Examining *Dragon Ball* and *Doraemon*: A Winning and Losing Case of Intercultural Media in the U.S.

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Abstract

American popular culture has played significant roles in almost every corner of the world. However, since the year 2000, Japanese *manga* and *anime* have become great rivals to U.S. popular culture. Many Japanese popular cultural artifacts such as *Dragon Ball*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Saint Seiya*, and *Sailor Moon* have been favored by consumers in the U.S. Nevertheless, not all manga and anime from Japan can succeed in the competitive U.S. cultural market. This paper examines *Doraemon* as a losing case and *Dragon Ball* as a winning case of intercultural media in the U.S. The discussion in this paper is based on findings by researchers in manga, anime, and popular culture and previous case studies of *Doraemon* and *Dragon Ball*. The studies suggest that *Doraemon* failed to comply with American preferences whereas *Dragon Ball* was successful in gaining attention from U.S. consumers. All of the findings imply that although manga and anime are new challenges to U.S. cultural dominance, American culture remains in the lead in terms of its cultural power.

Keywords: *Manga, Anime, Doraemon, Dragon Ball, Intercultural Media*

Introduction

Ability to access information has become taken for granted. Almost any type of information can be accessed with just a click and people can be unintentionally exposed to massive amounts of information in their daily lives through various forms of media (Martin & Nakayama, 2018; Podsatiangool, 2017, 2020). Martin and Nakayama (2018) in particular emphasized that any type and quality of information received through media experiences are influenced by popular culture such as television, music, videos, and magazines. For many years, researchers such as Brummett (1994), Martin and Nakayama (2010), Storey (2015), Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), and Williams (1983) have attempted to define the term "popular culture". Based on the definitions provided by other studies, the definition used in this paper is parallel to that proposed by Podsatiangool (2020): "the culture that is widely favored, produced, consumed, interpreted, shared by many people through media experiences, and is driven by businesses." (p. 10).

As the U.S. has long been the most influential producer of popular culture, U.S. consumers were rarely exposed to the popular culture of others (Martin & Nakayama, 2018; McGray, 2002). McGray (2002) concluded that American popular culture has played a

significant role in the international popular cultural market, stating that "culture flows from American power, and American supply creates demand." (p. 46). However, approximately after the year of 2000, the most remarkable growth of manga and anime in the U.S. took place (Brienza, 2009; 2014, Goldstein & Phelan, 2009; Ito, 2005; Poitras, 2008; Prough, 2010a; and Roland, 2006), raising the question of whether American popular culture remains unassailable.

Despite their growth, not all manga and anime are well received in the U.S. market. It is intriguing to examine the differences of the winning and losing instances. Since it is impossible to investigate all manga and anime, in this paper, *Doraemon* and *Dragon Ball*, as representational of the successful and unsuccessful cases of intercultural media in the U.S., shall be examined.

Manga as Intercultural Media

Popular culture has a significant relation with media experiences, as mentioned above. To further categorize manga and anime as intercultural media, the concepts of communication and intercultural communication should be defined. Researchers have discussed widely of the definition of communication and intercultural communication (Fiske, 1990; Gaines, 2010; Longhurst et al., 2008; Martin & Nakayama, 2010; Oetzel et al., 2016; Taylor, 2013; Ting-toomey & Chung, 2012; Samovar et al., 2013). Despite different approaches in defining both terms, they agreed that while "communication indicates the semiotic practices of how people produce, interpret meanings, and make sense of their social and cultural world through visual signs, linguistic signs, and other miscellaneous signs" (Podsatiangool, 2019, p. 14); while "intercultural communication means how people make sense of the media texts (visual, linguistic, and other miscellaneous signs) from other different cultural communities." (Podsatiangool, 2019, p. 14).

In this paper, the term "intercultural media" is defined to demonstrate the relationship between popular culture, media, and communication as "the media texts that enter other different cultural communities" (Podsatiangool, 2019, p. 14). Thus, the popularity of manga and anime among Asian countries since the mid-1980s (Chen, 2011, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2002; Natsume, 2004; Yamato, 2012) and in the U.S. after 2000 (Brienza, 2009; 2014, Goldstein & Phelan, 2009; Ito, 2005; Poitras, 2008; Prough, 2010a; Roland, 2006) renders them a form of intercultural media.

