

BELITTLING JAPANESE NATIONALISM IN *HETALIA: AXIS POWERS*

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Hetalia: Axis Powers is a controversial Japanese web comic, started in 2006, and its spread into manga (2008) and anime (2009) have generated heated criticism for espousing neo-nationalist sentiment. I analyze *Hetalia* within the broader scope of nationalism within Japanese pop culture. Accusations of racism and historical revisionism have been made at Japanese neo-nationalists and the creator of *Hetalia*. However, I argue that contrary to its appearance *Hetalia* is actually an artistic rejection of the nationalism critics claim it purports. By comparing it to nationalist artists, such as Yamano Sharin (*Kenkanryu* 2005) and Kobayashi Yoshinori (*Sensoron* 1998), I show how the comedic and cinematic techniques employed in *Hetalia* belittle nationalist concepts.

Keywords: Japan, Nationalism, Racism, Historical revisionism, Anime.

Introduction

Following Japan's economic bubble burst, Japan has experienced the emergence of right wing nationalism espousing racist and revisionist beliefs. Japanese artists have attempted to promote its culture both in East Asia and abroad, but their efforts have been stifled by right wing nationalism, disputes on its war history, and racism. Scholarship on Japanese anime and manga has shown that they have tremendous potential both as commodities to export and as extensions of Japanese culture; however, scholars also warn that nationalistic artists can destroy the goodwill created by their nonpolitical colleagues (Iwabuchi, *Cultural Flows*, 271). In recent years, Japanese manga, such as Kobayashi Yoshinori's 1998 *Sensoron* and Yamano Sharin's 2005 *Kenkanryu*, have been used to transmit nationalistic rhetoric that aims to separate the Japanese people from a perceived "other," and to create rifts between Japan and its neighbors. *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, started as a web-comic in 2006 by Hidekazu Himaruya, walks a fine line between being offensive and humorous. In *Hetalia*, each nation is represented by a single character that embodies the nation's history and culture. All the characters are stereotypes of their cultures. The show is about the characters' interactions throughout WWII, although there are many side stories that are not a part of WWII, but the depiction of WWII is lighthearted and comical. *Hetalia* does not portray violence or accurate portrayals of history; *Hetalia* is a collection of gags mocking militarism and stereotypes.

Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Sensoron*, Yamano Sharin's *Kenkanryu*, and Hidekazu Himaruya's *Hetalia: Axis Powers* are all been accused of promoting nationalism; however, I argue *Hetalia* is actually trying to subvert the nationalism it appears to be espousing. Kobayashi's *Sensoron* and

Yamano's *Kenkanryu* are often cited as the two best examples of manga's ability to incite, or attempt to incite, nationalism by purporting racist notions of Asian people and revisionist ideas on Japanese war history. They attempt to prove Japan's innocence of all wartime misdeeds by selectively using facts and exploiting small errors in their opponents discourse. Kobayashi tries to examine discrepancies in some photographs of the Nanjing Massacre, in order to declare the event was fabricated (Ropers, 69). *Kenkanryu* does present some facts to help support its claims, but it does so in order to fit its version of the past whose "relativisation and ridicule of human suffering, mental and physical exploitation" undermine any honest discussion of history (Raddatz, 222). On the other hand, *Hetalia* condenses history for comical effect, but retains an antiwar sentiment by belittling wartime axis beliefs. In *Hetalia*, each character's nation is targeted for ridicule through its stereotypes, and I argue the stereotypes are not intended to create a sense of racial inferiority.

Hetalia's portrayal of South Korea started an uproar, which caused the film studios and publishers to remove the character entirely from its manga and anime editions. *Hetalia: Axis Powers* and its fans are bashed as racists portraying inappropriate stereotypes of other people's cultures and ignoring crucial details of the historical events it portrays. Although *Hetalia* is not as overtly hostile as *Kenkanryu*, *Sensoron*, or other nationalistic manga, the defense that *Hetalia* is satirical in nature has been largely ignored by academia. Thus *Hetalia* is a particularly effective example to study classical notions of a nationalistic identity in Japan, which is insensitive to its neighbors' cultures. In *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, Hidekazu Himaruya creates a world in which stereotypical embodiments of various Asian and European countries mock history. However, the intent of Hidekazu Himaruya was never to create a series that attacked people's cultures or histories, but rather to use the comedy of stereotypes to jest nationalism itself. A close examination of its plot, character development, and imagery reveals a subtle disdain for nationalism, which purports racism and false history. A closer examination of *Hetalia* may prove to not only assuage critics' feelings, but also offer a satirical rejection to the growth of neo-nationalism in Japan.

Background

The 1990's and 2000's saw a resurgence of nationalism, in Japan; Japanese right-wing nationalists have used manga and anime as some of the many cultural outlets to project their message. Kobayashi Yoshinori and Yamano Sharin are prime examples of writers who have taken their fight from the loudspeakers to manga coffee shops. Within the context of these and other nationalist surges, it is easy to understand foreigners' wariness of any Japanese manga or anime engaging sensitive subjects like WWII, in a non-conciliatory manner. Hidekazu Himaruya's *Hetalia: Axis Powers* is commercially successful in both Japan and America. However, Koreans openly condemn *Hetalia* at both the fan and governmental levels for being racist, insensitive, and inappropriately mocking national issues. Other critics decry *Hetalia's* portrayal of WWII, which ignores the atrocities of the axis powers, as a form of historical revisionism. Does *Hetalia* belong amongst other nationalist manga like *Kenkanryu* and *Sensoron*, or does it represent a comical rejection of nationalism purported by peripheral elements in Japanese society?

Before examining *Hetalia*, it is necessary to formally define certain terms like "nationalism," "historical revisionism," and "racism," which will be frequently used throughout the essay. Nationalism can take different meanings. Its visible effects inarguably differ from nation to nation; however, I agree with historian Dr. Ian Nish that within every nation

“nationalism affects one’s view of history” (Nish, 87). At its most basic level, nationalism is a cause and effect of conceptualizing a collective group of people as a nation (Doak, 34). When I refer to “nationalism,” I am referring to a distinction between the “self” seen as a part of the nation and an “other” which is seen as something separate and foreign. Dr. Yuko Kawai, of Rikkyo University, wrote that a nation or “self” “is realized by persuading people to share the map of meaning (i.e., nationalism) through which they interpret the world in a particular way. In addition, imagining a nation entails imagining the ‘Other’” (Kawai, 18). Nationalism’s separation of “self” and “other” naturally creates conflict. It can manifest itself as racism in order to further distinguish between “self” and “other”, by elevating the “self” and lambasting the “other.” Nationalism can also inspire people to vigorously defend and reinterpret the nation’s past in order to glorify the “self,” in spite of criticism foreign and domestic. I will focus on how nationalism in Japan has manifested itself in these two primary forms: racism and historical revisionism.

