

Original Research Paper

- THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF MANGA ON SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The industry of Japanese comic books ('mangas') has taken the world by storm since the late 20th century. Not only do mangas hold a large market share in Japan, they have also attracted a global audience and become a popular medium for a broad range of genres. In foreign countries they are not only selling well but also penetrating the local culture. Mangas have been successful in transcending cultural barriers and making an important and lasting impression on audiences around the globe. At first, this success was limited, but now the imagination of readers has been captured everywhere, spawning a fan base that has been increasing day by day. These comics have nonetheless faced quite a few problems along the way. This paper will focus on the evolution of mangas in society, their content, and criticism of them and their cultural influence on society, with specific references to China and the U.S.

Keywords: Manga, Evolution, Society, Culture, Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most popular comic markets in the world is Japan. Mangas are Japanese comic books created in Japan or in the Japanese language. This term is used both to refer to comics and cartooning. Japanese pop culture, in the form including manga, has increasingly attracted attention over the past few decades. The appreciation of the Japanese comic books has been seen not only due to its entertainment value, but also due to the sophistication in the art and storytelling. With a wide variety of theme ranges and depth, mangas cater to every type of audience, which is not only limited to children.

However, mangas have been criticized for their sexual and violent content. As a large percentage of parents perceive mangas to be specifically for children they feel that it has too much gore and sex. They believe that some mangas are unsuitable for underage readers and should be reclassified for an adult audience.

The chapter titled "Sex and Violence" will look at the liberal Japanese culture and unsuitability of certain mangas due to the cultural and geographical differences between countries. The chapter titled "An Attack on Culture?" will deal with the religious controversies that have been seen to arise due to certain mangas and their content. The author then looks at the history of mangas and its development in the United States of America and also China. The author concludes the paper by offering a few suggestions and recommendations to help clarify and also for the betterment of the manga industry.

2. SEX AND VIOLENCE

The violence found in mangas is mostly graphic with spurts of blood, objects pierced into other people's bodies, violent dialogue, physical fights and others. Although this amount of violence is accepted in Japanese culture, it is not tolerated much by audiences around the globe in countries like the United States, China, Iran and others.¹ While Japanese culture allows characters to die because they are not believed to be immortal, audiences from other countries have had opposing views, seeing a bad influence on children that promotes violence.

¹ Jim Rutenberg, Violence finds a Niche in Children's Cartoons, The New York Times, January 28, 2001.

41 The sexual content of mangas has long been debated. Several have women with revealing clothing, long
42 legs and big breasts. The most prominent examples would be Tsunade from Naruto, Rangiku Matsumoto
43 from Bleach, Nami from One Piece and Lucy Heartfilia from Fairy Tail. These mangas are rated PG-13
44 with the tag “*ecchi*” i.e., playful sexual actions. Furthermore, some mangas show nudity, such as To Love-
45 Ru, Sekirei, Nozoki Ana **and others**.

46 Nudity in anime and manga appears in the category of *hentai*, i.e., violent anime/manga porn. It has given
47 the entire industry a negative image.² This image has been made even worse by instances in which serial
48 killers have been found possessing *hentai* and which are thus entirely blamed on *hentai* mangas. For
49 example, the “Otaku killer” murdered four young girls and was found to possess *hentai*.³ Even though the
50 anime and manga industry have managed to distance themselves from *hentai*, the nudity expressed in
51 these mangas and anime have sparked outrage by families and governments. Iran has banned mangas
52 except for some that have been made available to the public after approval by the Ministry of Islamic
53 Culture. Such approval is highly unlikely in the case of mangas and animes.⁴ Singapore has banned any
54 manga that contains “yaoi” content, i.e., *Yamete! Watashi no Oshiri ga Itai*, (roughly translated as “*Stop it!*
55 *My butt hurts*”).

