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Recommended Citation

Chen, Hsiao-ping (2006) "The Significance of Manga in the Identity-Construction of Young American Adults: A Lacanian Approach," *Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education: Vol. 2006 , Article 2.* <https://doi.org/10.17077/2326-7070.1384>

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MANGA IN THE IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION OF YOUNG AMERICAN ADULTS: A LACANIAN APPROACH

Hsiao-ping Chen

Introduction

Background to the Study

In the past decade, Japanese *manga*¹ (comic books) and *anime*² (animation) have become widely accepted as a popular visual form, and the mass media have made them accessible throughout the world (Natsume, 2000, 2001; Wilson & Toku, 2003). In the United States, artists, readers, and fans of *manga* have started to make their own Japanese-inspired comics and young adults have been forming their own fan clubs and web sites and display their own comic creations in the public domain.³ Young adult *manga* fans have formed Japanese *manga-anime* clubs on university campuses around the United States (Duarte, 2003). Today, the popularity of *manga* in the United States can be seen in bookstores, where whole aisles are filled with hundreds of different *manga* styles. The artform's tremendous social and commercial influence can be attributed to its popularity on young people's identity construction through popular culture (Toku, 2001c; Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Toku, 2003).

What is *manga*? What are its characteristics, and how does it differ from comics that are produced in the western part of the world? How are its cultural influences expressed? *Manga* literally means "humorous picture" in Japanese (Toku, 2001c). Its images are usually drawn in dichromatic (black and white) tones, its stories can be viewed as equivalent to the western novel in their depictions of complex human dramas (Ogi, 2001; Toku, 2001a). Unlike the children's cartoons created by American artists, *manga* and *anime* are not only for children, but are targeted toward adults. In Japan, though, *manga* can refer to a range of publications that includes *anime* (Schodt, 1986, 1996). For purposes of this study, printed, or story, *manga* is the focus.

In general, *manga* and *anime* stories typically include the following features: a high-tech look, fantasy worlds, human drama, complex characters with emotional, inner, development and growth, *mecha* characters (robots ridden by humans), and sexy, supernatural, and powerful female characters (Levi, 1996). This is merely an overview, since the range of stories is quite varied, and many have none of these features. A wide range of *manga* genres emphasize themes that include the everyday lives of ordinary people, the value of friendship and team formation, the importance of knowing oneself,

¹ The term was first popularized by well-known woodblock artist Katsushika Hokusai, who published *Hokusai Manga* in 1814 (Hosogaya, 2002; Schodt, 1986). The word *manga* combines the Chinese character *man*, meaning "involuntary" and implying "morally corrupt," and *ga*, the Japanese word for "picture." The result is a word with the double meaning of "whimsical (and slightly risqué) sketches" (Schodt, 1986, p. 18).

² *Animé* (ah-nee-may) is a Japanese term for animation. An example would be a motion picture that uses grouped cinematic productions (Schodt, 1996). *Manga* series are often transformed into *animé* productions, and are often later aired simultaneously in television, on cable networks, and in merchandizing.

³ The export value of Japanese *manga-anime* sold to the American market was estimated at \$75 million in 1996 (Iwabuchi, 2002), rising above that of the American comic book market, even as American artists had begun incorporating the Japanese *manga* style into their own comic book production. *Manga* has achieved commercial success through character merchandising in films, animation, and video games.

and the poignant impermanence of things in the materialistic age. In recent publications, there has been evidence of a growing emphasis on women's roles, the dissatisfaction of common people lost in the complexities of contemporary cultures, and fears of science and technological innovations (Ito, 1994a, 1994b; Kinsella, 2000; Lent, 1999; Napier, 1998, 2001, 2002; Ogi, 2001, 2003).

In particular, the genre of *manga* is distinguished by its questioning of identity (Napier, 2002). That is, through a series of images, *manga* creates a form of fantasy and imagination that carries emotional expression, often leading to radically different views of lifestyles, cultural values, and disparate beliefs from those of western society. Accordingly, the distinguishing features of *manga* characters and stories, as the American participants have said during the interviews, trigger a desirable image of self—seeing oneself reflected and experienced by the story's characters. Thus, *manga* mediates how its participants see themselves and want to be perceived by others. *Manga* certainly feeds the fantasies, and shapes the identities of today's young people, who consume and reproduce the *manga* texts and practices.

The impact of *manga* on the core of youth identity can be linked to the unconscious desire and fantasies brought in the media culture (films, movies, music, videos, and web games), according to art educator Jan Jagodzinski (2000). This reflects the under theorization of the visual in art education. It is the *fantasy* found in *media* that young people are able to use to open up new meanings and to produce new possibilities for new forms of identity. *Manga* allows its participant to experience something other than him/herself through fantasy, which triggers a questioning of one's identity and a desire to explore one's identity in what-if storylines.