One manifestation of nationalism is its utilization of racism to glorify the “self” while demeaning the “other.” One manifestation of racism is stereotyping, which is often used as a way of conveying the physiological differences between “self” and “other” thus promoting racist notions. Philosopher Dr. J.E. Thomas considers “racism” to be the belief that certain groups are “socially inferior... [as] the result of an artificially created social stratification” (Thomas, 27). Sociologist Dr. Ray T. Donahue views “racism” as “the belief in the superiority of certain races for presumed genotypic or cultural reasons” (Donahue, 106). A common form of racism is “stereotyping.” Dr. Donahue considers “stereotyping” “an exaggerated image of a targeted group, which is motivated by intergroup tension” (Donahue, 90). A stereotype can easily be used to demean a targeted “other.” However, a stereotype does not have to be used to demean a specific “other”; it can be used merely to call attention to certain preconceived notions. Racism in East Asia is quite different than in the West, where it can be described on clearer racial and physiological distinctions. Japanese racism often manifests as a belief in their national homogeneity and cultural uniqueness separating them from both their neighbors and their minorities. Japanese minorities are often viewed as “outsiders” who are marginalized in society (Hane and Perez, 446). This is not to say that all Japanese people hold racist views or that they are culturally prone to unknown lapses of racism, but its historical persistence is crucial to understanding modern hostilities over cultural mediums like *Hetalia*.

Whereas “racism” is more about bashing and demeaning the “other,” “historical revisionism” attempts to glorify the “self” through a selective interpretation of facts. Philosopher Dr. Minoru Iwasaki defines “historical revisionism” not as a form of rewriting history but as “emotional reactions... which are based on the very barest of data, since they are unable to endure historical dialogue” (Iwasaki, Richter, and Calichman, 513). Involved in any historical revisionism is also a “boundless desire for self-narrative” (Iwasaki, Richter, and Calichman, 520). After the occupation of Japan ended, in 1952, the fear of communism allowed for the rehabilitation of some wartime leaders, which caused the Japanese government to silence its discussions of wartime atrocities (Saaler; Yoshida, 21). Since then, the Japanese government has gradually moved towards acceptance of its wartime history and attempts to reconcile with its East Asian neighbors. However, the 2001 “textbook controversy” shows governmental tolerance of right wing nationalists, attempts to revise the history of WWII, persist in modern times. The Japanese Ministry of Education approved the nationalistic *Tsukurukai’s New History Textbook*, after forcing *Tsukurai* to make revisions, but in the textbook “quite a number of instances remained that opponents regarded as ‘distortions of history’” (Ducke, 42). Despite *Tsukurai’s* textbook only being used in a handful of private schools, this caused tremendous protest inside

and outside of Japan, only reinforcing Asians' apprehensions about Japanese nationalism. Sociologist Dr. Gilbert Rozman argues that Japanese revisionist nationalism has explosive potential to damage its foreign relations with its East Asian neighbors (Rozman, 56). Other than in textbooks, Japanese emotional self-narrative has led to various manga artists publishing their own revisionist interpretations of history within their manga.

Manga and anime can be a good outlet for nationalists to use, but it can also be a tool to combat nationalism. Manga refers to Japanese comics, but manga can be a long, discursive text. Anime refers to Japanese animation; manga usually precedes its anime adaptation (Poitras, 61). In Japan and East Asia, anime and manga are much more prominent than in America, which means that they can spark a greater controversy than American animators. Since the 1990's, Japan's cultural exports, which make up a large chunk of its service sector's exports, like manga and anime have become increasingly visible across the world (Sugimoto, 14). Japanese animators and manga writers want to reach more than just children; they seek to create complex storylines to cross generational boundaries (Napier, *Anime*, 17). Manga and anime's role in advancing nationalism stems not only from its ability to reach a wide audience as a popular commodity, but also their ability to depict complex social issues. Japanese animation tends to involve more complex moral relativity and deep psychological realism than American animation (Napier, *Manga and Anime*, 233). Manga is also known for allowing readers to "defamiliarize our institutionally determined experiences and enable us to perceive history in new ways" (Rosenbaum, 7). Manga and anime are ultimately at the whims of their creator. For decades, right-wing nationalists have used graphic imagery, insulting caricatures, or offensive content to make manga serve their ideological agenda.¹ Although manga has been used by several artists to purport nationalist views of WWII and East Asians, manga also has a rich history as being a satirical outlet for criticism of governmental policy or as gag comedy (Ito, 467). *Hetalia* is a gag comedy, but it has a satirical component full of complex metaphors and undertones about racial stereotyping and militarism that requires more than a cursory glance to ascertain its meanings.

Hidekazu Himaruya's *Hetalia: Axis Powers* emerged in the mid-2000s as a huge web comic success that then transitioned into a manga, in 2008, and finally into an anime, in 2009, but with its success came protests of racism and inappropriate omission of wartime history. *Hetalia: Axis Powers* was originally a web comic created by Hidekazu Himaruya, in 2006, while he was studying at the Parsons School of Design in New York. Parsons, a prestigious art school, is an unlikely place to develop racist or historically revisionist thought. In 2009, it was translated and rereleased in English, where it was a *New York Times* Bestseller. Koreans and Korean Americans were and still remain some of *Hetalia's* staunchest critics. Before the anime launched in Japan, an online Korean petition protesting the launch had garnered over 10,000 signatures. On January 14th, 2009, before the anime debut, the Korean Minister of Trade and Foreign Affairs was berated by a Korean official for the possibility of an unhindered premier; in the "meeting posted online by the Korean public broadcaster MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation), and then reposted with rough English translation to YouTube, a female official identified on-screen as Jeong Mi-Kyeong cited the concerns of the 'netizens' and declared *Hetalia* a 'crime against Koreans' akin to slander"² (Annett, 298). In America, *Hetalia* is not as demonized as in Korea; however, many anime critics agree the show can be insensitive at times. In her review of the first season for *Anime News Network*, Hope Chapman viewed the premise of the show as

¹ Unlike manga, anime does not have a long history of usage by nationalists, because animation is much harder to produce than manga. Despite making the adaption to anime, *Hetalia* is still accused of purporting a nationalistic agenda hostile to neighboring East Asians.

² Youtube video with subtitles can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo_bt9s9-kM.

