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Prospectus

Question

Japanese pop cultural products, particularly manga and anime, have become increasingly popular in the United States in the last decade and have become an increasingly visible force in the mainstream American conscious.¹ Manga are Japanese narrative works composed of illustrations in sequence roughly analogous to American comic books while anime (derived from the Japanese modification of “animation”) are the animated equivalent. Both types of media have begun to hedge out domestic products among young consumers; for instance, in 2007, manga sales totaled a record \$210 million, a significant portion of overall graphic novel sales in the country.² Furthermore, 75% of manga consumers were female, a population largely set apart from the traditional purchasers of comic books.³ These fans often congregate in loose-knit communities, both online and off, centering on a specific genre, series, or even a certain character.

This level of popularity on the part of a visibly foreign, and more importantly non-Western, popular medium is unusual in the United States and, but it is also important to remember the context of this importation. Manga and anime are media produced abroad by specific people from a specific culture in a language relatively few Anglophones are versed in. Beyond this, there is a long-standing power imbalance between the United States and Japan in military and economic terms, at the very least, in the minds of many American consumers. When Edward Said’s framework of Orientalism is applied to this context, it begins to be relatively easy to see opportunities for exploitation and expropriation on the part of American consumers. Essentially, the uprooting of manga and anime from their origin in Japan and their transference to America and translation from Japanese provides a fertile ground for consumers to “project” their views about Japan onto the work and, in turn, absorb what is offered and modify the pre-existing structure.⁴

This brings us to the fundamentals of what I will research. First, how are manga and anime consumed in the United States? Next, how does this consumption affect the consumers’ views of Japan?

Theoretical Framework

In his landmark work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said lays out his theory of how the West created and maintains an image of the “Orient”, primarily the Middle East. Essentially, for the majority of the history

¹ Brienza, Casey E. “Books, Not Comics: Publishing Fields, Globalization, and Japanese Manga in the United States” published online April 14, 2009. 103.

² Brienza. 103.

³ Goldstein, Lisa and Phelan, Molly. “Are You There God? It’s Me, Manga: Manga as an Extension of Young Adult Literature” *Young Adult Library Services*. Summer 2009. 32.

⁴ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. (Vintage Books, New York: 1979).

of the West's relationship with the "Orient", the West was in power and able to project power in such a way that other people had little sway over their depiction in the West. Said asserts that this has been a defining facet of the relationship between the East and the West and has led to long term negative consequences for the East because the distorted images held by the populous of the latter inform their decisions about the people of the former. He provides the framing of the current War on Terror and the response to 9/11 as an example.⁵

A modified, specific version of this theory is applicable to Japan and the West's encounters with it. There has been a long and fluctuating history of positive and negative depictions of Japan and the Japanese since at least the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853. Japan has been in turns seen in the United States as a childish wonderland, an aping younger brother, an impressive exemplar of the "civilizing" process, an increasingly power hungry tyrant state, a horde of monstrous warrior demons bent on destruction, a defeated people meant to be pitied, an economic powerhouse, and so on until today. All of these perceptions form the context in which the modern American view of Japan must be understood. America has not suddenly freed itself from its "Japanism"⁶; it still very much exists, and the consumption of manga and anime is an important part of the modification and maintenance of the current image of Japan, one of a sexually perverse techno-Mecca.

Data/Method

As mentioned above the popularity of manga and anime has led to the creation of numerous fan communities devoted to a host of different objects, and many of these communities are available, and indeed are most accessible, on the internet. Fans from around the world congregate on forums, post self-written works about the object of affection called "fan-fiction", interact in chat rooms, and generally weave the object they enjoy into their daily online interaction. Fans of course also congregate in the physical world and one of the most visible forms of this community is the convention.⁷ Fan interaction, both with each other and the object in question, is an important part of how a work is consumed and how it is thought about in the minds of consumers.

These two forms of interaction, digital and physical, comprise a vast body of information available for study. Fans make millions of posts and comments about what they like or dislike about the object of affection and in turn these ideas are taken and re-used by other fans in their own discourses. I hope to take a sample of these comments and attempt to develop a working idea of how fans of a certain work interact with the work and with other fans and, in turn, how this affects their views of Japan.

Hypothesis

⁵ Said.

⁶ Napier, Susan J. From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West. (Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2007). Napier uses "Japonisme" to name a theory I would call essentially the Japanese equivalent of Said's Orientalism.

⁷ Napier.

Based on my personal history of interaction with fans of manga and anime and their communities, I hypothesize that my final findings will reflect a number of different categories by which these products are consumed in the Anglophone world and what this means for perspectives of Japan. Manga and anime are decidedly foreign products and they are generally consumed with that at the forefront of the minds of the consumers; manga and anime offer a window into a different world, one vastly different from the everyday reality of the standard American consumer. This can mean a safe place to explore non-normative sexuality⁸ or simply a fantasy otherwise unattainable.⁹ It also means that readers and viewers of manga and anime are interfacing with a different culture in a way and to a depth that is relatively rare in current American culture. Many aficionados of manga and anime develop a deep-seated affection for Japan and go on to attempt to learn the Japanese language.¹⁰ On the other hand, an important thing to remember about this new affection is that, for many fans, it is based on an image of Japan created and maintained without direct interaction with the depicted. This can lead to a twisted image of the object based more on the thoughts of the consumer than on reality and one that reinforces stereotypes.¹¹

Methodology

The most essential question of my research is how manga and anime are consumed. The answer to this question will hopefully allow for some analysis of what manga and anime are in the current fan consciousness and what this means for perceptions of Japan. First, I hope to draw on a sample from community output focused on a variety of different manga and anime series, primarily forum posts and YouTube comments. I will then analyze this data quantitatively and qualitatively in the hopes of gaining reasonably generalizable themes. Quantitatively, data will be analyzed and coded according to themes specific to each work and to broader themes such as discussion of women or class. The same data will also be looked at through a qualitative lens less focused on numerical data to supplement the culling of themes and types of interaction.

I hope to have a large sample of quantitative results with which to compare the more focused qualitative samplings. This comparison will function as a filter to see if the comparatively narrow qualitative samples reflect what appear to be the themes of the community at large and, conversely, the qualitative results will hopefully prevent conclusions from becoming too arcane or removed from the reality and thoughts of the everyday consumers.

⁸ Goldstein and Phelan. 34-7.

⁹ Cornog, Martha and Perper, Timothy. "Eroticism for the Masses: Japanese Manga Comics and Their Assimilation into the U.S." Sexuality & Culture. No Vol. No No. 3-126.

¹⁰ Napier.

¹¹ Said.