

**JAPAN'S EFFORTS TO DILUTE ITS DARK HISTORY  
THROUGH ANIME "HETALIA AXIS POWERS"**

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**Abstract**

"*Hetalia*" is one of many *animes* with history, specifically World War II, as its theme, but what makes it different from other *animes* is the fact that it gained many controversies even before it was broadcasted. The characters in "*Hetalia*" are world countries' personifications with stereotypes as their characteristics. Because of that, it can be seen easily that these characters automatically have ties with each respective country. *Japan* is Japan's character in it, but his scenes mainly only contain cultural related things rather than war-related activities. This article aims to find out the agenda behind Japan's image representation via "*Hetalia's*" narrative plots and the characterization of *Japan*. Using cinema concept and representation theory to analyze the characterization through dialogues and narrations, I argue that there is a certain agenda to feminize to soften Japan's image and to dilute Japan's dark history so that Japan will have more positive image via "*Hetalia*". It automatically highlights Japan's position as not one of the 'main villains' in World War II by making one party look positively good (Japan) and another party look not so good in relation with geopolitics strategy.

**Keywords:** *ideology, watered-down dark history, geo-politics strategy, historical anime controversy*

## **Introduction**

Japan's history textbook has since long been debated not only in Japan, but also in its neighbor countries; especially China and South Korea. In 1965, Ienaga Saburo filed a claim to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) that the textbook's selection process and approval were not constitutional and therefore illegal. Ienaga did that after MEXT declined Ienaga's history textbook because "there were too many illustrations depicting the dark side of war, such as airstrikes, destroyed city by atomic bombs, and photographs of war veterans who had become disabled people because of war (Masalski, 2001).

That incident occurred because of Japan's education system in the beginning obligated all textbooks to have USA's certificates of approval when they were still occupied by USA after World War II. Those certificates could be obtained with MEXT's permission and by being selected as school textbooks. MEXT censored contents that were deemed as having potentials to offend USA (Cooley, 2008).

In 1982, school textbooks censorship became a diplomatic issue as the neighboring countries started to question it too. This happened after MEXT asked Ienaga to change some terms in his book, such as changing "Japan's military aggression in China" to "Japan was advancing to China", also to change "Korea's Freedom Movement" to "the start of Korean's rebellion". Both affected countries, China and South Korea, then pressured MEXT to not to intervene the contents of Japan's history textbook. In 1997, Ienaga won half his claims because Supreme Court decided for the government to hold back to not to intervene in educational contents (Masalski, 2001).

In early 1990s, an education professor from Tokyo University name Fujioka Nobukatsu suggested a discourse 'to fix history' by emphasizing 'a positive point of view' when one discuss Japan's past and by getting rid of any contents referring to 'the dark past', such as women prostitutes which flagged for having probabilities to make young scholars to feel uneasy when they read about the Pacific War. This discourse was opposed by many people in Japan, China, and South and North Korea even though Fujioka's book had been approved by MEXT in 2011. They viewed the book as inappropriate to be a textbook since it negated the truth about Japan's colonialism and war crimes (Masalski, 2001).

History textbooks' controversy continues until Prime Ministre Abe's reign now. In November 2013, MEXT proposed that history textbook must include nationalistic views about WW II. They also proposed a new term which said that they would reject textbooks that don't teach patriotism (Fackler 2013).

Not only history textbooks are under the spotlight, nowadays the most known popular culture media, *anime* (Japanese animation), joins the spotlight. It is because history sometimes being used as one of *anime*'s story theme. *Animes* such as 1998's "*Hotaru no Haka*" (about the struggle of brother and sister, Seita and Setsuko, during post-atomic bomb in WW II), 1996's "*Rurouni Kenshin*" (about an ex-assassin *samurai*'s live in Meiji Era and his involvement in political key events), 2009's "*Sengoku Basara*" (a video game adapted to *anime* about Japan's historical figures in feudal era), 2015's "*Kantai Collection*" (another video game adapted to *anime* about girls who own the souls of Japan's warships), and many more with historic theme

often includes war. War itself is a sensitive theme in Japan. According to MyAnimeList, even Japan's Broadcasting Ethics & Program Improvement Organization or BPO (放送倫理番組向上機構 *hoso rinri bangumi koso kiko*) got complaints about *animes* with war theme or showing war scenes implicitly or explicitly.

