations in *Flavours of Youth* – as they unfold in the juxtaposition of the *iyashikei* style against the appropriated details of Chinese rural and urban life depicted in the film – in terms of *mood* and *mode*.

Crucial to our argument is the complicated issue of the positionality of anime's nostalgic conventions. While anime as a media form should be seen as a matter of textuality rather than national culture (Suan 2019), the nostalgic style it has spurred has been nonetheless heavily associated with Japan, either because of Japan's centrality in the transnational dynamics of anime production or a consequence of cultural branding meant to resonate with its global audience. At the same time, nostalgic conventions in anime represent much more than simply any one country's escape from its troubling present. Our examination of nostalgia seeks to understand the complex mediation of the past through the present in a media text with a transcultural character that was explicitly conceived by its Chinese and Japanese creators as a meaningful contemplation on Chinese modernity expressed in an anime form. Its visual aesthetic has long antecedents in the nostalgic styles of representation ubiquitous in the Japanese media forms, which come with their own complicated readings. We locate our analysis in the context of Japanese nostalgia because *Flavours of Youth* tells us as much about Japan's struggle with modernity as it does about China's. Since most of the scholarship on Japanese nostalgia in media texts approaches the phenomenon from a position of Japanese economic and cultural dominance in Asia and has yet to fully account for the economic stagnation that has persisted since the early 1990s, this article seeks to provide a timely glimpse into the hierarchies of the creative economy as they take shape and realign in East Asia more recently. For us, *Flavours of Youth* offers a window through which to analyze these economic and geopolitical shifts in the co-productive relation between Japan and China as they manifest through the utilization of nostalgia and the performative conventions of anime.

We begin this article by outlining the theoretical terms of nostalgic representation expressed as sentiment: nostalgia as *mood*, and style: nostalgia as *mode*, and use these two methods of nostalgia as analytical anchors to examine how nostalgic conventions in media texts are (re)configured along ongoing political and cultural discourse in Japan and China. We continue with a close visual analysis of *Flavours of Youth* that frames the interplay of the two nostalgic methods in the film as a metacommentary on China's modernization process vis-à-vis Japan. Finally, in our conclusion we argue that the transnationally constructed, disembedded – and therefore artificial – nostalgia found in the film is a symptom of Japan's continuing ambivalence towards China manifested in the anime industry's overreliance on codified styles over shared engagement with the alternative cultural contexts of its Asian neighbours.

## Nostalgia as *mood* and nostalgia as *mode*

Public interest in the past and its depictions in popular culture have long attracted scholarly interest. In general terms, classical nostalgia critiques draw a distinction between the concept of *mood* and *mode*, or what could also be considered as sentiment and style (Grainge 2000). Nostalgia as a mood approximates the conventional emotion of yearning: it emerges from, and is made to relate to, longing and loss. Nostalgia as a mode is less concerned with the emotional experience of longing and more with the aesthetic style that typically uses hyperrealism or stereotypes of the past (Jameson 1991). Put another way, nostalgic mode is an artistic language in which the past is re-assembled through stylistic connotation for consumption as pastiche. While the two concepts normally coexist in media texts, they do not necessarily beget each other (Grainge 2000).

Nostalgia has a pliable quality, so in different hands its different components can be (re)constructed, (re)aligned and (re)packaged relatively easily. Sometimes it can be 'restorative' – concerned with reviving the past – and at other times 'reflective' – critical and aware of its idealizing tendencies. This duality, articulated in Boym's (2001) influential study of modern nostalgia, encapsulates both the emotional and psychological sense of loss and displacement, as well as the notion that that sense of loss is itself an illusory fantasy. Jameson's schema of modal nostalgia, on the other hand, provides a more 'indignant' (Hillenbrand 2010, p. 383) interpretation of the phenomenon as a regressive tendency in postmodern media culture preoccupied above all else with the production of glossy images of the past that are reconfigured to appease the viewer. As an aesthetic convention, nostalgic modality does not evoke the same sense of sentimentality as the nostalgic mood of 'restorative' nostalgia. Instead, it substitutes historical specificity with a 'vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum' (Jameson 1991, p. 26), which can be appropriated, re-combined and subverted without a sense of loss, melancholy or attempt to reclaim an idealized past. This culturally rapacious language of 'borrowed nostalgia', in turn, increasingly enables viewers to yield to nostalgic sentiments even in the absence of the proper object of their nostalgia.

The displacement of embodied past by highly processed, synthetic memories is inextricably linked to the commercialization of nostalgia in the image making practice of capitalist media production. A nostalgia that is not based on personal memory but a surface representation of the past as commodity plays a key role in what Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 31) calls a 'complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes'. This consumerist, ersatz, 'armchair nostalgia', cynically exploited through patina-like applications and devouring the past in endless repetition, allows one to mourn representations of a collective history which one had never personally experienced.

Ersatz reproductions of the past are ubiquitous in China and Japan and include such examples as 'red tourism' and Chairman Mao memorabilia; the vogues for old Beijing and colonial era Shanghai and Hong Kong; nostalgic fashion for retro style cheongsams; evocations of *furusato*, or the rustic, village-y feel, in lifestyle aesthetics; and the cultural phenomenon of Showa nostalgia, most representatively found in Japanese films and TV shows from the 1990s and 2000s, which nostalgically recreate life during the decades of post-war economic revival. Hidaka (2017) has written that such media productions are reflections of anxiety about the present rather than attempts to accurately depict the past and should be viewed as a critical reflection on the longer historical process of Japanese modernization. Nostalgia in East Asia does not manifest as just the flight from time, but also flight from place, as Margaret Hillenbrand observes in her essay on the region's fascination with the past. She turns a comparative lens on East Asian cinema to note that real cities – the cities of lived memory: flawed, messy, unfinished – are rarely objects of nostalgia in these media texts, once again intimating a struggle with modernity that affects cultural practices in the region (Hillenbrand 2010).

A central text on Japanese nostalgia is Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing* (1995). The book's analysis is primarily concerned with Japan's treatment of its pre-modern past within contemporary culture. For example, by looking at two Japanese domestic tourism advertising campaigns, Discover Japan from the 1970s and Exotic Japan from the 1980s, Ivy unpacks Japan's parallel relationships with its recent past and modernization process. While the former presents an invocation of Japan's lost times of yore by depicting young women coming into contact with a non-specific rural landscape or folk tradition of Japan, the latter assembles various de-contextualized images from Japanese history to create an exoticized image of the nation's past and traditions. Now rendered an unknown locale, it becomes a place young people should visit and experience – a literalization of L. P. Hartley's (1953) line that 'the past is a foreign country'.

