

MANGA: INVISIBLE CULTURAL 'IMPERIALISM' THROUGH POPULAR MEDIUM

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Abstract

The medium of comics is mostly known as popular culture medium, kids' stuff with their spandex superheroes, often sneered and looked down. However, through its long history, comics had proven to be contagious and influential medium toward the society, but unfortunately in the negative side. In United States of America (USA), the anti-comics movement led by Dr. Frederick Wertham accused that comics had bad and dangerous influence towards its young readers. This movement had brought comic in becoming public enemy number one in the past.

Although people seem to see only the negative impact of this medium, on the contrary there is also the positive side. The power within comic is enormous, but unlike the tsunami-like power that could devastate anything on its path, comic's power is unlikely otherwise: powerful yet penetrate in silent even to other culture and society as shown through the expansive 'export' of Japanese comics, known as manga.

Manga nowadays is known in most part of the world, especially in the South East Asia region. Imported as entertainment medium, manga influence could easily be seen in these countries, especially in Indonesia. Not only it proved to be booming in sales in these 'foreign' countries, manga also succeeded in penetrating to their culture, by creating devoted readers turn artists with manga-esque style and storytelling. The majority of young people in Indonesia now draw in this popular manga-esque style, following their favorite manga artists. Furthermore, it also changed how these people ways of reading: from left to right becoming right to left, creating the pretty boys genre in another medium and in the society itself.

Unlike other popular culture medium (such as television) that its influence is clearly shown and catch the attention of people who rise against it, comic had proved otherwise. This paper is intended to observe how this phenomenon happened through qualitative analysis of comic culture (especially manga), the content within manga and its powerful and cultural influence with a case study of Indonesia.

Keywords:

Manga, Media, Cultural Imperialism, Invisible Power

1. Introduction

Comics has been known as a popular medium of entertainment for quite long time. Based on cartoon and drawing, comics appearances such as its funny characters and stories, sometimes with full and bright color pages with superheroes in spandex, had attracted the attention of many people, especially children. This stereotype had led comics' medium in being looked down, just seen as a light medium of entertainment without any important or serious contents.

Despite this "stereotype", through its long history, comics had proven to be contagious and influential medium toward the society. Unfortunately it was seen mostly from the negative side. In USA, the anti-comics movement led by Wertham through his controversial book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, accused that comics had bad and dangerous influence towards its young readers, partly responsible for the rise in the juvenile delinquency.

Wertham also stated that many children were injured because they were trying to mimic their comics superheroes, by flying like Superman or fighting like Spiderman, unable do differentiate between fantasy and reality. The *Seduction of the Innocent* mainly focused on the horror and crime comics, but it also attacked comics in general, exposing that comics is a dangerous media, due to its content that full of violence, explicit sexual content, and led an anti comics movement in the USA around 1950s [1].

The anti comics movement ignited by Wertham's book might also proved that despite its "childish" appearances (that led to stereotype that comics is just for children), comics has enormous power within. It is up to us in how to manage that power. As stated by McCloud –a comics scholar- that the art form –the medium-known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The "content" of

those images and ideas is up to the creators, and we all have different tastes. The trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger [2]. And facts that comics had such enormous power could be seen in Japan, through their manga culture.

Manga –term derived from how the Japanese called comics and then accepted in the West as how the West refers to Japanese comics- nowadays is known in most part of the world, especially in the South East Asia region. Started like other foreign comics that were imported as medium of entertainment, slowly but sure manga managed to show their power and influential capabilities. Not only it proved to be booming in sales in these 'foreign' countries, manga also succeeded in penetrating to their culture, by creating devoted readers turn artists with manga-esque style and storytelling and all happens in 'silent'.

2. Method and Theories

2.1 Comics: The Power Within

What is *comics*? And how comics got that such enormous influence power? Will Eisner, in his book *Comics and Sequential Art*, stated that *comics* is basically a sequential art/art in sequence. This term then was developed even further by McCloud, which defined comics as juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer [3]. Therefore, comics is a medium based on the whole world of visual iconography, a language that used symbol as visual vocabulary in telling stories.

The symbol, which called icon, means to any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea. Icon could be categorized as non-pictorial icons, which has fixed and absolute meaning because they represent invisible ideas, and pictorial icons, with has fluid and variable

meaning, according to appearance.

Pictorial icons can be put in some sort of order, started from the photographic and realistic pictures that most resembles their real life counterparts. Gradually, through simplification of form, the picture then is more of a cartoon, far further from the real thing. The main thing is, even the form of cartoon is far from the real thing, we could respond it as much or more than a realistic image. McCloud defined it as amplification through simplification [4].