“uncomfortable” at best, where “inevitably, something will make your jaw drop in disbelief, even if it's stated with a wink and a smile” (Chapman, 1). She notes it is ultimately a light-hearted gag show, but she questions whether such a show should have been created in the first place. For every *Hetalia* fan, there is another furious anime blogger appalled by it.³ As the battle over *Hetalia*'s purpose rages in anime and manga circles, academia has as of yet not entered the discussion with earnest.

What little scholarship exists about *Hetalia*, has been lukewarm in its appraisal. As a recent phenomenon, especially in the English-speaking world, *Hetalia: Axis Powers* does not have a lot of scholarly research already published, but in Japanese newspapers and in a Canadian doctoral dissertation *Hetalia* has been praised and cautioned for its risky depictions. Sandra Annett, a doctoral student at the University of Manitoba, wrote her dissertation about transnational fan communities, and used *Hetalia* as one of her main case studies. Her ethnographic studies reveal its fan base is mostly young women (Annett, 273). Racially she sees *Hetalia* as “both promoting stereotypes and propels their re-imagining in new contexts” (Annett, 310). *Hetalia* does gloss over almost all of the war, especially the darker parts of the war, but if you watch the whole show, it is easy to realize the show is not about WWII. However, she acknowledges *Hetalia* is not supposed to be “an idealized community” and *Hetalia*'s fans have done a lot to try to fight the web-based anti-*Hetalia* sentiment (Annett, 309). In response to the initial TV delay of *Hetalia*'s premier, *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s Makoto Fukuda wrote that although funny “it may be better for world peace to limit the pleasure of such characters to this small Far Eastern Island nation” (Fukuda, 2). *Asahi Shimbun*'s Shigeko Matsuo extolls *Hetalia* acknowledging the humor of its characterizations, while recognizing its ability to make world history fun to learn, even if it teaches random and often incomplete stories. She argues its main benefit is making people want to learn more about world history and other people's cultures after watching it (author's translation, Matsuo). Due to the lack of extensive academic research, my claim that *Hetalia* is not the nationalistic ramble its critics claim is original.

My thesis attempts to give a close analysis of *Hetalia*'s plot, character development, and imagery, in order to delineate it from nationalist writers like Kobayashi and Yamano. I offer a different view of *Hetalia*'s meaning as an attack on the nationalism it is accused of purporting. In my opinion, *Hetalia* represents a highly successful manga and anime series that is unafraid of labels or critiques in its quest to provide satire and mock stereotypes. Although there are many countries that have not been introduced into the series, *Hetalia* does not play favorites by sparing certain cultures from gags. As a self-reflection, Japan is mocked far too much for *Hetalia* to be seen as glorifying Japanese culture or ethos. As a cultural export, it shows the limits Japan can push in its subject matter before its neighbors feel disrespected. Dr. Koichi Iwabuchi, of Monash University, argues that notions of nationalism can only be undone by “a critical consideration of media culture consumption, contextualized within a wider sociohistorical process of uneven globalization and considered in light of its uses for the advancement of a public pedagogy that contributes toward cross-border dialogues” (Iwabuchi, *Undoing*, 95). In my thesis, I attempt to accomplish Iwabuchi's goal of deconstructing the negative effects of nationalism unwantedly placed on *Hetalia* by a critical analysis of the anime. I will first analyze accusations of racism towards it by comparing it to *Kenkanryu*, and then I will examine *Hetalia*'s representation of history compared to *Sensoron*. My thesis examines some of the web comics that started the

³ On deviantart.com, I stumbled upon a rant by the anonymous “mewtalia”, who systematically eviscerates *Hetalia* for poorly portraying an inaccurate version of WWII: “The very *idea* of trying to make light of such a dark part of history is incredibly offensive” <http://mewtaila.deviantart.com/journal/Why-I-Cannot-Stand-Axis-Powers-Hetalia-231915296>

original controversy with Koreans, and then I will focus on the first four seasons (the fifth season has not been released yet) of the anime, which I think offers more room for analysis than the manga version.

Racism Through Manga and Anime

When comparing *Hetalia* to racist Japanese manga, I will use *Kenkanryu* (Hating the Korean Wave) as a benchmark for racism. *Kenkanryu* by Yamano Sharin was a commercial success, and it is derided for its racially charged depiction of Koreans along with its misrepresentation of Korean history during the Japanese occupation. The story follows a college student, Kaname, on his journey to discover the true history of Japanese imperialism. Kaname challenges Korean minority students to debate the truth behind the Japanese occupation of Korea. He wins all of the debates. The debates have “a nationalistic and jingoistic” feel, as they present one-sided pro-Japan facts “with a dramatic flair as though they are hidden truths” (Sakamoto and Allen, 5). By constantly winning and demeaning the arguments of the Koreans, Yamano actively attempts to glorify the Japanese “self,” while criticizing and patronizing the Korean “other.” *Kenkanryu*’s historical revisionism is coupled with stylistic devices intended to show the inferiority of the Korean people: derisive physiological features (the Koreans cannot open their eyes), emotionally hot-tempered, and cognitively irrational (Raddatz, 223). *Kenkanryu* is rightfully considered highly nationalistic for its racist and revisionist overtones, and its success has done little to assuage East Asians’ fears of the Japanese people as inherently racist. *Kenkanryu* has primed East Asians to be wary of any manga or anime that outwardly appears to be following in *Kenkanryu*’s nationalist footsteps.

Racism has been one of *Hetalia*’s biggest criticisms, but an analysis of the anime and the Japan-Korea comics shows that Himaruya neither glorifies the “self” (Japan) nor stigmatizes the “other” (Korea and the rest of the world). Korea as a character was never one of the main characters of the web comic, and he appears only in a small number of the comics. Korea’s character is portrayed as an immature teenager, but Korea’s character does not resemble Koichi the Korean in *Kenkanryu* (see figure 1). Koichi’s anatomical features represent negative stereotypes of Asian features, such as exceedingly slanted eyes and protuberant cheekbones (Raddatz, 223). Koichi is also portrayed as an emotional hothead. On the other hand, Himaruya’s Korea was represented by a tall, cute, teenager (see figure 2, 4, and 5). Unlike Koichi, *Hetalia*’s Korea can open his eyes and has some Caucasian features. In *Hetalia*, curly cowlicks are common traits amongst Caucasian characters like Italy (see figure, 3) and Canada. Since Korea has a cowlick and his light hair contrasts against Japan’s black hair, Korea actually appears more like a Caucasian than a racially stereotyped Asian. Korea as an “other,” in *Hetalia*, is not nearly as physiologically different from his Japanese counterpart as Koichi was to Kaname. Although Korea is not portrayed physically inferior to the Japanese, critics argue his immature personality and actions are racist.