The book's examination of nostalgic trends in Japan draws on the distinction between restorative nostalgia and the postmodern, modal nostalgia first articulated by Jameson. The Discover Japan campaign embodies the nostalgic mood: it posits an eternal, timeless Japan which has been lost in the race for modernity in its urban centres and is thus tempered by a yearning nostalgia for a disappearing past. The Exotic Japan campaign, on the other hand, is playful and ahistorical. Its representation of the past is expressed through a nostalgic 'style' characterized by a camp aesthetic and disengaged attitude to history, whose signifiers can be fragmented and re-combined into aesthetic assemblages for the viewer's pleasure.

## The construction of nostalgia in Japanese anime

Just as scores of popular trends and media forms appropriated the affective and narrative potential of nostalgia, so has anime, from classics produced by Studio Ghibli such as *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) to more recent blockbusters such as *Your Name* (2016). Cultural studies scholarship has generally interpreted these works as a retreat from the disorientation of the present precipitated by a national trauma or paradigm shift. Within this commentary, we have authors who attribute anime's use of nostalgia to a yearning for a Japanese past which has all but vanished in the modern era, and those who view the subject through a post-structuralist lens which underscores the medium's transnational derivations and international reach. For example, the 'elegiac' style of anime distinguished by a 'lyrical sense of mourning often connected with an acute consciousness of a waning traditional culture' (Napier 2005, p. 13) and most closely related to nostalgia as a mood, epitomizes the former, yearning-driven perspective. Such a conception of nostalgia leads Napier (2005) to read the work of director Hayao Miyazaki and a film like *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) as a clear recreation of the landscape and architecture of pre-war Japan, a past now lost but lovingly and attentively conjured in the present. The notion of nostalgia as a metaphor for a desire to reinstate the past is dispelled, however, by such authors as Otsuka (1994), Lamarre (2009) and Swale (2015). Indeed, the tendency of Western critics who ascribe an essential Japaneseness to Miyazaki's work when it is clearly constructed for the consumption of an international audience had even earned its own label, 'techno-orientalism' (Ueno 1996). As noted by Lamarre (2009), attributing the nostalgia of Miyazaki to quintessential Japanese traditions and values is a judgement which slides easily into essentialism and cultural determinism. Even putting these objections aside, if we engage in a visual analysis of the scrupulous details of architecture, landscape and tradition in aspects of Miyazaki's work, it is clear that far from being a representation of lost Japan, Miyazaki has self-consciously constructed an animated imaginary space, reconstituted from an assemblage of Western and Eastern architectures and landscapes derived from a panoply of historical eras.[2]

If the interpretation of nostalgia in the 'elegiac' style of anime is problematic, Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2009) offers a radically differing framework for decoding the convention, one that throws into relief the postmodern and eclectic dimensions of the nostalgic mode of representation. In this telling, Japan's defeat in World War II and the American military occupation are seen as turning points for Japanese creative culture that precipitated the collapse of the metanarratives of Japanese modernity which had characterized the country's development since the Meiji Restoration. Anime and manga were thus born out of the post-war generation's crisis of Japanese identity and fueled by the wholesale importation

of American popular culture. Stateless and ethnically ambiguous characters which are culturally indeterminate and thus palatable to Japanese and Western audiences for their ability to represent Japanese culture dissociated from its pre-war and wartime history, became the hallmark of the visual language of manga and anime. This quality of representation, known as *mukokuseki* or 'statelessness', has been described by critics as the 'cultural odorlessness' of anime (Iwabuchi 2002a). In this way, the unrestrained flow of Western popular culture and the technical constraints of the era[3] amalgamated into a strange new post-war pseudo-Japanese identity that coalesced its multifarious and contradictory influences into a culturally indeterminate 'stateless' style manufactured by the otaku for local and international audiences.

Important to our analysis here is to note that the concept of anime as a fusion of Western and Japanese imagery deliberately constructed from the cultural elements rooted in both landscapes, emulates an earlier idea in Japanese transnational process, namely *wakon-yosai*, or Japanese spirit/Western technique. The *wakon-yosai* catchphrase dates back to the Meiji Restoration and signifies the tension between 'Japaneseness' and modernity.[4] To unpack some of the cultural understandings that inform Chinese and Japanese conceptions of nostalgia in *Flavours of Youth*, we adopt and reformulate this maxim as Chinese spirit/Japanese technique and elaborate our analysis with reference to registers of nostalgia as *mood* and *mode* operating in the film. By Chinese spirit we refer to the sentimental narrative tropes rooted in rural nostalgia that inform the production, while Japanese technique is represented in the film's visual rhetoric expressed through the stylistic conventions of nostalgic anime.

## Chinese spirit/Japanese technique: narrative tension between nostalgic mood and mode

While the relationship between nostalgic mood and nostalgic mode should not be assumed, it certainly cannot be ignored (Grainge 2000, p. 28). In *Flavours of Youth* these two registers of nostalgia operate side by side, generating a sense of disconnect between the film's earnest, sentimental narrative and its visual style which the viewer is conditioned to associate with Japanese anime. Indeed, one of the Chinese directors of the film saw anime as the preferred medium for the adaption of the work and the film 'appears to court Chinese (as well as global audiences) *through* Japan' (Suan 2019, p. 150). When watching the animation, it becomes clear that the Chinese writers have created narratives that reflect on the past through nostalgia as *mood*, while the Japanese animators engage nostalgia as a *mode* of representation. At the same time, a sense of friction between these two nostalgic registers creeps up on the viewer as the film plays on, as if the object of nostalgia,

the Chinese past mediated through the present, somehow frustrated the creative credentials of anime convention and its established nostalgia-mode method. The vague feeling of disconnect experienced when watching *Flavours of Youth* springs up precisely from this aesthetic fracture as well as the intrusion of the Japanese-produced text in the second chapter of the film that disrupts the Chinese perspectives offered in the first and last chapters.

## *Chinese spirit: rural nostalgia as narrative mood*

How does the 'Chinese spirit' manifest in the articulations of nostalgia as *mood* in *Flavours of Youth*? In a parallel with Japan's preoccupation with *furusato*, or a pre-modern village community surrounded by nature, recent years have seen a surge of rural nostalgia making its way into the popular imagination in China (Pang 2018). While shaped by very different past traumas, most notably the experience of Cultural Revolution filtered through the memories of 'sent-down youth' (Meng 2020), Chinese wistfulness for the rural idyll serves as an antithesis to hectic modern life in the same way it does in Japan. A generation of media and cultural texts explored nostalgia as an expression of deeply felt longing for Chinese rural life, exemplified by films like Jiang Wen's Cultural Revolution nostalgia film *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (1999) and the nostalgic fashion for artifacts from the Cultural Revolution era amongst millennials, a Chinese version of German 'Ostalgie' (Mai 2016). In fact, along the imperial period and colonial modernity in pre-war Shanghai, the revolutionary past is one of the historical objects that have been most frequently appropriated as nostalgic tropes in Chinese cultural productions (Wu 2006).

