# MEDIEVALISM IN EAST ASIA – I:
## FROM PRINTED STORY-WORLDS TO DIGITAL ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

University of Salford, Manchester (UK)
2 – 3 December 2021

**CALL FOR PAPERS**

Images of the European Middle Ages, refashioned through the lens of *fantasy* or not, are massively present in our contemporary imagination and can be seen everywhere around the World. Such an ubiquity has pushed Academia to finally give the field of Medievalism Studies the recognition it deserves, ensuring that the phenomenon of medievalism, from its early beginnings to its *neo* forms, manifestations and impacts, can be scrutinised with much attention. Surprisingly though, one cultural area remains either under-appreciated or marginal at best in research on medievalism, despite becoming one of the most remarkable providers of neo-medieval creations: that is, East Asia, and in particular, Japan.

In facts, altered representations of the European Middle Ages have long been present in Japan – on the front cover of the first issue of children's magazine *Akai Tori* (1918), in the manga *Nazo no kurōbā* (1934) by Matsumoto Katsuji, or *via* the surprising fact that the Japanese translation of *The Hobbit* (1937) by J.R.R. Tolkien was one of the earliest (1965). Nowadays, neo-medieval images and narratives enjoy colossal success in Japan, and can be found across a great variety of genres, media and fields – manga, anime, games, light novels, movies, even radio drama and architecture; it has come to a point where their presence can hardly be missed in daily life, and where leading a "neo-medievalist life" through adventuring and socialising every day in neo-medieval MMORPGs has become normal.

And through the successful reception of Japanese popular culture overseas, neo-medieval images "made in Japan" have been seeping into foreign contemporary imaginations, from Europe to the USA and East Asia, to such an extent that they have heavily altered the flow of circulation of Medievalism as a whole: today, Japan has become one of its main driving forces. This process is gaining even more momentum if we consider the massive success of the neo-medieval MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV*, which in 2020 reached the most impressive number of 20 million users world-wide. With the rise of such a global community, Japan's neo-medievalism confirms its change of status: it is not just a cultural entity capable of crossing borders anymore; it now transcends them, creating a new sense of belonging and shared images way beyond local differences.

Meanwhile in East Asia, China and South Korea have been narrowing the gap with Japan, establishing themselves as strong receptors and providers of medievalism. One has only to look so far as their numerous trendy neo-medieval *manhua*, *manhwa*, and (web)novels (i.e. *Overgeared* by Park Saenai, or *Only I level up* by Chugong), or the success of both local and foreign games pertaining to medievalism there, from *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, to the recent *Genshin Impact*.

But, how, and when did altered Japanese representations of the European Middle Ages emerge, and come to be ubiquitous? What are the European medieval texts and images that have been, or are being transferred in East Asia? How deep is the influence of modern *fantasy* authors (e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, Robert E. Howard)? What of the role-playing game *Dungeon & Dragons*? How do Japanese Middle Ages images and folklore co-exist with the European Middle Ages in neo-medieval story-worlds? What are the characteristics, the internal movements of Japanese Medievalism? How do other East Asian Medievalisms differ? What part has Japan's mangaesque and digital culture played in the rise and success of its neomedievalism, locally and globally?

Never before in the history of Medievalism, has a culture outside of the European and US-American spheres been able to challenge in such a way the essentialist presumption that the European Middle Ages is "theirs". In what ways Japanese Medievalism, and East Asian Medievalisms in general, are shaping contemporary Europeans' reception of the European Middle Ages, their relationship to its heritage, and to the notion of "Middle Ages" itself?

Medievalism is commonly understood as "the reception, interpretation or recreation of the European Middle Ages in post-medieval cultures" (Louise D'Arcens 2016). If so, how, then, should we theoretically address works that play with the "Japanese Middle Ages"? Should they be kept under notions such as *jidai shōsetsu* ("Period fictions") and *rekishi shōsetsu* ("Historical fictions")? What about Chinese works categorised as *Xianxia*, which often involves local medieval elements? Should the notion of "Medievalism" encompass any "medieval" period – if such wording can be applied to another cultural area to begin with –, or should it be used only when it involves the European Middle Ages?

SUBMISSIONS

December 2021 will mark the 20th anniversary of the cinema's release of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by the New Zealander film director, writer and producer, Peter Jackson; an adaptation that rekindled the flame of Medievalism all over the world. What better occasion, then, to look at Tolkien's influence in East Asia, as well as extend our observations to the general state of Medievalism in, and from East Asia, and particularly in, and from Japan? Moreover, with the dramatic passing of Miura Kentarō – author of the manga *Berserk*, one of the most iconic and influential neo-medieval manga – in May, such a research endeavour appears even more necessary than before.

As such, we, at **Mutual Images Research Association**, have decided this year to start a sub-series of our annual International Workshop, dedicated to Medievalism in East Asia. This first edition, done in co-operation with, and hosted by **the Digital Curation Lab at the University of Salford (Manchester)**, aims to explore the reception, interpretations and refashionings of the European Middle Ages across all genres and media in East Asia, from early to most contemporary creations, from printed story-worlds to digital role-playing games. Participants are asked to consider the cultural, ideological, or theoretical implications of such recreations of the European Middle Ages.

We invite proposals for **20-minute papers**. We encourage submissions characterized by interdisciplinary approaches and based on frameworks coming from all disciplines of humanities and social sciences. This workshop **is open to PhD students and academics at any stage of their career**. Papers for this workshop can fall into, but are not limited to, the precedent questions and the following categories:

- Historical evolution of Medievalism in East Asia (e.g. Japan, South Korea, China)
- The reception and legacy of Tolkien in East Asia
- The influence of *Dungeons & Dragons* in East Asia
- Adaptation of European medieval texts, folklore, mythology and/or medieval history
- (Neo)medievalism in serial narratives (anime, manga/manhwa/manhua, novels)
- The *isekai* phenomenon in Japanese neomedievalism
- East Asian game industries and neomedievalism
- The impact of digital technology on medievalism in East Asia
- The reception of Japanese, South Korean or Chinese (neo)medievalism in Europe
- Musical (neo)medievalism in East Asia
- Eco-medievalism in East Asia
- Theoretical approaches of Medievalism when applied to an East Asian context

### DEADLINE AND WRITING RECOMMENDATIONS

Abstracts (≈300 words), a short bio, and 5-10 keywords should be submitted by **6 September, 2021**.
Abstracts are to be submitted to the following address: mutualimages@gmail.com
Your email subject line must read: **MUTUAL IMAGES 2021 Abstract Submission**. We acknowledge receipt and answer to all paper proposals submitted. If you do not receive a reply from us within a week, please resubmit.

All papers presented **may be subsequently submitted to the peer-reviewed research journal *Mutual Images – https://mutualimages-journal.org*.**

Due to Covid-19, we are expecting to hold this workshop at best **as a hybrid event with in-person as well as online participation, with the option of having it fully online. More details will be announced, later on, on this particular point. We will use the institutional virtual platform (Blackboard Collaborate). Access details will be provided in due time.**

**Under agreement with contributors, conferences video recordings will be available for free as part of a newly established MIRA (Mutual Images Research Association) Archive.**

Join Organising Chairs:
Dr. Maxime Danesin (Mutual Images Research Association, France)
Dr. Manuel Hernandez-Perez (University of Salford, Manchester, UK)
Dr. Juan Hiriart Vera (University of Salford, Manchester, UK)

For more information, visit
https://www.mutualimages.org
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