Through simplification, the cartoon would present the essential meaning from an object and amplified that meaning in the ways that realistic form could not. This kind of simplification toward pictures and characters toward a purpose would become an effective tool in storytelling in any medium. Cartoon is not just a way of drawing, but more likely a way of seeing. Cartoon's ability to focus our attention toward an idea is an important role of their special ability, whether in comics or drawing in general.

Another thing is the universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoons a face is, the more people it could be said to describe. The human brain's ability to perceived two dots and a line inside a circle as a personification of face is incredible. Even more, we could not avoid ourselves from seeing the face. This because humans are a self centered race, who visualize their selves in many things in this world.



Figure 1
Universality of cartoon images
Source: McCloud, 1999: 31

In fact, humans interact with each other through two kinds of imagination. If two people interact, one imagination will see their selves as a virtual

being because the humans inability to look directly to their faces. They can only guess their facial expression through the contraction of the facial muscles as a sense of shape, a general placement. Something as simple and basic as cartoon. The other imagination will see what is in front of them as something real, precisely through out every detail. Thus, when human looks at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, he sees it as a face of another. But when he sees the world of cartoon, he sees himself. Further more, human ability to extend his identities into inanimate objects, by giving parts of his identities to it could bring it into life. That is why through the cartoon (that is the basis of comics), we do not just observe it, but we also become the cartoon itself. We identify ourselves to the cartoon. And this is how comics "works".

2.2 The Manga Cultural Influences

Manga is another example of the power within comics. In fact, manga is an extraordinary medium as stated by scholar Schodt –writer of Manga, Manga and the World of Japanese Comics- that "Japan is the first nation on earth where comics have become a full fledge medium expression" [5].

Manga is known through its differentness, especially when compared to comics from the western part of the world. As a result, manga is categorized as a unique medium that represent the Japanese way of life –sometimes called "the painting of life" because its detailed visualization of the Japanese society. Not only its various themes and stories, manga has its own way of telling stories, visual style and even the way to read it: from right to left.

McCloud mentioned that manga is used the masking effects technique to the extreme. This technique puts a very iconic and cartoon characters toward a very realistic background, causing the readers to easily identify and mask



Figure 2
The use of masking effects in manga
Source: Takahashi, 1999

themselves in that characters, while safely enter a sensually stimulating world.

McCloud also stated that Japanese comic artists took the idea of the masking effects a step further, by playing with the objectifying power of realistic arts to other uses. For example, while most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification, other characters are drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their “otherness” from the reader. A property like a sword might be appearing very cartoony in one sequence -due to the “life” it possesses as an extension of the character’s cartoon identity. But when the character holding the sword realized some mysterious writing carved on the sword’s hilt, the sword might now became very realistic, not only to show the details, but also to make the reader aware of the sword as an object,

something with weight, texture and physical complexity.

Further more, McCloud noted that due to a different comics culture in Japan, manga developed a very different concept of motion than their American and European counterpart. While the American and European used conspicuous action lines or multiple images to render movement, the manga expressed movement through what McCloud said as “subjective motion”, operates on the assumption that if observing moving object can be involving, being that object should be more so. Japanese artists, starting in the late 60’s began putting their readers “in the driver’s seat.” [6].

Napier—scholar from Texas University, stated that manga and anime, although has been influenced enormously by global culture; it remains as an original product of the concatenation of circumstances that have created the culture of modern Japan. Japan itself is a society that remains unique, as the only ‘modern’ country in Asia, seen by the Western point of view. Also Japan’s origin in nation history is expressed in anime and manga’s range of modes, themes and imagery. Further more, Dr. Napier pointed out that the themes in anime could describe as three major themes [7]:

2.2.1 The “apocalypse” theme

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the nightmare that followed, give way to the ‘apocalypse’ theme. The end of the world is an important element in postwar Japanese visual and print culture. In this theme of anime and manga, although some contains visions of hope and rebirth, most of them is much darker, centering the on the destruction of the society and the planet itself.

Not only the atomic bombing, its horrific aftereffect led to this kind of theme. There are

other factor, however, either culturally specific or simply specific to the 20th century, that contribute to the pervasive darkness of many anime such as the increasingly alienating aspect of an urbanized industrialized society, the gap between generations, and the growing tensions between the genders.

The decade of economic problems in 1989 has led to an increasing disenchantment with the values and goals that much of postwar Japan has been built on. Although this disenchantment is very obvious in youth culture, which celebrates the ephemeral fashion of Shojo and the culture of *kawaii*, disillusionment has permeated through society, leading to record breaking suicide rates across the generations. The many apocalyptic anime and manga seem to be expressions of a pervasive social pessimism.

