

RESEARCH OF NOTE

Marketing Japan: Manga as Japan's New Ambassador

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If one is rolling through any major bookstore in the U.S. today one will encounter a prominently placed set of shelves labeled “Graphic Novels.” This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Fifteen years ago, most comic books were sold in specialty stores in the U.S..¹ but since the turn of the century, comics have made a resurgence. This trend has been fueled by new marketing tactics such as the use of the term “graphic novel” in order to combat the connotations of geeky adolescent boys, and by the promotion of a succession of Hollywood blockbusters based on traditional American comics—X Men, Batman, Spiderman, Iron man, the Hulk, the Shadow, Watchmen, etc, and the end is not yet in sight. However, as you start to peruse the “Graphic Novel” section of your local bookstore you will notice that roughly three quarters of the shelf space is devoted to manga (Japanese comics). Manga sales in the US have escalated in the past decade, from \$60 million in 2002 to \$200 million in 2007.² In fact, the explosive popularity of manga along with the cross-promotion of American comics through Hollywood are the driving forces behind the increasing prominence of graphic novels in the United States overall.

At the same time, in Japan, the press, scholars, and even government officials are labeling Japanese popular culture “Japan’s new ambassador.” If one peruses the manga studies section of any major Japanese bookstore, one will find numerous books describing or examining the appeal manga and anime³ have for international audiences. Additionally, in the past decade,

the Japanese government has begun to capitalize on the global popularity of Japanese popular culture. This new way of promoting Japan is evident in the pamphlet “Creative Japan,” produced and distributed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It asserts that, “It is impossible to fully convey here the magic of contemporary Japanese culture, which draws on a creative tradition with unbroken links to the past. However, we offer this brochure in the hope that it will enable people from other parts of the world to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of Japanese contemporary culture.”⁴ With short introductions to manga, anime, games, art, fashion, food, literature, architecture, design and technology, the brochure promotes international relations and an understanding of contemporary Japanese culture. Likewise, the former Prime Minister Taro Aso, a fan of manga and anime himself, identified Japanese tourism and culture as one of three high growth areas that would help revitalize the economy by the year 2020.⁵ One of the more provocative moves toward achieving this goal included the 2009 appointment of three new Foreign Ministry officials, known as “Cute Ambassadors.” The ambassadors, three young women dressed in popular fashion styles, travel to international festivals and events in order to teach about Japanese culture and popular culture.⁶ Through the initiation of international exchange projects related to traditional culture and art as well as pop culture, Prime Minister Aso hoped to make use of Japan’s soft power to further develop overseas markets for national products. In these examples we see a manga and anime as cultural ambassadors to the world.

In recent years a handful of scholars have argued convincingly as to why Americans like manga and anime, positing: exoticism, a dissatisfaction with simplistic American media, post 9/11 disillusion, etc.⁷ In this paper I examine the ways that manga has been translated, distributed, and marketed in order to determine the ways in which publishers promote or conceal the “Japaneseness” of Japanese popular culture. In particular, I focus my attention on the ways that cultural difference enters into discussions of manga markets in the U.S. with regard to format, content, and audience. By examining the

instances where publishers have successfully made decisions to keep Japanese content and the ways that these decisions have led, at least in part, to manga's popularity in the U.S., some light can be shed as to the ways that cultural differences are being played out throughout Japanese popular culture⁸ with special reference to the ways that Japanese culture is produced, packaged, and promoted through the international manga market.

Manga on the move: Licensing and Distribution of manga in the U.S.

Manga is a main medium of entertainment in Japan and has held such stature for much of the postwar era (since 1945). Manga, which literally means “various or whimsical pictures,” today refers to the expressive print medium that combines words and images to tell a story, or comics. While the word itself refers to a broad spectrum of print media, from one frame political satire, to four frame funnies, to longer two to three page gag manga, to dramatic short stories, multi-volume serialized novels comprise the bulk of the genre. Since the 1960s, manga have comprised between twenty to forty percent of all Japanese publications, although in recent years it has remained around twenty-two percent. In fact, the manga industry is not a specialty industry, but rather, most manga come from a manga division within a major publishing house. The top four publishing houses in Japan today (Kodansha, Shogakukan, Shueisha, Kadokawa) have the largest market share of manga alongside the standard fare of fiction, non-fiction, magazines, etc. Thus, manga developed into a mass medium like television or film, ranging in quality from literature to pulp fiction, with themes of historical romance, futuristic fantasy, super hero conflicts, high school life, sports, and economics. That is to say manga have become a fundamental part of popular culture in Japan, providing the backdrop to many other important forms of popular culture in Japan including anime, television, film and video.