Statement of the Problem

From observations of the Ohio State University (OSU) *manga* club members, *manga* production can be seen as a means of constructing different forms of identity. Members alter the *manga* style; giving their characters a unique style that can be used for building their own identities. *Manga* opens up a great space for making decisions about, thinking about, and playing with, personal and cultural identity. Members' embracing of Japanese *manga* seemed to be an example of this agency that leads toward change. *Manga* provides new forms of identity constructions through the fulfillment of desires awakened by reading, writing, creating, and cosplaying⁴ *manga* stories and characters.

A significant discovery was that members of the *manga* club believe that *manga* is better than western comics in connecting readers' inner emotions through the visual characteristics of its art style. It is a medium that invites reader participation. *Manga* helps its participants see the Japanese culture not as exoticism, but as imaginary to [re]create personal and cultural identity. "*Manga* makes you question and think about yourself as experienced by the character," says one club member. As members become more involved with *manga* over time, their views seem to *change* in response to different

⁴ *Cosplay* (kaws-phlay) refers to costume-play (Kinsella, 2000, p.131), best known for its role-playing and costume competition. Usually fans of *manga* and *anime* have their own costumes made and designed by themselves, spending a great deal of time making a set of clothes, wigs and props in order to visually display themselves with a character identification in *manga-anime* conventions. The purpose of the *cosplay*, according to the cosplayers, is to authentically transform themselves into their favorite characters. *Cosplay* is attended mostly by girls in their teens and twenties since sewing is considered a popular craft and exquisite art form among girl fans (personal conversations with cosplayers in 2004). Many cosplayers in Japan don't want their teachers or parents to know that they cosplay.

values, in terms of gender, sex, and religion. In this way, *manga* functions as a mirror for shaping members' personal and cultural identities.⁵

The question then became how does *manga* shape identity? Is participation in the OSU *manga* club, an expression of a desire to become “the other”⁶ through the reproduction of *manga* (Fiske, 1989; Jenkins, 1992)? Are members attracted to *manga* as an embodiment of the “exotic,” or are young fans using the *manga* style to express distinction and non-conformity to the mainstream American culture? In other words, is their involvement with *manga* a form of “refusal” (Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000) or “resistance” (McRobbie, 1991; Storey, 1996)? Finally, does *manga*, an imported artifact of Japanese culture, make *manga* fans more aware of their own culture, and does it help them define their identity, by contrast? How do young adults in the United States integrate *manga* into their own sense of American culture? What influence does the consumption and reproduction of the artifacts of another culture have on the construction of their own personal identity and the development of a collective identity?

Research Questions

A Lacanian approach is used to explore the identity construction of members of *manga* clubs to explain the fascination that *manga* holds for American youth. In what ways, and to what extent, do *manga* stories and characters help *manga* fans deal with identity issues and construction? This study examines how *manga* stories and characters are “communicated” and “used” by young *manga* fans in expressing their personal and cultural identities.

Concept of Identity

The view of identity from the researcher's perspective is that identity does not describe “who I am” or “where I belong.” From a Lacanian viewpoint, identity is a construct built from the external and internal. Identity refers to self-construction in process, or the ability to construct difference through the ongoing articulation⁷ with others. Identity is not only constituted outside us or extant inside us; rather, it weaves itself through our relationships with others. It is constantly contradictory and shifting.⁸

Lacan (1973; 1977c) sees identity as something that is inherently linked to the external; however, in the Lacanian view, identity is not just a set of subject positions that

⁵ Based on my observations, many members expressed a desire to visit, or live, in Japan. Some members were taking Japanese language and culture courses. Some members even assumed Japanese names or dyed their hair black, which suggested to me that they were (whether consciously or not) imitating the characters found in *manga* stories.

⁶ In the Lacanian view, an individual's perception of the other is not primarily based on an “us vs. them”. Instead, at least in part (in the Mirror stage), the individual tends to see “the other” as ideal image of him/herself.

⁷ Identity as diaspora, see Stuart Hall (1990; 1995; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 2000b; 1992). Identities derive from fictional stories of multiple selves; they are constructed on the basis of the narrative stories, experiences and histories we tell about ourselves. It is the discursive *process* of identification in relation to others that results in one's identity. Identity is a representation of how we are “transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. It is historically, not biologically, defined” (Hall, 1992, p. 277). Because identity is defined by context and rooted in culture, language, and history (Hall, 2000a), identity is not a fixed entity, but instead shifts and changes over time, depending on different contexts. Identification is thus a practice—a form of struggle for meaning, in which individuals constantly reproduce and reconstitute how they understand themselves in relation to others—not through opposition, but through difference(s).