56 Coupled with negative ratings of these mangas and anime is regulation of child pornography. A genre
57 called *lolicon* uses underage characters in sexual situations. Public fascination with the sexuality of young
58 girls has been made into a spectacle, which appeals not only to men but also to women.⁵ Young girls
59 have thus been seen as valid participants in sexual acts. On the other hand, as Sparks⁶ points out and as
60 Diamond and Uchiyama have found in their research,⁷ exposure to violence and pornography does not
61 necessarily affect the desires of the viewers and does not necessarily incite them to commit such crimes.
62 *Lolicon* mangas and anime were for a long time readily available and consumed in countries such as
63 Japan, the United States, and Australia, but many nations have stopped the import/selling of *lolicon*

² Samantha Nicole Inez Chambers’, Anime: From Cult Following to Pop Culture Phenomenon, The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communication, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2012, 95.

³ Crime Jun, Serial Child Killer Tsumoto Miyazaki, 2 others executed, Japan Today, June 17, 2008.

⁴ Michael K., Banned in China, TV Tropes, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BannedInChina>.

⁵ Durham, M. Gigi. 2009. The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and the Five Keys to Fixing It. New York: Overlook Press, 51.

⁶ Sparks, Glenn G. 2010. Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview. Boston: Wadsworth, 89-91.

⁷ Diamond, Milton, and Uchiyama Ayako. 1999. “Pornography, Rape and Sex Crimes in Japan,” International Journal of Law and Psychiatry (22:1), 9.

material. Japan has been under increasing pressure to meet global standards for regulating child pornography. However, in the case of *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*,⁸ the U.S. Supreme Court held that sexual images of virtual minors cannot be equated with child pornography. From a legal standpoint, no minor is actually part of the production of *lolicon* and no physical harm is done to anyone.⁹ Freedom of expression must be upheld, and the fans of anime and manga should have a right to enjoy such material. Because Japanese culture is relatively liberal in the world community, mangas tend to be rated PG-13 in that country even though some may be unsuitable for audiences brought up in other cultures.¹⁰ Dragon Ball Z was one of the first anime/manga to be appreciated by a worldwide audience in the 21st century and the anime and the manga both have scenes with nudity and use of foul language. Other famous animes and mangas such as Naruto, Bleach, and One Piece also contain some nude scenes and foul language. Such scenes and language cause parents and teachers to associate mangas and animes with behaviour that is deemed inappropriate in real life, thus leading them to seek bans on such mangas and anime.¹¹

3. AN ATTACK ON CULTURE?

Mangas and anime have also been deemed inappropriate because they “mock” religion. Some mangas and anime do talk about religion. While most of them go unnoticed, some have faced a backlash from religious communities.

The series Angel Beats shows each character’s thoughts on religion, and the story revolves around the afterlife. The focus is on the paths chosen by each character and how their beliefs help them decide their next step. The series implicitly talks about religions such as Buddhism and Christianity and different icons

⁸ *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234 (2002).

⁹ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Lolicon: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’* in Japan, *Image & Narrative*, Vol 12, No1 (2011), 84.

¹⁰ Hafiz Ahmad and Alvanov Zpalanzani, *Manga: Invisible Cultural ‘Imperialism’ Through Popular Medium*, August 29, 2006, 1.

¹¹ Parents in Russia request ban on ‘Death Note’, *Japan Today*, April 29, 2013.

and principles of these religions.¹² Another series, Hellsing, is basically a fight between English Protestants and vampires.¹³ While these series do have a focus on religion, they have not yet faced any issues regarding this focus.