Nostalgia has proved an arresting theme not only in popular culture. Linda Qian (2017, p. 4424) has noted that rural nostalgia in China, or *xiangchou*, should not be understood as just a sociocultural expression but rather as 'a political-economic and a cultural-political tool used by different levels of government to frame China's development'. Essentially a response to the problems of the Chinese rapid economic growth, rural nostalgia is thus the ideological heart of the new sustainable urban development model, which is based on the idea of human-centered urbanization that rebalances social and economic development with a newfound appreciation of nature and rural life in the idealized Chinese countryside.[5] Understood this way, the romanticized construction of rural life in China goes beyond its mediation through artistic and political texts and is *commodified* in Xi Jinping's China as an urban policy ideal for rural tourism and development. Another point to make about the discourse of rural nostalgia in China is to note that it is politically instrumentalized and deflects attention from wide-scale social problems associated with rural-to-urban migration. That is to say, the idealized

nostalgic yearning for village life of Chinese urbanites glosses over such issues as the deep-seated social and institutional prejudices against rural migrants and the plight of successive generations of the 'floating' and 'left behind' children, unattended by their parents who have gone to work in cities.

The invocation of nostalgia as a mood in *Flavours of Youth* is located within this ongoing cultural and political discourse on tradition and modernization in China. If the rural hometown denotes elapsed wholesomeness and the city's intimate link with Chinese modernity makes it flawed and unhomely (Wang 2005, p. 9), the nostalgic mood in *Flavours of Youth* serves to play an indexical role in relation to this spatio-temporal divide between the rural and the urban. When we compare the rural/urban nostalgic representations in *Flavours of Youth* and Makoto Shinkai's *Your Name*, for example, we notice that Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are presented in overtly negative and depressing tones, whereas Tokyo in Shinkai's work conveys the sense of energy the city signifies compared to the countryside. The rural settings in both films are depicted as places of idealized, wistful beauty; however, the latter's nostalgic tone is somewhat tempered by allusions to the harsher realities of rural life. Additionally, with its science-fiction resolution to the central narrative drama in the film, *Your Name* seems to suggest that traditions of the past can be rejuvenated in the present-day city. One might perceive crypto-nationalist undertones in the deployment of nostalgia and tradition in dealing with history in *Your Name*, but the film does at least offer a metaphoric commentary on the national trauma of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and the societal effects of *kasoka*, or depopulation and rapid ageing, on rural towns. *Flavours of Youth*, on the other hand, uses unmitigated, skin-deep nostalgia to obviate the social and geopolitical criticism which a Sino-Japanese coproduction might creatively benefit from.

## *Japanese technique: nostalgia machines as narrative mode*

Lamarre (2009) has argued that anime should be understood as a 'multiplanar animetic machine' in order to encapsulate the entirety of its multivalent system of concrete and virtual technologies, narrative techniques and visual aesthetics alongside the ecosystem of toys, cosplay, popular music, character franchises and video games – which all function in tandem to produce the anime *effect*. At the same time, given its inherently transnational history, production and dissemination, anime also exemplifies a complex conglomeration of cultural influences and productive relations in East Asia and beyond.[6] Anime theorist Stevie Suan (2017, 2019, 2021) has further argued that anime is a *performance* of the constellation of animation conventions and standard forms which produce the 'anime-esque' effect. He proposes

to think through the notion of anime as a set of conventions which can be practiced by anyone regardless of national background, thus divorcing anime from its ascribed position as essentially tied to Japanese culture through the soft-power Cool Japan advertising in the 2000s.

Collectively, these articulations of anime help to inform an understanding of it as a medium that is not tied to the national culture of Japan but rather produced through a complex array of medial practices which manifest themselves as the anime effect and play an important role in encoding nostalgia as a *mode*. The mechanism coordinating these practices is what we refer to as the 'nostalgia machine'. Nostalgia machines work by transposing the nostalgic conventions of a genre onto a nostalgic object set in any kind of cultural milieu in order to transmute longing into solace in an aestheticized, transcultural way.

Yet, if we consider nostalgia machines as a transmedial device, its application as a remembering mechanism has not always succeeded at producing compelling transcultural commentaries. Nothing embodies this problem more than the penchant for 'transnational nostalgia' exemplified by 'Japan's yearning for the pristine rural idylls of South East Asia' (Hillenbrand 2010, p. 390) which cropped up in Japanese media productions throughout the 1990s.

Driven by Southeast Asia's popularity as a collaboration destination and filming location for Japanese films, TV dramas and documentaries and the fashion for Hong Kong and South Korean popular culture amongst Japanese women in the 1990s and early 2000s, the 'transnational nostalgia' phenomenon has been generally problematized as Japan's attempt to re-negotiate its national identity in the face of newly emergent Asian modernities (Iwabuchi 2004), albeit one that elided Japan's imperialist legacies and the region's economic inequity (DeBoer 2015). The metanarrative governing the majority of Japanese cultural texts' engagement with the region in that period was framed within a transnational evocation of nostalgia in which the 'present' of Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia merely represented the idealized immutable past of Japan. Rather than integrating the industrial, economic and cultural achievements of contemporary Asia which would challenge the notion of Japanese superiority, especially in the face of Japan's own economic downturn, the media texts in question used a mode of nostalgia that reified the imperial geopolitics of pre-war Asia in the present. As observed by Koichi Iwabuchi (2002b, p. 550), the 'Asia' represented in Japanese popular culture of the period is 'where Japanese consumers find their lost purity, energy, and dreams', and whose cities such as Hong Kong and Bangkok brim with energy and 'the same kind of raw vigor that Japan had once had during the high economic growth era' (p. 552). Similar sentiments echo through the narratives of Japanese residents in early 2010s Shanghai in a study of China-bound Japanese migration by Aoyama (2015).

