

The Role of Entertainment Media in Promoting Culture: The Case of Japanese Cartoons and Superhero TV Series in 80s-90s Thai Society

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Abstract

This research delved into the specificity of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series during the 80s-90s based on two questions; how their content familiarized the Thai audience with the culture of Japan and what impact they have delivered. Content analysis, audience analysis, and document research were used as the research methodology. The discovery suggested that Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series were culturally powerful. Their presentation of the local culture was comprehensible, repetitive, and joyous, causing the audience to be connected to the culture of Japan with ease. Each cartoon and superhero TV series also possessed high entertainment quality that drew mass attention from the Thai audience as well as enlarging the consumption scale. This came to light as a result of some creative techniques employed by their creators and, therefore, engendered some significant impacts as explained in the theory of soft power.

Keywords

culture – cartoon – superhero TV series – Japan – Thai society

1 Introduction

Japanese culture is very popular in Thai society. Taksinapinun (2008, 2) and Potjanalawan (2015, 28) point out that such popularity derives from exposure

to Japanese-ness presented through Japan's pop culture. The proliferation of Japanese consumer products, the sharp rise of Thai visitors to Japan, the appreciation of Japanese art and lifestyle and so forth, are evidence of how Thai people fall in love with Japan.

The intense popularity, in fact, has been discernible since the late 90s. The case of Japanese food as seen from the success of the Fuji Restaurant chain is the first detectable indicator. The restaurant was founded in 1982 but grew rapidly by 1997 both within and outside the capital city (Thairath Online 2012). Japanese cuisine also had a widespread reputation, slightly before or after the year 2000, with the transfer of favor from a mixture of Thai and Japanese taste to the original one (Japan Information Service 2016, 2).

The next indicator came about during the late 1990s-early 2000s when Thai society witnessed the formation of a Japanese Studies Network as well as the boom in Japanese popular culture as a subject of learning (Phongpaichit 2006, 10). At the time, the craze for Japanese songs, series and actors could be seen everywhere (Marumura 2015), as exemplified by Johnny's Family, the leading music company originating in Japan. A Thai fan club was formed, so were relevant shops and spaces for fan gathering. This happened subsequent to the release of their songs (Peumputhakul 2004, 2–3).

In an attempt to explain the success of Japanese culture, some preliminary research has been conducted before bringing to light the large number of Thai economic actors and social influencers that have contributed to the spread of Japan's current cultural influence. Many of them are the youth and children from the late 70s who grew up with Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. They turned into an active section of the population who fueled the love of Japan once they had matured. This coheres with theory of generation, insofar as attitudes and behavior of each generation are always shaped by technologies, beliefs and the overall environment in which they are raised (Ivanova and Smrikarov 2009, 1). According to Suzuki, Wangpokakul and Suyara (2010, 85–86), consumption of Japanese entertainment media, such as cartoons¹ and superhero TV series, did smooth the path for cultural relations between Thailand and Japan. It went on like the K-wave in the 2000s which swept through many territories by the distribution of Korean songs and TV dramas (Bok-rae 2015, 154; Sim, Kim, and Lee 2017, 292).

1 According to Junprung (2018), the broadcast of Japanese animations in Thailand began around 1965 (*Ninja Kid Fujimaru of the Wind* was the first animated series aired by Channel 4 Bangkokunprom), whereas availability of the very first comic book started in 1971. But the mass consumption of cartoons and animations did not develop until the late 70s.

The power of cartoons and superhero TV series is however still a question to explore and so is their inclusive impact. This is because they outperformed other diplomatic elements in terms of cultural relations despite having no support from the Japanese government.

