

# **PAPER BRIDGE TO JAPAN: REVIEWING THE RELEVANCE OF MANGA IN SPREADING JAPANESE CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Originally intended to be a leisurely comic strip with paintings and pictorial representations, manga has emerged as a 'soft power' of modern-day Japan. As the world's largest manga exporter today, the country is considered to be a manga superpower. Its influence on a fanbase spread across the globe has proved to be a noteworthy component in developing cross-cultural empathy within the readers. Despite its traction, the genre entered the literati only recently. Many researchers have analysed the influence of Japanese traditions, history as well as culture upon modern-day manga and their adaptations. Several researchers have also attempted to study the intercultural translation of manga and the influence of manga across countries. The growing emergence of cultural studies as a field of enquiry and manga as a cultural and literary product provides the base for the current article.

With the country's hybrid culture filled with urban and modern legends, myths, traditions and folklore, most of the stories created in manga are steeped in indigenous culture and are combined with modern lifestyle to create a unique reading experience. This renders these graphic novels as cultural products of manga, which are commodified and read throughout the world. The present article acts as a review of contemporary research in the field of manga as a cultural product and identifies its relevance in spreading Japanese cultural identity, thereby contributing to a global cultural identity. The study opens up new lenses to look at manga as cultural products of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and broadens the scope of recognizing individual and collective manga series for further research as expounders of Japanese cultural identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature has multiple functions, some of which include providing instruction, motivation, expression, reflection, entertainment and even identification. While exploring the different purposes of literature, literary critics have argued over one characteristic contrast within texts – literature for instruction and literature for the sake of art. Although much research has moved beyond such strict distinctions, it has unilaterally been agreed that much of literature in the present society is a part of a cyclical process, where literature shapes society, and, in turn, also gets shaped by it. While reading a literary text, the reader experiences the lives of the characters. As Gillespie rightly states,

*By its truthful portrayal of life's complex moral choices, literature draws us in, submerges us into a story, and summons our imaginative power to identify with characters. . . In the fractious world we inhabit, empathy is a much-needed skill, and literature is a form in which we can practice this skill. (18)*

The genre of manga, also known as the Japanese graphic novel, has served similar functions within Japanese society. The rich Japanese culture, steeped in rural and urban myths, religious beliefs as well as traditional values, subconsciously paves its way into graphic novels. With the advent of globalization, the form entered the world market and gained considerable international acclaim. Unlike other mainstream comics and graphic novels, manga is not reserved for the children's section. Today, manga is being read not only by adolescents but also by academicians across the world. Several animated movies and series like *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto* and *Death Note* had also started as manga series; and any reader who is familiar with manga can substantiate its international appeal and its ability to reflect societal values.

Graphic comics, with their growing influence over the readers, caught the interest of the literati recently. Several researchers have explored the usage of Japanese legends and myths within the stories. These legends, accompanied by graphic elements, not only compose an engaging story but also induce an insight into a culture that dates back to over 35,000 years. The manga and anime production industry are used as cultural products in the international market to narrate Japanese history, retell the legends and spread values. As these cultural products travel the world, the national identity of Japan soon becomes a part of a Global Cultural Identity

(GCI). The following sections deal with a detailed review of critical research attempted on manga as products of Japanese Cultural Identity (JCI), exerting an influence further upon GCI.

## **FROM JAPANESE CULTURAL IDENTITY TOWARDS A GLOBAL CULTURAL IDENTITY**

According to historians, the Japanese initially referred to their nation as *Yamato* before adopting the name *Nippon* in the seventh century. Both *Nippon* and *Nihon* are considered to be accepted names for the nation. *Nihonjinron* (日本人論), where *nihon* refers to Japan, *jin* to person, and *ron* to hypothesis; is a genre of literary texts that discusses Japanese national and cultural identity. Kazufumi Manabe has propounded five tenets encompassing such literary texts – uniqueness, homogeneity, blood, cultural competence and social participation. These tenets, embedded within Japanese culture, showcase that the texts are “not a portrait of the empirical reality of Japan,” but are “a world view, a conception of Japanese culture, Japanese society or Japanese people” (Manabe 120).

Japan takes pride in the global appeal of its cultural and technological products. The Japanese government and industries are confident in Japanese commodities, such as manga (Japanese graphic novels), anime (animation), hi-tech devices, and traditional Japanese cuisine and hospitality, which are considered to improve Japan's global standing and soft power. The branding of cultural content within manga and anime has led to a popular conception of ‘Cool Japan’, which is defined by popular culture as that which capitalizes on the international appeal of Japanese anime and manga. Katja Valaskivi asserts that “Cool Japan is a social imaginary that brings together the aims of the Japanese government” to promote this industry, as well as to uphold the “various interests of artists and producers” (488).

