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Using Manga to Teach Superheroes: Implications for the Classroom
Teach Superheroes: Implications for the Classroom

By GVSU Faculty Hsiao-Ping Chen

Introduction

Imported Japanese manga (comics) have proliferated in the U.S., and young people in this country have appropriated them culturally for the purpose of artistic expression. This paper provides first a global popular culture context for Japanese manga/anime and its characteristics, and second an example of using manga as a visual arts teaching tool for teaching students about gender representation through a hero/heroine theme.

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Global Popular Culture and Japanese Manga

Throughout the past decade, Japanese manga (comic books) and anime (animation) have become widely accepted as popular visual forms, and mass media have made them accessible throughout the world (Natsume, 2001; Kinsella, 2000). Manga's popularity is apparent in bookstores in the United States, in which entire aisles are dedicated to hundreds of different manga. Artists, readers, and fans have begun to make their own Japanese-inspired comics as well, contributing to a global process of production and consumption. And young people in the United States have widely appropriated the form for consumption. As young people culturally appropriate manga, we may see them begin to question and contest their identities rather than taking them for granted. This developing phenomenon raises many questions by which we may explore the societal effects of globalization. Why and how does Japanese manga affect young people’s identities on such a global scale? How is Japanese manga interpreted by American youth, and how does it acquire new meaning as a result of these perspectives? How does this global experience in everyday life change the way we understand the process of cultural meaning and identity formation?

Manga Characteristics

Manga for all practical purposes means “comic made in Japan,” and the term covers a wide range of publications, such as picture books, anime and cartoons (Schodt, 1986, 1996). Story manga are usually printed in dichromatic (i.e., black and white) tones, with a focus on pictorial images rather than text, particularly emphasizing depictions of feelings and inner emotions in sequential motion. Along with its iconic technique of figure drawing, manga has a distinct and elaborated facial style, (large, wide eyes, long eyelashes, and small, delicate mouths (Natsume, 2000). These aesthetic qualities and the distinctive style of manga typically incorporate the following features: a high-tech style, fantasy worlds, human drama, complex characters who grow and develop emotionally, mecha characters (robots ridden by humans), and sexy, supernatural, powerful female characters (Levi, 1996). In Japan, manga is a multi-billion-dollar industry with circulation numbers among the biggest in the country, and compose one of the largest sectors of the publishing business. Sales of manga were $6.7 billion in 1995, representing 40% of all published books and magazine sales (Lent, 2004; Schodt, 1986; Yuko, 2004). Manga is read by people of all ages, and the most popular weeklies can reach 6.2 million readers, in a variety of genres and formats (Lent, 2004). In order to keep pace with market demand and to maintain its readership, manga continues to create new storytelling styles to attract new readers in a wide array of genres.

With its freshness, diversity, and wide range of visual styles, manga is rapidly gaining vigorous new markets in many countries in East and Southeast Asia, including Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, and China. Its popularity is also spreading to Europe (France, Germany, and England) (Natsume, 2000, 2001; Wilson & Toku, 2003), and its markets are expanding in Canada, Australia, and some areas of Africa and Latin America (Lent, 2004). In addition, manga is also captivating the attention of American youth. Major Japanese publishers such as Viz, Tokyo Pop, and Dark Horse, online websites, and local mainstream book companies have begun wide distribution in the United States (Lent, 2004). The prevalence of emerging manga pop culture in foreign countries is due in part to globalization, most obviously via the spread of capitalism, the wider distribution of cultural commodities through the Internet, and the proliferation of global printed media.
images of normal people doing normal things—scenarios with which many readers can identify. The most popular genres in the U.S. are: the fantasy element of shōjo (manga for girls) as being magical and power (e.g., Sailor Moon). Female superheroes often have alternative gender roles. Female protagonists in shōjo manga are often equipped with fantastic “super” powers in order to create a pleasing (“cool”) persona possessing both female and male qualities (Napier, 1998). Such protagonists can be read as depicting “wish-fulfilling fantasies of empowerment” and can also be seen as “intimately related to a young girl’s normal femininity” (Naipier, 1998, p. 93). For example, Sailor Moon and her Sailor friends embrace both feminine and masculine qualities—cute and pretty and wearing girls’ sexy clothing—but also carrying weapons and having the potential to be aggressive with their magical and supernatural powers.

**Using the Sailor Moon Manga as an Example**

(Recommended for Grades 4-6)

This lesson intends to engage students in thinking about how the superhero genre ties in to models of gender, masculinity or femininity. By studying the images of the superheroes represented in manga, and inviting students to talk about what it means to be a super girl/boy (e.g., girls don’t have to be feminine in order to be girls, girls can be tough and make changes in the world), and about fe/male roles as assigned to social and cultural values, students will begin to understand and question how certain images are constructed as social norms (how girls/boys should be).