Between all the 'heavy and serious' history-themed *anime*, "*Hetalia Axis Powers*" (abbreviated *Hetalia* ヘタリア. *Hetalia* itself are made of two words: ヘタレ *hetare* and イタリア *Italia*. *Hetare* has a meaning of *nasakenai* or pitiable) emerged as the 'lighter' and the satire-comedic one. It began as a webcomic (online comic) made by Hidekaz Himaruya (日丸屋秀和 *Himaruya Hidekazu*) which gained much popularity and then adapted to *manga* and *anime*. Since 2006, *Hetalia* still running until now.

At first, this series was scheduled to be broadcasted in Japan's *Kids Station* channel from 2009 January 25<sup>th</sup> at 1:52 am, but it was cancelled suddenly "due to certain situations". The news was delivered via *Hetalia* official website and *Hetalia* then was distributed through *Mobile Animate* application in mobile phone and through the *Animate.tv* website (the biggest *anime*, *manga*, and games retail company in Japan). *Hetalia*'s 52 episodes were divided into two parts. Each part contained 26 episodes and broadcasted from 2009 January 24<sup>th</sup> until 2010 March 5<sup>th</sup>. Each episode has a 5-minute duration and has sub-episodes in it. Some of these sub-episodes are connected while others are not.

*Hetalia* offers metaphors and allegories about historical and political moments and socio-cultural phenomenon from each WW II country participant with war as the main story background. Every character is those countries' personification. Traits and temperaments from each character are derived from those countries' stereotypes (subjective stereotypes since it depends on how Japan view the world around it). The names of the characters are the names of the countries, so we will meet characters named *Italy*, *England*, *Germany*, *America*, *Japan*, and many more.



Figure 1. *Hetalia* characters

(First row, left to right: *Roman Empire*, *Austria*, *Poland*, *France*, *England*, *America*, *Japan*, *Italy*, and *Germany*. Second row, left to right: *China*, *Russia*, *Spain*, *Greece*, *Belarus*, *Estonia*, *Latvia*, *South Korea*, and *Chibitalia* or child *Italy*)

*Hetalia* main characters are the Axis countries (*Italy, Germany, and Japan*) and the Allies (*England, America, Russia, China, and France*). According to Anime News Network, this was one of the reasons *Hetalia* were surrounded by lots of controversies, especially regarding the accuracy of the characters and its historical contents. Even South Korea banned *Hetalia* in all kinds of form because they were offended with the way *South Korea* character was depicted.

Among those characters, *Japan's* relationships with other characters stand out in the whole plot of *Hetalia*. This character is the representation of Japan and his characterization is taken from Japanese people stereotypes in general. Through this character also the Japanese government actions on domestic and international affairs are portrayed. But different from the other characters which have certain scenes showing their actions in wars, participating in political treaties and such, *Japan* almost doesn't have those kinds of scene; there is only one episode telling about *Japan's* childhood where he was found and raised by *China*, then adopted many things from the latter, and another episode about a treaty between *Japan* and *England*. The rest of *Japan's* episodes are about Japanese habit and culture. There is no episode or even narrations about *Japan's* involvement in the WW II. When he is with other Axis members, *Germany* and *Italy*, *Japan* shows up only when they are having military training together, which already reduced to a quiz-format-kind-of-training. There are also some scenes portraying Axis being defeated by Allies, but they have been reduced so it can be said that there are no significant 'wars' which involved *Japan*.

In *Hetalia*, historical events, wars, and political disputes are packed in comedy so that the serious impression which usually surrounding those kinds of event are gone. Their meaning has been reduced to become laughing stocks. Also, the way *Hetalia* being broadcasted indicated that everyone in Japan can access *Hetalia's* inaccurate history stories. Therefore, I propose this research question:

Are there certain efforts to dilute Japan's "dark history" behind *Japan's* characterization and *Hetalia's* world history rewriting?

*Hetalia* will be treated as a cultural artefact, specifically as cultural diplomacy tool or socialization agent with hidden ideologies behind it and as an arena for "cultural war". In this article, constructionist approach from Hall's representation concept, binary opposition, and cinematography are used to analyze the meaning of identity representation of *Japan* socio-culturally via narration, dialogues, and characterization opposed with other characters which conveyed to the audience unconsciously, so that the hidden ideology behind the characterization can be revealed. I argue that there is a certain agenda to make one party look positively good (*Japan*) and another party look not so good in relation with geopolitics strategy.

For this article, I use 4 (four) episodes from *Hetalia's* part one. Those episodes are: (1) episode 4, when *Japan* is first introduced, (2) episode 12, depicting cultural shock between *Japan* and *Italy*, (3) episode 15, culture shock between *Japan* and *Germany-Italy*, (4) episode 16, *Japan's* and *China's* shared history.

