

Women and Anime: Popular Culture and its Reflection of Japanese Society

Topic: *What do the portrayal of women in Japanese animation as a form of popular culture reveal about the role of women in Japanese society today?*

The role of women in Japan is a hot topic amongst commentators on the state of contemporary Japan. While it is important to consider analysis drawn from statistics and surveys, it is also important to look at how popular culture defines the modern Japanese woman. Consequently, Japanese animation, as a form of popular culture, can be used as an analysis of the role of women in Japanese society. Through looking at how women are portrayed in a broad sweep of Japanese animation over the last ten years or so, we can begin to identify the role of women in contemporary Japanese society.

In order to understand the connection between Japanese animation as a form of popular culture and its link to society, it is important to consider the meaning of these terms and how they relate to each other. Martinez defines popular culture as the “culture of the masses”¹; in the Japanese context, this is arguably a correct interpretation of the meaning of popular culture to this society. Hidetoshi Katō raises this point in his discussion on how ‘popular culture’ is a problematic term when translating it into the Japanese context. According to Katō, the Japanese scholar would translate the term ‘popular culture’ as *taishu bunka*; translated back into English, this term means “mass culture”². Katō also suggests some other terms used by Japanese scholars when talking about what would be regarded as ‘popular culture’ – *minshu bunka* and *minzoku bunka*, which translate to “public culture” and “folk culture” respectively³. Consequently, Martinez’s definition hits a comfortable middle road with regards to the terms offered by Katō. Further, Martinez defines the anthropology of popular culture as “the study of the interaction between the *apparently* separate realms of the material and the symbolic”⁴. Roger Buckley argues similarly, stating that popular culture should “tell us something about contemporary Japanese behaviour”⁵. Following this mindset, the purpose of this discussion is to determine a connection between Japanese animation (a form of popular culture) and the role of women (whether this role is shifting or remaining conservative) in contemporary Japanese society.

The images presented by mass media, which include Japanese animation among others (including its related cousin, *manga*, or Japanese comics, which are often what many Japanese animated productions are based off⁶) have arguably helped shape the identity of modern Japanese women. Japanese animation, or anime, is useful when studying the role of women in society for a number of reasons. Firstly, as popular culture serves to reflect and inspire the changes in Japanese society, these trends are identifiable through observing the changes and themes in anime⁷. Secondly, it helps one to understand the dynamics of Japanese society and culture. While there won’t necessarily be obvious patterns of behaviour often identified as distinctly ‘Japanese’, such as conformity, loyalty and deference⁸, there are subtle undertones that identify themes and characters as Japanese. Thirdly, just as manga is as much a woman’s domain as a man’s in Japan⁹, so to does Japanese animation cater specifically for female tastes. This is important, because unlike the animation industry in the United States whereupon children’s programming is largely aimed at young boys, the Japanese animation industry caters for both sexes across a wide age group. Consequently, it

¹ D.P. Martinez (ed.) (1998), *The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures*, UK, Cambridge UP, p. 3.

² Hidetoshi Katō, ‘Some Thoughts on Japanese Popular Culture’ in Richard Gid Powers, Hidetoshi Katō (eds.) (1989), *Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture*, USA, Greenwood Press, p. xvii.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ Roger Buckley (1990), *Japan Today [2nd Ed.]*, Great Britain, Cambridge UP, p. 99.

⁶ Georgia Harbison, Jeffrey Ressler (1999), ‘Amazing Anime: Princess Mononoke and other wildly imaginative films prove that Japanese animation is more than just Pokemon’, *Time*, v154, i21, p. 94.

⁷ Susan J. Napier, ‘Vampires, Psychic Girls, Flying Women and Sailor Scouts: Four faces of the young female in Japanese popular culture’ in D.P. Martinez (ed.), *opcit.*, p. 91.

⁸ Roger Buckley, *opcit.*, p. 98.

⁹ Susan J. Napier, ‘Vampires, Psychic Girls, etc’, in D.P. Martinez, *opcit.*, p. 92.

is possible to gain an insight into the role of women in society as both sexes' views are represented. These three points, in combination with the above argument that by analysing popular culture one can gain insight into Japanese society, forms a legitimate foundation for observing how the role of women in Japanese society can be analysed through examining their role in Japanese animation.

