Original Article

Reading border-crossing Japanese comics/anime in China: Cultural consumption, fandom, and imagination

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Abstract

Differences in cultural consumption are well recognized as potential forces for changing the cultural identity of consumers. Based on this logic, our hypothesis posits that Chinese readers, who comprise the largest fan community of Japanese comics/anime, are culturally influenced by this foreign product. To examine this hypothesis, we question whether the global values and worldviews of freedom, peaceful coexistence, justice, companionship, and humanity, which are embedded in Japanese comics/anime, influence the values and ideology of Chinese readers. This study was aimed to examine the reading strategies and patterns in legally or illegally imported border-crossing cultural products to assess the potential cultural impact of their consumption on young Chinese readers. Their differences in passion could affect their devotion, their identity, and their worldviews. In this study, focus groups in Japan and China, in-depth interviews, and textual analyses of Japanese comic/amine were conducted to examine the reading, fandom, and cultural impact of comics/anime on Chinese urban youth. The significance of this study is that it explores new models of active reading that affect the long-term shape of and changes in the values and identities of Chinese youth. The findings of this study shed light on whether imported cultural products could transform, change, and dilute the ideologies of the state and nationalism, thereby allowing new and alternative imaginings of values and global citizenship, which are emerging areas of interest in global communication studies.

Keywords

Anime, Chinese audience, cross-border reading, cultural consumption, fandom, Japanese comic

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Introduction

With the rise of middle class in China, the agendas of well-developed cities in the country have had to include how to satisfy cultural needs, such as entertainment and leisure, particularly of the children and youth in well-off families. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has made systematic attempts to create a domestic popular culture, including movies, games, and animation, under the umbrella of creative industries and cultural clusters (Fung & Erni, 2013). However, except for Chinese games and animation, such as Pleasant Goat and Grey Wolf (Fung, 2012), most attempts have been unsuccessful. The young Chinese population still consumes Taiwanese mandopop (pop music) and K-pop, Hollywood movies, American and Korean dramas (online and on local TV), and Japanese comics/anime. This study focuses on one of the largest categories of border-crossing popular culture in China—Japanese comics/anime.

In its 8-year long survey, found that with 5 million readers, China was probably the biggest comics market in the world. According to the results of the survey, teenagers entering middle high school were the immediate target readers of comics (below 13 years accounted for 11%; 14-17 years, 50%; above 18 years, 30%), and 70% were female. Because of the lack of high-quality domestic comics, youth have to search beyond China's borders. Inevitably, Japan comics/anime, which has a long history of importation to China (*Astro Boy* was first imported in 1974) has been the major choice. However, because of its huge market, China has come increasingly in the spotlight of the global comic market industry. As youth have started to consume and download Japanese comics/anime from non-copyrighted Chinese comic portals and mobile apps (e.g. Tato), local publishers have attempted to officially localize and import famous Japanese titles. Two major distributors of these Japanese comics, Guangzhou Tianwen Kadokawa Animation and Comics (since 2010) and Hangzhou's Fanfan Comic Culture and Arts (since 2007), are the only official distributors for the Japanese publishers Kadokawa and Shueisha in China. It could be said that Japanese manga and anime have been popularized in both the print and Internet industries in China, and they are easily accessible by Chinese youth.

This phenomenon has generated many important lines of academic inquiry that have not been addressed in the past. From the perspective of cultural policy, there is a contradiction between the PRC's deliberate attempt to boost its creative industries and the censorship imposed by the Cultural Bureau in the national interest. From the perspective of political economy, for major Internet content providers, such as Tencent, Sohu, Tudou, LeTV, and other video TV sites, the balancing of profit motives and political risks by acquiring the copyrights of Japanese animation and screening them on their websites is a common phenomenon in the industry. The purpose of this study is to collect baseline empirical data by examining readers' consumption habits and the ensuing formation of a fan community from the bottom-up perspective of cultural studies.