In the pre-80s era, Japan embarked upon an initiative of cultural diplomacy to boost relations between the two countries. It consisted of human exchange program and cultural grant aid projects (Thipakorn 2013, V). Everything proceeded in combination with the constructive image of Japan herself as an exemplar of a developed nation (Taksinapinun 2008, 87–88). But Japanese culture did not permeate Thai society and Japan even faced resistance in November, 1972 with the implicit support from the Thai government (The New York Times 1972, 4; Zimmerman 1974, 509). Students decided to take action against Japan's economic imperialism through condemning Japanese investors or rallying in universities, due to a reaction of hatred (Siriyausak 2004, 3–5; Sanartid 2015, 30). Such an undesirable moment lasted for a while and was likely to recur until the fans of Japanese cartoon and superhero TV series grew up to be the socio-economic drivers as well as Japan's cultural promoters. That means Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series had more potential than the official measures.

This research was designed to provide further explanation how Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series promoted culture to such a degree. It examined the specificity of their contents as well as investigating the impact of consuming those cartoons and superhero TV series in greater depth. The overall process was based on an assertion that media content is a significant factor for cultural transmission (Iheanacho 2014, 93).

2 Research Methodology

In the absence of full statistics, the research was conducted in compliance with the qualitative tradition, using content analysis, audience analysis, and document research.

Content analysis refers to a way of examining texts or messages in an array of media to penetrate their visual characteristics (Smith 2017, 1–7; McKee 2001, 138–149). It was applied in this research to cast new light on Japanese cartoons/superhero TV series in the matter of cultural presentation. The areas to be analyzed encompassed cultural images, characters and stories/styles contained in each case study. 30 titles distributed during the 80s-90s were selected to accomplish this task. All of them came from the popular genre.

Audience analysis is to collect data about audience reactions to the cartoons and superhero TV series. It served to unfold insights into a group of individuals with reference to their shared interests (Ross 2013, 96). In this research, audience analysis relied on data from 10 informants who were both consumers and observers of the case studies during the 80s-90s. Some more data was taken from sources, such as the Internet forum, the editorial sections in the old comics and so forth.

For document research, it means the accumulation of recorded data available in archival documents, news and articles. Document research was applied to find out the impact of Japanese cartoons/superhero TV series as from the 80s.

3 Related Theories and Concepts

Four theories/concepts were selected. They comprised media and cultural influence, identification, entertainment theory, and soft power theory. Each of them can be explained differently.

Media and culture became a subject of debate after it was evident that some mainstream media, such as those from the US or South Korea, could really boost Americanization or Koreanization respectively. They did so via the depiction of proper contents encompassing stories, visual communication, characters and so forth. Hence, it is impossible to deny the power of media in promoting culture. And this has been tested over and over as shown in the work of Showkat (2017, 58) which perfectly proved the inextricable link between mass media and cultural impact. To explain Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series from the cultural perspective is therefore necessary.

Identification signifies a process in which the audience identify with the character in the story, insofar as they feel as if they really are that character, making them an imaginary part of the story (Blandford, Grant, and Hillier 2001, 128; Hayward 2006, 369–374). Identification was utilized in the research to analyze a sentimental attachment to Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series, because such attachment brought about the assimilation of Japanese culture.

Unlike identification, entertainment signifies the state of satisfaction arising from emotional experiences. In psychology, this state is called “meta-emotion” and it occurs whenever the audience achieves a desired feeling such as joy, sadness, excitement, etc. (Bartsch 2008, 46), and thus entertainment media are made to stimulate their audience’s emotion in order to reach meta-emotion at varying levels (Bartsch and Viehoff 2010, 2247). The need to understand the

entertainment quality of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series necessitated the application of entertainment theory in the analysis.

As for soft power, it was devised by Joseph Nye as from the end of the Cold War to urge the US government to spotlight a soft approach in place of military missions. Soft power refers to the use of socio-economic diplomacy in constructing international relations as well as enhancing the reputation of a country. It covers the areas of technology, education and economy (Nye 1990, 154). Soft power can also arise from all kinds of pop culture as found in the case of the US (Nye 1990, 168–169). In 2019, Japan was ranked the first in Asia in terms of soft power capacity, followed by South Korea, Singapore, China, etc. (Mcclory 2019, 67). The ranking indicated how much Japan has invested in soft power resources and how much Japan has exported her cultural products to the world. Soft power is important to the discussion of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series, because it helps to understand their role in delivering some socio-economic outcomes.