- Identify the elements in a story/character that represent gender identity (e.g., femininity vs. masculinity)
- Write a short descriptive analyses of images from superhero tales (What is a Hero? Or Heroism? What does it mean to be a Hero?)
- Create a character who they would like to be or a hero from their culture they think embodies heroism.
- Write, illustrate, and analyze alternative endings to familiar superhero tales — if given the power to change the world, what change would the student make?

**About the story of Sailor Moon**

Sailor Moon is known as “pretty warrior” sailor Moon” in Japan, embodying conventional norms both of boys’ culture through fighting, warriorship, and superpowers—and the conventional trappings of girls’ culture, through romance, friendship and appearance (Allison, 2000). Sailor Moon is an action/adventure comic series targeted to young girls. The stories often include romantic themes and center on a fourteen-year-old high school girl named Tsukino Usagi (alias Sailor Moon), who has ordinary desires and superpowers. Sailor Moon and her other friends are ordinary high school girls who possess the power to transform themselves

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into superheroes so that they can fight the Dark Kingdom to save the earth. Sailor Moon represents an ideal girl: She has long blond hair and big eyes, and has been given some supernatural powers that transform her from a girl into a tough, pretty, monster-fighting super-heroine. Sailor Moon is guided by the wise black cat Luna and the white cat Artemis, and is aided by Tuxedo Mask, and her other sailor friends—Sailor Mercury (Amy), Sailor Mars (Rei), Sailor Jupiter (Makoto) and Sailor Venus (Maiko).  

**About the main character Sailor Moon**  
Visually, Sailor Moon is drawn with flowing lines and curves. She has big eyes, lots of eyelashes, lots of curly hair, and generally appears against a background covered with little pretty sprinkles (i.e., magic), thereby inviting focus on action most of the time. Sailor Moon represents a girl who wants to be both tough and feminine (pretty and powerful). Her emotions are expressed through narration of her thought processes or through the expressions of the eyes (e.g., passivity and emotionality), instead of through speech (talking) and action (aggression- and reason-oriented). Sailor Moon represents the different kind of super heroine with the power to challenge the norm, and redefine and experience what it means to be a girl (girls can be tough and still remain feminine in form). She allows the reader to experience empowerment through different means of identification (an ordinary girl/boy can do great things).  

**Discussion and activity**  
1. The superhero genre is a classic tale, often involving fighting scenes featuring a protagonist who has a dual identity (real and secret identity) trying to save the world with his or her superpowers. Sailor Moon and her friends share similarities with the western style of superhero, but with a twist: Sailor Moon relies on her friends to complete her mission, and the stories emphasize this friendship, together with a sense of determination and trust regarding the value of teamwork in fighting the monsters. Each of the characters has an identity representing who they are and a special ability by which they transform into a superhero.  

2. Look at the images of Sailor Moon and her friends. How is the concept of hero and heroine represented and displayed? What does it mean to be a hero or heroine? How does Sailor Moon and her Sailor friends transform and reflect the values of gender roles (e.g., gender stereotypes, models of masculinity or femininity)?  

3. Sailor Moon represents the ideal girl one aspires to be. By studying the images in Sailor Moon manga, students can begin to understand the social construction of gender corresponding to societal values from another cultural context (Toku 2001). For example, the concept of hero/heroine is constructed by social and cultural values. How to be a girl (e.g., beautiful Barbie, powerful Xena, innocent, cute, likable Sailor Moon) is different throughout different cultures. Most Japanese manga emphasize gender depiction, constructing the notion of what are desirable gender roles through the representation of the certain characters (e.g., super hero/heroine, goddess, powerful god, warrior). Art educators can ask students questions to begin to understand gender
construction in the superhero/heroine genre. For example, Who is Sailor Moon? What does she stand for? What makes her a superhero? What is her mission as a superhero? What is she fighting against or trying to accomplish? What is Sailor Moon’s real/secret identity? What is her magical weapon? What types of costumes does she wear which make her stand out as a super girl? Who else helps Sailor Moon in her battles against the Dark Kingdom? What is Sailor Moon’s alias? What team is she a part of (affiliations)? Who is on her team? What are the team’s abilities? Who is Sailor Moon’s enemy? What sort of transportation does Sailor Moon use in her fight against the dark force? 