Culture is a broad term with various definitions. Raymond Williams claims that contemporary usage of the word is spread across four different senses: the individual's "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development"; "culture as a universal process"; culture as art/aesthetic; and as within anthropology and sociology. The sense of culture as anthropological and sociological is contrasted with civilization. While civilization signified the universal evolution of human

beings and societies, culture suggested uniqueness: each group had their own culture. Both concepts spread throughout Europe as part of nationalist ideology, but each country decided to emphasize on civilization or culture based on political considerations.

World Culture or Global Culture is formed through the interconnection of various cultures locally found. Where the culture of a nation has an “air of provincialism,” Konrad claims that “it is international integration that determines universality” (209). The pathway toward this universal cultural identity traces back to globalization, which is the root cause of many forms of global exchange. Moreover, with globalization, there also came a sense of national identity. People became more aware of the identity of their culture. This cultural identity provided local forms of knowledge, culture and traditions with a sense of self. The rise of this identity foregrounded interrogations of the self – questions like “Who am I?”, “Where are we going?” and “What do we have?” (Deng). Thus, a sense of self-awareness and speculation was created with the help of the globalization of cultural identity.

## THE RISE OF MANGA

Manga, as an art form, can be traced back to twelfth-century Japan. The word manga uses characters from the Chinese script (*kanji*) that forms a major part of the Japanese writing system. The word *man* means ‘involuntary’ or ‘leisurely’ and *ga* means ‘drawing’ (Fukushima 19). The concept of manga was first embedded in the Edo period of the twelfth century within the *Chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* or Scrolls of Frolicking Animals. It initially included paintings with a few words as commentary, commonly called “*ponchi*” or “*ponchi-e*” meaning punch-pictures (Hirohito and Prough 39). The form developed over centuries to include more words, and punch-pictures were transformed into what is known as ‘manga’ today. Iwase Samuru, under the pen name of Santō Kyōden, developed the first proper manga called *Shiji no yukikai* in 1798.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of several magazines associated with Manga. In 1900, *Jiji Shinpo* newspaper included a section on *Jiji Manga*, accounting for the first use of the word manga in its modern sense (Petersen 22). Manga had established an exceptional

reputation within the domestic market by the 1900s, when Japan exported the comics to other Asian countries like Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan and several countries in South-East Asia. For most of these countries, the modern culture of Japan represented a “hybrid identity of Western and Asian influences” (Wong 29). The manga readership soon flourished, and during the 1970s, the “otaku” class emerged – a group of young and dedicated fanbases devoted to collecting comics, watching adaptations and reading published as well as amateur manga – which soon developed into a full-fledged social community.

Prough (2010), in *Marketing Japan*, recently claimed manga to be Japan’s “cultural ambassador” to the world. The manga industry has grown from merely a regional production to a \$4.2 billion enterprise (Pink par. 4). These graphic comics, originating from Japan, paint a picture steeped into Japanese culture by being inclusive of its history, tradition, folklore, etc. Therefore, manga acts as a medium for communicating information and creating aesthetic pleasure. The readers of manga, ranging from adolescents to adults, are provided with rich information of the culture of Japan along with an aesthetic experience of visual art. This sense of global mass culture further developed with *manga kissa* (comic cafes), anime and manga conventions, cosplay (portmanteau of costume play) events and fan gatherings. Comic-Con, the world’s biggest comic convention, also instigates a sense of identity within the manga and comic fanbase by hosting events across the world. Thus, beyond the economic prospects, the manga industry also has a wide social and cultural appeal.

## **MANGA AS AN EXPOUNDER OF JAPANESE CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Manga paints a picture of the cultural identity of Japan, including its history, social order, traditions, fables, folklore, etc. It does not shy away from depicting the imperfections of society. Thus, one can see a range of social phenomena being depicted within an entertaining yet informative graphic fiction. A recent study on the culturally specific items used in manga and their effect on the translation of Eiichiro Oda’s *One Piece* noted that much of the Japanese culture categorized under traditions, food as well as drink are preserved even beyond the translation of the text (Susanto 68-70). The following paragraphs will be dedicated to an understanding of different cultural items portrayed within popular manga fiction.

*One Piece*, a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Eiichiro Oda, is serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* magazine. What began in 1997 is being continued till the present time with over a hundred volumes following an adventurous story of Luffy, who, along with a group of pirates, searches for the world's treasure 'One Piece' to ultimately become the King of the Pirates. Considered to be one of the highest-grossing media franchises, the series has sold about five hundred million copies worldwide. *One Piece* is filled with modern as well as traditional cultural references like Kabuki (classical Japanese dance-drama), folk heroes like Momotarō, mythical animals like Yamata no Orochi, deities like Susanoo, etc. Singh, in his study of the cultural narrative of the series mentions:

*The manga provides a distinct discourse on swordsmanship via Zoro and other swordsmen, which mixes a theorization and aestheticization of sword-technique with societal issues like as moral ideals and gender definitions, among other things. This fundamental concept from samurai literature was adopted by Japanese popular culture, which produced standardized sets of traits that often identify "good swordsman" characters in manga. (8)*