4 Research Findings

The studies in accordance with the abovementioned plan resulted in a number of findings. They are discussed as follows.

4.1 *Presented Culture*

Zlatar (2003, 3) explains that media are instrumental in promoting culture, because media carry cultural content and convey it to a wide range of audience. In the case of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series, Japanese-ness was intensely inherent in their stories with use of several techniques; thus, those cartoons and superhero TV series were an outstanding stimulus for cultural assimilation.

To begin with, Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series often presented culture through a conversation between characters, narration, or description (in the case of comics), so that the audience was educated on Japanese culture despite having no familiarity with it. In the anime series *Ikkyū-san*, narrations often came up to describe the local traditions of Japan, because each episode depicted a culture to be found only in Japanese society, such as the zen monastery, the Shōgun position (the supreme leader during the feudal era) and so forth. Whoever watched *Ikkyū-san* would certainly be given a sound body of knowledge concerning Japanese living.

The next technique is to project culture through both main and supporting characters by featuring Japanese culture via characters' interactions or

personal activities. For instance, different characters joined together in a local ceremony to tell the audience how Japanese people interact with each other, what tools are involved or what mode of thinking governs their actions. *Urusei Yatsura* was an example where key characters frequently took part in traditional activities such as *Hanabi* (a fireworks festival), *Otsukimi* (a moon viewing festival), etc. Sometimes, Japanese culture was exhibited via a character's profession or personal way of life that could only be seen in Japan.

To depict culture via setting is the third technique found in Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. Even in a situation devoid of dialogue or character interactions, Japanese culture tended to appear in the background, such as houses, temples, shops, and a variety of places which communicated Japan's architectural patterns as much as lifestyles and local costumes. A good example was a TV series entitled *Denshi Sentai Denjiman* where the lead characters were expected to fight against evils from the outer space. Many episodes were created to present Japanese-ness through the set and costumes, even though they were supposed to entertain their audience as sci-fi action.

But some creators would opt for incorporating culture into themes which could be any messages pointing to moral or ethical conduct or subjects of presentation that determined the structure of the storytelling. Combining culture with themes could be exemplified by *Keiji* whose content revolved around ways of thinking, beliefs or behavioral rules of the Japanese warrior tradition. Themes function liked a center of the story. Once the audience understood themes, they would have a profound understanding of the inherent culture.

To mix Japanese culture with fantasy is another indispensable technique found in a variety of cases. Those stories were made to put Japanese culture on view either fully or partially, even though they were supposed to project technologies and surreal settings. This technique allowed a work about science, a galactic community or a future society to cover the cultural image of Japan. The manga series *Cobra* is a clear example due to its incorporation of Japanese cultural identity. The entire story was in fact about a space pirate and his adventurous journey, but some of the volumes featured the set being stylized with Japan's cultural elements such as a Japanese castle, Katana (a sword) or a lady's Kimono.

Finally, it is to expose culture as symbolic elements. Symbols are normally significant in conveying some specific meanings and can capture the audience's attention. When the audience is attracted to those symbols, they will learn cultural messages as a consequence (Showkat 2017, 58). An example is a Teru Teru Bōzu in *Ikkyū-san*. The Teru Teru Bōzu is a handmade doll believed to have magical force to drive away bad weather. It appeared in all the episodes to signify the bond between the lead character and his mother. By that, the

audience was informed of its function in the story as much as its implication in Japanese tradition.

All these techniques were found to be very useful in promoting Japanese culture. They diversified the cultural image of Japan and its function throughout the story. The audience then had the opportunity to experience Japanese culture repeatedly and variously until they were accustomed to the culture projected before their eyes. These techniques also caused the Thai audience to appreciate the culture of Japan without the feeling that it was imposed on them. As each one generated seamless integration of Japanese culture and the content. While the audience consumed the content, the presented culture was assimilated at both the conscious and unconscious level.