What makes Japanese animation interesting to study when observing the roles of gender is the way it caters for diverse tastes and differs from mainstream Western animation. Anime, has been given numerous descriptive definitions by Western commentators. The Economist has defined it as "edgy, provocative, documentary-like"¹⁰, while Computer Graphics World have attributed "dramatic lighting, intricately wrought scenes and a broad range of color [sic]"¹¹ as mainstays of Japanese animation. These industry buzz-words describe anime in a way that makes it appear as a different expression of animation as a whole. In reality, it is and isn't. In reality the Japanese have embraced animation as an expression that goes beyond the staple set by Disney in the West. This includes animation catered for children, teens and adults, ranging from simplistic stories, to romance, pornography and works with a flair for superbly written storylines. It is also important to consider that much of the anime produced originates from manga¹²; as such, definitions of readership can be defined along similar principles. Respected writer Frederik Schodt has split the manga available into two distinct halves as defined by the gender,

The huge boys' comic [shōnen] magazines carefully balance suspense with humor [sic]: dramatic stories of sports, adventure, ghosts, science fiction, and school life... Girls' comic magazines [shōjo] also strive for balance but are distinguished by their tales of idealized [sic] love.¹³

Consequently, anime, which is arguably defined by the principles of manga, caters for a wide swath of Japan's population. Content ranges from superb works to trashy soap-operas or pornography; ultimately however, they form an integral role in Japan's popular culture and exist as a legacy of past ideals¹⁴.

Given the range to choose from, it is important not only to analyse a number of sources to gain insight into how these productions on the whole reflect the position of women in Japanese society, but to examine them with an open mind. Western reaction to anime has been varied, generally reported on with reactionary distaste. One British writer wrote that he was "altogether shocked"¹⁵ by the content presented in a manga magazine he happened upon one day. Film critics have both embraced and criticised Japanese animation. Mamoru Oshii's theatrical adaptation of Shirow Masamune's 'Ghost in the Shell', regarded as a cinematic achievement that ultimately questions what it is that makes us human by many, has been lauded as "a spectacular-looking Japanese animated film, but... like so many of its kind, involves a confusing narrative and peculiar metaphysics that reduce interest"¹⁶.

To avoid ignorant generalisations such as these, it's obviously important to look at works from a variety of genres to determine an educated opinion on the subject matter of this essay – Japanese women in society. To observe the role of women as portrayed in anime with a female-specific target audience, *Kodomo no Omocha* (1996) will be used to be analysed. To see how women are being represented in anime that is targeted at a male demographic, *Dragon Ball Z* (199?) will form the basis of analysis. Finally, a recent work from what is arguably

¹⁰ Author Unknown (2000), 'Japanese animation – Toy stories for grown-ups', in *The Economist* (US), v354 i8159 p. 96.

¹¹ Lorraine Savage (1998), 'The Anime Invasion', in *Computer Graphics World*, v21 n4 p. 73.

¹² John Canemaker (2000), 'Un Disney', in *Print*, v54 i3, p. 94.

¹³ Frederik L. Schodt (1983), *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*, USA, Kodansha International/USA, p. 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Peter Milward (1980), *Oddities in Modern Japan – Observations of an Outsider*, Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, p. 32.

¹⁶ John Walker (ed.) (1997), *Halliwel's Film & Video Guide*, Harper Collins Publishers, Great Britain, p. 304.

Japan's most respected and successful animation studio today, Studio Ghibli, will be analysed - *Mononoke Hime* (1997). The importance of studying Studio Ghibli's work is to see how women are portrayed by an animation studio whose works reach a very wide audience, works that typically cross the gender and age boundaries. As such, while this analysis certainly won't prove to be the final answer, particularly since its length restricts a far wider analysis, it will prove an interesting investigation when considering what images of femininity have been projected onto Japanese society over the past decade or so.

Kodomo no Omocha was a popular series that aired on Japanese television in the mid-nineties, based off the manga serialised before the production of the television program. Compared to many *shōjo* anime, *Kodomo no Omocha* is arguably quite radical, though it is by far not the only one. The story is a wacky comedy fused with typical *shōjo* elements – love interests, pretty artwork and a female lead. The series is about a young girl named Sana, who lives with her eccentric, but loving, mother (an Aoki Award winner) and Rei, her personal manager.

What's particularly interesting about *Kodomo no Omocha* is that, particularly at the beginning of the series, the characters often flies in the face of convention. Unlike other female characters that will be analysed, Sana is loud, outspoken and is not intimidated by anyone. She is a strong female lead that works to do her best for her job (she's a famous star of a children's TV program), friends and family. While there are undertones of traditionally female qualities in her, she doesn't fit into the stereotypical role of a wholly subservient character. She's only a child but already is working hard and stresses the importance of her job. Her mother is another example of strong female roles within the anime. She is intelligent, in control and the men are more likely to be subservient to her than anything else.

The show still has features of conservative Japan, such as when Sana's female teacher cries and runs to another male teacher for assistance whenever the class acts up or the way in which Rei's old girlfriend chases after him adoringly. The male characters are, on the whole, very traditionally empowered, though like many a *shōjo* anime, have soft sides to their personality. Despite this, the depiction of the two main female characters, Sana and her mother, offer an insight into the modern Japanese woman as having the capacity to be strong, yet gentle and compassionate.