In Japan, the origin of manga began in the 12th century as the "Animal Scrolls" painted with frogs, hares, monkeys, and foxes, for instance, depicting the decadent lifestyle of the Japanese upper class of the period (Ito, 2005). Later in the 18th century, it was a woodblock print master Hokusai Katsushika (1760-1849) who first coined this type of art as manga. The word manga is written with two Chinese characters [漫画] translated as irresponsible pictures or various or whimsical pictures (Brienza, 2009, 2014; Ito, 2005; Podsatiangool, 2019; Prough, 2010a). Due to its popularity around the world, manga may be understood in many senses. For the purpose of discussion in this paper, manga refers to "all Japanese style graphic novels printed in black and white by any publishing company whether as periodicals or books" (Phornprapha & Podsatiangool, 2019a, pp. 102-103) and it is "not necessary that manga artists

must be Japanese, or the language of manga should be Japanese" (Phornprapha & Podsatiangool, 2019b, p. 403).

Manga has gradually been evolved over time, especially during and after World War II. As many researchers have pointed out, Japanese society was strongly influenced by the U.S. in many aspects, with manga not being an exception (Brophy, 2010; Ching, 2007; Henshall, 2004; Ito, 2005; Metzler, 2007; Podsatiangool, 2007; Podsatiangool & Phornprapha, 2019; Sasaki-Uemura, 2007; Takano & Osaka, 1997). American popular culture such as Hollywood, Disney, Popeye, and Superman has directly influenced manga as many manga artists adopted Western concepts and drawing styles in their creations after being exposed to American popular culture after World War II (Bouissou, 2010; Brienza, 2009, 2014, Drummond-Mathews, 2010; Grigsby, 1998; Ito, 2005; Natsume, 2004; Prough, 2010b; Roland, 2006; Yamato, 2012). Consequently, the unique styles of applying physical features of Westerners such as non-Asian hair colors and large eyes, and cinematic techniques of narrating the stories have characterized features of Japanese manga (Podsatiangool, 2019).

Manga should not be confused with anime (Japanese animation), although both of them may sometimes be used interchangeably. Chambers (2012) explained that "manga was the foundation upon which anime was built" (p. 95). The most significant difference between them is probably the order of how they are created. Manga usually are printed in black and white in weekly or bimonthly manga magazines as episodes. Publishers may compile those popular among fans into a comic book called Tankobon (単行本) which refers to Japanese comic books that comprise a collection of manga episodes that have previously appeared in manga magazines. Only manga that are a huge hit will be made into animation (Podsatiangool, 2019). On the other hand, animation means "a non-recorded (non-live action) illusion of motion and as a frame-by-frame production" (Martinez, 2015, p. 42). Japanese consume anime from television broadcast in a variety of versions such as short and long programs. Japanese consumers normally have a chance to read manga before watching its adaption into anime whereas other readers abroad often start from watching the anime before reading its manga version (Brienza, 2009; Chen, 2011; Goldberg, 2010; Prough, 2010a).

Although manga and anime can be considered "intercultural media," manga artists and anime producers in Japan have not intentionally aimed to export manga, at least not until 2000. As the fan bases around the world continue growing, the producers of both media have begun to consider marketing their products overseas (Chen, 2011; 2012; Grigsby, 1998; Johnson-Woods, 2010; Prough, 2010a, 2010b; Roland, 2006). That the American market has not welcomed popular culture from outside the U.S. and producers of manga and anime did not intend to export their work are interesting phenomena to explore. The discussion hereafter shall investigate significant features of Japanese manga based on *Dragon Ball* and *Doraemon* as a successful and an unsuccessful case of intercultural media in the U.S.

Doraemon and *Dragon Ball* in the US

The discussion regarding *Doraemon* and *Dragon Ball* in this part is to illustrate the features that contribute to manga's success and vice versa based on the findings of the studies of the failure of *Doraemon* and the success of *Dragon Ball*. *Doraemon* entered the U.S. as

animation and did not win over consumers' as it did in other parts of the world, especially in Asian countries. On the other hand, *Dragon Ball* went into the U.S. market as animation and manga and has become equally successful in both versions.

Doraemon

Doraemon is truly an icon of Japanese manga. It has been so popular that Japan's Foreign Ministry appointed its main character, *Doraemon*, the blue cat robot, the country's first animation ambassador. In addition, the blue cat was also enlisted as one of 22 Asian heroes by Time Magazine (McCurry, 2008). *Doraemon* consists of 45 volumes in the original Japanese manga version by Fujiko (1974-1996). Each volume has approximately 190 pages which contain 15-19 episodes.