The spate of ostensibly transnational co-productions financed by Japanese money and set in 'exotic' Asian locales might be better understood in the historical context of Japanese exceptionalism in Asia. Indeed, this is the point made by Wada-Marciano (2012) in her analysis of the 2004 film *The Hotel Venus*, which featured a Japanese and Korean cast and was filmed in Vladivostok, Russia. The dialogue of all the Japanese characters is spoken in stilted Korean as the film was marketed for a domestic Japanese audience hungry for Korean media. The retro aesthetic of the film recalls socialist realism of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the album covers of 1960s *enka*[7] singers, which Wada-Marciano labels an aesthetic of 'imperialist nostalgia' for Japan's past only to be found in pure and naive present-day Asia.

One would be right to consider such accounts of transnational productive relations as suffused with ersatz nostalgia and problematic. The question arises: are the productive mechanisms of the nostalgia machine up to the task of properly accommodating and understanding de-territorialized cultural landscapes? The following sections focus on this question by studying the narrative imagery in the anime text of *Flavours of Youth* mediated through the performance of the nostalgic conventions of the genre. Guided by the Chinese spirit/Japanese technique ethos, our analysis seeks to find out if the film's 'Chinese spirit' works to mitigate some of the machinic, homogenizing tendencies of the nostalgic anime mode. We propose that rather than representing a shortcoming of anime's creative potential to express universal emotions, the film's aesthetic tension arises from Japan's view of China filtered through a lens of nostalgia that circumscribes the grounds for productive dialogue between the two countries' past and present.

## How conditions of co-production configure the narrative tension in *Flavours of Youth*

A close reading of the film text of *Flavours of Youth* reveals a narrative tension produced in the dynamics of the competing methods of nostalgia as *mood* and *mode* that manifests through the juxtaposition of Chinese cultural idioms and the conventions of nostalgic anime. Steeped in the nostalgic *iyashikei* style, the first and last chapter in particular are critically alike in their exposition of this narrative aesthetic.

The first chapter 'The Rice Noodles' written by Li Haoling is set between the protagonist Xiao Ming's hometown in rural Hunan and his present life in contemporary Beijing. The story begins in Beijing with Xiao Ming reminiscing about the hand-made *sanxian* noodles served in the village noodle shop, which he enjoyed eating with his grandmother as a boy. Xiao Ming recalls the day the shop closed down, and that as the town eventually modernized, another noodle shop opened serving packaged noodles which were not as

good as the hand-made ones. After he moved to Beijing, Xiao Ming tried *sanxian* noodles from a chain store, but they could not replicate the flavour of the ones he remembered tasting in his hometown. The film then moves back to the present when Xiao Ming hears the news that his grandmother is about to die, and he returns home a few moments before she passes away. Afterwards, Xiao Ming has a bowl of *sanxian* noodles in the village and is filled with hope for the future.

As Linda Qian (2017, p. 4424) notes in her essay on the cultural politics of nostalgia in Xi Jinping's China, 'Urbanites are looking toward a "nostalgic sojourn" in the countryside as a momentary escape from city life, or even as a "remedy" for what is being experienced as China's urban disease'. The same sentiment echoes in the words of a rural tourism enthusiast in China cited by Choong-Hwan Park (2014, p. 521) who poetically rhapsodizes, 'Villagers here are very *yuanshi* [primitive, pristine] and *shishi zaizai* [truthful, sincere, authentic, right-minded, etc.]. Their life is a very authentic life. […] Here, you still can feel *ren de qi* [the vitality and warmth of humanity], but not in the city'. The animation's first chapter clearly articulates these ideas of Chinese nostalgia for the countryside and sense of mourning for a traditional way of life lost to the rush for urbanization. The film opens in Beijing in the rain, and the colour palette of these contemporary city scenes is rendered in muted grey tones, as Xiao Ming cynically comments that he is 'going through the tedious cycle of life and trying to regain what I had cherished'. This is contrasted with the scenes in his hometown, which are suffused with an overly golden light and warm, saturated colours that give the scenes a sense of life and vitality the cityscape lacks. The framing of the hometown scenes also uses a vignette that blurs the corners of the image in an oval shape, producing the effect of looking at the landscapes in a photo frame and adding to the picturesque atmosphere. The film then fetishistically focuses on the sensual elements in the preparation of *sanxian* noodles, using shallow focus framing and slow motion to depict the steam rising from the boiling noodles, the careful slicing of mushrooms, the egg frying in oil, and the broth being poured into the bowl. This is to set up the contrast between the loving care invested in the preparation of the hometown noodles against the processed sterility of the Beijing version of the same dish. As Xiao Ming states, 'The machine-made noodles were almost too perfect. I used to love *sanxian* noodles, but it just doesn't taste the same'. The narrative of gradual industrialization that parallels the breakdown in traditional relationships is visualized through heavy symbolism and some more subtle visual clues. After the old noodle shop closes, the end of the simple country lifestyle is signified by a closeup of a cigarette light slowly being snuffed out. The next scene shows Xiao Ming waking up to a town seemingly modernized overnight, his alarm clock with the words 'Made in China' printed on its clock face alluding to the role of manufacturing

in China's economic rise, followed by shots of a factory with workers dressed in blue overalls arriving for their first shifts of the morning while Xiao Ming rides to school. The urbanization process is represented by the family abandoning the village for the city, symbolizing the social fragmentation which has accompanied the economic shifts occurring in the village. The shot of the thriving factory earlier in the film is mirrored exactly in a shot at the end of the chapter which shows the factory now abandoned, symbolizing China's move towards a post-industrial economy and suggesting hope for the restoration of Chinese tradition embodied in rural life now that the race to modernization is complete.

All these elements fit within the official Chinese directives on reinvigorating rural areas and if *Flavours of Youth* was an entirely Chinese-produced film, this reading might stand as valid. However, this heartfelt and sincere narrative of longing for a simpler kind of Chinese past is filtered through the nostalgia machine of the anime genre, producing intriguing and somewhat unexpected results.

