Localising Japanese Popular Culture in the Philippines

— Transformative Translations of Japan's Cultural Industry

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Japan's Cool Japan Initiative has aimed to tap Japan's cultural industry to boost the country's soft power all over the globe. In Southeast Asia, Cool Japan has its merits in countries such as Thailand and Singapore where Japanese cultural products, ranging from restaurants to television shows, have become easily accessible. Borrowing from Koichi Iwabuchi, Cool Japan provides opportunities for the country to present their "cultural odour." That said, when the government is no longer in control of different cultural products, this 'cultural odour' takes a different shape. As a country that has not been central to Cool Japan initiatives, the Philippines presents an interesting case of localisations that negotiate Japanese cultural products in the Philippines. Focusing on observations of Japan's contents industry, particularly access to anime and manga, this paper highlights how local consumers have made efforts to transform the 'cultural odour' of these Japanese products. This paper focuses on digital outputs such as social media fan works and *dōjinshi* of popular anime shows that bravely challenge the meanings of these Japanese cultural products. I argue that these localisations present critical transformations of Japanese popular culture which has led to knowledge from deviates from normative notions of Japan.

Keywords Cultural Diplomacy, New Literacies, Anime and Manga, Popular Culture

1 Introduction

The flows of Japanese popular culture all over the globe has reached an interesting zenith in the last twenty years. Outside traditional modes of media distribution, the internet has been pivotal in diversifying audiences for Japanese media as various online platforms provided new avenues to distribute media. Global streaming platforms such as Netflix, Youtube, Amazon Prime, iTunes and Spotify have made various Japanese music and shows available to countries like the Philippines. Legal access to Japanese media through these platforms, however, have only been around in the Philippines for the last five years. This highlights the limited access Filipinos have to Japanese popular culture.

Before streaming services, access to Japanese media in the Philippines have been limited to traditional outlets, expensive imports, the occasional cultural events by Japanese-led companies and organisations, and various events initiated by fans of anime and manga. This limited access to Japanese media poses an interesting challenge to understanding Japan. Given the tenuous past between the Philippines and Japan because of World War II, access to Japanese popular culture opens opportunities for cultural understanding. It potentially contributes to shifting strained and painful memories of World War II which continues to colour Filipino understanding of Japan. As such, diplomatic efforts such as Cool Japan serve as important avenues for cultural understanding. Cool Japan efforts, however, are moving slower compared to iterations of Japanese popular culture being produced and disseminated online. In this presentation, I examine how adaptations of Japanese popular culture in the Philippines have been adopted despite gaps in cultural literacies concerning Japan. Using approaches from New Literacy Studies, I hope to unpack the transformative ways in which Filipinos understand and adapt Japanese culture. This lack of direct engagement with Japanese popular culture and its media literacies became an opportunity for Philippine fans to begin experimenting with the media. This paper explores these experimentations that have made Philippine iterations of anime and manga increasingly divorced from Japan. Through the examination of different comics and *dōjinshi*, this paper intends to highlight the transformed Japanese media literacies in Philippine culture. Through these transformed literacies, I aim to highlight how the Philippines is retooling Japanese media literacies to produce new media that tries to recentre media closer to home.

2 Transformative literacies in Transcultural Spaces

Critical to this study is the notion of literacies. For this study, I borrow the concept of literacies from New Literacy Studies where the idea of literacy is beyond reading and writing. Instead, literacies are seen as “skills, knowledge, and tools in use within social practices where participants are undertaking tasks and pursuing purposes ... particularly in a world beyond school”.¹ When one considers media products such as anime and manga, there are various skills, knowledge and tools necessary to engage with the media. Part of these skills may involve understanding how manga panels are constructed² or how there are different narrative and visual elements in Japanese media that elicit affective responses.³ These different media literacies concerning anime and manga have been extensively discussed in Japanese and Anglophone discourse. The accessibility of anime and manga literacies in Japanese and in English highlight the two centres that influence global Japanese popular consumption : Japan and the United States.

Japan serves as an important pillar responsible for producing these media contents while American distributors, publishers, and media outlets are responsible for disseminating Japanese contents in a globally accessible language : English. I would like to note, however, that while there are other English-language distributors in other countries, American distribution of Japanese anime and manga in English have the longest history and the widest global reach. More often than not, English-translated manga and anime are sold outside of America from American publishers. That said, various iterations of the English language will also have an impact on the transformation of anime and manga literacies in the Philippines.