## Characterization

### Japan



Figure 2.

Japan character design. [hetalia.wikia.com](http://hetalia.wikia.com)

Physically, *Japan* is a small and short man. His hair is black and straight, and he has dark brown eyes. His face often portrayed with a flat expression or no expression at all with no significant movement from his facial parts; his stiff brows, flat gaze, and a mouth in a constant silence. Mainly he wears a white navy uniform and it doesn't refer to any division in Japan's WW II force.

### Germany



Figure 3.

Germany character design. [hetalia.wikia.com](http://hetalia.wikia.com)

*Germany* is depicted as having a tall, broad, and muscly stature. His blond hair is slicked back and his eyes are blue-colored. According to *German Master Race* article, his physique can be interpreted as the perfect Aryan visualized by Nazi; tall, long face, blond hair, blue eyes, and pointed nose. His uniform refers to Waffen-SS uniform, an elite division from German's military force and functioned as Nazi party protecting soldiers. Waffen-SS prioritized Aryan as its members.

*Italy*



Figure 4.

*Italy* character design. [hetalia.wikia.com](http://hetalia.wikia.com)

*Italy* portrayed as a man having a medium build and height. His eyes and hair are brown-colored and there is a part of his hair that curled outside his left side, also his eyes are closed in most scenes. The way *Italy* looks refers to Italian race characteristics which are dominated by dark-colored hair and eyes, brownish skin, and medium-height stature owned by Mediterranean (Jenkins, 2006). His face is dominated by soft lines to accentuate his childish trait. He wears a blue-colored military uniform, referring to the common uniform Italian soldiers wore during the WW II; it doesn't refer to any certain divisions. *Italy* also sometimes can be seen holding and waving a white flag in one of his hands.



*China*



Figure 5.  
*China* character design. [hetalia.wikia.com](http://hetalia.wikia.com)

*China* is a man with a medium height and medium build body. His eyes are light brown-colored and he fashions his long dark brown hair in a ponytail. *China* often depicted with a full confidence on his face with his brows points up and a smile. Sometimes a small panda can be seen hanging from his hand or perched on his shoulder, to define more of his identity as Chinese. His military uniform is green-colored with a wide red band on his left hand. His uniform refers to Chinese common military uniform.

### ***Japan with Axis***

Data sources:

- Episode 4, time 0.00 – 0.14  
Synopsis: *Japan*'s first airtime and introduction
- Episode 12, time 3.54 – 4.16  
Synopsis: Morning, *Japan* is strolling in his garden when *Italy* suddenly appears and hugs him. Bewildered *Japan* pushes him while stating that it's his first hug. *Italy* thinks that *Japan* is weird but *Japan* insists that *Italy* must take responsibility for it.
- Episode 15, time 0.00 – 0.35  
*Japan*'s culture shock with *Germany* and *Italy* Western culture. He finds them eating snails and they ask him to join them. *Japan* shakes his head in panic and refuses them by saying that his stomach is already full with *onigiri* (rice ball).



Figure 6.  
Lower part of *Japan's* body



Figure 7.  
Upper-back part of *Japan's* body



Figure 8.  
*Japan's* face

Figure 6 is the first shot *Japan* is introduced to the audience. We see his lower body part for the first time before the camera moves upward gradually to show his leg and gun. Then Figure 7 shows his back and his head with blue-colored background and sakura flowers in the upper part. In Figure 8, *Japan* turns his body to introduce himself while sakura petals falling around him. This entire scene is accompanied by a Japanese traditional music.

The impression we got from the above scene is peace and serenity. For a while the audience forgets that *Hetalia* is a rowdy and funny *anime*. It can be implied that *Japan* is a beautiful and peace-loving country, also holds its traditional values. This is strengthened by the camera technique used in this scene, which moves from below to the top, as if guiding the audience to a bit of voyeurism so that this character can be felt intimately immediately. The sakura also adds a feminine accent to *Japan* so that it negates other masculine aspects (aggressive, brute, etc).





Figure 9.  
*Japan* is walking in a garden



Figure 10.  
Suddenly *Italy* hugs him

In Figure 9, *Japan* is walking to a pond. The atmosphere is calm and peaceful with birds' singing and green color dominates the scene. Suddenly *Italy* hugs him out of nowhere in Figure 10.