This study contributes to the theoretical literature by arguing that Japanese comics/anime influence Chinese youth. As suggested by Iwabuchi (2002), Japanese cultural products have shifted significantly from emphasizing the Japanese national context in order to suit the tastes of other inter-Asia countries, which are the largest potential cultural business partner. The so-called "cultural odorlessness" means that Japanese comics/anime are usually anachronistic. Their storylines are not specific to Japanese settings, and they create an imaginary world with fictional characters. However, because Japanese cultural meaning and norms are embedded in the story's narrative, they exert a subtle cultural influence. Based on theories of cultural globalization (e.g. Robertson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1991), the import of foreign culture in different forms has been unpreventable to a significant extent because of the globalization of transportation in the last decade as well as technological advancements, such as the Internet, in the 21st century. Such cultural imports are not negligible; moreover, they are critical to the local people, especially audiences that consume

cultural products. Scholars of reception studies (e.g. Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1973) recognized that the audience can construct preferred messages, meanings, and identity through cultural consumption. Hence, it is highly possible that Chinese readers of Japanese manga are culturally influenced by this Japanese cultural product. This theory will be further investigated in this article.

Prior research has been conducted on cultural globalization and the influence of Japanese culture in China. Kinsella (2000) studied the operation of the Japanese manga industry, and the regional and global distribution of manga through shipping and logistics. Similarly, Lent (2001) applied a historical approach to trace the origin of current Chinese and Hong Kong comics. Lent recognized the influence of Japanese anime and manga in the production of Hong Kong and Chinese comics, especially the ways in which Hong Kong (in the early stages) and Chinese comic artists mimicked the drawing techniques and style of Japanese characters in their works. An example is the drawing of facial features in the Japanese style of "big eyes and small nose" (Ng, 2003). Similar studies on the ways in which Chinese anime copied Japanese techniques and genres found that much Japanese manga and anime influenced Chinese cultural production.

However, previous studies on cultural globalization have suggested that the influence of cultural products is less on the tastes of local consumers than on their ideology. Several scholars in diverse cultural fields have attempted to study this cultural phenomenon. Three authors have conducted studies in China. Their findings showed that Japanese popular culture, as transmitted throughout the medium of soap operas, influenced the audience's perception of Japan (Fung, 2007; Mouri, 2008), comics (Chew & Pun, 2016), and music (Fung, 2007). Regarding Japanese comics/anime, in mainland China, Qijia Chen and Hui's (2009) studies on the Japanese manga industry and its culture in China were incomplete, focusing on the field of comics. Li and Chen's studies provided a general consumption pattern of university students and reasons for the popularity of comics. They focused on the impact of violence and the "bad" influences of specific Japanese genres (e.g. homosexual love, boy's love (BL), *tanbi*, and *yaoi*, which are specific romance genres related to sex and sexuality in Japan). However, the central theme of cultural studies, including power relationships and resistance after being influenced by embedded mediated ideologies, has been neglected possibly because of censorship. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding about the values, worldviews, and ideologies of young Chinese readers, in addition to their attitudes toward Japan and their own society, after consuming Japanese comics. Consumption, as mentioned earlier, could create new thoughts and imaginings about Japan and, more importantly, about Chinese society.

This study seeks to fill the gap in the research by gaining insights from various theories of cultural globalization, particularly intra-Asia cultural traffic and Asian cultural regionalization versus globalization. The study of audiences is also based on the long tradition of cultural studies on reception and audience. Based on this previous scholarship, this study is aimed to determine whether and how the Chinese reader is affected by "foreign" cultural content, in which new ideologies and values are embedded and thus consumed by Chinese youth. The inquiry into the potential tension between the Japanese values consumed and the everyday discourse in Chinese society is an intriguing academic question. In addition, the long-term impact of Chinese fans' imagining and perception of their home country are examined in the light of the complex Sino–Japanese diplomatic relationship and history.

Three major categories of potential interviewees were recruited to participate in this study: (1) consumers of imported Japanese manga, (2) members of fan clubs or informal organizations, and (3) members of comic forums. Because online interviews do not facilitate a solid and thorough data collection, face-to-face interviews were conducted. Potential interviewees were recruited through social networks of Japanese manga associations in universities and fan clubs of the Japanese

publishers, Kadokawa and Shueisha in China. All interviewees were regular consumers of Japanese manga and members of a comic forum. They participated in various levels of fan activities, such as fansubbing or cosplaying. Two focus groups were conducted in each of three major Chinese cities, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, which widely represent urban youth in China. Two focus group interviews were also conducted in Japan and their results were compared with the Chinese data. An average of eight subjects were in each focus group. The numbers of males and females were more or less equal, and their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years. This age range comprised most teenage readers and comic fans in the two countries. The interviewees were from families of differing socio-economic status. Their occupations varied and included students, blue-collar workers, comic magazine editors, and lawyers. The study of a wide variety of Chinese interviewees provided a clear and comprehensive landscape to understand as much as possible the cultural impact of Japanese comics on Chinese youth.