Dragon Ball Z offers an interesting insight into the portrayal of women in anime aimed at a male demographic. The reason this is an interesting series to look at is because of its popularity (which has spilled over to the West recently, creating a 'post-Pokémon' wave of fandom) and the way it portrays gender roles.

Women are offered few roles in this anime and what roles they're given are dismally backwards. While it has been pointed out that fundamental beliefs about gender roles are difficult to change in any society, including Japan's¹⁷, *Dragon Ball Z* has portrayed the role of women as subservient/secondary at their core. The show is very male-centric, emphasising strength, discipline and hard work as the key to being successful in the world of this anime. Being a martial arts anime, this isn't surprising. One of the women who appear regularly is the protagonists' female friend Bulma, an intelligent scientist. Bulma is a gifted inventor and often creates something that will aid her group of friends in whatever plight they're in. In this case, Bulma is portrayed as a confident, intelligent woman who, while not of equal status, still remains an important part of the team. However, when she's put in a position of danger, she typically falls into the 'damsel in distress' stereotype all too common in male-orientated anime and manga. She's rescued one way or another, but is often the least of the group's priorities – she's often rescued as an after-thought, as opposed to being a genuine critical concern. Hence we see what Eri Izawa determines as the "Unequal Relationship" genre, where women are second to men in a world dominated by patriarchy¹⁸.

¹⁷ Eri Izawa, 'Japanese Manga and Animation: Gender Relations in Manga and Anime', <http://www.uncc.edu/~medmoto/3209/anime/gender.html> (abridged), accessed 31-10-2001.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Studio Ghibli was founded in 1985 by two people who are regarded as two of the greats in the Japanese animation industry – Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. Their films are renowned locally and internationally also. The importance with studying work by Studio Ghibli is because their productions (which are theatrical) have such widespread appeal in Japanese society. Consequently, the images and stories this studio creates are witnessed by a vast number of Japan's populace across the divides of age and gender. In fact, the focus of this analysis, *Mononoke Hime*, grossed approximately US\$150 million at the box office, topped only by *Titanic*¹⁹. Interestingly, the only film to actually earn more than *Titanic*'s US\$219 million at the Japanese box office was Studio Ghibli's *Sen to Chihiro to Kamikakushi*²⁰, which was released theatrically in July, 2001.

Mononoke Hime, a film regarded as Miyazaki's 'darkest' production in his career (particularly when compared to earlier efforts from Studio Ghibli, such as *Majo no Takkyubin* or *Tonari no Totoro*). The story centres on three principle characters – San, the Wolf Princess, Lady Eboshi and prince Ashitaka, the 'pillar' between which these two women are placed. One of the strengths of *Mononoke Hime* is the way in which the opposing characters, San and Lady Eboshi, are portrayed. Both exemplify strong, powerful women, sure of themselves and their world. Lady Eboshi could be interpreted as the new woman of Japan. She is in charge of a profitable ironworks that employs people regarded as beneath society (prostitutes and lepers), leading by compassion, returning dignity and purpose to their lives. This comes into conflict with San, who lives in the forest of the Deer God, raised by the great wolf gods who dwell there, as the ironworks requires the natural resources of the land in order to maintain its output. San is another strong female character who follows a more 'natural' way of life; as opposed to the entrepreneurial mindset of Lady Eboshi, San is dedicated to preserving the forest and the creatures that dwell within. Hence, Miyazaki (who wrote the screenplay and directed *Mononoke Hime*²¹) is portraying the capacity of women to be strong, competent and successful. San represents the capacity of women to be strong in the dwelling of the traditional while Lady Eboshi is an example of how women can be successful and entrepreneurial in the face of modernisation.

From these analyses, it's essential to consider how these reflections on the role of women are present in contemporary Japanese society. Martinez admits that it is difficult to discover what the true role of Japanese women in Japanese society are in a perceived country "where men are still dominant... [and] Japanese women are held to be gentle, submissive and beautiful"²². Historically, this is quite correct. Japanese women's suffrage was only achieved in 1945²³ and it is noted that while Japanese women may be able to find jobs, it is far more difficult to find careers, even today²⁴.

However, there are signs that public opinion is changing. There is clear evidence among both men and women, that the role of women in Japan is no longer the traditional housewife/mother²⁵. Surveys by the Prime Minister's Office in 1987 and 1995 demonstrate the shift in public opinion of women by both sexes. While in 1987 over 50% of the men surveyed agreed with the traditional role of women in Japan, by 1995 the percentage had dropped to 33%²⁶. Interestingly, observing the state of Japanese animation over the past decade or so reveals a relative parallel between the content of Japanese animation and these results. While contemporary *shōjo* and *shōnen* anime still inscribe aspects of traditional

¹⁹ Author Unknown (1999), 'Amazing Anime: Princess Mononoke and other wildly imaginative films prove that Japanese animation is more than just Pokemon', in *Time*, v154, i21, p. 94.