Figure 11.  
*Japan*'s surprised face



Figure 12.  
*Japan* asking *Italy* to take responsibility

Because of *Italy*'s sudden hug, *Japan* is surprised in Figure 11. He quickly removes himself from *Italy* while stammering that it is the first time of him being hugged by someone else. Then in Figure 12 he asks *Italy* to take responsibility. While doing so, his military uniform changes into his domestic outfit usually worn in his home.

In Figure 9, green color and natural aspects (plants, pond, sun lights, and birds tweet) dominate the scene. The camera uses the bird-eye view technique which shows the setting for the scene and shows *Japan*'s connection with his surroundings. We can feel peacefulness and calmness in this scene and it can be implied that Japan appreciates peace. Japan is a peace-loving and pacifist country. It is also a country that respects and loves its own nature so that its own image becomes more positive. That peacefulness is disrupted by *Italy*'s sudden yell before hugging *Japan*, as if implicitly shows that West, *Italy* in this case, has destroyed the peacefulness owned by Japan.

*Japan's* shock when he was hugged by *Italy* and his panic when asking for responsibility is considered weird by *Italy*; it can be seen from *Italy's* creased eyebrows and sweat mark on his cheek. *Italy* considers physical contact as a normal thing in his country, but *Japan's* reaction makes him look naïve and innocent. Moreover, his reaction also oozes femininity with his outfit change, sitting in his house rapidly, and the presence of his pet cat amplified his domestic aspects.



Figure 13.  
*Japan* is confused, seeing *Germany*  
snails and *Italy* are eating snails

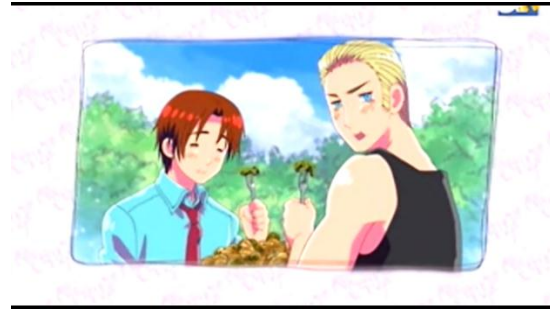


Figure 14.  
*Italy* and *Germany* are eating

Then in Figure 13 we can see that a confused *Japan* when seeing his allies are eating snails. He considers Western culture as something that is difficult to understand. When he asks *Italy* and *Germany* what they are eating, they answer that they are eating *escargot*, a France delicacy with snails as the main dish (Figure 14). They offer him to join them but he refuses by saying that he is already full with *onigiri* (rice ball).

This scene depicts one of many cultural shock scenes which *Japan* has when he is with his Axis allies. And it is also one of the scenes that don't indicate any war activities that have been done by Japan with Axis during WW II in the real life. This kind of portrayal is absolutely different from *Italy* and *Germany* portrayal which depict them doing many war-related activities, such as training with grenades, manufacturing tanks, etc.

Beside showing confusion, *Japan's* expression in Figure 13 also indicates that he is feeling inconvenience with his Allies' behavior. Although he states that culture shock is the reason, but it can be implied that he is not comfortable doing things together with his allies. *Japan's* traditionalism and nationalism also can be read when *Japan* says that he is full of *onigiri*, his own country's characteristic cuisine. When opposed with *Germany* and *Italy* eating a France cuisine, both the latter seems to have a low nationalism on their own respecting countries.

## Japan with China

Data source:

- Episode 16, time 0.00 – 2.21

Synopsis: *China* opens the scene by announcing that he is going to tell an old story. It turns out that the story is about the first time he met *Japan*. *China* was walking alone in a bamboo forest when he found a child *Japan*. He then decided to take care of *Japan* and one of his efforts is introducing a letter and writing system. Even he proudly introduced *Japan* as his brother to other people which sadly received a poor response from *Japan*.



Figure 15.  
Child *Japan* is found alone



Figure 16.  
*China* greets *Japan*



Figure 17.  
*Japan* rudely replies *China*'s greeting

When walking through a bamboo forest to freshen up, *China* found a small child alone (Figure 15). He then quickly recognizes that the child is a new country. In Figure 16, he greets the child but unfortunately, the child replies his greeting with rude words in Figure 17. These are the dialogues.

中国：新しい国あるね。ちっちゃいある。こんな狭いところで生まれて大変そうあるね。私、ちゅごくある。分からないことがあったら、何でも聞くよろしい。お名前なんとあるか。

日本：こんにちは、日の落ちるところの中国さん。私は日いずるところの日本です。

中国：ひいっ。失礼なやつある。

*China:* Atarashii kuni aru ne. Chicchai aru. Konna semai tokoro de umarete taihen sou aru ne. Watashi chugoku aru. Wakaranai koto ga attara, nandemo kiku yoroshii. Onamae nan to aru ka?