While Japan and America play central roles in the transnational distribution of Japanese popular culture, the transcultural knowledge surrounding anime and manga are produced by an increasingly multinational English-language fan base. Fan labour surrounding anime and manga translations have been critical in raising global interest over titles that are yet to be officially translated by Japanese or American media companies. In translating these works, fans have made efforts to capture cultural nuances that can help fans of anime and manga to immerse in Japanese culture.⁴ These efforts

¹ Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Studying New Literacies,” (*Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 58, no. 2, October 2014), p.97.

² Fusanosuke Natsume and Osamu Takeuchi, *Mangagaku Nyuumon [Manga Studies Primer]* (Minerva Shobō, 2009).

³ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku : Japan's Database Animals* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

are clear in translated works that are directly translated from Japanese to English. These translations, however, become diluted when fan translators work from another translation of Japanese anime and manga. For example, in Southeast Asia, local translations in Thai, Mandarin, Cantonese or Indonesian are more accessible.

As early as the 1990s, Japanese media, such as television dramas, animated shows, and manga, have been widely distributed in Southeast Asia through different media outlets from Singapore, Taiwan and Hongkong that localise this media in Mandarin, Cantonese and, on occasion, English languages.⁵ By the 2000s, other media companies from other parts of the region also actively translated Japanese media. Indonesia and Thailand have developed robust translated manga publishing industries.⁶ Many of these local translations are used as alternative resources for English-translated fan works surrounding Japanese media. In the same manner, these English-translated fan works become materials for Anglophone fans all over the globe to access Japanese media online. The layers of translation surrounding fan works highlight the resourcefulness among global fans who are passionate to seek alternative resources to generate interest in Japanese popular culture. The multiple layers of translation and at times recontextualised translations often lead to the loss of cultural nuances within some English-translated fan works. At times, shoddy fan translations lead to many misreadings or misinformation passed onto readers. These erroneous fan works, alongside careful commercial and fan translations of Japanese popular media, contribute towards diverse interpretations of Japanese media literacies. All these fan efforts are not unnoticed as global interest in Japanese popular culture has pushed the Japanese government to consider integrating these contents within their diplomatic efforts.

Cool Japan was a cultural policy developed in the early 2000s as an effort to foster creative content in the country in hopes of making Japan appealing to foreigners.⁷ These contents aim to promote domestic growth while connecting to other countries by showing that Japan is a country that helps the world.⁸ In Southeast Asia, Cool

⁴ Matteo Fabbretti, "The Use of Translation Notes in Manga Scanlation," (*Transcultural: A Journal of Translation and Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2, November 22, 2016), pp.91-101.

⁵ Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Duke University Press Books, 2002), pp.90-106.

⁶ Fusanosuke Natsume, "East Asia And Manga Culture: Examining Manga-Comic Culture in East Asia," *The Asian Face of Globalisation Reconstructing Identities, Institutions, and Resources*, ed. Ricardo G. Abad (The Nippon Foundation for Asian Public Intellectuals, 2001), pp.101-105.

⁷ Michal Daliot-Bul, "Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of 'Cool Japan' and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age," (*Social Science Japan Journal* 12, no. 2, 2009), pp.250-252.

⁸ Cool Japan Movement Promotion Council, "Cool Japan Proposal" (*Cool Japan Movement Promotion*

Japan Strategy focused on Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia as countries where they could focus the promotion of Japanese media contents such as dramas, music, anime and manga. For the Philippines, Cool Japan focused on fashion.⁹ This diverse approach of Cool Japan in Southeast Asia made encounters with Japanese popular culture varied. In areas where access to media contents was concentrated, literacies surrounding Japanese media became more complex and nuanced. Those countries were able to develop iterations of Japanese media using these literacies. In the Philippines, where access to these materials was minimal and centred only in major cities in the country, Japanese media literacies came from different places, far away from cultural centres such as Japan and the United States, and mostly from online spaces where these media and cultural literacies have been widely interpreted as it flows across different cultures.

3 Iterations of Japanese Popular Culture in the Philippines

The distribution of anime and manga in the Philippines has a long turbulent history that involves the “forgetting” and “remembering” of its Japanese qualities. Part of the forgetting involves direct intervention from the government during the Marcos Presidency and from the rebranding of Japanese animation as morning cartoons during the 1980s. The “remembering” of anime and manga’s Japanese qualities came aggressively in the late 1990s and early 2000s where television stations took notice of the surging popularity of the anime subculture in the Philippines.¹⁰ Tagalog-dubbed Japanese animation was increasingly shown on local television. The cost of licensing, distribution and translation, however, limited the anime and manga people consumed. Wide access to anime and manga is possible to people who could afford to import these media from the Japan and the United States or by accessing them online through fan sites. More often than not, fan-translated goods were the cheaper option. Due to the diverse ways in which Filipino anime and manga consumers access Japanese media,

Council, 2014.8.26).

