

23 Fantasy wars and their real-life inspirations

Tourism and international conflicts caused by *Attack on Titan*

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‘Contents’ has been defined as ‘the combination of the creative elements’ (Seaton *et al.* 2017: 2). In this sense, all contents can be called fiction. There is a wide range of war-related contents, ranging from those which strongly reflect historical facts to those which are complete fantasy. Well-known examples of fantasy wars produced by the Japanese contents industry include *Mobile Suit Gundam* (TV animation series, 1979), *The Legend of the Galactic Heroes* (science-fiction novel, 1982–1989), and *Attack on Titan* (manga, 2009–2021). Fujitsu (2021) presents a useful classification schema for animation contents measuring the distance of the contents from historical fact according to whether the story is ‘historical’ or ‘non-historical’, or ‘linked’ to an actual historical war or ‘not linked’ to one (Fujitsu 2021: 7–8, 120–121). Using this schema, a fantasy war can be defined as a war created at a considerable factual and relational distance from the actual wars of history.

Fantasy wars are consumed as events in a fictional world, rather than as events in the real world, even though fantasy wars may include in some creative way real historical elements in the motifs, characters, and weapons in the story. *Clouds Above the Hill* (Chapter 12) and *Grave of the Fireflies* (Chapter 17) are war-related contents based on historical events which occurred in the real world. By contrast, *Mobile Suit Gundam*, *The Legend of the Galactic Heroes*, and *Attack on Titan* are also war-related contents, but they are not based on historical events and depict non-historical fantasy wars. This chapter focuses on the tourism imaginaries of *Attack on Titan* (manga 2009–2021; TV animation series 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020–2021, 2022; live-action film 2015) and how interpretations vary internationally.

War in *Attack on Titan* and related contents tourism

Attack on Titan was originally a dark action fantasy manga by Isayama Hajime. The first half of the story appears to be about the battles between

humans and titans. However, in the later stages it turns into a story about war between ethnic groups. The titans, depicted as the enemy of mankind, are an ethnic group called Eldians who are being persecuted and used by another ethnic group, the Marleyans. The story, therefore, is not about battles between mankind and titans, but about war between human beings.

Attack on Titan includes many war-related scenes, such as invasions of other countries by Marley (the nation that controls the titans' power), racism against Eldians, and the actions of various political cabals. All the war-related scenes in *Attack on Titan* are non-historical fantasy events, and Eldians, Marleyans, and all nations and ethnic groups in the story are fictional. As such, *Attack on Titan* has an important characteristic of fantasy-war contents tourism: its story allows audiences in different countries to read messages from the story into the real social issues around them.

Attack on Titan is set in a fantasy world and uses fictional locations. However, it induces tourism in the real world. Nördlingen in Germany is often considered by fans to be one of the model locations for the story because of the similarity of the landscapes (Tabizine 2018). Fans use their imagination to connect Nördlingen's landscape and the fictional city surrounded by giant walls in *Attack on Titan*, and relive the narrative world there as tourists. This type of tourism destination is not a location or a model for a scene but is visited by fans simply because of its similarity to the scenery in the story.

Attack on Titan also generates international tourism. The Japanese TV programme *Why did you come to Japan?* (broadcast 23 August 2019) introduced tourists who visited Japan to see the *Attack on Titan Final Exhibition*, which they visited multiple times during their stay (TV Osaka 2019). In addition, for several years from 2013, when the TV anime was broadcast, the authors observed an international boom among cosplayers to cosplay the characters of *Attack on Titan* at pop culture events both inside and outside of Japan (Figure 23.1).

Attack on Titan also encourages creators' tourism imaginations. It was adapted into a live-action film in 2015, and the shooting location was Hashima Island in Nagasaki prefecture, also known as Gunkanjima (Battleship Island). Nagasaki Prefecture Convention and Tourism Association, which helped with the filming, said the island was selected as a shooting location probably because 'the island's decrepit architectural landscape was close to the image of the blighted city attacked by titans' (Huffington Post 2014). On 11 and 13 May 2014, the staff and cast visited the island to shoot the film (Eiga.com 2015). The original manga, therefore, induced 'creators' tourism' as they searched for appropriate filming locations (Yamamura 2020: 62). Furthermore, as part of Nagasaki



Figure 23.1 A scene from *Attack on Titan* re-enacted by French and Korean cosplayers at Japan Expo 2013. They had both travelled to Paris to cosplay. Photo: Yamamura Takayoshi.

Prefecture's official tourism promotion, Nagasaki Prefecture Convention and Tourism Association and Nagasaki Prefecture introduced a recommended route for visiting shooting locations on their official website (Nagasaki Prefecture Convention and Tourism Association n.d.). This is a typical example of film-location tourism in the manner of other non-historical fantasy-war contents such as *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Lord of the Rings* (Bolan and Kearney 2017).

Audience literacy, tourism imaginaries, and national conflict

Attack on Titan not only induces tourism but also generates confrontation among fans regarding social issues in the real world. *Attack on Titan* depicts anti-Eldian racism by Marleyans as a problem between two ethnic groups. The story is fictional, but some people read it as a metaphor and interpret the story as having an 'anti-Korean, nationalist, pro-Japan subtext, parallels to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and subtextual references to Nazi Germany' (Speelman 2019). But Speelman also notes, 'no one can clearly say what [the author of *Attack on Titan*] Isayama's true intentions are except for him'.

As seen regarding *Grave of the Fireflies* (Chapter 17), gaps can exist between the creators' intentions and audience interpretation, which 'raise various sensitive issues related to historical awareness and political ideas'. In a way, the international issues regarding *Attack on Titan* are even more sensitive. This is not so much a question of creators' intentions, but rather of audience literacy and what messages the audience reads from the content. While *Grave of the Fireflies* is a classic example of the contents depicting historical war, *Attack on Titan* is a typical case of non-historical war. However, both exhibit a gap between the creators' intentions and audience interpretation, and both create imaginaries of real-world problems such as war and racism.

In 2010, Isayama said in his blog that one of *Attack on Titan's* characters is based on Akiyama Yoshifuru (1859–1930), a general in the Imperial Japanese Army (see Chapter 12). Following this revelation, people claiming to be Korean wrote comments criticizing Isayama's use of Akiyama as a model and his unacceptable historical consciousness (Isayama 2010). Some Koreans see Yoshifuru as a war criminal who 'was responsible for countless atrocities against Korea and China during Japanese occupations' (Speelman 2019). This reaction triggered conflict among fans of different nationalities in East Asia, who have different perceptions of war history. This conflict attracted attention outside of Asia, too (Ashcraft 2013; Speelman 2019). Through transnational consumption, the fantasy-war contents gave audiences in each country the opportunity to make connections between the real world and fictional world, and metaphors allowed the audiences to link real social issues and a fictional story. This process can sometimes generate negative emotions and trigger serious political conflict among fans.

While there are conflicts over historical perceptions among these different audiences, it has not spilled over in any obvious way into *Attack on Titan* contents tourism. The contents tourism phenomena can be seen as a form of entertainment, such as travelling to see similar landscapes to the city in the film, visiting filming locations, enjoying related exhibitions, and attending cosplay events, all of which are separate from the historical issues mentioned in this chapter. In other words, audiences can separate enjoyment of the narrative world of *Attack on Titan* from the war-related issues they can read from the contents. A similar conclusion was drawn regarding *Shin Godzilla* in Chapter 22. As has been demonstrated, fantasy wars induce contents tourism and simultaneously make audiences interested in social issues related to historical wars. Fantasy wars, therefore, are an important category of war-related contents tourism about which much further research is possible.

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