Cultural influence of border-crossing consumption of Japanese anime/manga

Consumption habits of Japanese manga/anime

Chinese readers of Japanese manga/anime usually form this consumption habit in childhood, probably by watching cartoons, such as Daemon, Dragon Ball, and Card Captain Sakura. They spend more than 10 hours a week over 10 years on average developing their taste and reading preference for Japanese manga. They rely on comic forums and mobile apps, such as "Baidu Post Bar," "Tencent Comics," "Pukka," and "Manhua Ren," which provide the reader with convenient and free reading services. Hence, the interviewees tended to not buy Japanese manga/anime in printed copy, and they spent less than 200 RMB on reading material on average per year. However, they were willing to spend from 1000 RMB to 5000 RMB per year on souvenirs or accessories (e.g. files, stickers, and toys) of the Japanese manga/anime that they favored.

The massive expenditures of money and time on Japanese manga/anime indicate that Chinese readers do not allocate much resources on other manga genres, such as comics produced in China. The focus group interviews revealed that more than half of the interviewees were contemptuous of Chinese comics because they thought that they copied the techniques, style, and content of Japanese manga. One of the interviewees gave an example (the picture below) and satirized the Chinese comics artist as a "*copy-cat who fails to mimic the best*" (Jeffery, interviewee from Guangzhou, 19 November 2017). His example was the Chinese comic "Soul hunting," in which a significant character attacks opponents with a fist similar to the classic gesture in *One Punch Man*.

The interviewee's comment conveys the implicit assumption, probably in an exaggerated manner, that Japanese manga are produced according to very high professional standards, which can be judged by the drawing and animation artwork. By assuming that Japanese manga/anime is the gold standard, the interviewees seemed to judge Chinese comics very critically. When the interviewees were asked to comment on the well-praised Chinese animation, *Big Fish & Begonia*, most compared it with works of Hayao Miyazaki, which are recognized as masterpieces of Japanese animation around the world. In contrast, they expressed disappointment that Chinese comics had devalued traditional Chinese culture because most Chinese comic artists tended not to explore the usage of frame, angle, brushstroke, and coloring, which have long been recognized as substantial elements in Chinese art. Some interviewees, such as, Choi Yu, expressed the following:

I had not heard about Big Fish & Begonia *before. To be honest, I do not care about Chinese comics and animation. I would laugh at the [Chinese] readers who fancy [these comics]. I would only watch the best one (Japanese manga/anime) and only it can make me satisfied.* (Choi Yu, interviewee from Shanghai, 20 December 2017)

In this comment, the consumption habits of "reading Japanese manga" and "reading Chinese manga" are polarized. The former is considered to represent superior cultural behavior with high aesthetics and lifestyle. In contrast, the latter is identified as vulgar and mundane. This comment suggests that Chinese readers who consume Japanese manga/anime have the tendency to reject the "underdog" Chinese comics and animation. Thus, because identity formation around these Chinese comics is curbed, Japanese manga/anime are major cultural texts around which cultural identification takes place.

Perception of global value

Chinese consumers of Japanese comics/anime are expected to be prone to the values and world-views embedded in these cultural products. Central in these cultural productions are strong themes, including freedom (e.g. *Attack on Titan*), peaceful coexistence (Naruto), justice (*Death Note*), companionship (*One Piece* and *Hunter*), humanity (*Fullmetal Alchemist*), and so on. In the relatively closed political context of China, the consumption of these foreign cultural products by Chinese youth promotes the formation of new ideologies and values. The inquiry into the potential tension between the Japanese values consumed and the everyday discourse of Chinese society guided the research performed in this study.