On the other hand quite a few series have faced a severe backlash by various religious groups for some scenes that indirectly insult or mock them and their religion. In the manga Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, the antagonist picks up a book from the library and after examining it orders the execution of the protagonist. The book that was picked up was shown to be the Quran. The writer says he did not know Arabic and had picked a random book that turned out to be the Quran. The writer eventually censored the later prints in response to protests by the Muslim community, and soon sales of that manga were halted.¹⁴

The Pokemon series, launched in 1996, is undoubtedly one of the most profitable mangas with earnings of over \$150 billion.¹⁵ However, it has had quite a few problems over the years, especially from American fundamentalist Christians who link Pokemon to demonism and say that Pokemon teaches violence, evolution, concepts such as reincarnation and the use of occult objects, such as magic stones, to gain power to defeat your opponent.¹⁶ They have opposed it so much that they have banned anything relating to Pokemon in their houses.¹⁷ The same series has had similar controversies with the Islamic community¹⁸ and the Jewish community.¹⁹

¹² Angel Beats!: An Anime About The Afterlife Influenced By Different Religions, Lady Geek Girl, December 16, 2014, <https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2014/12/16/angel-beats-an-anime-about-the-afterlife-influenced-by-different-religions/>.

¹³ Oh My Pop Culture Jesus: Christianity in Anime, Lady Geek Girl, May 6, 2012, <https://ladygeekgirl.wordpress.com/2012/05/06/oh-my-pop-culture-jesus-christianity-in-anime/>.

¹⁴ Jojo's Anime, Manga Sales Halted Due to Islamic Images (Updated), Anime News Network, May 22, 2008, <http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2008-05-22/jojo-anime-manga-sales-halted-due-to-islamic-images>.

¹⁵ The Manga Phenomenon, World Intellectual Property Organization, September 2011, http://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2011/05/article_0003.html.

¹⁶ Innocent Children's Game...or Not? Pokemon, Real Deliverance, <http://www.realdeliverance.com/pokemon.shtml>.

¹⁷ Is Pokemon Okay for a Christian to Watch?, Beneath The Tangles, January 15, 2014, <http://www.beneaththetangles.com/2014/01/15/is-pokemon-okay-for-a-christian-to-watch/>.

¹⁸ Qatari religious leader bans Pokemon, BBC News, April 3, 2001.

¹⁹ Jim Fitzgerald, 'Swastika' pokemon card dropped, Chicago Sun Times, December 3, 1999.

4. THE HISTORY OF MANGAS IN THE U.S.

It has become common in the West to attribute everything that is weird in comics to Japanese cultural influence. Yet comics were stigmatized long before mangas came on the scene. In the 1950s Dr. Fredric Wertham accused comics, notably in his book 'Seduction of the Innocent', of having a dangerous influence on young readers and inadvertently causing juvenile delinquency. He claimed numerous comic books showed use of drugs, violence, sex and other adult content. Later on Wertham attended a conference in New York City called "The Psychopathology of Comic Books" which was the start of the anti-comics movement in the United States. Not long after the conference the Detroit Police Commissioner, Harry S. Toy, investigated this matter and came to the conclusion that the comics were "Loaded with communist teachings, sex, and racial discrimination." This movement eventually led to the banning of various comic books as well as mass burning of comic books in some states and the enactment of the Comic Code Authority (CCA) in 1954. Now every comic book had to be approved by the CCA and a stamp of approval put on each comic book. As a result there was a decline in comic book sales in the U.S. News such as the one regarding the Otaku killer²⁰ made sales plummet further; however this changed in the 21st century. Carol L. Tilley, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois, found flaws in the papers of Wertham. This material was not made available by the Library of Congress until 2010 and as soon as it was Dr. Tilley disproved Wertham's entire work and called it "manipulated, overstated, compromised and fabricated evidence."²¹ His work did not even contain a bibliography or any citations.²²

Even though Wertham's work has been disproved of and the CCA lost its importance in the late 20th century it is due to this movement that mangas did not reach the American audience till very recently. A large number of comics, especially mangas, are still not sold in the U.S. Mangas were avoided for the simple reason that they were considered to be cartoons, and cartoons are supposed to be for kids.²³

²⁰ *Supra* 3.

²¹ Dave Itzkoff, Scholar Finds Flaws in Work by Archenemy of Comics, The New York Times, February 19, 2013.

²² Dusty Rhodes, BAM! WAP! KA-POW! Library prof bops doc who K.O.'d comic book industry, Illinois News Bureau, February 11, 2013.