Doraemon is worth examining because despite *Doraemon*'s iconic status in Japan and across Asia, it is relatively unpopular in the U.S. (Chen, 2011, 2012; Natsume, 2004). Podsatiangool (2017) and Prough (2010a) indicated that it has been a challenging way for *Doraemon* to enter the U.S. market as the producers of *Doraemon* had been trying to market it from the late 1970s. It was not until 2014 that *Doraemon* properly entered the U.S. market but still it is far from being popular in the country.

The phenomenon was examined by Podsatiangool (2017) using the American animation version to demonstrate how the power of American culture played a role in shaping the U.S. animation version of *Doraemon*. In investigating *Doraemon*, Podsatiangool (2017) applied Barthes's (1972) poststructuralist qualitative semiotic analysis on selected media texts from the animation version broadcasted in the U.S. Media texts can be defined by many terms, namely, physical images and sound patterns (Podsatiangool, 2017) or visual signs and linguistic signs (Podsatiangool, 2019). Due to the limitation of accessibility, only the corresponding signs that would yield connotative meanings were selected as the data. Selected data from original Japanese manga version that are corresponding with the signs from the American version were also analyzed to compare and contrast. Based on Barthes (1972) and Chandler (2007), Podsatiangool (2017) assigned each sign in both versions with numbers (No. 1-3). Number 1 stood for the denotative sign in the first order and the connotative signifier. Number 2 referred to the connotative signified. Last, number 3 was the connotative sign in the second order. The analysis was done based on the critical approach among the three stances of intercultural communication provided by Martin and Nakayama (2010, 2018) and Oetzel et al. (2016). The critical approach emphasizes the importance of power, historical context, and inequalities in order to understand intercultural communication. Since this approach tends to focus on media rather than face-to-face interactions, it can be argued that the critical approach is appropriate to examine *Doraemon* as the unsuccessful intercultural media. Many studies in manga and anime have applied textual analysis in the critical approach of intercultural communication. Therefore, the application of semiotic analysis in the study of *Doraemon* made contributions in terms of the alternative method to conduct the critical approach of intercultural communication.

The findings of Podsatiangool (2017) indicated that some physical images and sound patterns from the animation version broadcasted in the U.S. were altered to comply with the accepted norms in the U.S. In brief, most items that suggested Japaneseness were eliminated. In this case, Japaneseness "indicates any visible forms of Japanese or any Japanese scents that

can be detected to show it is 'from Japan' in the manga" (Podsatiangool, 2019, p. 14). The settings of *Doraemon* in the American version imply that the narratives were in the U.S. The identities of the characters were changed to match with American consumers' familiarity. For example, the characters' names were adapted to English naming. Noby, Sue, Sneech, Big-G, and Ace were the names in the American version for Nobita, Shizuka, Suneo, Giant, and Dekisugi, the main characters, respectively. Furthermore, the Japanese lifestyles of the characters were changed to Americans' such as the utensils, currency, and language in other signs.

The findings in Podsatiangool (2017) pointed out that such alterations occurred because of the socio-cultural and ideological inequality. Even after the alterations, *Doraemon* still cannot capture the essence of Americanization. Big-C cultural features from the iceberg model of culture (Weaver, 1993), Japaneseness, remain too prominent. This explains why American readers do not favor animations such as *Doraemon*. The study concluded that "the U.S. is still the most 'powerful' promoter of ideological artifacts of the world. If the most powerful Americans do not like it, no matter how popular it is in other countries, it has no future in the U.S." (Podsatiangool, 2017, p. 100).

All in all, the reasons why *Doraemon* is relatively unpopular in the U.S. are as follows. First, American consumers do not welcome the Japaneseness in *Doraemon* although it is the very core of the plot (Podsatiangool, 2017). Unlike Asia, especially in Southeast Asian countries, Japaneseness was well received since their economy was highly influential in the region. As a result, a majority of the people are already familiar with Japanese culture and Japaneseness (Chen, 2011, 2012; Iwabuchi, 2002; Natsume, 2004; Yamato, 2012). In addition, Japan was perceived as an idol which was similar to how the Japanese perceived the U.S., "reminiscent of Japanese sentiment following WWII in which American culture was idolized." (Natsume, 2004, p. 96). This is not the case for consumers in the U.S. Popular cultural artifacts that will be successful in the U.S. are supposed to be universal, hybridized, and culturally odorless (Brienza, 2009, 2014; Chen, 2011; Yamato, 2012). Therefore, *Doraemon*, which is replete Japanese ideologies or so called Japaneseness, is unlikely to be successful in the U.S. market.