Most interviewees regarded Japanese manga/anime as their "enlightenment," which led them to a "new world with stunning imagination and meaning self-reflection." In summary, the rich content, the high quality of artwork, and the human-like characters in manga/anime had captured the interviewees' hearts and induced their repeated and continuous reading. However, the meanings and values embedded in the texts of the manga also affected them. The degree of influence depended on the reader's personal experience, including his or her background and acceptance as well as the compatibility with Chinese values. Ho Lok, an interviewee from Beijing, exclaimed that the most famous Japanese manga, *One Piece* was his "only love" because it gave him the hope to "dream" as well as "companionship." He imagined himself as the main character in the manga, *Luffy*, and he wished he could one day escape from the hardship of work and reality and pursue his own dream. According to another interviewee, Rihong, *Fullmetal Alchemist* was her beloved because the concepts of humanity, family relationships, and the meaning of quid pro quo (i.e. the equivalent exchange of value in Latin) stimulated her to think and act according to these principles:

Fullmetal Alchemist *influences me mostly as the meaning of quid pro quo inspires me to think that everything has its price, and we cannot ask for more, or we will suffer and lose something important because of the surplus we want to make. I learned to care more about humanity and the damage accompanied by technological advancement.* (Rihong, interviewee from Shanghai, 20 December 2017)

Chinese readers attempt to combine the ideas conveyed by Japanese manga with the existing Chinese culture and their local society. In the interview we have just described, Rihong combined the meaning of karma, which is a Buddhist idea rooted in China, with the threat of science, which

is a common notion of Western environmentalists and humanists, to explicate technology, a central theme of *Fullmetal Alchemist*. The extent of local influence and the influence of Japanese manga/anime influence varies from reader to reader. In some cases, local values—an aggregation of thoughts about authority, obedience, and order—could overwhelm the global or foreign values acquired from these comics/anime. When the notions of freedom (in *Attack on Titan*) and justice (in *Death Note*) were discussed during the focus group interview, two Chinese interviewees provided specific explanations of these two universal values:

> *I do not like the meaning of justice portrayed in the Japanese manga* Death Note. *Subjectivity always corrupts people's judgment in terms of justice. [Instead,] we should uphold the authority of law and elite that is somehow more important than the nature of justice.* (Yiu Man, interviewee from Beijing, 12 December 2017)

> *I have not seen any tiny hint of freedom in* Attack on Titan. *It simply portrays general restraint in society. Such restraints cannot be surrendered under the guise of freedom. That's why I hate to see Alan, the main male character, breaking the rules. Freedom, to me, should not outwit rules and regulations, and rather, it should be bounded by them.* (Chong Mon, interviewee from Shanghai, 20 December 2017)

These explanations by Chinese readers convey the values of social harmony and obedience to authority that are fundamental in the public and political discourse in China. The perceptions of these few readers regarding the ideas of freedom and justice embedded in Japanese manga were in direct contrast to the general responses of the Japanese interviewees, who expressed that both freedom and order should be upheld for the sake of the "greater good." As long as the artistic message of the cultural product led to a discussion of freedom and justice—even in abstract terms or absurd content—the Japanese readers espoused that it should be valued because it had the effect of self-reflectivity, which was part of the social function.

> *I cannot clearly state whether the action of the main character is justified or not, but it is always good to see people in the story arguing on that, as more reasonable thinking and intensive exploration could only result from ideological conflict.* (Odo, interviewee from Tokyo, 14 April 2017)

> *The first time I read* Death Note *was in my adolescence. I was not mature enough to compare the gain (the number of criminal drops) and the loss (the distortion of social order). But the meaning of the comic story helps us to keep thinking, particularly at times we encounter injustice in our society.* (Sawada, interviewee from Tokyo, 14 April 2017)

Although there was a deviation in the readers' perceptions of the issues of freedom and justice in the two countries, the readers in both countries shared a similar understanding of homosexuality. In particular, the female readers in both countries shared the rising concern about the homosexual imagination embedded in Japanese comics although they did not oppose love affairs between two male or two female characters. Regarding the homosexual imagination, the genre of *yaoi* (male love relationship) and *yuri* (female love relationship) comics are focused on the interaction and lives of characters of the same sex. The interviewees use the terms "*beautiful*" and "*aesthetic*" to describe the "*true, pure and unsullied relationship of the same sex*," which rose above the "*ugly and impulsive sexual instinct*." These terms convey the humanity and sanity of both controlling and idealizing virginity in a seductive society. Their similar attitudes toward sexual orientation indicated that readers in both countries were potentially influenced by the same cultural texts. This

finding demonstrates that to a certain extent, Chinese readers could be affected—if not perverted—by consuming imported Japanese cultural products. The results also showed that consumers were unaffected after exposure to cultural texts that featured justice and freedom. In the case of sexual orientation, some aspects might sway Chinese values and worldviews.