4. For the studio activity, students will be asked to expand their imaginative thinking by empowering themselves in playing a superhero role. The following questions invite students to imagine themselves in power: Which superhero are you? If given the power to change the world, what change would you make? Students will be asked to create a superhero drawing in a comic style, and they will define and write about their choices of superhero and give their reasons, their illustrate and analyze alternative endings to familiar superhero tales. Students will be asked the following questions in helping them making connections as to which superhero qualities they would embrace in themselves or what type of superhero they aspire to become: What does it mean to be a superhero or super heroine? If you were going to become a superhero (super heroine), what would you call yourself? What is your mission as a superhero? What would be your power, or extraordinary strength? (e.g., I am magical in that I can..., or I represent...) What is your secret identity or alter ego? What costume would you wear that makes you stand out as a superhero/heroine? What would be your magical weapon in your fight against the enemy? How would you get your powers? Who would your enemy be? What would be your alias? What team would you be a part of (affiliations)? Who else would be on your team? What are the team’s abilities?

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Footnotes

1 Manga (mahn-gah, 漫画) literally “humorous picture,” is similar in some respects to comic books in English (Toku, 2001). Adult manga, in fact, are considered to be as complex in form as novels in their depictions of human dramas (Toku, 2001a). Like comics, its format is a sequence of pictures that tell a story.

2 Ani mé (ah-nee-may) is a Japanese term for animated films (Schodt, 1996). Manga series are often transformed into ani mé productions which appear on television, cable networks, and in merchandizing.

3 Manga has achieved commercial success through character merchandising in films, animation, and video games. With its freshness, diversity, and wide range of visual styles, manga is rapidly gaining vigorous new markets in many countries in East and Southeast Asia, including Taiwan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, and China. Its popularity is also spreading to Europe (France, Germany, and England) (Natsume, 2001; Wilson & Toku, 2003), and its markets are expanding in Canada, Australia, and some areas of Africa and Latin America (Lent, 2004). Major Japanese publishers such as Viz, Tokyo Pop, and Dark Horse, online websites, and local mainstream book companies have begun widespread distribution in the United States (Lent, 2004). The prevalence of emerging manga pop culture in foreign countries is due in part to globalization, most obviously via the spread of capitalism, the wider distribution of cultural commodities through the Internet, and the proliferation of global printed media.

4 This is merely an overview, since the range of stories is quite varied, and many have none of these features.

5 This is merely an overview, since the range of stories is quite varied, and many have none of these features. Themes entail not limited to supernatural mysteries, magical girls’ romance, life changes, fear of technological innovations, giant robots (known as mecha, usually ridden by human pilots) fighting with unknown aliens, martial action (Ninja as martial artist/warrior), vampire battles, the role of the domestic housewife, cooking, the school sports epic, romantic triangles, and the gender reincarnated transvestite are also explored (Levi, 1996).

6 It is common to see girls dressed as boys, and beautiful boys who can be mistaken as girls (see Revolutionary

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As educators, including art educators, strive to teach meaning making in relation to the world we live in, the superhero genre can be a great way to engage students in talking about the world in which they live in relation to themselves. Japanese manga is one of the visual resources through which teachers can teach children about constructing the notion of what gender is, building on the students’ interest in popular culture. How do these characters assign their gender roles, whether female or male? By deconstructing the notion of gender at different points of the story and character, students may begin to understand and call into question how the image constructs desire. A visual culture art educator, Wilson (2000, 2003, 2004), advocates the importance of making connections to popular culture, including the student’s interests and needs in teaching the social conditions of visibility and the meaning derived from the socio-political-cultural context. It is important to empower students by having their voices heard and to understand the encoded visual imagery grounded in a student’s desire so that teachers might be able to motivate students to learn and see the possibilities of visual aspects of the identity they would like to embody. The manga as a visual medium has the power to promote imaginative thinking and playful engagement with possibilities in multiple contexts. The significance of Japanese manga is that it has provided an imaginative world of fantasy in students are given the power to make changes in their lives, potentially creating and trying out different identities through the creation of new stories, forms and styles.

For References to this article please visit http://colleaguesplus.com

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7 Some of the most popular manga among youths are read by girls. Other manga that are related to the superhero genre include Naruto and Neon Genesis Evangelion. Sailor Moon episodes (anime version or TV show) can be watched at http://www.watchsailormoon.com/series/sailor-moon/. Sailor Moon also appears in other series, including Sailor Moon R, Sailor Moon S, Sailor Moon Supers, and Sailor Stars. This paper focuses on the series of Sailor Moon which can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Moon.

8 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sailor_Moon

9 Sailor Moon is a hero and a very beautiful elegant warrior in whom can be found some visual similarities to and differences from such American style comic heroes as Wonder Woman or Xena.