Second, *Doraemon* is relatively unpopular in the U.S. because of its main target consumers, children. For consumers in the U.S., *Doraemon* can be too childish for Americans who watch anime. The accomplishment of manga and anime in the U.S. has been in the market for young adults (Brienza, 2009; Natsume, 2004; Poitras, 2008; Prough, 2010a). The narrative that the consumers were looking for was that containing the elements of young adult literature (YA). Although *Doraemon* contained fantasy elements commonly found in YA, it did not correspond with other characteristics of YA described by Cole (2009) and Nilsen and Donelson (2009). First, the protagonists of *Doraemon* are not young adults. Nobita, Shizuka, Suneo, and Giant are elementary students. The incidents in the plot and conflicts are often about their school or daily lives. Hence, the story is told from the point of view of those of children. Second, *Doraemon* featured children who have to participate in incidents to resolve the conflicts. The parents occasionally take part in the plot as the conflict is revealed or dissolved. Unlike YA, the conflict is usually resolved by the main character who is young adult. The existence of the parents is not prominent. Third, the theme of *Doraemon* does not suggest the

growth of the characters. All the protagonists remain static while YA's are often dynamic as the theme of YA involves coming-of-age.

Dragon Ball

If *Doraemon* is iconic, *Dragon Ball* is epic. It has become a prototype for other Japanese manga. *Dragon Ball* consists of 42 volumes in the original Japanese manga version. In the study of *Dragon Ball*, Podsatiangool (2019) used the 34 volume Japanese version (Toriyama, 2002-2004) and an English version published in the U.S. by VIZ Media (Toriyama, 2018) in the analysis. The side story, the cinematic, the fan-made, and other unoriginal versions are excluded as there are numerous unoriginal versions due to its extreme popularity around the world. Selected media texts, visual signs and linguistic signs, from the beginning to the end of Freeza's Saga were analyzed since it was supposed to be the original ending of the story, "the story was originally supposed to end as Son Goku turns into the Super-Saiyan, the form of the awakened one who defeats Freeza, the most powerful creature in the universe and the greatest villain of the story" (Podsatiangool, 2019, p. 35). Due to its popularity, Toriyama decided to continue the story after Freeza's Saga; however, the story significantly diverges since then (Aitchison, 2018; Baccetti, 2017; Baird, 2016; Kanzenshuu, n.d.).

Unlike *Doraemon* which is relatively popular among Asian countries but not really well-known globally, *Dragon Ball* is indeed the most successful case in the U.S. and in almost every country around the world (Ashcraft, 2018; Baird, 2016; Bryce & Davis, 2010; Chen, 2011; Couch, 2010; Drummond-Matthews, 2010; Goldberg, 2010; Gulfnews, 2019; Jones, 2012; Karbank, 2018; Mínguez-López, 2014; Muncy, 2019; Walsh, 2015; Wardak, 2019). It is not exaggerating to say that *Dragon Ball* is a winning case of intercultural media in the U.S.

Podsatiangool (2019) used data from the 1st Saga to the 5th Saga of Jonisuke's (2018) segmentation of each *Dragon Ball* saga. The data consisted of visual signs and linguistic signs. Barthes's poststructuralist qualitative semiotic analysis and Fairclough's (1995) three dimensions of critical discourse analysis (CDA) were applied to analyze these signs from the beginning to the end of Freeza's Saga. The visual signs were categorized into narrative scenes, physical appearances of characters, costumes of characters, weapons or devices of characters, and abilities of characters. On the other hand, the linguistic signs were categorized into narrations, names of characters, dialogues of characters, names of weapons or devices of characters, and names of abilities of characters. Then, all signs were analyzed for their denotative meanings. Last, by applying Fairclough's three dimensions and Barthes's two semiological systems, all signs were analyzed holistically to make sense of the signs' connotative meanings. The analysis was done based on the critical approach among the three stances of intercultural communication provided by Martin and Nakayama (2010, 2018) and Oetzel et al. (2016). Most research on manga and anime applies either semiotics or Fairclough's CDA. However, the study of *Dragon Ball* has offered a new mixed framework of qualitative analysis in the study of intercultural communication and of CDA.