Imagination of Japan and China

Chinese readers perceive Japan and China differently in relation to their understanding of Japanese manga/anime. Chinese readers tend to fantasize about Japan, and they aspire to embrace Japanese culture in contrast to the "less ideal," if not nefariously perceived, motherland in which they experience the exertion, vicissitudes, and precarity of everyday life. One interviewee expressed, "*Compared to China, Japan is a relatively nicer, cleaner, more civilized, open-minded and relaxing place.*" Several interviewees expressed that Japanese were mostly polite, humble, meticulous, considerate, and sensitive to their neighborhoods. One interviewee in Guangzhou exclaimed his willingness to find a Japanese lover because he conceived that Japanese girls were "*more beautiful, charming but quiet,*" and Japanese females had the "*perfect figure to express the male's masculinity*":

> *I would fantasize having a girlfriend like the one I found in Japanese manga/anime. I believe there must be some [ideal girls] like the Japanese manga portray, and at least, [I believe] that, in reality, the local culture and society there [in Japan are real].* (Jeffery, interviewee from Guangzhou, 19 November 2017)

When these interviewees were asked about the reasons for their perceptions, they all said that Japanese cultural products were the major reference for their imagined Japan. These imaginings are deeply seated in the storylines of the comics, and they are constructed by the fan boys and fan girls who consume them. The imaginings of manga fans in China, however, were rebutted by the interviewees in Japan. Most of the Japanese interviewees did not share the simplistic view that manga celebrates the ideal in Japanese society. One interviewee in Japan expressed her regret—ironically while laughing—of the "exaggerated" and "unrealistic" imaginings of Chinese readers, and she expressed her perceptions of the female in Japan:

> *I would feel sorry for him [the boy who praises the cuteness and beauty of Japanese females] because I do not think he could find any girls who look similar to the comic characters [laughing]. I am glad to know that we are praised in a cultural and social manner, but the truth is actually that most of my friends would not behave in that way or act like a princess.* (Sawada, interviewee from Tokyo, on 14 April 2017)

The Japanese interviewees recognized China as the leading country in the global future, but they were not familiar with the culture and history of "*mysterious*" China. The lack of opportunities to visit China and consume Chinese cultural product were in general the reasons for their perceptions. They also expressed their pride in Japanese manga/anime, which has been widely distributed and consumed in many countries. Animation or comics produced in other countries, such as China, are seldom distributed in Japanese bookstores or circulated among and consumed by Japanese readers. Despite the historical and cultural differences between the two countries, Chinese readers romanticize Japanese culture based on the border-crossing consumption of Japanese comics/anime. In contrast, Japanese readers well understand the entertaining and unrealistic nature of their manga industry. Thus, the discrepancy between the perceptions of Japanese and

foreigners persists. In China, the heavy consumption of cultural products from beyond its borders might increase biased perceptions of other nations and their social norms. Such acculturation in daily life reinforces an idealized version of another nation, which is difficult to revise even if there are real encounters with the people of that nation.

The data collected from the focus groups in China revealed that the imaginations of Chinese readers about Japan could lead to tangible practices, such as traveling in Japan or learning the Japanese language, but it would not sway their judgments about nationalistic conflicts, disputes, and issues. Some of the interviewees in China regarded themselves as "Chinese with Japanese taste" because their cultural behaviors were highly influenced by Japanese culture in terms of thoughts, perceptions, and aesthetics. However, with regard to political issues, such as the dispute over Diaoyu Island or the collective memory of the Nanking massacre, all the Chinese interviewees expressed their feelings about Japan and were able to express logical and stern judgments and arguments from a nationalistic standpoint. In the face of national issues, their cultural positioning was reduced to a diluted version of identification with self-label of no more than "fans of Japanese culture," but momentarily and flexibly, they could switch back to being core Japanese anime fans based on cultural and economic consumption.