2.2.2 The “matsuri” theme

The *matsuri* or festival is an integral element of Japanese religious and social life, a celebration of the “the realm of play and ritual.” The liminal space of the festival allows for a kind of controlled chaos, in which “people behave in extraordinary ways, once freed from ordinary time and everyday order.” In the anime and manga, this kind of spirit can be seen in their wild humor, grotesque exaggeration, playfulness, sexual content, and violent themes by expressing the spirit, and transform it into the world of anime and manga.

2.2.3 The “elegiac” mode

The word elegiac literally refers to a poem about death written in a style of lamentation and may be taken in a wider sense to refer to a mood of mournfulness and melancholy, perhaps mixed with nostalgia. This wistful mood is an important element in Japanese cultural expression. Elegiac also has links with the long lyric tradition in pre-modern Japanese culture and in the past had been frequently linked to the natural world, the

seasons and change of which best epitomize the feeling of transience.

During a discussion with Prof. Makino and Kazuma Yoshimura from Department of Manga, Kyoto Seika University, it was pointed out that Japanese are much related to nature. Even the simplest changes in nature such as the change of season give significant meaning for the Japanese. The weather plays a major role in storytelling. The scene of a rock being wet by raindrops, the falling of first snow, the blooming of sakura flowers and even garbage flew within the Neo-Tokyo River would give significant impact to the reader, and become an integral part of the storyline.

Beside the three factors above, there is one thing that set the manga’s identity: the representation of Japanese peoples’ every day’s life. Manga has covered almost every aspect of daily life, ranging from love stories, science fiction, fantasy adventure, history, economics, sports to politics. Kosei Ono, a manga and cartoon observer when being asked why almost every works of mangaka represent Japanese Sabi and Wabi philosophies with strong Japanese cultural background answered that the mangaka did not intentionally put all of the philosophies mentioned above. They just did what they used to do, presenting their daily life as they usually do. Even the aforementioned “manga-esque style” is an adaptation of other culture such as United States with strong Japanese spirit.

3. Results and Discussions: How Manga Influences other Cultures

“When I read the Candy-candy Shojo manga, it influenced me a lot and persuaded me in becoming a mangaka”, said Calista Takarai – one of the pioneer in Indonesian local comics when she asked why she decided in becoming a comic artist. She is just of many readers turned artists that followed.



Figure 3
How a comic (manga) reader decides to become a comic artist (mangaka)
Source: Ahmad, 2003.

The appearances of manga in Indonesia started in the beginning of 1990s, started by several manga titles (Candy-Candy, Dragon Ball and Kungfu Boy) published by Elexmedia Komputindo. With their compact format, black and white pages but quite thick pages (around 180 pages), unique and fresh visual style and storytelling, and relatively cheap price, these imported mangas quickly gain popularity among Indonesian readers. Many of them then became loyal buyers. With no time to wait, manga reached booming sales in Indonesia.

The booming of manga sales in Indonesia could be described like the tipping point phenomenon: when something is reaching the top and rolling pass the tip of the mountain, it will start rolling like a snowball, getting bigger and bigger and could not be stopped by anything, just like an epidemic [8]. The term “tipping point” then was used by Gladwell in his book with the same title. According to Gladwell, the tipping point was caused by several factors, such as the stickness effect and the power of context.

3.1 The stickness effect

In order to sparkling epidemics, ideas have to be memorable and move us to action. Something that memorable means it has stickness effect. In manga, the stickness effects are:

3.1.1 Kawaii/cute syndrome

The cuteness factor of many manga characters is making them easy to be embraced, to be remembered and to be liked by the readers. Almost everybody loves cute characters, and manga characters provides them in abundance (such as Pikachu, Digicharat, even “infamous” the high school girls, etc).

3.1.2 Simple yet stylish character design

Judging from the appearances of many manga characters, they all represents simplicity but stylish characters. Unlike their Western counterparts that focused deeply on the knowledge of basic human anatomy, it seems easy to draw the manga characters. This “easy yet stylish” factor enables many readers to try to draw, first by imitating their favorite characters and then developing their own manga characters. This made the opinion of it is easy to draw comics and encourage the readers to start drawing with the manga-esque style.