Himaruya’s choice to make Korea an immature teenager rather than an adult may not have been the most sensible of choices, but it was also necessary for him to create jokes tailored to Japanese stereotypes of Koreans, which he could then subvert. In order to call attention to racist stereotypes and the absurdity of its preconceived notions, you need to first present a seemingly racist stereotype. Himaruya also had to try to make his jokes funny. As a result, Korea’s character, who teasingly argues with Japan about the origins of certain cultural items and tries to assert his dominance in cheeky ways, came off to many as insensitive. On some levels, the jokes are insensitive, and they are not politically correct. Sandra Annett believes *Hetalia*’s Korea was

an “overall a cute and friendly character... [but] the diminishment of Korea’s concerns and the infantilization of his character is consistent with more general depictions of colonized or conquered nations” (Annett, 301). I disagree with the notion of *Hetalia* infantilizing Korea; I believe the jokes serve a deeper purpose than to promote Korean stereotypes. The most controversial web comics pertaining to Korea and Japan is a comic of Korea tricking Japan into letting him grope Japan (see figure 4). The comic is weird and sexually charged. There were many who interpreted it as a perverse reference to the Takeshima/Dokdo dispute, where Takeshima was Japan’s breasts being molested by Korean intrusion (Annett, 297).⁴ While that interpretation is possible, I disagree. In the comic, Korea did not assault Japan or steal something from him. Korea starts a perverse dialogue by asking Japan to let him touch his breasts. He begs Japan to let him touch his breasts for a movie he is going to show to America. Japan then reluctantly gives Korea permission to touch him. It is only after Korea admits to Japan he was “really just touching,” that Japan panics and visibly struggles to free himself (author’s translation, Himaruya, figure 3). Despite supposedly making fun of Korea, it also shows Korea as the dominant character. Showing Japan, or Japanese characters, as weak and easily fooled would be repugnant to many nationalists like Yamano, and is uncharacteristic of an infantilized entity. This comic did nothing to glorify Japan. Although it casts the “other” as perverse, the “other” was also portrayed as crafty and physically strong, since Japan had to desperately struggle to free himself. Something *Kenkanryu* never did. Although Korea’s portrayal in *Hetalia* was not polite towards Korean sentiments, it does not promote racist notions of Korea’s mental or physical inferiority.

Hetalia’s Korean web comics have been criticized for portraying Korea as an immature upstart who makes false claims about cultural artifacts. Korea’s character does argue about the origins of Japanese cultural traditions, such as Kendo (see figure, 5), but the jokes are not always about the cultural origins. In Kendo’s case, the joke starts by Korea jesting that Korea originally developed Kendo. Ignoring Japan’s explanation of Kendo’s true origins, Korea interrupts Japan display his new car: ““more important than that [Kendo], Japan! Look at this Hyundai car, it’s the best!”” (author’s translation, Himaruya, figure 5). Japan appears shocked and irritated when he realizes a Hyundai was the real punch line. The true origins of Kendo did not seem to matter to Korea. In *Kenkanryu*, Koreans were making serious attempts to undermine Japanese cultural history (Raddatz, 221). In *Hetalia*, Himaruya is jesting at the notion that Koreans would seriously try to argue the origins of well documented cultural traditions. It is possible Himaruya is attempting to portray Koreans as immature. However, Korea is not seriously attempting to argue about Kendo, which is seen both by the casual tone of his speech and his lighthearted facial expression. I interpret the joke’s humor not to be the subject matter or punch line, but rather the juxtaposition between Japan’s stern defense of his nation’s past and Korea’s nonchalance on cultural differences. The juxtaposition implies Korea was not stubborn or ignorant, but instead playful. Had the two been serious in their convictions, the joke, if it could even be a joke, would be making fun of Korean stubbornness and cultural ignorance the way *Kenkanryu* did. I believe Himaruya rejects that style of racist comedy, in favor of lighthearted jabs at the triviality and absurdity of such jokes. Portraying Korea’s character as a teenager rather than an adult or its slightly immature personality can be perceived as offensive to the Korean people, but Himaruya was also constrained by the style of his jokes. *Hetalia* is about stereotypes and mocking preconceived notions about cultures. Had Korea’s character been a

⁴ Takeshima/Dokdo is a disputed island in between mainland Korea and Japan. After WWII, the Koreans began to administer the island, but Japan still claims ownership of the island. The dispute has led to a number of diplomatic confrontations, and as of yet neither side is willing to compromise on ownership.

normal adult with a normal personality he would not fit into the farcical world of *Hetalia*, because none of the characters are normal.

In *Hetalia*, every nation has its moments when its actions are designed to make people laugh at it, and Japan is no exception. Rather than idolizing Japan, *Hetalia*'s representation of Japan is a socially awkward, emotionally repressed, and sometimes obsequious character to be laughed at. He is neither the proud soldier in *Sensoron* nor the charismatic scholar of *Kenkanryu*. In season 3 episode 9, Japan is humiliated by Italy. Jokes about Japan are not uncommon. Italy is possibly the most mocked character on the show; he is portrayed as a cowardly, childish, buffoon who constantly frets at the thought of battle. The scene starts with Italy offering Japan a ride home in his car, because Japan is upset axis meetings, with Germany and Italy, are always in faraway Europe. Italy then proceeds to speed as fast as he could. Japan bobbles his head back and forth constantly, as he begs Italy to obey the speed limit, a concept Italy had never heard of. Japan's face is covered with vertical black lines indicating stress, while Italy smiles as the wind blows in his hair. The clip ends with Japan quivering in the fetal position, covering his mouth from fear, while Italy casually smiles informing him they had arrived at Japan's house. The narrator says, "I'll make safer cars," Japan vowed to himself" (season 3, episode 9). The clip, amongst many like it, is the equivalent of taking a *kanabo* and smacking Japanese pride in the face. The imagery, content, and character usage all combine to humiliate Japan. The image of Japan is that of a visibly stressed man trembling in the backseat, while an infamous coward is framed above him, implying Italy was the dominant character not Japan. If Japan's character had been a fearless soldier immune to cultural gaffes, I would argue *Hetalia* would be purporting an idealized notion of the "self" in order to promote nationalism. Himaruya's version of Japan, however, could not be farther from an idealized "self," nor does he try to blatantly dichotomize or attack a perceived "other."