⁹ Cool Japan/Creative Industry Policy-Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) “Cool Japan Initiative” (2014.7.21), <http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/creative/file/1406CoolJapanInitiative.pdf>

¹⁰ Kristine Michelle Santos and Febriani Sihombing, “Is There a Space for Cool Manga in Indonesia and the Philippines? Postcolonial Discourses on Transcultural Manga,” *The End of Cool Japan: Ethical, Legal, and Cultural Challenges to Japanese Popular Culture*, ed. Mark McLelland (Routledge, 2016), pp.202–203.

there have been no central texts, literature, or spaces in which Filipino fans root their knowledge of Japanese culture.

Fortunate fans of Japanese media are at times able to learn Japanese culture through universities. Through various student exchange programs, Filipino university students were able to access Japanese culture and were able to bring their knowledge home. These students would be some of the early fans who would establish cultural organisations such as the University of the Philippines' Japan-Philippines Friendship Club (also known as TomoKai) and DLSU Nihon Kenkyuu Kai. These were pivotal spaces during the 1990s and were crucial in establishing local fan networks that organised events and distributed fan-produced materials related to anime and manga. However, these organisations mostly conducted their activities in the capital. For the rest of the country, online anime and manga fan spaces and communities became valuable resources for Japanese media.

4 Learning Japanese Media through Affect Creates Transformative Local Media

By the early late 2000s, local television stations actively included Japanese drama and anime as part of their afternoon programming, sparking wide local consumption. This surge of interest in anime eventually led to efforts in bringing manga to the Philippines. At that time, manga was accessible either as direct imports from Japan, Chinese-translated titles from Hong Kong or Singapore, or English-translated titles from the United States. As imported goods, these titles are expensive and are highly inaccessible to young people in the Philippines. The same could be said with other original merchandise related to Japanese media. More often than not, Filipino consumers of Japanese media turned towards fan works online or pirated media. In all cases, materials that would allow fans to properly process the literacies they were encountering from anime and manga were expensive and at times inaccessible. Nonetheless, these fans still manage to learn aspects of these literacies through their affective encounters with Japanese media.

Affect can be seen as a visceral response untethered to logic or emotions.¹¹ It has been associated with affective responses such as *moe*, a word that means to “sprout”

¹¹ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual : Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC : Duke University Press Books, 2002), 35.

or “burn” which is integral to various literacies surrounding fan culture in Japan.¹² Affect has also been seen as an opportunity to gain knowledge through one’s response to the media.¹³ In various ways, affect has also opened opportunities to learn various literacies in popular media. These literacies can also be used to elicit affect.¹⁴ When some of these literacies are lost in translation or access, these affective encounters leave room for interpretation and transformations. This happened in Philippine comics where artists who are unfamiliar with the rules of Japanese manga started to adapt what they like while mixing it with their own and other styles, leading to what one comic anthology in the Philippines describes as a “culture crash”.¹⁵

By 2010s, these loose interpretations of Japanese literacies surrounding Japan’s media culture would inform and shape various fan practices in the Philippines. Inspired by *dōjinshi* culture in Japan, Filipinos would also hold their independent comic fairs. Artists would adopt various visual styles taken from anime and manga, ranging from the use of screen tones to the use of large expressive eyes for female characters. The interest sparked local publishers to attempt producing local comics using manga style. Comics from the local publisher, *Black Ink*, use labels such as “boys love” and “shoujo”, which taps into the anime and manga literacies of Filipino fans.

The execution of manga literacies, however, in some of these comics are a little different compared to those published in Japan as knowledge on manga literacies and production are not extensively studied on Anglophone fan spaces or in the Philippines. For example, the comic form in some Philippine *dōjinshi* deviates from Japanese standards as some are published in a way that the text reads from left to right rather than right to left.¹⁶ Due to this change in format, panel layouts strive to approach Japanese panelling techniques yet fail to account for the flow of texts. Even when following the Japanese standard of developing comic panels that read from right to left, the placement of speech bubbles sometimes remain vertical rather than

¹² Azuma, *Otaku : Database Animals*; Patrick W. Galbraith, “Moe and the Potential of Fantasy in Post-Millennial Japan” (*Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*, 2009.10.31) <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2009/Galbraith.html>; Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* (Duke University Press Books, 2019).