Indeed, the affinity between nostalgia and anime is key to an understanding of the film's development. The two Chinese directors of *Flavours of Youth* belong to the generation who grew up with anime, and 'it appears that their nostalgia for the past of a locale in China is something they feel is best expressed through anime' (Suan 2019, p. 149). The film's concept, therefore, relies on the utilization of China as a nostalgic place constructed in the transnational network of not only production, but also imagery. Its content – partly inspired by the lived memories of the film's Chinese directors – is located in China, but the articulation of China in the film is achieved through a localization process occurring largely in Japan. Chinese cultural details the viewer is bound to notice are apparent in the ubiquitous sky blue and white tracksuits common in Chinese schools, food ads on the walls and entrance scrolls presenting poetic readings of the buildings (Li 2014) that are a characteristic feature of the urban landscape in Chinese cities, and the mounted red and gold good luck prints on the restaurant walls that are put up during the Lunar New Year. The central focus of the plot is the semi-open-air noodle restaurant, which is ubiquitous in smaller Chinese towns and villages, while the restaurant's cooking area features a wok and slow cooker that are features of many Chinese kitchens. All these elements combine to articulate what is ostensibly a strong sense of Chinese visual identity. Even minor details, such as the flat, blunted tips of the Chinese chopsticks rather than the sharp and pointed Japanese type, and a food cart selling *jianbing* (savory crepes), a street food found in many Chinese cities, reinforce the cultural specificity of the story. Indeed, the Japanese production department's commitment to high standards of authenticity in rendering the film's Chinese cultural details is clearly elaborated by Takayo Nishimura, the animation director on all three chapters of the film, when he discusses the lengths to which the

Japanese crew had gone to in studying the visual elements of the settings (Inoue 2018). These details, carefully executed by means of the anime machine's technical nous, work to forge a sentimental narrative that reflects the Chinese past through nostalgia as mood, while simultaneously creating a sense of dislocation for the viewer between the film's heavily Chinese narrative and its *iyashikei* style.

The use of the tension between the two methods of nostalgia as a narrative strategy in the film's representation of Chinese experience is not necessarily a flaw or problem in and of itself. As pointed out by Bingham (2009), combining nostalgia as mood and mode to generate narrative and thematic tension has been instrumental in Makoto Shinkai's extremely popular approach to *iyashikei* and *sekaikei*[8] conventions. The juxtaposition of the personal melodrama mediated through nostalgia as mood and mode with wider, historically driven science-fiction narratives is precisely what drives the unique aesthetic and emotional thrust of Shinkai's films. In *Flavours of Youth*, however, nostalgia for China's recent past is simply resurrected as a faithfully rendered patina, visually remarkable but largely failing to initiate complex meditations on time and place. The obsession with cultural detail in lieu of engagement with an alternative cultural landscape only serves to generate an ersatz mourning for a disembodied and disembedded past, undermining nostalgia's transformative and reconciliatory potential as the conduit to addressing more contemporary regional issues. Nishimura makes just this point when he says, 'There are many things we do not understand about the sense of nostalgia that Chinese people feel' (Inoue 2018). The gap between 'real' China and the Japanese production team's *idea* of China constructed through the material trappings of Chinese culture used as visual references in the drawing process, becomes an unwitting reflection of the ambiguity of the developmental relationship between China and Japan. In this dynamic, China's past is valorized over the modernity which Japan already achieved in the post-war era, a sentiment expressed in the film's first chapter as a weary post-industrial nostalgia for the pre-modern traditions which are all but lost in Japan, but perhaps still to be recovered and cherished in contemporary China.

Thematically and aesthetically similar, the third chapter 'Love in Shanghai' was written by Chinese Internet celebrity Jiaoshou Yi Xiaoxing and is set in the author's eponymous hometown. The narrative focuses on the relationship between childhood sweethearts Xiao Yu and Li Mo and flashes back and forth in time between the past and the present. Xiao Yu, a top student, is forced by her father to apply to an elite university in another city and Li Mo, unbeknownst to Xiao Yu, decides to apply himself to his studies in order to also get into the same university and be close to her. When Li Mo is accepted into the university, he discovers that Xiao Yu is in the hospital after her father beat her for failing the entrance examination.

In the present, Li Mo discovers a misplaced old cassette tape which he had received from Xiao Yu, so he rushes back to his grandmother's home to play it on her cassette player. His grandmother still lives in his and Xiao Yu's old family home, now an almost demolished shikumen[9] neighbourhood. There, Li Mo discovers that Xiao Yu had purposely failed the test in order to stay with him.

'Love in Shanghai' is aesthetically the strongest of the three chapters and largely keeps with the Makoto Shinkai's model of focusing on young lovers who miss their connection through random chances of fate. The chapter uses the same devices as 'The Rice Noodles' such as representing the past through gold-infused sunlight while the scenes in the present are set at night. The narrative is a clear commentary on the loss of traditional family relationships in the process of urbanization. A scene set in the present shows Li Mo, now working as an architect and thus, literally the architect of his own misery, reprimanded by his boss for designing a hostel which retrofits the traditional architectural features of the shikumen style with modern materials and designs. Li Mo's boss tells him, 'This dinky hostel in shikumen. You plan on building this? It's urban development, our firm's reputation is on the line,' making clear that he values newness and modernity over history and tradition. When Li Mo is shown moving into a modern apartment block which happens to overlook his old shikumen neighborhood, his friend comments, 'Some parts of the shikumen are being demolished. Your grandmother still lives there, right?' Li Mo's callous response, 'Leave the nostalgia for later', speaks to his troubled relationship with the past. Incidentally, the chapter's depictions of shikumen might recall for the Chinese audience the mid-2000s cases of forced evictions carried out to make way for new development projects that ended in human tragedy.[10]

Like in the first chapter, the visual signifiers of the story's Chinese setting are executed with great care. For instance, the accurately rendered detail of shikumen architecture creates a culturally specific urban landscape that is a mimetic representation of modern Shanghai. Some of the other obvious Chinese cultural references include the Chinese style tin box of biscuits Li Mo's friend is snacking on while teasing him about his infatuation with Xiao Yu, the depiction of the iconic Oriental Pearl Tower that dominates the Shanghai skyline, a Chinese-style calendar in Xiao Yu's room, and the Chinese flag above the blackboard and its association with Chinese nationalism. While it may seem nitpicking to list these details, which no doubt speak to the Japanese animators' desire for an accurate representation of Chinese culture, the quaint narrative image they serve to reinforce situates the film so much in the Chinese locale that viewing the Japanese language version of *Flavours of Youth* generates the feeling of watching a dubbed film rather than a transnational work. Yet, the anime film base comprises quite a few works that have drawn inspiration from non-Japanese landscapes and

integrated content through the genre's convention more successfully than *Flavours of Youth*. Here, notable examples include the assemblages of different cultural references used to create a universally identifiable non-place exhibiting the quality of *mukukoseki* as seen in Hayao Miyazaki's films, and *Spirited Away's* (2001) use of Jiufen Village in Taiwan as an inspiration transmuted through Japanese *yokai*[11] folklore. Another case in point is Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), which directly references Hong Kong but reinvigorates its portrayal by inserting Hong Kong's urban environment into a hybridized, dystopian version of the future.