In *Hetalia*, all of the characters are targeted for jest, but the jokes are never in a malicious manner, which prevents a perceived "other" from emerging. Himaruya does not try to isolate any one nation as an evil "other." Often episodes are structured so that each successive gag mocks a different character. Sometimes this can be disorienting, but I believe disorientation is a part of the satire. By placing gag after gag of stereotype after stereotype, the viewer is unable to pause and target any one character for serious ridicule. Their attention constantly shifts to a new target, until everyone seems like a fool. Unfortunately, the disorientation also precludes the viewer from pausing to reflect deeply on the misconceptions presented in any one particular joke. Season 3 episode 11 is a prime example of the rollercoaster style of gags. The episode starts with Japan lecturing China about copyright laws, but it ends with Germany scolding Italy for exploiting Japan's malleable nature to turn him into an Italianesque coward. Japan starts by looking as a serious nation proud of its technology and respect for international law. The next image of Japan is of a scared, shaking tourist. When he returns from touring Italy, he has changed his voice and posture to act more like a childish Italian. In the episode, Japan starts as a respectable character, but he ends without sense of pride in his culture and easily assimilates into a foreign culture. The announcer notes "that Japanese people get influenced very easily" (season 3, episode 11). A lack of solid pride in native culture is anathematic to nationalism. The "self" (Japan) is portrayed as hollow in the episode, and the "other," in this case Italy, is portrayed as having a vibrant infectious culture. The episode is a complete reversal of what Yamano and other nationalists are trying to accomplish; instead of instilling pride in the Japanese "self" Himaruya mocks the "self" and offers a positive view of the "other." By using a rapid succession of gags, none of the gags appear spiteful, and the viewer is unable to identify a particular "other" despised by Himaruya—*Hetalia* does not have a despised "other."

Yamano Sharin's *Kenkanryu* and Hidekazu Himaruya's *Hetalia: Axis Powers* are both criticized for racially charged depictions of stereotypes of other nations, but *Hetalia* lacks *Kenkanryu*'s malicious nature to demean Korea and glorify Japan. *Hetalia* does have politically incorrect and at times racially insensitive caricatures. Gag comedy based on jesting stereotypes and thus has to have some degree of politically incorrect imagery and character personalities. Neither in the original web comics nor in the anime version that followed it did *Hetalia* attempt to isolate Japan as a dignified "self" people should idolize. The "others" are often portrayed as the butt of jokes, but each nation also has its turn to be the dominant character, even at the expense of Japan's pride. Critics can dislike *Hetalia* for being tactless at times, but I argue their accusations of supporting malicious racism are based on curt examinations of the show, which do an injustice to Himaruya's true intentions

Historical Revisionism in Manga and Anime

Sensoron and *Kenkanryu* provide a baseline to show elements of racism and historical revisionism, which I will compare to such elements in *Hetalia*. They argue Imperial Japan was helping Asia, and any atrocities committed were either highly exaggerated or fabricated. This is in part a reaction to the growth of "Korean cultural productions, including television drama, film, pop music, etc. have become widely consumed by audiences in Asia" which have infiltrated Japanese culture (Shim, 15). Kobayashi Yoshinori, the author of *Sensoron* and other right-wing manga and essays, is a prominent critic of both the influx of Korean culture in Japan and also the lack of respect for traditional, especially imperial, Japanese values. He is commercially successful, and he incorporates other conservative writers' essays into *Sensoron*. Kobayashi selectively analyzes "primary sources" in an attempt to justify his bold claims, adding a scrap of creditability to his ideas (Sakamoto, 7). Kobayashi viciously attacks both the historical evidence behind the "comfort women issue" (an extremely sensitive issue to Koreans and the Chinese) and its implementation in Japanese textbooks (Ahn, 39). Dr. Rumi Sakamoto, of the University of Auckland, views *Sensoron* as "a fictionalized past [that] has both a nostalgic and utopian function as Kobayashi counterposes the heroism and self-sacrifice of the wartime soldiers with today's youth... overemphasizing the glory and honor, paying little attention to the cruelty, misery, and hardship of war" (Sakamoto, 6). *Sensoron*'s selective portrayal of WWII has rightly been ridiculed for its biased presentation of history, which omits details in order to protect the image of Japan.

Hetalia's critics decry it for more than just its perceived racist notions; they also denounce it for its interpretation of WWII and other historical events, which lack acknowledgement for grievances against Japan. Gag-comedy constrains Himaruya to a small amount of time to touch on important historical events, such as China's discovery of Japan, Russo-Japanese War, and WWII amongst others. The time constraints naturally appear as historical omission for the sake of defending the nation; however, *Hetalia* does not attempt to omit history to protect Japan's pride, but rather it condenses history for comical effect. To examine historical revisionism, it is best to start at the historical beginning of Sino-Japanese relations, which *Hetalia* heavily condensed. The story of Japan's emergence does not arise until the 16th episode of the first season, it is important to remember that in *Hetalia* Japan is not the most recurrent character. It starts with China introducing himself and telling the audience of an "ancient tale" (season 1, episode 16). When China is already a grown man, he finds Japan as an impertinent toddler alone in the jungle and offers to take care of him. China finds Japan is a fast learner but could not write. After he offers Chinese characters, he becomes enraged at Japan's development of

hiragana all by himself. China is then further frustrated when Japan pauses before accepting the title of “little brother” to China. At the end of the clip, under moonlight Japan tells China “I want to become strong” so I can fight the Western powers when they arrive, but China blew off the remark (season 1, episode 16). The clip covers a ton of historical ground and that may make it seem confusing and oversimplified, because it is oversimplified. Although the clip may leave the viewer with the impression that Himaruya believes Japan developed primarily on their own, a closer examination of the episode can offer a different perspective.

The condensation of pre-modern Sino-Japanese relations does not imply a desire to elevate Japan above China or deny the tremendous cultural inheritance Japan owes to China, but rather a stylistic necessity of balancing humor with history. Cinematically, the episode shows respect for China’s pervasive influence on Japan in its development from a toddler into an adult. When the story starts, we see a high-angle shot of China looking down on Japan, who is captured in a low-angle shot, implying China’s strength and power to be greater than Japan’s. The camera angles even out, as Japan matures, but they never switch to show Japan as the dominant figure. After Japan learns how to write, the narrator interjects “thereafter, Japan grew up without problems” implying that literacy was a defining moment in Japanese development—a development China gave to Japan (season 1, episode 16). Himaruya captures this development with a close up of China’s happy face, as he taught Japan; Japan’s close up reveals a straight but clueless face. The close ups reveal to the viewer the importance of writing, by showing Japan’s unawareness of such technology. Showing China’s face in a close up, portrays China as magnanimous, happy to help his neighbors. The portrayal of China is positive and respectful. When Japan hesitates to say he is China’s little brother, he is talking to a panda. By having him converse with a panda, Himaruya diminishes the importance of the delay and casts the scene out of any semblance of a meaningful history lesson. *Hetalia* is a comedy. Himaruya uses interjections of cuteness or silliness to remind the viewers what they are watching is not supposed to be a serious history lesson. It would be impossible to make a detailed history lesson on the origins of Sino-Japanese relations continuously funny. Himaruya is constrained by the need to entertain. Condensing and satirizing history becomes a necessity, however, that does not mean he is attempting to denigrate China’s role in Japan’s development or Chinese culture in general.

