

A Roman in Kyoto: Empire Nostalgia in Takeushi Hideki's *Thermae Romae* (2012)

This presentation explores Takeushi Hideki's *Thermae Romae* (2012), and investigates how this Japanese film uses the cinematic site of ancient Rome both to project and confront its "empire nostalgia." While scholars have compared ancient East Asian and Greco-Roman history and culture within a broad theoretical paradigm, only recently has scholarship begun to engage specifically in cross-cultural "deep comparison" between the literary cultures of Rome and Japan. In her recent book, Wiebke Denecke (2014) compares the literary cultures of Rome and Japan, and articulates how each of these "latecomer" cultures developed and defined itself against the backdrop of a highly sophisticated, earlier "reference culture," Greece and China. Denecke's book illuminates striking similarities in how the younger literary cultures of Rome and Japan sought to establish their own distinctive identities, for example, by reconstructing origins for their later literary traditions to compete with those of the older cultures; by presenting accounts of their predecessors' "decline" in contrast with their own progressive "simplicity"; and by formulating narratives of state formation with heroic founding myths and evocations of the imperial capitals, Rome and Kyoto, as important cultural spaces.

But while this scholarly juxtaposition of Rome and Japan makes for fruitful academic discovery, the comparison can perhaps be made more immediate through the lens of modern popular culture, where Japan engages directly with ancient Rome. Here are two cultures of extraordinary global influence, both defined by the beauty and power of their intellectual and cultural achievements, both celebrated and reviled for their imperial ambitions, both firmly structured around social and military hierarchies, both fixated on the mysteries of death and meticulously observant of its ceremonies, and both passionately obsessed with bathing, in all its

rituals and *accoutrements*, or as one internet commenter describes it, “the two cultures in the world that have loved baths the most: the Japanese and the Romans” (*myanimelist.net*).

This paper considers the relationship between ancient Rome and Japan as presented in *Thermae Romae*, the successful film adaptation of Yamazaki Mari’s best-selling six-volume *manga* of the same title (2008-9). This time-traveling comic fantasy, set in the year 128 AD in the time of Emperor Hadrian, introduces Lucius Modestus (Abe Hiroshi), a prominent Roman bathhouse architect who is disheartened by his lack of new ideas. Under pressure to satisfy the Emperor’s hunger for innovation, Lucius tries to relax away his troubles in the Roman *thermae* (baths), when he is sucked through a drain/time-tunnel and emerges into a present-day Japanese public bathhouse: as one critic puts it, the film’s premise is “*Hot Tub Time Machine* meets *The Fall of the Roman Empire*” (Mintzer 2012). The first half of the film offers numerous site gags that capitalize on the familiar “fish out of water” screen trope crossed with the foreigner who is stupendously impressed by Japanese ingenuity, a stock figure in local tourist videos (Schilling 2012): Lucius is both amazed and inspired by Japanese aquatic marvels, although as an elite ancient Roman he refers to the old men he encounters in the bathhouse “flat-faced slaves.” Guiding him Beatrice-like through this wonderland of hydraulic technology is Mami (Ueto Aya), an aspiring *manga* artist (a sly intertext with the story’s graphic origins), as Lucius travels back and forth from Rome to Japan, picking up ideas and artefacts. The second half of the film, however, delves into imperial court intrigue, when Lucius attempts to bolster the regime of the noble Emperor Hadrian (Ichimura Masachika), whose position is challenged by a dissolute aristocrat, Ceionius (Kitamura Kazuki). This presentation examines how the film negotiates the theme of “empire nostalgia” in several ways: how the casting of the statuesque Abe and the other Roman roles with established Japanese actors of “western” physical features, speaking Japanese

(and sometimes Latin), encourages the visual and aural identification of the two cultures; how the filming location at Cinecittà studios in Rome promotes a link with the golden age of “Hollywood on the Tiber” productions and their nationalist strategies; how the adaptation from the hip native genre of *manga* to the conservative “epic” cinema effects a crucial shift in tone and compels a greater focus on the narrative of empire; and how setting the film in the Hadrianic reign permits the use of the “*Gladiator* formula,” that is, the interrogation of the “good” vs. “bad” imperial models. This presentation contributes to the panel discussion of the globality of onscreen Rome by demonstrating how it is a valuable site for the projection of modern anxieties and aspirations even in contemporary Japanese film.

Bibliography

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