Interestingly, some audience feedbacks suggested that the young consumers (at the time) felt that Japanese culture was internationalized and highly indicative of human primacy. For them, Japanese culture represented civilization, creativity, and decency, whereby it deserved tremendous admiration. The internationalized quality was tightly related to use of two creative techniques, namely, addition of some socio-cultural value that was globally accepted and addition of gratification to the image of Japanese culture to make the culture itself more entertaining and interesting.

The research detected the first technique from all the selected cases. One of them was *Mr. Ajikko* whose story focused on a young cook and featured Japan's culinary culture in a highly inventive way. In one episode, the lead character joined a cooking competition in Japanese curry. He was announced the winner after he had cooked the dish that caused the judges to drink the least amount of water, meaning that his dish contained the right degree of spiciness and it was created with serious consideration for the diners. Food in this sense was not only cooked in conformity to the inherited recipe but also with a desire to provide the utmost happiness to people. Another case was *Super Doctor K* which concerned medical treatment performed by a character named Doctor K. Some episodes narrated the event vis-à-vis his ancestor who lived in ancient Japan and cured his patients with knowledge considered to be groundbreaking. His knowledge was in fact too innovative to be in that era but it filled the image of ancient Japan with modernity. One way or another, these two cases have shown how Japanese creators internationalized their culture with added value. No data revealed whether they did it on purpose but the technique made the cultural image of Japan worldwide in scope and urged Japanization both in Thailand and many other regions.

In contrast, any culture contradicting global trends was not found in popular Japanese cartoons nor superhero TV series distributed during the 80s-90s. A culture like the whaling program is an example. Some conservatives in Japan

promoted the continuation of hunting, whereas the world opposed it on the grounds that whales were an endangered species. Although some Japanese people value this culture as spiritually precious, it never appeared in any popular cartoons or superhero TV series during that period.

Another example is the tradition regarding gender. Many cartoons or animations were created to portray Japan as a nation of advanced female culture. This could be exemplified by the case of *Tokimeki Tonight*, where the lead character is a teenage girl born to a vampire father and werewolf mother. She lives a normal life but is ready to take action to handle many problems. Her depiction goes against the traditional picture of Japanese women which is fixed in a passive role, such as being a housewife or a victim to be rescued by a hero. Instead, she was courageous, active, and adventurous.

As for the next technique, adding gratification made Japanese culture so interesting that the Thai audience could automatically relate itself to the culture of Japan. No barriers or gaps were reported to be obstructions to this cultural perception. *Doraemon* was one of the works showing an unambiguous illustration of Japanese culture in accordance with this technique. A number of its episodes featured stories about Japanese traditions intermingled with joy. An episode about Japanese New Year, for instance, presented the key characters starting the day with greeting the rising sun, followed by numerous exciting activities such as having rice cakes, receiving money gifts from grown-ups and playing Hanetsuki (a badminton-liked game). The audience then discerned the aura of happiness shining out of Japan's New Year, whereupon they had a good impression of Japanese people, customs, etc.

To sum up, the successful promotion of Japanese culture via cartoons and superhero TV series concerned the question how culture was put in the content as much as what was put in the content. Without the use of appropriate techniques, the presented culture might not be memorized by the Thai audience nor end in the cultural stream as described at the very beginning.

4.2 *Character Identification*

Identification is a psychological reaction to the character. It happens, mostly, to the character in the leading role whom the audience will not be hesitant to adore and follow from the beginning to the end.

Analysis of the character has led to the finding that character identification really tied the young audience to the culture of Japan. It did so in two ways. Firstly, character identification resulted in the mass consumption of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. It then sustained the consumption of culture presented in the stories. Secondly, character identification provoked imitation

of popular characters whose features were representative of Japanese-ness. It caused the young audience to adopt Japanese identity.