Hetalia: Axis Powers is known for comically depicting various periods of history, but its omission of certain details makes it appear to be revisionist propaganda; its depiction of the Sino-Chinese War, or lack thereof, and of the Russo-Japanese War are prime examples. Before those wars are examined, it is important to note some general facts about the show’s portrayal of historical events: none of them ever show any semblance of blood or real violence, most are brief clips, and they give only the most basic overviews. *Hetalia* shows China, in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, slaving away for France and Britain as a cook only to return home, and sees Russia already living in his house. It then cuts to a “Rough Map of China before the Russo-Japanese War” with China crudely chopped up into slivers going to France, Britain, Germany, and a “slowly encroaching Russia” (season 3, episode 6). The Sino-Japanese War is not portrayed in the episode. Unlike other historical events that are introduced in one episode and then clarified in a latter one, the Sino-Japanese War remains absent from the animated series. That is not to say it will not be brought up in the upcoming 5th season. China is then seen cowering by a corner gazing at Russia eating its food. Suddenly Japan drops out of nowhere waving a stick and asks Russia “Please Leave!” (season 3, episode 6). To the average viewer this looks pretty offensive, because an important part of Sino-Japanese relations is omitted and China is portrayed as helpless to stop foreign incursions into Chinese territory.

Cinematically, this episode does not match its apparent revisionist overtones and is a classic example of *Hetalia*'s mocking nationalism. When Japan comes to China's aid, all three characters are no longer their normal anthropomorphized selves; they appear as their heads attached to small white blobs resembling pillows. If Japan had arrived in the scene gallantly branding his *katana* and beating Russia to a bloody pulp to protect a helpless little China (see figure 6 from *Sensoron*), it would have been a clear attempt to rewrite history to excuse Japanese transgressions and promote Japanese nationalism. Himaruya could be trying to hide latent notions of revisionism by wrapping them with cuteness; however, Japan's characterization is laughable. He is a little blob with a stick, who even in the most serious of circumstances could not avoid being polite by saying, "please" (season 3, episode 6). *Hetalia* puts all three characters on the same level as non-anthropomorphized figures to indicate both the equality of man and to mock the idea of attempting to rewrite history. The whole episode is a collection of absurd jokes creating a mood of fragmented nonsense, in order to diminish any substantive attempt to pose as a message about history. The episode starts with America using a cheeseburger to try to cure Britain's cold, hardly the opening to a nationalistic tirade on the Sino-Japanese War or the Russo-Japanese War. The episode ends with Italy crying, because he lied to *chibitalia* (Italy as a baby) about growing up to be a powerful nation. Perhaps Himaruya could not think of a funny skit for the Sino-Japanese War, or perhaps the networks wanted to avoid the topic entirely. The result is the Sino-Japanese War is omitted and the Russo-Japanese War is cursorily mocked.

Contrary to its name *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, is not solely about WWII, and its omission of WWII fighting, especially its darker aspects, fuels criticism of its revisionist ideology. The fighting in WWII receives almost no coverage and only in the most indirect ways does it ever surface. WWI is briefly portrayed but only to make fun of Italy's poor showing. The buildup to WWII is shown with the formation of the Tripartite Alliance. A birds-eye shot is used to capture Japan's signing of the treaty, as Italy sleeps through the event. Rather than glorify Japan's military adventures, *Hetalia*'s bird's-eye shot of the signing implies a sense of hopelessness for the axis. Kobayashi's *Sensoron* displayed the Japanese soldier as proud and fearsome, but Himaruya condemns Japan's choice from the outset of the war. After the signing of the Tripartite Pact of 1940, Germany asks Japan if he could make U-boats for him. Japan replies that he could not, but he could miniaturize them and advertise them in new colors with popular voice actresses (season 1, episode 4). The U-boat then transforms into a Gundam Warrior surrounded by flashing colors. Flashing colors are usually used in anime to display awesomeness or the end of a transformation. In this scene, flashing colors is used to emphasize the absurdity of its historical inaccuracy. U-boats cannot transform into moving robots, and suggesting U-boats are nothing better than toys belittles axis militarism. Some critics claim that it was inappropriate to make WWII a laughing matter. Perhaps it is, but that does not mean that *Hetalia* is attempting to be insensitive to the victims of WWII. In my opinion, the scene uses a bird's-eye shot, Italy's aloofness, and jokes about axis militarism to mock the nature of the Tripartite Pact and the mindset of those nations during the war. By mocking the tools and ideas of war and degrading it into a minute long gag, Himaruya expresses his contempt for war and the foolishness of man to pursue it, thus creating an anti-war message rather than glorifying the imperial state as Kobayashi did.

The only fighting *Hetalia* portrays is on a remote island, which serves as a metaphor for the aloofness of wartime ideals. When the Axis Powers first arrive on the island, they decide on their new name "Axis Powers" which prompts Italy to dream of the world revolving around the three of them (season 1, episode 5). Historically, their plans were not dissimilar to Italy's dream. However, Himaruya does not glorify this dream; he intentionally presents it in a childish manner

to demean its symbolism. Italy reverts from his anthropomorphized self to merely his head attached to a small blob and speaks with a childish tone, while dreaming of world domination. The reversion of characters into just their heads, is not solely to provoke laughter, it is Himaruya's way of expressing his belief that the dream is childish. By demeaning the Axis ideal of world domination to that of a childish dream, Himaruya directly rejects the kind of nationalist pride and revisionism Kobayashi would approve of. Historical issues like V2 rocket strikes or treatment of POWs were given only brief segments. Season 1 episode 18, was the first time you see the two sides fight. In a low-angle shot from the axis perspective, America is laughing at the sword-and-pistol bearing Japan and Germany. The low-angle shot implies America's elevated strength, since Japan and Germany had to look up to see him. America then orders China, equipped with only a stir-fry pan, to fight. China leaps towards them in another low-angle shot showing China's comparative strength. China decisively crushes them. The camera switches to a bird's-eye view of the Axis Powers, in blob form, on the ground unconscious. Both the bird's-eye view and the change in the hierarchy of scale between the defeated tiny Japan and the victorious full-sized China demonstrate the powerlessness of the axis and the strength of the allies. More importantly it depicts the axis as pathetic. The three of them were reduced to the size of babies on the floor by a stir fry pan wielding Chinaman. The scene repeats itself in later episodes, and Japan's ignominious defeat happens each time. Himaruya may have glossed over the atrocities of war, but he did not glorify Japan. Figure 6, shows a scene from Kobayashi's *Sensoron*, which depicts Japanese forces overwhelming the Western powers. The Japanese forces appear triumphant in the foreground, while the Europeans and Americans are terrified in the periphery. Kobayashi's framing of a proud warrior flanked by the guns of a battleship indicates his desire to elevate the notion of Japan's former military glory; Himaruya's framing of Japan unconscious at the Allies' feet indicates his acknowledgment of historical facts but also his disapproval of glorifying the army. The depiction of wartime Japan as both the butt of jokes and cinematically weak is completely anathematic to Kobayashi's *Sensoron*.