Contrary to manga production in Japan, where it is a critical part of the culture industry, its success overseas has been primarily driven by fan interest, rather than by large-scale

corporate interests, although that is beginning to change. That is, until recently, most manga sales overseas were initiated by the importing company not by the Japanese publishing houses. Accordingly, Japan artists and editors focus their creative energies on their Japanese audiences, yet publishing houses have established international divisions to manage the licensing of their products and broker contracts for manga with international companies. As fan bases overseas continue to grow, manga publishers in Japan have begun to think about marketing their products overseas, even though the national market is still primary.⁹

Manga entered the market in the U.S. as a result of the popularity of anime. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, small groups of fans worked together to obtain and circulate a range of Japanese anime (animated TV shows and feature films). In fact from the 1960s onward, several anime were showcased on American television in major children's television timeslots ("Astroboy," "Speed Racer," "Star Blazers"). By the early 1990s, two anime feature film releases ("Akira" and "Ghost in the Shell") in theaters in the U.S. started the anime/manga boom that this paper addresses.¹⁰

Anime was much easier to import initially because it only required the addition of subtitles or voiceover dubbing (voiceovers).¹¹ On the other hand, the language and formatting of manga was initially cumbersome to translate. It wasn't simply a matter of translating the content and dialogue, but manga are read right to left, frame by frame, and page by page. So to adapt a manga into an English edition required either redrawing or flipping each page. Flipping was cheaper but often rendered images backwards, a detail that was sometimes too distracting to readers.

From the 1990s, several companies have come to dominate the manga translation and distribution market in the US, in particular Tokyopop, Viz, and more recently Del Rey.¹² Interestingly Viz Media and Del Rey both have official connections to one or two main publishing houses in Japan. VIZ LLC, located in San Francisco, California, has been one

of the main translators and publishers of *manga* in English in the US since 1987, when it began as a subsidiary of Shogakukan. In 2005, VIZ merged with ShoPro to become VIZ Media, a joint venture owned by Shogakukan and Shueisha.¹³ Consequently VIZ publishes *manga* almost exclusively from these two publishing houses. As the name implies VIZ Media has a broadly diversified line of products both anime and manga.

In 2005, Kodansha began a joint venture with Random House, starting the Del Rey *manga* line which publishes Kodansha's most popular titles.¹⁴ Del Rey has been a division of Random house since the 1970s with a focus on science fiction titles and in 2004 they branched into manga, followed quickly by the contract with Kodansha. Both of these mergers represent a foothold for major Japanese publishing houses in the US market, while providing VIZ and Del Rey with nearly limitless access to manga titles. Finally, in July of 2009 Kodansha opened Kodansha USA, the first full scale branch of a Japanese publishing house here in the U.S., to release a line of manga called Kodansha comics. According to Irie Yoshio, Vice President of Kodansha and head of Kodansha USA, Kodansha will continue to license titles to Del Rey and others, and Random House will distribute its comics.¹⁵ This is an active attempt at learning about the American manga market by working directly within it (although the venture has been slow to take off, suffering several delays).

Tokyopop, located in Los Angeles started primarily in manga publishing in 1996. From the beginning Tokyopop has been integrated into the internet, from their beginnings as a website which provided information about Asian cultural themes especially pop culture to their elaborate fan community and promotional site today.¹⁶ Tokyopop does not have a direct relationship with one publishing house but rather samples titles that may have appeal here and contracts with individual publishers to license them. This status gives them flexibility in choosing titles they want to publish, but also makes each contract negotiation more complex. Tokyopop primarily publishes manga and web content, and in 2006 the company restructured into

two companies: one to focus on media and original titles and the other to focus on the web content.