Starting with the first way, the characters in Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series were always created to attract the young audience with an outstanding and dramatizing look. Then, the audience could identify with them effortlessly followed by consumption of their stories, no matter if those stories abounded with foreign cultural images. In other words, character identification caused the audience to consume cartoons and superhero TV series and, therefore, consume Japanese culture that appears as part of the stories.

The favorite characters could be found in many cases, such as a robot in *Mobile Suit Gundam*, a male hero in *Kamen Rider Super One* or a heroine in *Sailor Moon*. The robot in *Mobile Suit Gundam* had a smart fighter look, carrying a couple of laser swords. The robot itself was designed to be like a Samurai warrior rather than a lifeless machine. As to *Kamen Rider Super One*, the character was able to transform his body into a superhero, disguised in a suit and unique mask similar to a hornet's face. He rode a huge motorbike to fight against villains. He could be viewed as an alternative version of a capable policeman. In contrast, *Sailor Moon* acted as a female fighter whose special power and overall look remained girly. She appeared in a high school uniform even in the midst of fighting to maintain her feminine characteristics.

As for the second way, the young audience would attach their mind to cartoon or hero characters in order to fulfil their desire (of being the character they liked). They then invented a recreation where they could be the character of their choice. They built an imaginary world from the selected stories, sometimes, with cooperation from friends. Some of them might be the heroes and the rest played the villains. They might swap roles as they liked. Items, such as toy guns or shields, could be used as props to give the feel of reality. This impersonation caused the young audience to assimilate Japanese culture which was inherent in the appearance of that character.

A key factor for this identification appeared to be the audience's immaturity. As immaturity filled their minds with sincere appreciation and the desire to identify with each character at a passionate level (unlike grown-ups whose identification with movie or TV drama characters rather happened in a reasonable scale). The identification then increased the degree of cultural assimilation from the chosen character which was created to represent Japanese-ness either entirely or in some sense. Some characters were named in the Japanese language. Some of them adhered to traditional lifestyles, while some others appeared in local costumes or with props suggestive of Japanese features. When the young fans formed a picture of themselves as being the characters

they loved, they embraced those attributes so that they could represent their chosen characters to perfection. This stimulated them to accept Japanese-ness as if it was their own culture.

Suffice it to say, character identification serves as another answer with regard to the question why Japanese cultural promotion during the 80s-90s was very successful. Character identification worked as a contributor for the mass consumption of cartoons and superhero TV series where Japan's cultural image was diversely presented. It also generated the desire to imitate key characters expressive of Japanese-ness before ending in a personal assimilation of Japanese culture. To conclude that the character component is another reason for the success of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series is therefore theoretically plausible.

4.3 *Entertainment Quality in Stories and Styles*

All the audience feedback revealed that Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series of the 80s-90s were of a high quality for Thai fans. Numerous titles drew attention from a huge number of fans in an instant while titles from other countries did not. This caused the massive consumption of those cartoons and superhero TV series whose presentation of Japanese-ness never paused.

The research referred to 'entertainment' to spell out the term 'quality' in this context, because entertainment was the sole purpose of consumption at the time. The part about related theories has already explained in that the state of entertainment manifests whenever the audience receives the desired emotional stimulation, leading to the utmost gratification. Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series were the materials whose content never failed to bring the Thai audience to that goal. Their creators relied on the arts of entertainment to fulfil the audience's emotional needs. Their creations then had great potential to give the Thai audience the expected pleasure.

The arts of entertainment can be detailed in many ways. The first one is to offer stories with complicated and dramatic plotlines. The plotlines could be designed to feature very serious issues such as deprivation, living hardship, violent activity, political corruption and so forth. The second way is to offer characters with a distinctive appearance (as discussed before) as well as showing strong wills to tackle thematic problems. To stay with exaggerated presentation in order to help communicate stories with powerful emotions was found to be the third way. The rapid moving of backgrounds, for example, turned up whenever characters engaged in fighting to enhance the feel of rapidity. Or characters' eyes seemed to burst out (in a comic event), whenever something happened to shock them.