²³ Ian Terry, The American Perception of Anime: Blood, Legs and Language, The Artifice, July 22, 2013.

5. MANGA AND THE CHINESE

As one of the most authoritarian major countries, China has been bringing in new regulations to moderate the content seen by the public. The country has been criticized for its policies regarding freedom of expression.²⁴ On 8th June, 2015 the Chinese Ministry of Culture blacklisted the distribution of 38 titles in both online and print forms. This is not the first time that the Ministry has blacklisted mangas and anime. In April 2015, 62 titles were banned, including international bestsellers such as *Naruto* and *Sailor Moon*. The decision was made to protect the welfare of the children and reduce the level of juvenile delinquency in the country.²⁵ Out of the 38 that were blacklisted some are international bestsellers, such as *Attack on Titans*, *Tokyo Ghoul*, *√A*, *Sword Art Online*, *Tokyo Ravens*, *Death Note*, and others. According to a ministry official, Liu Quiang, some of the titles promote violence, some include sexual content, and some encourage juvenile delinquency, and attack the government.²⁶ This decision, and the reasoning given by the Chinese government, is questionable, as some of the blacklisted series do not promote any of the above-mentioned themes.

Apart from blacklisting mangas and anime the ministry has imposed a new regulation which requires websites to get approval from the ministry before they can stream any content. In this day and age there has been rampant misuse of the Internet, around the issues of intellectual property and censorship. China is said to have the world's highest piracy rate.²⁷ The ministry has issued warnings and fined 29 Chinese websites that still show content which the ministry had banned. The Chinese policies alone have been unsuccessful in preventing piracy. In a survey, Peter Goderie and Brian Yecies discovered that Internet piracy is not an isolated phenomenon and exemplifies a wider trend toward liberalization among Chinese youth.²⁸ The audience has paid little attention to the State and its ban on manga and anime.

²⁴ Peter Goderie and Brian Yecies, *Cultural Flows Beneath Death Note: Catching the Wave of Popular Japanese Culture in China*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, August 30, 2010, Volume 8, Issue 35, Number 1.

²⁵ Caitlin McCabe, *China Bans Anime and Manga from the Internet*, CBLDF, June 11, 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Supra* 23.

²⁸ *Id.*

6. CONCLUSION

While mangas and anime may not intentionally try to harm any culture or religion, the industry has been in the limelight for the wrong reasons. Even the Japanese industry has pushed for a ban on genres such as *lolicon*. In June 2014, the Japanese government passed a law banning all child pornographic content and gave a time period of one year for this ban to come into effect. Other governments have likewise banned specific anime and mangas. There have also been petitions by people to enact an international ban on manga.²⁹

The Internet has allowed some people to buy the original manga then scan, translate, edit, and post it on the Internet. This act, called scanlation, has threatened the very existence of some mangas, as the manga artists depend on their income from mangas to make more of them. Rampant manga piracy makes it tougher for manga artists to earn a living. A solution to this problem could be adopting a Netflix style arrangement and delivering the manga and anime with the translations on the same day it is released. People may pay a minimal amount to subscribe to a manga, and the artist will be able to earn a living and keep working.

Mangas depict a world completely different from the real world, and this sharp contrast has made them popular among youth globally. A world that is full of dreams and passion sometimes becomes a world that is more honest and reasonable because human society is shown in an alternative perspective.³⁰ For the manga industry to flourish throughout the world a few changes may need to be made to the content or at least to the ratings of manga for audience suitability. By doing so the industry will definitely get bigger, and countries will accept mangas into their culture.

Ethical approval and consent are not applicable.

²⁹ George King, Enact an International Ban on Anime and Manga, <https://www.change.org/p/the-united-nations-enact-an-international-ban-on-anime-and-manga>.

³⁰ Yang Wang, The Dissemination of Japanese Manga in China: The interplay of culture and social transformation in post reform period, Center for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, 25.

171

172 **REFERENCES**

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186