Finally, there are several institutions that have been influential in the growing manga market in the U.S.: major bookstore chains and libraries. In my interviews at each of the three publishing houses discussed above, the importance of both online sales of manga and the major bookstore chains arose. Indeed, one of the early problems manga publishers faced was where to market and distribute their comics. Should they be distributed alongside American comics in specialty stores or in mainstream bookstores?¹⁷ Comic book stores have never been a primary market for manga distribution; most carry a few top of the line and alternative titles (e.g. Tezuka Osamu and cult classics like *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and more artistic titles like *Tekkon Kinkreet*). But in the late 1990s, as both VIZ and Tokyopop began publishing more manga series in standardized format, several major bookstores began to take interest. In particular Tokyopop sought a market in the malls, where kids hang out, and partnered with Waldenbooks at the turn of the millennium. The goal was to reach beyond the audience that already liked comic books to sell manga more broadly. Shortly afterwards, *Barnes and Noble* and *Borders* both began carrying lines of manga from all the major publishers. In 2007, seventy-five percent of Tokyopop's manga sales were through *Barnes and Noble* and *Borders* according to Kasia Piekarz, manager of marketing and merchandizing. Additionally, a few popular manga are sold at *Walmart* and *Target*.

In speaking with people in the manga industry in the U.S., one of the promotional connections that surprised me was its relationship to libraries. Both Tokyopop and Del Rey Manga have sections on their webpage devoted to libraries and booksellers, with articles on issues like "An Introduction to Manga," "How to read manga," rating systems, as well as links to helpful listservs and blogs like "Graphic Novels in libraries listserv," "Mangablog," etc. .¹⁸ All three publishers discussed the role that libraries have played in promoting manga as books that attract young people who don't otherwise like to read. Across the nation many public libraries have developed manga

collections for their young readers.¹⁹ Each of these publishers sought to reach a wider audience than those who only go to comic book stores, and the interest of big bookstores and libraries has been important to the industry. But establishing markets in the mainstream also raises the issue of how and what to translate.

Translating comics, translating culture

The process of translation is always about more than linguistic switching. Translators have to choose whether to keep the natural feel and spirit of the text intact while sounding fluent in the second language, or to keep the translation as close to the original as possible, losing some fluidity of prose in the process. The process for translating *manga* has changed over time from an erasure of cultural difference to its promotion because of national origins. Each of the decisions I discuss below involves preserving the “Japaneseness” of the text.

One such example is the attempt to market *Doraemon* to American television executives, an effort recounted to me by the head of the manga division at Shogakukan. *Doraemon* is a catlike robot from the 22nd century, who lives with a Japanese family and helps out their hapless son through futuristic devices that he pulls from the pocket in his belly. *Doraemon* is one of the most popular manga characters in Japan, and his image saturates commercial products from toys, to lunchboxes, to household appliances. However, in the late 1970s, when Shogakukan approached US companies to try to market *Doraemon*, they were told that cultural markers such as chopsticks, futons, etc., would have to be removed. In its original state *Doraemon* was deemed “too Japanese” for American children. But when the artists, Fujio Fujiko,²⁰ were approached with this proposition they argued that to erase these cultural elements was to lose the essence of their creation. Thus, *Doraemon* has never been exported to the US, although in the intervening years it has become vastly popular throughout Asia (with no cultural changes). What is important about this example is that the cultural aspects alone made the cartoon “too

Japanese” for a Western audience, while the creators considered that Japaneseness to be at the very core of *Doraemon*.²¹

However, by the mid 1990s, with the rise in anime fans and global popularity of Pokémon and Sailor Moon, not to mention Nintendo and Sony video games, Japanese content within popular media was no longer an issue. In fact, it was a selling point. In the case of manga, publishers and translators had long struggled with the logistics as to how to translate the manga format. As has been noted, manga is read from right to left. One can make a mirror image of the page (called flipping), without significantly altering the text itself, but then everyone ends up left handed (which is all but unheard of for samurai) and certain scenes can literally feel backwards. One can also cut out and rearrange each frame by hand but that is cost prohibitive. Throughout the 1990s, most manga published in the U.S. were flipped as publishers tried to develop a market for the genre, but growth was slow. The few titles that remained in their original format catered to die-hard fans. However, in 2002, Tokyopop standardized the price and format of their manga and printed them unflipped, marketing them as more authentic—both because the standardized format was closer to the Japanese original as was the ordering of frames and pages.²² And it worked, revolutionizing manga in the U.S. Other publishers followed suit, although still today not all manga published in the U.S. are read right to left.