These creative techniques changed Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series into products with highly emotional content. As suggested by the fans' reception, they fell in love with Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series because of these specific styles.

In tandem, the content in Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series might depend on the detailed presentation to provide better entertainment experience. They did so by using delicate design of characters' actions, situations and backgrounds to intensify mood and tone. The technique as such was highly effective in interesting as well as emotionalizing the Thai audience. For example, if it were a prelude to a fighting event, the characters would stare at one another for a certain period. The surroundings might be created to convey an aggressive sense such as featuring a strong wind or heated ground. Strange sounds were inserted to maximize the tension. Other characters witnessing the event sweated and talked about the upcoming fight. It was found that such a delicate scene enriched emotional experience as well as heightening the degree of entertainment to catch the audience's eye.

The last finding regarding Japanese entertainment was the convention that each work belonged to a specific category with the intention to entertain its target group, whereas similar products from other countries, including those produced in Thailand, did not. This would inform the audience of what to consume and what entertainment style they would encounter. Thereby, Japanese creators would find their way to connect with the target audience.

The categorization depended on either gender or age-group criteria. In terms of gender, comics or animations for boys would be created with a masculine style, plus severe content, such as using a dark-tone line to draw characters, exposing characters' muscle and body full of scars, inventing vicious conflicts as a climax or presenting blood and gore to communicate pain. Comics or animations for girls would be the opposite, as they provided the audience with lighter content, mostly about romantic relationship. A sweet drawing style was used to generate a lovely tone. The eyes of characters looked larger than normal but noses and lips were made tiny to give the feel of cuteness. Flowers and pretty props were also put in the background to produce an exquisite atmosphere. In terms of age, the content for little children would not be as difficult to understand as that consumed by older fans. Normally, works in this category presented fantasy or comic events in the absence of sex, complex relationship and violence.

To sum up, entertainment in Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series should not be referred to as an outcome of what was consumed only but also an outcome of creative strategies. Successful entertainment maintained consumption of the content as well as appreciation of the presented culture.

Japanese creators evidently achieved the art of entertainment to attain a high level of interest from fans. Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series hence feed the cultural image of Japan to the Thai audience for many years.

4.4 *Impact of Consumption*

At the outset, this research highlighted cultural promotion as a result of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. The collected data revealed that such promotion can be discussed in greater depth and linked with the politico-economic and socio-cultural impact. All of them could be understood within the framework of soft power.

As discussed, soft power involves the use of non-military means in pursuit of strengthening relations with other countries for political, social and business purposes. Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series have gone beyond the limit of entertainment products by becoming one of Japan's soft power resources because of two reasons.

First and foremost, those cartoons and superhero TV series have boosted Japanization among the Thai audience – the very basis for achieving Japan's soft power which is no more than securing her international influence.

The term “Japanization” may contain no exact meaning but it is often used to denote the process and/or phenomenon of making an individual or society more Japanese (Suzuki 2010, 16; Manratri 2013, 47). Japanization in the case of cartoons and superhero TV series can be explained in at least two ways.

Firstly, the Thai audience knew Japanese culture quite comprehensively in spite of no relevant lessons being provided in the national curriculum. They were accustomed to it, thereby adopting Japanese culture in their everyday life. Some of them purchased food and snacks such as Sushi, Dango, Okonomiyaki, Senbei, etc., all of which were previously unknown to the majority of Thai people. Some were interested in souvenirs or goods from cartoons and superhero TV series. Some devoted themselves to cosplay costumes or fashion promoted by famous characters, whereas some really practiced Japanese culture such as bathing at Onsen, joining the Sakura festival and other traditional activities in Japan. It is noteworthy that these are local cultural activities with high specificity. Without the role of cartoons and superhero TV series, Thai people would not enjoy them as part of their own culture.