The nostalgic methods of representation utilized in *Flavours of Youth*, meanwhile, produce a superficial hodgepodge of cultural cliches and codified styles that does not quite live up to the creative opportunities putatively offered by the co-production environment of the film. If the very act of co-production could enable the producers to rearticulate China as a place closer to contemporary East Asian realities rather than present it as a stereotypical, ambiguous entity covered in a nostalgic patina, the film could perhaps be more successful on the creative level. As it stands, the film's obsessive display of cultural detail mediated through the performance of nostalgic anime conventions inadvertently constructs a somewhat reductive notion of China's past and present and stands in for proper engagement by the producers with the geopolitical and economic legacies defining contemporary Sino-Japanese encounters.

## *Flavours of Youth* as a metaphor for Sino-Japanese relations

In an interview with Yoshitaka Takeuchi, the Japanese writer and director of 'A Little Fashion Show', the second chapter of *Flavours of Youth*, the filmmaker states, 'I wanted to focus on the relationship between people. I created this story based on two sisters, while this project itself was born between the nations of Japan and China. So, I wanted to depict how relationships change' (Bertschy 2018, para. 7). As it happens, Takeuchi's attempt to make a statement on the China–Japan relationship in Chapter 2 of *Flavours of Youth* provides a metanarrative through which to read the film as a whole. Narratively and stylistically, 'A Little Fashion Show' differs from the first and last chapters of the film. For one, it is set entirely in the present and does not mine the same overtly nostalgic vein of the other two chapters. At the same time, its animation style is more visually crude, diverging from the high artistic standards characteristic of the Shinkai style, perhaps because Takeuchi has stated that, '[…] I wanted to reflect my vision, not Shinkai's. So that's why I try to put a little bit more of myself in there, and try not to do the same thing that Shinkai does'.[12] The chapter's visual style resembles the fast paced animation used to produce anime for television series which rely on the repetition of the same limited set of facial expressions, angles

and gestures for the characters and backgrounds drawn from the archives of the studios' animation banks.

Set in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, 'A Little Fashion Show' focuses on the relationship between an older sister Yi Lin who works as a fashion model and her younger sibling Lulu. Yi Lin has looked after Lulu since the death of their parents and the episode opens with Yi Lin forgetting to attend a birthday dinner the younger sister has prepared for her, showing up tipsy after her colleagues surprised her with a birthday party. Yi Lin is portrayed as a fading beauty in the modeling industry who is threatened by the entry of the much younger model Shui Jing. To prove she can maintain her position in the industry and continue to support her younger sister, she embarks on a regimen of exercise and dieting which endangers her health and culminates in her collapse during a catwalk. When Yi Lin recovers, she finds out that all this time Lulu has practiced fashion design. She resolves to re-establish her career and her relationship with her sister by setting up a fashion design/modeling agency together.

If we read the plot of 'A Little Fashion Show' as a metaphor for Sino-Japanese relations, we can see the line spoken by Yi Lin, 'I liked choosing new clothes for my little sister', as suggesting that the 'new clothes' represent the modern technologies Japan has been responsible for transferring to China from the West, an act of redistribution of the Japanese spirit/Western technique inheritance. The line describing the two sisters physically outgrowing the ability to exchange clothes, 'We played princess with my hand me downs, to the point where we couldn't exchange clothes anymore', can be interpreted as the end of friendly technology exchange, perhaps because of Chinese intellectual property theft, piracy and counterfeiting of Japanese technology and products. When Shui Jing, the younger model who can be seen to represent the new China explicitly tells Yi Lin, 'You're so popular in our school, everyone copies you', it directly references the Chinese fascination for Japanese popular culture. The inclusion of the character Shui Jing who represents the global power and wealth of China's new generation, which makes the older model Yi Lin look out of date, dramatizes contemporary developments in the China–Japan relationship and the economic rise of China in the recent decades. The depiction of Shui Jing stealing the affections of Yi Lin's love interest who baldly tells her, 'Don't think you'll always be on top', can be read as the West transferring its geopolitical and economic attention from Japan to China. Yi Lin's collapse represents the crisis in Japan after the post-war boom years and the economic depression of the 1990s, signaling that the country's relative stasis compared to the astronomical growth of China means that it can no longer operate along the same developmental model it had followed previously.

Although this chapter does not ostensibly seem to follow the nostalgic logic of the first and third chapter, it does, in fact, subliminally reinforce

the idea that the only way to progress is to return to traditional ways of working, which in the story is represented through Lulu's bespoke fashion designs and the close familial relationship between the siblings being re-established. Again, the hierarchy is perpetuated between the older, more experienced sister representing Japan employing the younger sister to design the clothes she wears, relegating Lulu to the role of cheap labourer to fuel the career of Yi Lin in much the same way Chinese manufacturing fueled the Japanese economic boom of the 1980s. Thus, while the chapter attends to Japan's existential anxiety over the rise of China in a refreshed way, the thinly veiled nostalgia in the resolution part of the story recalls the framings of implicit developmental hierarchy between Japan and Asia critically analyzed by Iwabuchi (2002b, 2004) and DeBoer (2014).

## Sino-Japanese encounters and the shifting landscapes of transnational anime production

To contextualize the co-production environment that produced *Flavours of Youth*, we must consider the geopolitical and economic realities that have informed the production and dispersion of animation in the region. Whether state- or industry-driven, cross-border exchanges of creative and cultural capital that took place in the animation industry between China and Japan in the last few decades have been mediated through the region's shifting developmental horizons.

Contemporary Japanese animation was introduced to China in the early 1980s, following the realignment of Sino-Japanese relations in the 1970s and the 1978 signing of the formal peace treaty.[13] As local television networks in China began to import Japanese animation to fill the media void[14], Japanese companies went on to outsource production to animation studios in China in search of cheaper labour (Mori 2011).[15] The period from the 1990s through early 2000s saw the explosion of popularity of Japanese manga and anime fueled by the proliferation of pirated content illegally published in magazines, printed in low-quality volumes and circulating on VCDs and DVDs in informal markets (Li 2016). This included local adaptations of popular Japanese manga and anime titles, which appropriated techniques of Japanese works and adapted them to Chinese stories (Chew and Chen 2010, Saito 2017).[16] Eventually the Chinese government introduced drastic restrictions on imported manga and anime in order to nurture the nascent Chinese comic and animation industries. Foreign animations were banned in 2006 from being shown on TV during primetime hours, while Japanese anime was barred from cinemas in 2012–2015 as a repercussion from the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute.[17] The official censorship of anime pushed the consumption of the Japanese content underground onto illegal online file sharing networks and streaming websites, while the government

subsidies and preferential policies provided an unprecedented boost for the domestic animation studios.