Himaruya does not openly attack right wing nationalists who deny Japan's wartime history, but he does subtly offer a simple solution to tensions in East Asia: regret. If *Hetalia* attempted to seriously debate the evidence and historiography of Japanese wartime history, it would no longer be funny. It would probably be weird to see a comedy directly commenting on social and political issues. However, I believe through interrelated clips Himaruya does express his solution to the problem of tension between Japan and its neighbors indirectly through metaphors, which only someone who has seen a good amount of the show would understand. I believe that in season 4 episode 26, the final three fragments before the credits represent Himaruya's sincere belief in the need for reconciliation amongst East Asian nations and Japan. The first fragment shows three images that have been intentionally censored images. China yells at Hong Kong, "you'd need censorship. That's why I said don't do it!" (season 4, episode 26). Then the camera cuts to a long-shot of Japan in a field on a stormy day. Japan informs the viewer he wanted to wait until the last to show his final technique, and in a close up of Japan's emotional face he proclaims, "But if you're serious, I'll get serious, too! My final secret technique: Expression of Regret!" (season 4, episode 26). The ground then explodes upwards towards the sky, leaving a large crater at Japan's feet. The episode then cuts to the final fragment, which is merely an intertitle. The intertitle says, "Thus, the world has become peaceful thanks to a single Italian Person's underwear" followed by a falling pair of underpants. On the surface, these clips seem unrelated and confusing.

Although these three clips seem confusing and unrelated, their juxtaposition implies metaphorical continuity revealing Himaruya's true interpretation of the path towards East Asian

reconciliation. I think the first fragment is a metaphor for Japan's history of censoring wartime atrocities. Japan's textbook controversy in the 2000s shows a disturbing tolerance by the Japanese government to tolerate omitting details of Japan's wartime actions; however, in the past the Japanese government has actively tried to suppress information about Japanese wartime activities. In 1984, Ienaga Saburo, who sued the Ministry of Education for unconstitutionally intervening in the descriptions of historical facts, and liberal minded historians and journalists formed the Research Committee on the Nanjing Incident to counteract the governmental attempts to white wash wartime history (Yoshida, 23). Considering China addresses the censorship, Himaruya is referencing China's consistent role in attempting to hold Japan accountable to its wartime history. The second fragment is Himaruya's solution: regret. The long-shot of him alone in a storm is a metaphor for Japanese isolation in a time of growing turbulence, which could only be upturned by a sincere "expression of regret!" (season 4, episode 26). I believe Japan's "expression of regret," in *Hetalia*, is a reference to Prime Minister Murayama's apology to East Asia, in 1995. The Murayama apology formed the basis of governmental reconciliation policies and helped ameliorate Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese relations (Togo, 71). The final fragment is a reference to an earlier episode in which Italy's childish underpants calmed Germany's rage. The simplicity of the idea that peace could be solved by a pair of underpants is the joke's punch line, but I believe, underneath the surface, it represents a metaphor that the path to peace and reconciliation in East Asia is far simpler than assumed. For Japan, the path is regret. The Japanese government has expressed regret for Japan's role in WWII, but those efforts are often undermined by nationalistic revisionists like Kobayashi, politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine (commemorating class-A war criminals), and right wing politicians' statements (Jin, 170-1). Together the clips form a coherent dialogue: despite a history of nationalist attempts at censorship, the best road to reconciliation within East Asia is as simple as Japan expressing sincere regret about the past.

Kobayashi Yoshinori's *Sensoron* and Hidekazu Himaruya's *Hetalia* are both criticized for their inaccurate representations of history, which appears to be an attempt rewrite history to glorify Japan. Kobayashi is seriously trying to glorify Japan. *Sensoron* intentionally presents a nonfactual representation of history to glorify Japan's imperial history. Himaruya is trying to make comedy out of history. *Hetalia* does omit many historical facts, but it was never trying to be a serious historical discussion. When *Hetalia* condenses history for comical effect, the imagery and dialogue indicate the scene is solely a gag. Himaruya's metaphors and cinematography suggest he views war as senseless. Rather than supporting right wing nationalism, *Hetalia* appears to be a satirical anti-war anime.

Conclusion

Contrary to its detractors' claims of promoting Japanese nationalism, *Hetalia* utilizes the appearance of racially charged stereotypes and condensed historical events to subvert nationalist ideals. Detailed analysis of its plot, character dialogues, imagery, and cinematic techniques reveals contempt for Japanese nationalism, which promotes racist and historically revisionist notions. *Hetalia* should never be considered a valuable learning tool, other than for its ability to inspire people to learn more about world history. As gag comedy, it can be hard to see an overarching plot, especially because historical events are chopped up between episodes, but some clips are related with other clips to create metaphorical criticisms of nationalism and its deplorable impact on the state of relations between Japan and its neighbors. All of *Hetalia*'s characters are flawed in their own way, with no character, especially not Japan, rising amongst

the pack as a glorified nation or culture. Its characters are stereotypes who say and do nonsensical things, but *Hetalia* is not unfairly cruel or diminutive to any one nation. The show is self-aware. Its characters point out each other's flaws, rather than idealize one entity. *Hetalia*'s imagery mocks the seriousness of nationalism by reducing it to childish ideals. Nationalism is a serious matter in Japan; artists like Kobayashi and Yamano try to dichotomize the "other" from the idealized "Japan," and their views have spawned many critics in both the artistic and academic worlds. Although there has recently been a surge in nationalistic manga artists, there has also been a strong history of manga artists who have fought to present accurate interpretations of Japan's war history without attacking other nations for being racially inferior (Penney, 170). I believe *Hetalia: Axis Powers* is an artistic example of Japanese manga and anime that rejects the premise of nationalism and subverts it by using its sensationalized stereotypes to debunk the fallacies of nationalism for Japan's youth.