Summary of the findings

Based on the premise that the cultural habits, taste, and imagination of an individual are affected by his or her consumption preferences, the comparison between Chinese readers and Japanese readers of Japanese anime/manga indicated the cultural influence of border-crossing consumption. The findings of the study showed that Chinese readers were similar to Japanese readers in specific aspects of their consumption of comics/anime, which deviated from the social norms in China. Thus, the findings revealed the cultural influence of Japanese manga/anime on Chinese consumers of border-crossing cultural products. Table 1 shows the comparison of habits, global values, and imagination of the Japanese and Chinese readers interviewed in this study.

Overall, the results showed that imported cultural products, in this case, Japanese manga/anime, influenced the Chinese readers interviewed in this study. As shown in Table 1, there was a significant influence of border-crossing cultural consumption on the habits, taste, and imagination of the Chinese readers. However, there was less influence on ideological concepts, especially those that conflicted with the ideas embedded in the imported cultural product. Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) found that exported Japanese cultural products are characterized by their "cultural odorlessness." In other words, they are readily understood by audiences across Asia. The findings of the present study partially support Iwabuchi's findings that border-crossing products are consumed by the 500 million Chinese readers of Japanese comics. This study examined a prominent cultural phenomenon that involves a large number of Chinese youth, specifically the cultural impact of Japanese manga/anime on border-crossing consumption.

Border-crossing consumption in China

The results of this research suggested the influence, to a certain extent, of Japanese manga/anime on Chinese readers. Based on theories in this field, comic texts represent collective desires and dominant ideologies (e.g. Allison, 2000). Moreover, readers who regularly consume a cultural product might be greatly affected by its content. Studies on cultural consumption and its effects are a new trend in the long tradition of research on the Japanese comic art industry, including

Table 1. Comparison of the habits, global values, and imaginations of the Japanese and Chinese interviewees.

	Japanese readers	Chinese readers
1. Habits		
Consumption pattern	Intensive consumption, spend much money on consumption	More intensive consumption, spend much in consumption
Involvement in fan activities	Different forms such as cosplaying and *doujinshi*	Different forms such as fansubbing and cosplaying
2. Taste and global values		
Justice	Justice should be varied and personalized. People have different faith in justice. Sacrifice is acceptable for the "treater good"	Justice should be homogeneous and upheld by the authorities
Companionship	Aspire to it and dream to achieve it in reality	Aspire to it and dream to achieve it in reality
Peaceful coexistence	Accept people with different cultural and religious backgrounds	Accept differences in people, and people should be obliged to maintain social harmony
Humanity	Human rights should be protected and respected. Nature and humanity should not be violated	Human rights should be protected and respected. Nature and humanity should not be violated
Freedom	Aspire to it, which can only be achieved by action	Aspire to it, which can only be achieved within proper restrictions
Homosexuality	Acceptable; should fight for sexual preference even if it means going against the social norms	Acceptable; should fight for sexual preference even if it means going against the social norms
3. Imagination		
Japan	The place of birth	Nicer, cleaner, and more civilized
China	A dominant country in the future with many myths and much uncertainty	Less civilized and needs to be improved
Self-identity	Japanese	Chinese with Japanese cultural preference
National controversy	Supportive of Japan	Supportive of China

comics, manga, and animation (K. Ito, 2005; Kinsella, 2000; Schodt, 1996). The effects of the border-crossing consumption of Japanese comic artwork in culturally imported products has seldom been addressed in academic research. However, media scholars have begun to examine the globalization of Japanese comics/anime in the attempt to explain their global appeal in terms of cultural proximity and variability (Chen, 2010). In 2003, the circulation of Japanese anime was immense, and it reached a revenue of USD 12.5 billion (M. Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji, 2012). Major markets in Europe and the United States (Brienza, 2009; Lamerichs, 2013) have been studied. However, only a few local scholars have addressed the popularity of Japanese manga in the Chinese comics market in the 1990s (Lent, 2001). Their findings suggested that Chinese comic artists adapted the drawing skills, cinematic angles, and human features that are characteristic of Japanese comics (Ng, 2003, p. 184).