The move to publish unflipped manga was a boon to the industry in several different ways. On the one hand, it made publishing manga much cheaper: now the words just had to be translated and replaced within the frames. At the same time, according to Stuart Levy, CEO of Tokyopop, manga publishers and artists in Japan resented the suggestion of modifying their artistic creations to cater to an American format. Once Tokyopop saw success with unflipped titles the Japanese licenses poured in.²³ Similarly, fans are known for being perfectionists when it comes to their desired media, and in the case of manga and anime fans, this translates to demanding that their texts remain as close to the original as possible. For instance, no one has

spent time in an anime club without debating the horrors of your favorite movie with a bad dubbing. The transition to original format manga was immensely popular among fans in the U.S., a point I will return to in the next section.

While this format change was one of the most significant transitions in manga publishing, there are other areas of manga content where cultural translation has been cumbersome. One such instance is sound effects. The Japanese language is full of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is not really quite the right term because in Japanese there are a wide variety of words that not only represent sounds but also a feeling or action. For example, the sound of noodles being slurped is *suru suru* and the word for someone smiling is *nico nico*. The inclusion of onomatopoeias in the structure of the Japanese language makes sound effects in manga seem less awkward than in American comics, where such words are used only in the medium of comics. Onomatopoeias are written in *katakana* for emphasis (a separate syllabary used for emphasis or foreign loan words, much like italics are used in English) and are used to enhance and control the flow of the page. But these words are notoriously hard to translate. Like the issue of flipping, in the end it is both cheaper for the publisher and more authentic for the fans if the original sound effects are left as they are, and this is not infrequently done.

Finally, according to Trisha Narwani, manga editor at Del Rey, when Del Rey began publishing their manga, they made a consistent effort to include cultural notes in the side bars, in order to explain customs or situations that may not be readily understandable to readers and to distinguish their manga from their competitors. These cultural notes serve to explain customs that the audience may not understand, drawing them into the world of the text, and furthering their knowledge of Japan in particular. Each of the tailoring of the manga texts themselves discussed here reflects nuanced decisions about translation, from keeping the text as authentic as possible, to providing explanatory notes, to helping readers better understand the story and its broader context. Likewise, each of these decisions

highlights the “Japaneseness” of manga texts, rather than obscuring or erasing it as was necessary in earlier eras. But these decisions also reflect and affect the composition of the audience for manga in the U.S. is and what their relationship to Japanese culture might be, an issue which I will turn to now.

Selling Manga, Selling Japan

While manga is a big business and a central part of the culture industry in Japan, in the U.S. manga’s popularity has been driven primarily by its fans. This is seen in the perseverance of the earliest anime fans who circulated videos direct from Japan via mailing lists, to the countless anime and manga fan websites, including scanlation (scanned translations of manga) and anime sites that provide pirated copies of manga and anime. In fact, the advent of the internet played no small role in connecting fans of manga and anime across the globe both to the texts they love and to each other. Indeed, the manga industry in Japan has been relatively slow at really embracing the international popularity of its products and most of the growth in the market has been driven by U.S. fans dedicated to providing more access to manga and anime, and to marketing experts who saw the potential of the genre.

While fans can be credited with the emergence of the market for manga in the U.S., they are a complicated audience, and are difficult to satisfy. As the examples above attest, fans prefer the content of manga to remain as close to the original as possible. Del Rey Manga Editor Trisha Narwani put it this way, “We would never substitute Brittany Spears for a Japanese pop singer because we didn’t think our readers would know the singer. Our fans are interested in Japanese culture and want these things explained rather than erased.” Not flipping, preserving original sound effects, and even obscure cultural context, are all a part of efforts to remain authentic as demanded by many fans.