Although Japanese manga and anime like *Sensoron* and *Kenkanryu* have been used to purport racist and revisionist views, Himaruya is not alone in rejecting their nonsense. There are Japanese artists like Ishizaka Kei who acknowledge the cold realities of Japan's wartime history; their work "refuses to shy away from depicting the rape of military prostitutes... enjoin[ing] the reader to consider Japan's responsibility for its wartime actions" (Ropers, 74). The amount of people who buy, let alone adhere to, Kobayashi and Yamano's nationalistic manga is small in comparison to the population of Japan. However, their publications garner attention in Japan and abroad because "sensationalist denials attract more interest than moderate voices and patient scholarship" (Yoshida, 28). The works of the extremists, who are not the majority, tend to reverberate much louder than normal, rational voices from Japan. As a result, the extremist voices have primed other East Asians to be critical to any Japanese manga or anime that attempts to show stereotypes or represent Japan's imperial past. *Hetalia*'s controversial nature probably helped it grow commercially, but I believe it successfully walks the fine line between politically incorrect gaffes at nationalism and supporting nationalism itself.

Appendix

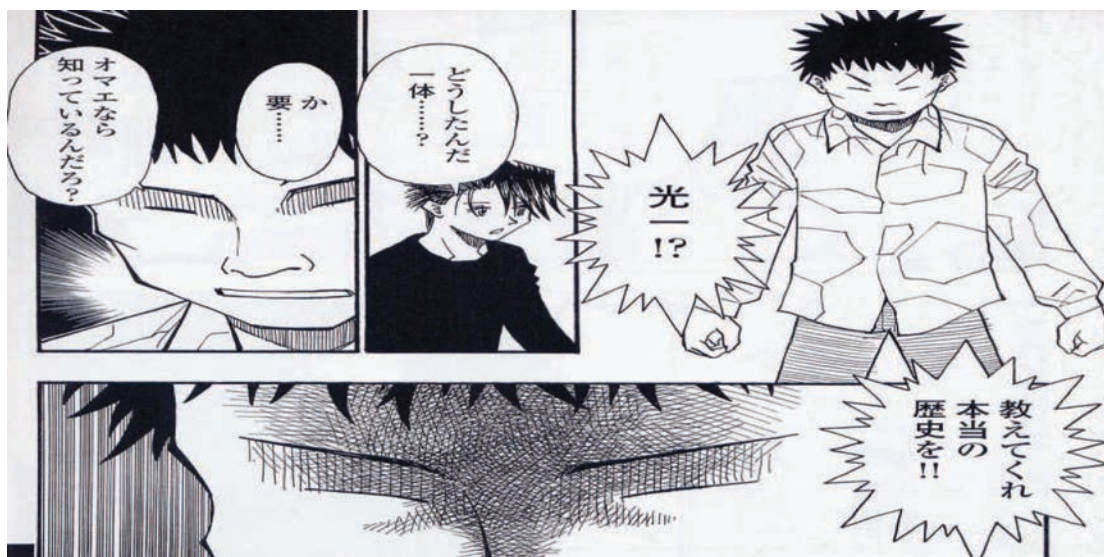


Figure 1. *Kenkanryu*'s Koichi.

<<http://www.google.com/imgres?hl=en&tbo=d&biw=1333&bih=645&tbm=isch&tbnid=0Ep8ku81MvtwFM:&imgrefurl=http://www.japanfocus.org/-Mathew-Allen/2535&docid=nwfjXQp7bmAZQM&imgurl=http://www.japanfocus.org/data/fig%252520%252520Koichi%252520asking%252520Kaname%252520to%252520to%252520teach%252520him%252520the%252520%2527true%252520hi story!%2527.jpg&w=1588&h=1376&ei=tv--UKuEHJCO8wTGoIDACQ&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=446&vpy=118&dur=2615&hovh=210&hovw=241&tx=120&ty=87&sig=106061204387487048029&page=1&tbnh=136&tbnw=157&start=0&endsp=29&ved=1t:429,r:4,s:0,i:95>>



Figure 2. Hetalia’s animated Korea (never made it into the animated series).
http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Hetalia:_Axis_Powers_characters

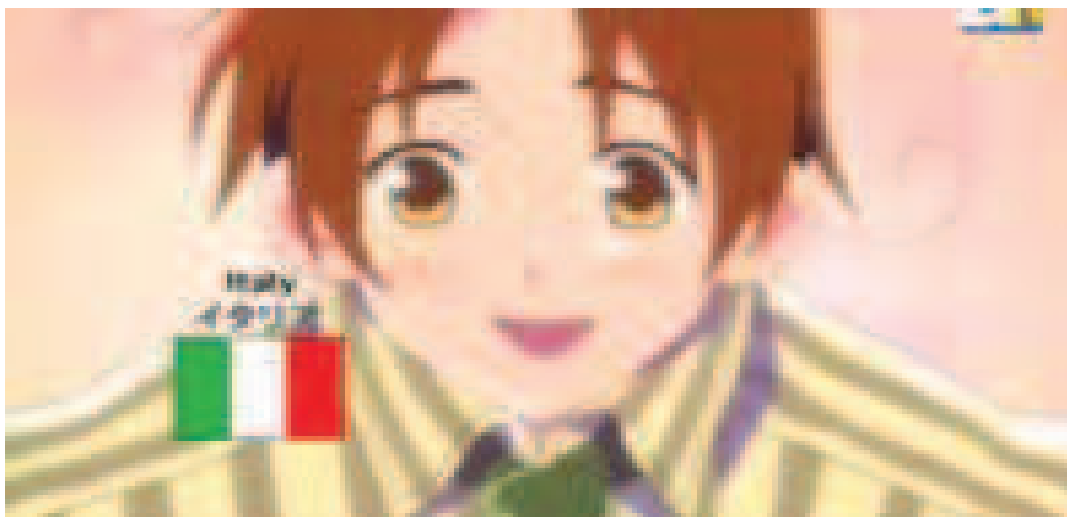


Figure 3. Italy’s character showing his cowlick.
http://hetalia.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Hetalia:_Axis_Powers_characters



Figure 4. web comics of Japan and Korea.
< http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/k_r.htm >



Figure 5, Korea and Japan argue about the origins of *Kendo*.

< http://www.geocities.jp/himaruya/k_r.htm >



Figure 6. Sensoron's glorification of the Japanese Army, "For teaching them a lesson, Japanese soldiers deserve applause" (author's translation). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:G_On_War_excerpt.jpg>

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