¹³ Anna Wilson, “The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction” (*Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 21, 2016), 1.4.

¹⁴ Kristine Michelle Santos, “Queer Affective Literacies : Examining ‘Rotten’ Women’s Literacies in Japan” (*Critical Arts* 34, no. 5, 2020), pp.10–12.

¹⁵ Jescie James Palabay, “Culture Crash Comics... Messages from the Editor” (*Culture Crash Comics*, 2000.8), 1.

¹⁶ Kristine Michelle Santos, “Disrupting Centers of Transcultural Materialities : The Transnationalization of Japan Cool through Philippine Fan Works,” (*Mechademia* 12, no. 1, 2019), pp.110–111.

accommodating the more horizontal layout for an alphabetical dialogue. While many English-language publications teach various manga techniques, the inaccessibility of these texts has made the production of local comics using manga techniques are challenging for Filipino artists. Nonetheless, some artists use it as an avenue to experiment with manga and other comic literacies.

A more popular approach in Philippine *dōjinshi* culture is the production of illustration books. Inspired by illustration books often tied to various anime or manga series, fans tend to produce illustration books to collate the fan works they produced within a year. These books do not necessarily require a lot of literacies from manga production. As such, there is a lot of room for experimentation. In recent years, some of these illustration books became opportunities for artists around the globe to collaborate on a given theme. For some Filipino fans, they used this opportunity to produce an illustration book for a Japanese anime series that promotes local culture and practices. In *Tara Na!*, a fan illustration anthology for the anime series *Yuri!! On Ice* (2016), Filipino illustrators collaborated to produce a travel guide, bringing the characters to various places in the Philippines while experiencing local culture.¹⁷ This *dōjinshi* is one of many emergent works in the Philippines that uses literacies from Japanese popular culture to assert local culture. Some of these works have been circulated all over the globe. In Japan, some of this *dōjinshi* produced by Filipino are sold at specialty stores such as Toranoana. The international traction that some of these Filipino works received highlights the increasing decentralisation of Japanese popular culture as more fans actively contribute to these spaces.¹⁸

Another fan activity that also shows transformed Japanese fan and media literacies are FILO AU. FILO AU is multimodal fan media narratives that use social media platforms as a medium to tell stories about characters and their fictional interactions on fake social media accounts as though these characters live very Filipino lives. A practice among fan communities surrounding KPOP since 2018, FILO AU became popular in 2020 as more people were online and grew increasingly familiar with many online practices. Some iterations of FILO AU highlight boys love (BL) literacies, where various narrative and visual elements are used to highlight what Japanese BL fans refer to as “coupling” (*kappuringu*) which pairs two male characters in a romantic relationship. What is interesting is the adaptation of FILO AU within anime and manga

¹⁷ Yoizine PH Team, *Tara Na! [Let's Go!]* (Self-published, 2018).

¹⁸ Santos, “Disrupting Centers of Transcultural Materialities : The Transnationalization of Japan Cool through Philippine Fan Works.”

fandoms. The characters that were rooted in Japan were uprooted to live very Filipino lives as they speak in Tagalog, banter using Tagalog memes, and even live Filipino experiences either as volleyball varsities for a local college or as actors for local drama. FILO AU is an interesting example of how literacies external to Japanese popular media impact fan expression to generate spaces where locals can feel stronger affective experiences with media. Not only has FILO AU emboldened local fans together but their activities have made Filipinos visibly present on online fan communities of anime and manga.

These Filipino fan expressions seen in dōjinshi and FILO AU are examples of how the lack of access to resources on Japanese cultural and media literacies has given many Filipinos the opportunities to liberally adapt these literacies and make them their own. As a result, Filipino works highlight the creation and insertion of local affective literacies within the consumption of Japanese popular culture. This action deviates from the original intentions of Cool Japan which are to generate interest in Japan. Rather, the transformations of Japanese cultural literacies have given Filipino fans and media various opportunities to consider new modes of local expression. Within fan spaces, these transformed literacies have emboldened local creators to forward Filipino representation. Within local media, these transformations have inspired new visual literacies in comics and new queer explorations on local television. Japan is increasingly lost in the process as Filipinos increasingly make these literacies their own.

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