Yet, here again we encounter issues of translation, although fans tend to want a whole series translated with as little change

as possible, in marketing manga to American audiences publishers have to pay attention to the age of the target audience and what may or may not be appropriate for them. This is a thorny issue in publishing manga because acceptance of representations of violence, drinking, smoking, or sexuality is different in Japan than in the U.S. For example, several publishers related examples of titles for young girls that have a comic side-character smoking. In the U.S., cigarettes are changed into lollipops. However, such changes are part of what can upset fans about mainstream translations of manga.

In recent years both the manga industry in Japan and overseas have had to battle pirated manga and anime markets.²⁴ Today almost as quickly as an anime appears on television in Japan or a manga book hits the bookstore, you can get an online version with subtitles/translated by fans.²⁵ Not only is this access to new content cheaper than buying them in bookstores, but for many, this gives fans control over keeping the authenticity as strong as possible. Several editors noted that they too watch scanlation and fan sites in order to see what fans are interested in and occasionally find particularly good translators for freelance work. Yet, like the music industry, the manga industry in Japan and abroad is trying to find ways to counter this phenomena, primarily through offering its own online versions and translations of new manga.

Outside of the manga publishing industry, fan desire for authenticity provides an interesting relationship to the cultural content of manga more generally. As high school teachers and college professors attest, the interest in Japanese language and enrollment in Japanese history, literature, and culture classes today is dominated by students who want to learn more about Japan after exposure to manga or anime. For some, this leads to a desire to learn the language simply so he or she can just watch the original, or maybe even translate them someday. But for others, manga leads them to desire to learn more about Japanese culture and history. This is what former Prime Minister Aso was focusing upon in his campaign to promote Japanese culture through popular culture, and we witness it daily in our classrooms, as this special journal edition attests.

Yet, because many, although not all, fans of manga move beyond enjoying the medium as a dynamic storyteller to seek out information about the context behind the story, whether historical or contemporary, aesthetic or humanistic, I suggest that its draw is at least in part particular to Japan. Furthermore, these students do not typically remain interested solely in contemporary Japan, nor in manga or anime. In fact, while students initially express an interest in Japan via popular culture, they move on and show an interest in history and culture. Outlining the areas where Japan is important in the translation, distribution, and consumption of manga allows us to think about what makes them global ambassadors. The fact that manga sales really began to escalate when the Japanese qualities were preserved and even accentuated likewise indicates that there is something beyond complicated plots, dissatisfaction with Hollywood, and exotic locals that is transmitted through manga. As attested by the fans of manga who desire to learn more about Japanese language, history and culture, via popular culture, in fact, the selling of manga is not just about rebranding comics or challenging Hollywood, but is rather about the selling of cultural difference.

Endnotes

¹This article focuses on manga distribution in the U.S. although there are significant implications here for the global market more broadly. Most poignantly because the U.S. market is more firmly established, so companies from France and Europe that want to license manga tend to translate the English version rather than starting from scratch with the original Japanese. Clements, Jonathan. 1995. The mechanics of the US anime and manga industry. *Foundation* 64:32-44.

²Koulikov, Mikhail. 2007. ICv2 White Paper. In *ICv2 Conference on Anime and Manga*. New York, NY: ICv2.

³While manga refers to print comics, anime refers to animated shorts or films in televisual, video, DVD or feature film format.