The Chinese animation industry, however, has contended with a number of issues. Chinese animations have traditionally not seen much success at home and abroad and until recently were accused of being poor-quality imitations of popular foreign works, especially Japanese ones (Saito 2017, Fung et al. 2019).[18] By the same token, the censorship, plagiarism, and low production value of Chinese domestic animation have generally led to negative perceptions of Chinese animation in the eyes of the Japanese animation industry (Yamada 2013).[19] Yet, the industry statistics for the past few years provide an alternative context which holds one of the keys to understanding the reasons behind Japanese producers' renewed interest in accessing a shifting regional production landscape. As the Japanese domestic animation market stagnates, close to half of all anime revenues now comes from abroad, with total overseas sales tripling between 2014 and 2019 (The Association of Japanese Animations 2020). Much of this gain has been driven by licensing shows to China's streaming services including Tencent Video, Bilibili and Youku. Thus, given the relative stagnancy in the home market and the explosive growth of demand for anime in China, securing a better access to the Chinese market and production chains is increasingly becoming a matter of not only broadening creative horizons, but also economic survival for Japanese animation studios. Indeed, when Noritaka Kawaguchi, the producer of *Flavours of* Youth, was asked about the film's intended viewers, he was unequivocal in stating that the film aimed to appeal to a 'young Chinese audience' (Bertschy 2018, para. 18).

Yet, even as production emphasis shifts to China leading to the formation of new infrastructures for Sino-Japanese co-production including the ones underpinning *Flavours of Youth*, the screen imaginaries yielded by such co-operative productions are contained within a familiar convention couched in an artistic language influenced by Japan's centrality in the anime production network. Even though anime owes its evolution into the media form it is today to a creative process that involved artists across Asia repeating a set of similar aesthetic patterns until they became recognizable as anime-esque, it is studios in Japan that have sat at the top of this transnational production system, dominating creative development and 'authenticating' the production's relation to its Japanese antecedents (Suan 2019). Hence the appeal of anime convention for the Chinese producers of *Flavours of Youth*. As a creative formula anime lends itself well to a co-production process that aestheticizes China's modernization through Japan (by entrusting the animation work to the Japanese side), while the film's mobilization of nostalgia as an inclusive practice of representation serves as a vessel for transcultural Sino-Japanese creativity. Collectively, these considerations suggest that while anime may no longer depend on Japan as a defining characteristic,

it relies on frameworks of knowledge and production experience that work to reify a Japanese point of view. *Flavours of Youth*, while outwardly a film about China, highlights this sort of Japan-centric positionality by creating a visual rhetoric that collapses the uneven landscape of China's transitions into a homogenous animation product straight out of the production mold of the nostalgia machine.

The film's portrait of China, assiduously textured in fine cultural detail, is an artifact of the unique conditions of co-production that underpin it. With much of the source material coming from the Chinese side and the animation production done by the Japanese, the project inverts the traditional distribution of functions in cross-border co-production environments. This foregrounds a new challenge for the Japanese industry: how to articulate and express a region which it has never contemplated before – save for nostalgia-filtered clichés – back to its Chinese partners and the Chinese (and global) audience? One of the producers, Yasutaka Inagaki, conveyed this exact point when he said, 'In order to make a film about today's China, I don't want to make a film that will make Chinese people feel uncomfortable. Also, of course, the director must not limit the expression he wants to depict. I was very careful to create images that balanced these two factors' (Inoue 2018). The result is a well-meaning effort, but one in which rapprochement with Chinese modernity is held in abeyance and the promotion of an idealized transnational co-production landscape takes precedence over engagement with the legacies of Japan's relationship with China. As a result, *Flavours of Youth* retreats into a 'style over substance' approach, where overt attention to cultural detail ends up working to obscure actual memories and results in a screen imagery which appears at once very Chinese and oddly de-territorialized in its anime style. While the film's retrograde one-size-fits-all modality of artificial nostalgia recalls the pattern of earlier Japanese transcultural collaborations that did little to dismantle Japan's prevailing conceptions of 'Asia' (Iwabuchi 2004, DeBoer 2014), it also signifies more recent ontological concerns for the Japanese animation industry. Japan's loss of status as the sole economic hegemon in Asia and the shifting landscapes of cultural production that increasingly mobilize China for its market and productive resources are just the most obvious forces necessitating Japanese rearticulation of its outdated constructions of China and Asia. At stake here is the issue of how the Japanese animation industry negotiates its future economic dependence on a cultural partner it is only now learning to know and respect.

## Conclusion

Attention to the imaginaries of nostalgia in media texts reveals the ways in which reflections on the past manifest cultural anxieties about the present. In his work on Japanese cultural interactions in Asia, Iwabuchi (2002a)

argues that the nostalgic style of 1990s Japanese media productions involving inter-Asian collaborations perpetuated developmental hierarchies between Japan and Asia by reinforcing the reductive notion of Asia as a backdrop for Japanese narratives. Japan's conceptual re-integration into the region after a century and a half of identification with the West was an uneasy attempt to re-negotiate its national identity in the face of newly emergent Asian modernities. An examination of how modernities are specifically constructed or, as is the case for the media text considered in this article, obscured through nostalgic conventions, can further shed light on practices and ideologies of the transcultural production process itself. In a departure from the traditional production model in which Japan plays a central role in creative development and outsources manual work to animators in neighbouring countries, *Flavours of Youth* represents a rare project in which creative ideas and lived memories of Chinese directors are transmuted in the hands of Japanese animators into *iyashikei* style text situated in a clearly identifiable Chinese cultural milieu. Cultural 'odorlesness' juxtaposed with the media form's implied 'Japanese' branding makes anime appealing to the Chinese side; the nostalgia machine's expertise in assembling the past for popular consumption through appropriated narrative images plays into the strengths of the Japanese side and offers a promise of building a stronger regional co-production environment. Both Chinese and Japanese directors recognize anime's ability to creatively use the affective and narrative potential of nostalgia as a key to tapping into a global market of viewers on platforms such as Netflix. However, as our analysis of the anime text has showed, Japanese animators, their knowledge and experience notwithstanding, struggled to engage with the Chinese modernity in a way that would help the film convincingly work through the traumas of the past and their legacies in the present. This stands in contrast to Japanese anime's past successes in integrating non-Japanese cultural elements in its narrative styles, as well as the transnational community's proficiency in performing the conventions of anime-esque (Suan 2019).