The findings by Podsatiangool (2019) indicated that the Japaneseness in *Dragon Ball* is not prominent as it focuses more on creating culturally odorless imaginary territory in the readers' minds. It allows the cultures from both East and West to co-exist. This intertextuality might be a factor that contributes to *Dragon Ball*'s popularity in the U.S. and in other countries because there are at least four types of intertextual references, to the real world; to Asian

entities; to Hong Kong as international Asian city; and to Western entities, embedded in the story. Readers in the U.S. and around the world can relate to elements in the story. Podsatiangool (2019) concluded that:

> *Dragon Ball* can create interwoven relationships between the past and the present, the east and the west. It does not have a rigid plot as it keeps changing its atmosphere all the time depending on what Toriyama considered popular at that time. It is a mixture of many things circulating in Japan. The myths in each Saga and each Arc fluctuate between 'being Chinese', 'being Japanese', 'being Hong Kong', and 'being Western'. (p. 250)

The reasons why *Dragon Ball* managed to become successful in the U.S. are opposite to *Doraemon*'s. First, *Dragon Ball* does not showcase Japaneseness in its narrative. Since consumers in the U.S. are not open to Japaneseness, the amalgamation of intertextual references becomes an effective strategy to attract American readers. In this sense, they are hybridized and culturally odorless instead of representing Big-C cultural features. Unlike *Doraemon*, the characters of *Dragon Ball* are not the representation of Japanese. For instance, the protagonist, Goku, is highly influenced by the protagonist of the Chinese novel Journey to the West. Many of its antagonists are inspired by Hollywood movies such as Android 16 being inspired by The Terminator, the Red Ribbon Army inspired by James Bond; The Five Champions and All-Seeing Crone inspired by Count Dracula, The Invisible Man, and The Mummy; and Freeza inspired by Aliens. In addition, the plot of *Dragon Ball* does not revolve around any particular cultural context. The quest motif plays a significant role in the plot. The protagonist is on a quest to complete a mission. In this case, Goku, has been through obstacles to collect all *Dragon Balls*. In addition, Toriyama has applied numerous plots from Japanese folklore such as the tales of Urashima Taro; from Chinese folklore such as the novel Journey to the West and the mythological dragon Shenlong; from Hong Kong martial arts movies such as competition and training scenes; and from Hollywood such as James Bond, Star Wars, Superman, and so on.

Another reason for the achievement of *Dragon Ball* is its target consumers. Even in Japan, *Dragon Ball* is categorized as Shonen Manga (少年漫画) or manga for young male adults. It is no surprise that *Dragon Ball* is able to fit in the U.S. market more easily than *Doraemon*. Therefore, *Dragon Ball* contains the elements that align with consumers' preference as YA. Firstly, Goku, the protagonist of the story, is a young adult who grows up without parents. The plot, therefore, evolves around the struggle of Goku through conflicts. Furthermore, learn and evolve seem to be key words for the development of the protagonist. Goku learns from the incidents that occur and evolves to improve with each. This reflects the theme of coming-of-age since the character demonstrates the dynamic of characteristics. In sum, *Dragon Ball* contains the elements that *Doraemon* does not. Consequently, *Dragon Ball* has won where *Doraemon* has lost as intercultural media in the competitive U.S. market.

Conclusion

This paper contrasts the elements of *Doraemon* with *Dragon Ball* to illustrate a losing and a winning case of intercultural media in the U.S. The findings are consistent with Martin and Nakayama (2010, 2018) and McGray (2002) that culture flows from the U.S. to the rest of the world and not vice versa. The U.S. is a leading promoter of ideological artifacts (including popular cultural artifacts) of the world. *Doraemon* could not comply with American preferences for young adults' plots and for universal, hybridized, and culturally odorless sentiment whereas *Dragon Ball* effectively included these elements.

For American readers, the "coolness" of manga and anime derives from its universality, which Brienza (2014) described as not-the-United-States-ness, and not from its Japanessness. Popular cultural artifacts that can be popular in the U.S. are characterized as universal, hybridized, and culturally odorless. In other words, the Big-C cultural features in those artifacts must not be too prominent. Otherwise, these Big-C features "must be strictly screened, inspected, and even altered" (Podsatiangool, 2017, p. 100). The current findings suggest that the U.S. and American culture have since World War II been a powerhouse of international popular culture and will continue to remain so.

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