- ⁴Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japanese Embassy in the UK. 2007. Creative Japan. The brochure is available in PDF form from <http://www.creativejapan.net/index.html>.
- ⁵to Masami. 2009. Aso reveals new plan to create 2 million jobs. *The Japan Times*, April 10.
- ⁶Kaminishikawara Jun. 2009. 'Cute ambassadors' roam globe to promote Japan's pop culture. *The Japan Times*, June 17.
- ⁷See in particular, Kelts, Roland. 2006. *JAPANAMERICA: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the U.S.* New York: Palgrave, Macmillan; Napier, Susan J. 2005. *Anime: from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle, Updated Edition: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave; and Napier, 2007). *From Impressionism to Anime*, (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
- ⁸My dissertation research focused on the production of *shM'jo* manga (girls comics). As I was conducting my research in 2000-2002 the American market for manga was just starting to be discussed in publishing circles in Japan; indeed, many of my interviews ended with an inquiry about whether or not *shM'jo* manga would sell to American girls. This paper comes out of a smaller follow-up project on manga in the US in dialogue with my research on the industry in Japan.
- ⁹It is important to note that marketing *manga* overseas in Asia predated attempts to market it in the U.S. and Europe.
- ¹⁰For a more detailed history of anime in the U.S. see, LaMarre, Thomas. 2009. *The anime machine : a media theory of animation*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; and Napier, 2005).
- ¹¹Dubbing is the process of rerecording voices for a foreign film or show, rather than relying on subtitles which are more cumbersome and out of the running for many children's shows. Typically, dubbing strays further from the original text in an attempt to make the translation sound as natural as possible, while subtitles have a tendency to remain closer to the original text. As I will discuss later in this paper the decision to "dub" or "sub" an anime has played a role in

how anime are marketed and who the target audience is in the U.S.

¹²Traditional comic book publishers, DC, Marvel, and Dark Horse publish some manga as well, but this study focuses on the largest manga distributors. Additionally, there are several other small publishers who are increasingly visible in the manga market in the US.

¹³VIZ Media, LLC. 2006. *Announcing VIZ Media!* 2005. Available from http://www.viz.com/news/newsroom/2005/04_vizmedia.php.

¹⁴Del Rey Manga. 2006. *Manga: About us*. Available from <http://www.randomhouse.com/delrey/manga/about.html>.

¹⁵Reid, Calvin. Oct 5, 2009. Kodansha Sets Up to Publish Manga in U.S. *Publishers Weekly*, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6700369.html>.

¹⁶See, www.tokyopop.com.

¹⁷Clements, Jonathan. 1995. The mechanics of the US anime and manga industry. *Foundation* 64:32-44.

¹⁸Tokyopop. TOKYOPOP's Guide to Manga for Retailers, Librarians and Educators. <http://www.tokyopop.com/corporate/booksellers/882>; Del Rey Manga. Bookseller and libraries resource page. http://www.randomhouse.com/delrey/manga/booksellers_librarians.html.

¹⁹One issue that came up in all of my interviews with publishers in the U.S. was the problem of rating manga to help libraries and parents know what is appropriate for different age groups. In part this is because the main demographic for manga in the U.S. according to these three publishers is boys and girls between the ages of 12-18. While there is not one standardized rating system each of the publishers has established a rating system. As was pointed out to me, this was particularly important because American parents are used to thinking that cartoons/comics are for kids and thus anything. Rating systems can be found on each publishers webpage as follows: Del Rey Manga. Bookseller and libraries resource page. http://www.randomhouse.com/delrey/manga/booksellers_librarians.html; Tokyopop.

TOKYOPOP's Guide to Manga for Retailers, Librarians and Educators. <http://www.tokyopop.com/corporate/booksellers/882>; and VIZ Media. Our Ratings. <http://www.viz.com/ratings/>.

²⁰*Doraemon* was created by two artists Fujimoto Hiroshi and Abiko Moto, who used the joint pen name Fujio Fujiko.

²¹Anne Allison's book *Millennial Monsters* provides an apt analysis of Japanese toys and their popularity in the US. Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys in the Global Imagination*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²²McLean, Thomas J. 2007. Manga Man Explores Right-to-left Brand Cortex. *Daily Variety*, Oct 26, 2007; and Ibid. 2007. Levy looks back on 10 years of Tokyopop. *Daily Variety*, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117974761.html?categoryid=1050&cs=1>.

²³Ibid.

²⁴In general this is a bigger problem for anime than for manga. You can download and then own a DVD of a pirated fansub anime which is then not much different than owning the licensed copy. But reading manga via scanlation online just isn't the same owning the books. This is brought home time and again in examples like the popular *Naruto* which you can read almost all of online and in libraries, and yet *Naruto* is still one of the top sellers.

²⁵There are several chapters analyzing the scanlation phenomena in the forthcoming reader *Manga : an anthology of global and cultural perspectives*. Johnson-Woods, Toni. *Manga: an anthology of global and cultural perspectives*, (New York: Continuum, 2010).