The viewer's experience of the Sino-Japanese encounter in *Flavours of Youth* is mediated by narrative methods of nostalgia articulated through a tension between sentiment and style, or what we refer to as Chinese spirit/Japanese technique. The 'Chinese spirit' of *Flavours of Youth* incorporates the nostalgic mood of sentimental longing for a simpler life and tradition which have been lost in the rapid modernization of China. This longing is juxtaposed with the Japanese technique embodied in the anime machine deployed onto Chinese modernity. The creative process involved in reconfiguring China's transitions through anime conventions creates a friction between the parasitic nostalgic form and the cultural host it attaches itself to, collapsing the film's potential for reflection on the contemporary realities of a shared Asian experience. Consequently, the film retreats into a form of artificial nostalgia that is neither

convincingly Chinese, Japanese or even anime-esque. In attending to the considerations raised by nostalgia-mediated transnational animation, this article has argued that the aesthetic fracture created in *Flavours of Youth* by the transposition of nostalgic anime conventions onto the Chinese cultural landscape stems from the enduring tendency in Japan to view its neighbour through a temporal and developmentalist lens. This appraisal underscores the historical fact, as notably pointed out by Yuzo Mizoguchi (2005 cited Ching 2019, p. 11), that 'Japan does not have a shared experience' with its Asian neighbours and that 'Japan's conceptualization of Asia, which is vital in its modern/colonial self-definition', is still considerably anachronistic, even in 2018.

As the inaugural animation feature released since the signing of the 2018 China–Japan Film Co-production Agreement, *Flavours of Youth* might be seen as the vanguard of the increasing proliferation of Sino-Japanese collaborations in the animation industry. Alongside the massive success of Makoto Shinkai's *Your Name* in China and the growing number of co-produced animation series[20] it is possible to envisage a thriving collaborative environment and profitable future for the two industries. It remains to be seen, however, whether creative mobility entailed by these co-production environments will result in new screen imageries entering production databases of Asian animation. Conceivably, the impact of the Chinese market and hence Chinese cultural forms on Japanese animation may have a similar effect that US popular culture had on the first generations of post-war otaku constructing novel identities through their imaginary animated worlds, and perhaps act as a reinvigorating influence on the Chinese and Japanese animation industries in the post-Shinkai, multipolar geopolitical arena of the twenty-first century Asia. However, unless Japanese filmmakers manage to distance themselves from opportunistic use of cultural resources and creatively engage with the shared legacies of Asian modernities the cultural revitalization of the Chinese and Japanese animation industries through transnational co-production will remain an unfulfilled promise.

## Notes

1. Examples of the *iyashikei* genre anime include *Mushishi* (2005), *Natsume's Book of Friends* (2008) and *Barakamon* (2014).
2. See for example, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986) and *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989).
3. The scarcity of resources available to the Japanese animation industry in the post-war period led to the prevalence of 'limited animation' and contributed to the rise of a Japanese animation aesthetic which was minimalist when compared to the full animation technique developed by Walt Disney, Warner Brothers and Hanna-Barbera studios in the US (Power 2009, p. 132-133).
4. *Wakon-yosai* was itself a revision of the Heian era formulation *wakon-kansai,* or 'Japanese spirit/Chinese technique'. The ethos was again recycled in the Showa era economic boom of post-war Japan.

5. The Chinese government has tapped into this bottom-up groundswell of nostalgic sentiment to drive Xi Jinping's 2014 'New Type' Urbanization Plan (NUP 2014-2020). For the rhetoric and implementation of 'rural community building' policies in 2010s China, see for example, Meyer-Clement (2020).
6. For work tracing the lineage of mutual influence between China, Japan and the West in the early decades of Asian animation see Daisy Du's *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation* (2019).
7. *Enka* is a genre of sentimental popular music in Japan characterized by nostalgic lyrics and ballad-style arrangements.
8. The *sekaikei* style of anime is exemplified by narratives that involve characters absorbed in introspective melodramas and romances, whose emotions are mirrored in the outside world through apocalyptic cataclysms.
9. Shikumen is the name for a style of architecture unique to Shanghai that was popular from the late 19th to early 20th century. It was influenced by the city's position as a foreign treaty port and represented an adaptation of traditional Chinese and European architectural styles. The majority of Shanghai's shikumen survived into the 1990s, but many have since been demolished to make way for urban redevelopment.
10. See for example, 'Shanghai zonghuo bi qian an heimu kaifashang wei mouli shaosi liang laoren' [Developer burned two elderly people for profit in Shanghai], 22 September 2005, http://finance.sina.com.cn/g/20050920/16151984193.shtml.
11. *Yokai* in Japanese folklore refers to supernatural entities and spirits, often with animal features.
12. Ibid, para. 16.
13. The signing of the 1978 Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty and the resulting intensification of cultural exchange between the two countries introduced China to Japanese animation series including *Astro Boy* (1963), the first Japanese program to be broadcast on Chinese TV in 1979, and feature films including *Sandakan No. 8* (1974) screened during a Japanese film week held in Beijing in 1978 (Clark 1984). It also prepared the ground for several film and television co-productions between China's CCTV and Japan's NHK including the landmark documentary series *The Silk Road* (1980).
14. Prior to that the most widely seen form of animation in China were domestic *meishu* films (Wu 2009).
15. Japanese anime studios began outsourcing parts of their production overseas in the 1960s, mainly to South Korea (Mori 2011). With Korean labour costs growing, production shifted to China in the 1980s, even though the Chinese studios went largely uncredited on the finished products (Endo 2008).
16. These manga adaptations became a prominent genre known as *xinmanhua* or 'new manga' in Chinese.
17. See Greer 2019.
18. The perception of Chinese animation has begun to change in the recent years, with more and more films enjoying commercial and/or critical success including *Nezha* (2019), *The Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015) and *Have a Nice Day* (2017), a critically acclaimed independent feature which was a target of political censorship by the Chinese government.
19. For example, an official from The Association of Japanese Animations expressed that Chinese animation did not pose much threat to the Japanese industry because of creative limitations imposed on the Chinese industry by the

country's political system and the fact that many Chinese productions were copies of Japanese works (Yamada, 2013, p. 11).

20. See for example, *Hitori no Shita: The Outcast* (2016) and *Robomasters: The Animated Series* (2017).

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on earlier iterations of this paper. We would also like to thank Leo Pang for his valuable input that helped shape our writing, as well as Daisy Bisenieks, Pan Lu, Hiroshi Murai, Lee Lok Hin and Lian Qinyi for sharing their insights with us during the course of this research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding details

This work was supported by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Grant Number P0009591.

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