Shinigami, a deity of death, is an often-recurring folk reference in popular Japanese culture. It appears as a major figure in the manga series *Death Note* by Tsugumi Ohba, where a teenage boy finds a mysterious notebook called "Death Note" belonging to a Shinigami. The adolescent is granted supernatural abilities to kill people with the help of the book. The narrative is a psychological thriller that combines the Japanese religious reference of the Death God to make a classic mystery masterpiece. The series refers to psychological insight into omnipotence and control as well as intriguing references to contemporary society. Napier, in his review article, mentions that identity issues present in the series "...are both personal and perhaps cultural, and the death note itself becomes a fascinating way to explore them" (359).

Numerous other folk legends, indigenous references, mythical characters, etc. are interpolated with urban western and Japanese culture for an empathetic understanding of traditional roots. The tales of Yubaba and Yamauba (the mountain witch), legends of the shape-shifter gallant Jiraiya, the myth of the Otsustsuki clan, and many more are used in popular manga like *Spirited*



*Away, Naruto, In/Spectre* etc. Such manga series, with their hybridity, become a source of valuable information about JCI across the globe.

## **INFLUENCE OF MANGA AND JAPANESE CULTURAL IDENTITY ON GLOBAL CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Manga, since time immemorial, has served several purposes within Japanese society. The different genres of manga are used for didactic and moral, as well as, aesthetic and entertainment purposes. Sports manga motivate the children's interest in athletics and games (Gravett 54); whereas war manga, written during the post-war period in Japan, served as a medium to talk about themes that were considered to be "politically incorrect" (Schodt 79 as qtd. in Drummond-Mathews 64).

There is no reservation that the globalized world has an inherent attraction towards the 'culturally different' and the 'exotic' (Howell 167), even though Japanese products might not share all typical characteristics of the 'exotic', which is usually considered to be 'barbaric', 'primitive', 'natural' or 'remote'. As a matter of fact, Tsurumi believed that Manga is a "democratic" tool for producing "aesthetics" and "border art" that is accessible to "cultural amateurs" who can thereby dislocate the boundaries set up by high and low cultures. After globalization, culture, in its literary sense, is increasingly becoming a part of leisure activity (Hendry 9). Umberto Eco, in *Travels in Hyperreality*, terms culture to be 'show business' to portray Culture (with a capital C) within the ideology. Thus, denoting the culture of the 'other' as a "spectacle" (Hall), the discourse moves from regionality to cultural dominance. McCracken takes this discussion further in his *Culture and Consumption*, claiming that culture and consumption "have an unprecedented relationship in the modern world. No other time has seen these elements enter into a relationship of such intense mutuality" (xi). This cultural consumption becomes a selective way of 'shopping' for cultural content to produce a hybrid culture.

Japan is often called 'karucha—rando' (Culture Land in Japanese). The traditional roots within Japanese culture have sprung out of decades of a selective approach against influential

commodities. Schodt, in his 1986 work *Manga*, asserts “Japan’s relative cultural isolation has always allowed her to be choosier about foreign influences and then to adapt them to her own tastes. . . Foreign comics were exotic but, in the end, alien” (45). Such an approach initially attracted a negative understanding of the Japanese culture, especially from Americans, who considered manga to be “overrun with ‘Bushido’ type qualities” that helped in inciting a sense of “Japanese nationalism” (Rankin-Brown and Brown 89). Though some creators participated in romanticizing the culture, it was mainly done to provide Japan with an international cultural identity. With the passage of time, the cultural product of Japan – manga – became a soft power that, although rooted in myths and legends, was able to transcend the borders of its country and embody a universal acceptance.

Manga paints a picture of the cultural identity of Japan, including its history, social order, traditions, fables, folklore, etc. It does not shy away from depicting the imperfections of society. Thus, one can see a range of social phenomena being depicted within an entertaining yet informative graphic fiction. With Japan’s hybrid culture filled with urban and modern legends, myths, traditions and folklore, most of the plots in manga are steeped in indigenous culture and are combined with modern lifestyle to create a unique reading experience. The Japanese Cultural Identity is carried forward with the help of globalization onto the world, to create a Global Cultural Identity, a realm of readers, fans and critics alike.

## CONCLUSION

The essay provides a detailed review of relevant literature and research attempted within the field of manga. A historical, cultural, social and literary phenomenon, manga is a genre in Japanese literature that is brought to the forefront with the growing interest of the ‘culturally cosmopolitan’ public. The article opens up new possibilities for interpretation and interpolation of cultural studies into the field of manga and provides further scope for future research. It also invites further prospects of study including exposition with the help of manga beyond classroom education and the effects of inter-cultural hybridity to increase empathetic cultural understanding in comics.



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