In the case of the consumption of Japanese manga/anime in China, the influence of these imported cultural products resembles the active audience paradigm (e.g. Eco, 1979; Hall, 1973; Morley, 1981). The influences on the taste and habits of Chinese readers indicate the vulnerability of readers after they become fans. Previous scholars have claimed that audiences are not passive receivers but filter out or refuse to endorse messages that do not fit their views (Eco, 1979, p. 4). Conversely, audiences may just as easily be culturally influenced when they accept the message embedded in the product. Such change is nourished and developed by the reproduction of cultural products generated in original texts and images (Jenkins, 1992), particularly in the digital era (Fornas, Klein, Ladendorf, Sunden, & Svenigsson, 2002; Livingstone, 2004). The digital era allows the development of tools that facilitate the production of audience-generated text. Moreover, the Internet allows audiences to search for resources as well as others who share similar tastes and habits (Fornas et al., 2002; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996).

The interviewees in the three Chinese cities were proactive fans of Japanese manga/anime. They engaged in many activities, such as cosplaying, drawing comic *doujinshi*, and writing fan novels. Their participation reinforced their understanding and self-identification because they regarded themselves as members of a group. The factor of peer influence has been supported by several fandom studies in the cultural studies literature in terms of history, industry, cultural practices, and the effects of fandom on popular music (Frith, 1988; Grossberg, 1992; Straw, 1991). As suggested by studies of Dick Hebdige (1979) and others (Hogg & Savolainen, 1998; Holt, 2002), the cultural influence of Japanese manga on the style and taste of the Chinese readers interviewed in the present study could be a form of symbolic resistance to the hegemonic society. However, the findings showed that their values were unchanged, which suggests that their retention of the existing hegemony and ideology were not influenced by their consumption of the foreign cultural product. Nationality, for example, is one of the hegemonic ideologies that are affected by consumption. The findings of the present study indicate that the Japanese cultural consumption of Chinese readers is far from being the "cultural battlefield of resistance and oppression" suggested in previous studies (e.g. Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012). On the contrary, the present findings support Chen's (2016) findings of national sentiment of K-pop fans in China despite the conflict between Korea and China.

Despite the complexity of the Sino–Japanese diplomatic relationship and history, it might be possible that the consumption of Japanese cultural products could create new imaginaries of Japan and change the values and worldviews of the next generation regarding Japan. Internally, Chinese youth are exposed to the celebrated values embedded in the imaginary comic world, which seem to contradict the social inequality and imperfection of Chinese society. It might be possible that Chinese youth would ponder and reflect upon Chinese society and their everyday lives, which could lead to alternative views of the status quo in the long term.

Conclusion: cultural policy for or against border-crossing consumption

The findings of this study showed that the national identity and political ideology of the interviewees were robust and that they were unaffected by their consumption of border-crossing cultural products. Nevertheless, Chinese youth are not immune to foreign influence. Chinese readers have a high regard for Japanese culture because of their consumption of Japanese comics/anime. The superiority of Japanese comics/anime naturally debases the local production.

At this point, it is necessary to explain the reason that the existing cultural policy is crucial for the Chinese government to maintain social harmony. Conservative cultural policies have been proposed and implemented to defend local cultural industries and audiences under the guise of protecting adolescents. An example is the censorship policy administrated by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). The imported Japanese comics have to pass the censorship of the Cultural Bureau. Moreover, the titles must comply with the regulations stipulated by the Bureau. For example, in March 2015, the Cultural Bureau ordered that around 97 Japanese comics/anime be removed from various Internet sites because they disseminated content of "violence, terrorism, obscenity, and disruption of morality," which were detrimental to the "mentality of the youth." Such censorship seemingly sends conflicting messages to the public, particularly children who rely strongly on cultural consumption for the acquisition of social norms. However, the consequence "better" is the elimination of the perception that Japanese aesthetics are "high" and Chinese aesthetics are "low" might lead to the reduced production of comics/anime, which might be the theoretical foundation for executing the current policy of cultural promotion in China.

The study contributes to the cultural studies literature by exploring new models of active reading and consumption that shape the values and identities of youth. The long-term implications of this study are that its findings shed light on how imported or border-crossing cultural products transform, change, and dilute the ideology of the state and nationalism while allowing for the new and alternative imagination of values and global citizenship. The findings of this study suggest that Chinese audiences are able to consume border-crossing cultural products without negatively affecting their nationalistic sentiments even when the content contradicts the ideology of the state. The long-term identification with the modern and superior cultural position of Japan (or of other nations in readings of other forms of cultural texts) in comparison with Chinese culture may inevitably lead the Chinese audience to develop values that are perhaps not universal but that promote a strong sense of reflexivity in perceptions of Chinese culture and society.

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