*Japan:* Konnichiwa, hi no ochiru tokoro no chugoku san. Watashi wa hi izuru tokor no nihon desu.

*China:* Hii. Shitsurei na yatsu aru.

Translation:

*China:* Are you a new country? So small. It looks difficult to born in this small space. I'm China. Feel free to ask me if you have any questions. What is your name?

*Japan:* Hello, China, the place where the sun sets. I'm Japan, the place where the sun rises.

*China:* What a rude fellow!

It can be interpreted from this scene that *China* is the one who found *Japan* and helped him to stand as a new country (Figure 16). Unfortunately, *Japan* repays *China's* kindness by saying rude things (Figure 17). This scene also implicitly states *Japan's* and *China's* stance with each other in real life.

When *China* first found child *Japan* in Figure 15, there's a soft light beam around *Japan*. It makes *Japan* the center of focus and it's as if *Japan* is someone blessed by heaven. Another meaning to this scene is it is an honor for *China* to have found *Japan*.

From the answer given by *Japan* to *China* when the latter asks for his name can be interpreted that *Japan* doesn't respect *China*. "Sun sets" can be mean "an era has come to an end", while "sun rises" can be mean "a new beginning". This indicated that *China's* time is over and will be replaced by *Japan*. Since the beginning, *Japan* didn't respect and underestimated *China*. For *Japan*, *China* is a country whose sovereignty will be taken by it.

The narrative continues with *China* noticing that the adult *Japan* can only draw. *China* concludes that it is because *Japan* doesn't have a writing system. He then introduces *Japan* to *kanji* (Chinese letters) and permits *Japan* to borrow the system. Not long, *Japan* begins to write and *China* thinks that *Japan* is using *kanji*. It turns out that *Japan* is making a new letter system

based on *kanji* called *hiragana* (*kanji* simplified version). *China* becomes angry with *Japan* for his ‘misbehavior’.

*Japan’s* shenanigans to *China* doesn’t stop at that. When the both of them are taking a stroll, they meet a *Panda*. *Panda* asks *China* about *Japan’s* identity. *China* introduces *Japan* as his little brother proudly, but when the former asks the latter to respond to the former’s statement, there is a 3 (three) seconds gap before finally, *Japan* confirms *China’s* statement. *China* becomes angry once again for it.

China and Japan’s history goes a long way back. Japan learnt so much from China and even the letter and writing system is ‘imported’ from China through envoys being sent by Japan to China several times. Their relationship is so close that Japan and China can be considered as brothers as depicted in *Hetalia*. But what is missing here is the fact that Japan had invaded China and there’s a famous incident caused by it called The Manchurian Incident (Japan invaded China in Manchuria from 1931 September 18<sup>th</sup> to 1932 February 27<sup>th</sup> and established a puppet country Manchukuo. It lasted until the end of WW II. During the invasion, China lost around 600,000 lives and many of Chinese women were used as ‘comfort women’). This incident left a gaping wound in China until now. Japan’s imperialism has been reduced or non-existent at all. Episode 16 is the only episode where *Japan* is paired with *China*, and even the story is about the beginnings of their relationship through culture acculturation from China to Japan. Japan’s unwillingness to admit having any kinds of relationship with China is represented by the three seconds gap in the scene.

## Conclusion

*Hetalia Axis Powers* is a satiric comedy *anime* which uses history as its theme. In the midst of heavy and serious *animés* with the same theme, *Hetalia* brings a certain freshness and lightness to the audience. But even so, it is not out of questions that *Hetalia* also brings a certain agenda.

Japan’s war-related activities reductions aim to give a good image to Japan. Even the cultural interactions between Japan and China depicted in it also has the same goal. Particularly Japan’s dark military history and its disgrace for having lost in WW II are not portrayed so that the audience can’t or won’t remember Japan’s brutal imperialism. These reductions are some of the ways to deliver Japan’s justification on its military aggression in the past.

The absence of other Asian characters aside *Japan* and *China* makes Japan’s positioning as “Asia’s old brother” (Asia leader) and as a nation equals to the West with positive images becomes smoother. The pieces of evidence confirmed that *Hetalia* is doing some efforts to dilute Japan’s dark history. Moreover, there’s a tendency to divert the issue of Japan’s militarism by feminizing Japan so that its image becomes “one of WW II victims”. This is in line with their efforts to water down their history to be written in their own history textbooks.



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