⁸ This research uses the work of Jacques Lacan to support identity theories.

are imposed upon the subject. Identity is not fundamentally constructed outside the subject, and it is not based primarily on the perception of the other as different (at least, in the mirror stage, the other is part of the ideal-self). Instead, identity—arising as it does from a psyche that is internally split and fragmented—is essentially connected with one's dissatisfaction with something that is conspicuously lacking. One wants to become, or go beyond lacking, and this leads to an endless desire and search for recognition.

Theoretical Framework

Aspects of Lacan's (1973; 1977a; 1977b; 1977c; 1998) identity theory of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic, particularly his ideas of the imaginary and the mirror stage, are relevant to this study because they examine the ways these young people construct their identities through reading and creating *manga* stories and characters. The ideal images represented in *manga* mirror a youth's desires to be individual, beautiful, powerful and unique, and all of these get down to the root of the desire to be a complete and unified self.

Lacanian theory is important for this study because it explains the researcher's observations of *manga* fans. *Manga* fans want to be like—or think they are like—the *manga* characters with which they identify, yet these characters are always beautiful or powerful, and always distinctive—unique. It seems that what is evoked by *manga* is young people's participation in an imaginary world in which their real identity struggles can be temporarily resolved. When they identify with a strong character, their own weaknesses disappear. By identifying with a beautiful or popular character, their desire to be recognized and appreciated is fulfilled. *Manga* allows its participant to experience something other than him/herself through fantasy.

Methodology

This research, a qualitative study, also incorporates interviewing as a research method. Its investigation of the ways in which *manga* fans' identities are linked to their favorite *manga* stories and characters also incorporates the views of the researcher. The research data are spoken, personal facts and do not define meanings; instead, meanings are socially constructed, and then interpreted, by the researcher (Schwandt, 2000). The theoretical framework for this study reflects the researcher's own belief system, and also affects how the collected data was framed and interpreted.

Part of the purpose of this research is to provide an emic perspective by listening to the participants explain their own points of view. By asking questions, and paying close attention to the answers, the researcher does not aim to inform the participants. Rather, the goal is to use the interview process to uncover their struggles in defining themselves. In using a conversational questioning technique, it is hoped that participants will be able to detail the process by which they identify with characters and stories, and how their desires are created and fulfilled through reading *manga*. When we have become one with the speaking subject, it is possible to see ourselves shift and change as we take on different subject positions. The focus on the participants' own stories encourages them to find their own elements of identity. These elements shape and identify their desire, as it acts in identity construction, in such a way as to prepare them for the process of understanding their identity. It also assumes that their desires are part of identity construction, and that the participants then become conscious of them once the desire is spoken. The researcher acts as an analyst, to listen and to interpret what has said.

Participants in the study were recruited from the members of the OSU *Manga* Club. Although this study uses multiple sources, data collection relies primarily on semi-structured interviews with participants.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Much of what is known about young people's artmaking is derived from the classroom context in which teachers have a significant influence on students' practice. Wilson (2000; 2003) states that popular visual cultural images of Japanese *manga* are expanding in a rhizomic fashion, and have an impact on young children's cognitive and artistic development (Toku, 2001b, 2001d, 2003). However, their research is based only on an analysis of participants' graphic development. This study extends the current research on *manga* by investigating the meanings young adults develop and communicate in response to their voluntary involvement with the artform.

This study is significant in that it supports a different way of understanding identity construction from a Lacanian perspective. In looking at young people's *manga* production, which their desires for the other have produced, the researcher has attempted to understand and map the shape of those young people's identities. Then an attempt has been made to name the desires that constitute the identity construction. *Manga* identity performs a type of cultural production that offers young people an opportunity to recognize personal, cultural and collective desires, and to become conscious of them. These young people strive to satisfy the desires that motivate change. This research enables an understanding, beyond the fixation of young people's strivings, toward new constructions of identity. It also connects identity construction with young people's popular fashions of artmaking through *manga* creation. In understanding members of the *manga* club's own fantasies with spectacular *manga* characters and stories, this study hopes to provide an explanation of how identity, in general, is constructed through a means of self-construction and production.

Outline of the Study

This dissertation is organized as follows: Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature on theories of identity, focusing in particular on the Lacanian perspective, and also provides additional information related to *manga*'s characteristics and origins. Chapter Three describes the methodology used in this study. Chapter Four presents an analysis of research participants' interview data, using cases. Chapter Five discusses the Lacanian themes that emerge in these narratives presented in Chapter Four, and summarizes the research findings, implications, and suggestions for further study.

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