3.1.3 Characters and readers grew up together

The manga characters grew up together with their readers. It is usual to start with a novice characters (usually when he/she was still a child) then we follow how he/she developed into more mature personality and upgrade his/her abilities in the course of time, until he/she got married and had children of their own. This create strong bond between the the readers

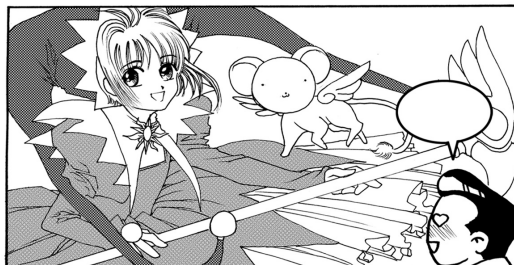


Figure 4
Cute syndrome in manga character
Card Captor Sakura, CLAMP

and their favorite characters, just like two best friends that grew up together. The readers learnt and knew almost everything in how the novice characters honed his/her abilities into a magnificent warrior, usually through the “push to the limit” kind of training.

3.2 The power of context

The power of context could simply describe as environmental argument on how the epidemic could spread. Epidemics are case sensitive to condition and circumstances of time and place in which they occur. In manga, the powers of context are:

3.2.1 The various themes, inspired by daily activities

As mentioned above, manga has covered almost every aspect of daily life, ranging from love stories, science fiction, fantasy adventure, history, economics, sports to politics. These various themes of stories enable us to learn more about the Japanese culture and everyday life. And for Indonesian people, it is always interesting to know about other cultures, especially from more modern countries. Several Indonesian comic artists go even further by creating their pen name using the Japanese name and characters (such as Calista Takarai, Anzu Hizawa and Shinju Arisa).

3.2.2 The Shojo, Shonen, Bishojo and Bishonen genre

Manga divided their products based on the

readers in two types: manga for girls (shojo manga) and manga for boys (shonen manga). Although there are no strict rules regarding the readers (girls could read the shonen manga and vice versa), but the approach of each genre turn out quite different.

Shojo manga is created by girls for girls in the girls’ way. Therefore, reading shojo manga is like reading the mangaka’s personal diary, told in heart to heart in an intimate way. They broke the ‘regular’ rules of comics such as linear and logic story structure, creating and composing more emotional panels, using flowers to represent how the leading characters’ feeling and aura [9].

The evolution of shojo manga continues on the themes, reaching the more complex yet compelling stories from life philosophies to forbidden love. All of this create powerful bond between the artists and their readers, sometimes even to the degree that the readers used the stories in shojo manga as moral support in facing the harsh reality of daily routine.

Shonen manga is created for boys; with stories focused not on the result of what the leading characters is doing, but how he overcomes all challenges and obstacles toward his goals with honesty and determination. Shonen manga acted like an insight and self motivation for their readers that with strong will and hard



Figure 5

The manga-esque style found in Indonesian comics

Source: *White Castle*, Calista Takarai

work, they can overcome any obstacle in front of them [10].

The stylish visualization found in the shojo manga creates another genre: the *bishojo* (beautiful girls) and *bishonen* (beautiful boys) that put handsome yet “feminine” male (in contrast to the handsome and macho type of guy). The bishonen genre became even more popular that it affects the profile of several leading male characters in the Indonesian television shows that prefer the more *bishonen* look.

4. Conclusions

Comics is a popular medium that is based solely on visual to tell a story. By using icons as the representation of things, the visual could be simplified. Through simplification, the icon would present the essential meaning from an object and amplify that meaning in a way that could be not achieved by realistic form. This kind of simplification toward pictures and characters toward a purpose would become an effective tool in storytelling in any medium. Cartoon is not just a way of drawing, but more likely a way of seeing.

Further more, human ability to extend his identities into inanimate objects, by giving parts of his identities to it could bring it into life. That is why through the cartoon (that is the basis of comics) we do not just observe it, but we also become the cartoon itself. We identify ourselves to the cartoon. This is how comics “works”, penetrating our unconsciousness silently.

Manga is using this kind of “amplification through simplification” (sometimes) to the extreme, using very iconic and cartoon characters against very realistic background, so the readers could mask themselves in the characters while safely enter a sensually stimulating world, put the readers in the drivers’ seat.

Manga’s potential in creating the tipping point enables them to embrace and slowly influences readers from another country to create their own comics, by imitating their favorite characters before creating their own. This unintentionally made readers turned artists to draw first like their favorite mangakas, resulting in the manga-esque style of drawing, a different form of cultural “imperialism”.

End Note:

- [1] Sabin, Roger, 1996, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels*, Phaidon Press Ltd, pp 68, USA.
- [2, 3, 4, 6] McCloud, Scott, 1997, *Understanding Comics*, Paradox Press, USA.
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