Secondly, the Thai audience appreciated Japan for the most part, even though some past mistakes had already impaired Japan's reputation. One of the mistakes concerned war crimes by the Imperial Japanese Army which slaughtered and enslaved many innocents during World War II (Kraipakorn 2015, 43). Another one was about Japan's business sector which weakened economies in many countries, leading to the widespread fear in the early 1970s

before the National Student Center of Thailand decided on an anti-Japanese movement in 1972 (Sanartid 2015, 23). But such an undesirable image seemed to be inconsequential to the consumers of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. The unconstructive portrayal of Japan in the Western media as seen in *Black Rain* or *Kill Bill Vol. I* was also ineffectual.

Japanization is in fact not limited to the audience, but also the whole society. People who already favored Japanese culture were likely to influence their peers and families to acknowledge Japan to varying degrees. For that reason, the love of Japan could be found even among the non-consumers of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series.

The next reason is about the byproduct of consuming Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. The previous discussion has made clear that many titles brought about preference of Japan and her culture. Such preference changed the audience's attitude from seeing Japan as "the other" to a "model for one's living". They did not open their minds to more consumption of Japanese cultural products only, but also became a generation in support of Japan, leading to many benefits.

Japan could, for example, carry on her thriving businesses and investments in the absence of anxiety that the resistance as in 1972 would take place again. According to the Embassy of Japan in Thailand (2014), Japan successfully expanded her investment from the last half of 1980s until becoming Thailand's top investor with 29% of all foreign direct investment (based on the figure in 2007). Then, more businesses such as FamilyMart, Daiso, Uniqlo, etc., were established, while their sales locations multiplied in response to the increasing demand of Japanese cultural products among Thai people. Thailand hence turned into one of the main bases for the Japanese economy, causing Japan herself to take full advantage of skillful but inexpensive labor, available facilities, plus related policies. The investment value given to Thailand was only surpassed by that given to China (Embassy of Japan in Thailand 2014). In this respect, Japanese entrepreneurs ran more than 6,000 businesses in recent years and received good cooperation from the Thai side (Prachachat 2019).

Aside from business concerns, Japan can secure people-to-people relations at a high level. The case of tourism can well be a valid example. Subsequent to the initiation of the Korean wave, Japanese culture regained its wide recognition among Thai people via visa exemptions for Thai nationals traveling to Japan. It was reported that the Japanese government granted the exemption in 2013 as a result of the rising number of Thai travelers to Japan from 144,969 in 2011 to 260,858 in 2012 (Thairath Online 2013). Then, Japan developed into the top destination for Thai travelers with no sign of change (Sritama 2018). It

should be pointed out that the policy would not result in success if Thai people had possessed no foundation, such as cultural knowledge or desire promoted by cartoons and superhero TV series. This is similar to the case of South Korea which interested Thai travelers via TV dramas, TV shows and songs.²

Above and beyond, the love of Japan slowed down China's soft power from arriving at its destination. Thailand has geo-political and economic significance, and China puts forward connectivity via transnational rail routes, trade, education and the like to reduce (or even eliminate) Japan's as well as USA's influence in Thailand. But no evidence suggests that Thailand will do so or replace Japan with China. Support of Japan is still visible in the popular and economic sector. In 2019, the government of Thailand even took steps to elevate the industrial cooperation between Thailand and Japan as well as issuing a statement endorsing their economic relations (Prachachat 2019). On the other hand, China has struggled to reach her goals as shown in the delay of Thai-China rail deal (Hongtong 2019).

These examples may reflect widespread concerns about China's domination of Thai society and its economy. Part of the feeling comes from the massive purchasing program which targeted Thai universities and the tourism business for Chinese vacationers in Thailand (ThaiPBS 2019). But the other part pertains to the deep-rooted relationship with Japan, whereby Thai people feel more comfortable dealing with their Japanese collaborators.

Despite the concrete benefits, the Japanese government became an active user of pop culture many years later owing to the fact that they had not realized the power of cartoons and superhero TV series, not until the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology admitted their cultural significance in November 2000 (Choo 2012, 86). However, the government created the Cool Japan Strategy in 2012 which integrated cartoons, music, games, fashions, etc., as a means to nation branding and building a new market for the cultural industry. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even emerged as a famous character from the video game named "Super Mario" during the Olympic closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro (Rich 2016). This was indicative of Japan's strategy to depend on a memorable character from everyone's childhood. The cartoon and superhero industry during the 80s-90s was, therefore, the unintentional soft power resource that Japan ever found.

2 As revealed by the Royal Thai Embassy, Seoul (2013), Thailand accounted for up to 395,984 foreign visitors in 2012, only surpassed by visitors from Japan, China, the USA, and Taiwan.

5 Conclusion

The entire study started from a question about Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series how they promoted Japanese culture among Thai people. To obtain the answer, three research methods were employed comprising content analysis of 30 cases taken from a group of famous works, the study of audience feedback, plus document research.

It was found that Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series promoted Japanese culture with their cultural potential as well as entertainment potential. Beginning with the former, many titles were filled with cultural images to be easily digested and enjoyed by the young fans. Their famous characters also represented Japanese-ness based on the tactical design. Consuming Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series was thereby equivalent to consuming the culture of Japan. As for the latter, each title was found to be highly entertaining due to appealing characters, captivating stories and presentation style. They could attract the mass audience without any difficulty. So, they functioned as a fine carrier of cultural contents, helping Japanese culture to be distributed far and wide in Thailand.

The research discusses more findings in an effort to understand the impact of consumption. All the case studies, to put it briefly, served as Japan's soft power resources, because they encouraged Japanization and helped Japan secure her place in Thai society, economy, plus international relations. Advantageously, Japanization laid the foundation for stable socio-economic cooperation, unlike that in the old days which was shaken easily by personal dislikes. But the consumption of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series could last at the cost of Thailand's cultural inheritance because many young people seemed to welcome Japanese culture more than Thailand's.³ The popular sector was also unaware of Japan's economic movement due to the immense admiration, whereupon assessment of Japan was nearly absent compared to a new player such as China.

Either way, Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series possessed tremendous potential for initiating and maintaining cultural promotion. They came with magnetic properties, while providing content appropriate for cultural appreciation. They, in this manner, operated as an influential educator to turn the young audience into both the receiver and supporter of Japanese culture in the long run.

3 It could be argued that Thai culture was treated too much from the conservation perspective. It lacked the color to interest the young generation.

It should, however, be noted that, not all the media boosted cultural promotion as did Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. The likelihood of success depends on creativity of the content. The case of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series has shown that culture should be depicted seamlessly in the background, the main character, the dialogue, etc. It should also be in a story with international value, plus positive feelings, such as pleasure or joy.

To provide entertainment in order to arouse interest is another lesson from Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series. Any attempt to promote culture via an indie or underground work will certainly not be as workable as the mainstream one because it lacks sufficient entertainment (for the majority of people). In this way, creators must comprehend the mechanisms of human's emotion and the relation between emotional impact and the given content. The case of Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series is hence equivalent to that of American movies and South Korean TV dramas in terms of being a model for cultural transmission.

6 Suggestions

Even though the research laid emphasis on media content, the content itself is not the sole factor for the successful promotion of Japanese culture. The future research should also take a close look at the consumption context to perfect understanding.

In this respect, the extensive availability of famous titles may be explored, namely, high consumer demand, weak competitors from within and outside Thailand. The matter of children and youth culture is another area to be concentrated upon, because it is documented that Japanese cartoons and superhero TV series were (almost) an integral part of the child and youth culture, especially, in urban areas. In similar fashion, the stream of globalism should be taken into account. As the 80s-90s was an era of cultural globalization aiming to advocate socio-cultural connections via pop culture, belief and tradition. Cultural globalization lessened localization but encouraged Thai people to acknowledge international culture. Such globalization might speed up the acceptance of international culture such as that from Japan.

Many more factors resulted in the consumption of imported cartoons and superhero TV series as well as helping the audience to be closely familiar with the cultural image of Japan. Exhaustive research on them will be beneficial to completing the explanation.

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