²⁰ Don Groves, Lukas Schwarzacher (2001), 'Japan's "Spirited" levitates \$200 million', Reuters/Variety in [Nausicaa.net](http://www.nausicaa.net/), 19-10-2001

²¹ Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata Filmography, [Nausicaa.net](http://www.nausicaa.net/), accessed 5-10-2001

²² D.P. Martinez (ed.) (1998), *opcit*, p. 2.

²³ Jennifer Robertson (1998), *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, USA, University of California Press, p. xii.

²⁴ Roger Buckley (1990), *opcit*, p. 93.

²⁵ Kenneth G. Henshall (1999), *Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins and Mainstream*, Great Britain, Macmillan Press Ltd., p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 26.

female roles respectively, there is also a mutual trend across the both genres to portray women as strong, equal individuals. The role of women in shōjo anime such as *Kodomo no Omocha* gives girls a role model unlike the traditionally submissive, quiet woman in the face of Sana's eccentric, enthusiastic nature that is rewarded by success. Studio Ghibli's films have typically portrayed women as equal, confident and able to take charge in their lives. Anime aimed at boys often retain the portrayal of women as 'bystanders', whether it be the token 'damsel in distress' or cheerleader. However, it is interesting to note is how the role of women in Japanese animation aimed at the boys has begun to portray women beyond this traditional stereotype. Recent productions such as *Ranma 1/2* (mid-nineties) and *Love Hina* (2000) play around with the role of gender, offering a cast of characters that serve to put women on equal grounding as men in some cases, though there is still the re-enforcement of traditional gender roles.

Japanese animation is an established form of popular culture. It is widespread, is consumed by both sexes and across all age groups, and offers a series of representations of women. While the capacity of a single essay (especially one of this length) leaves little room for widespread analysis of numerous sources, what has become apparent through observing trends in Japanese animation and contemporary Japanese society is an apparent shift in opinion. However, it is important to identify that the traditional role of women will probably always manifest itself in popular culture. This is because the traditional role of women is an option, just as choosing a career or being entrepreneurial are choices. What is encouraging to see is that the latter of those choices are being represented, either directly or indirectly, in anime. It bodes well for the future of Japanese society as alternative roles of women are being portrayed for both sexes in the 'culture of the masses'.

- Sean Boden, *mangaman@japan.com*, November 2001.

-Bibliography-

Author Unknown (1999), 'Amazing Anime: Princess Mononoke and other wildly imaginative films prove that Japanese animation is more than just Pokemon', in Time, v154, i21.

Author Unknown (2000), 'Japanese animation – Toy stories for grown-ups', in The Economist (US), v354 i8159.

Roger Buckley (1990), Japan Today [2nd Ed.], Great Britain, Cambridge UP.

Ian Buruma (1984), Behind The Mask: On Sexual Demons, Sacred Mothers, Transvestites, Gangsters, Drifters and Other Japanese Cultural Heroes, New York, Pantheon Books.

John Canemaker (2000), 'Un Disney', in Print, v54 i3.

Richard Corliss (2001), 'Geishas & Godzillas: Which is odder – the image of Japan in Hollywood movies or the image of Japan in its own films?', in Time International, v157 i17.

Georgia Harbison, Jeffrey Ressler (1999), 'Amazing Anime: Princess Mononoke and other wildly imaginative films prove that Japanese animation is more than just Pokemon', in Time, v154, i21.

Kenneth G. Henshall (1999), Dimensions of Japanese Society: Gender, Margins and Mainstream, Great Britain, Macmillan Press Ltd.

Pico Iyer (2000), 'Finding the Old in the New: One of Japan's most enduring traditions is to reinvent those traditions again and again', in Time International, v155 i17.

Eri Izawa, 'Japanese Manga and Animation: Gender Relations in Manga and Anime', http://www.uncc.edu/~medomoto/3209/anime/anime_contents.html (abridged), 31-12-2000.

D.P. Martinez (ed.) (1998), The Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures, UK, Cambridge UP.

Peter Milward (1980), Oddities in Modern Japan – Observations of an Outsider, Tokyo, Hokuseido Press.

Nausicaa.net, <http://www.nausicaa.net/>.

Richard Gid Powers, Hidetoshi Katō (eds.) (1989), Handbook of Japanese Popular Culture, USA, Greenwood Press.

Calvin Reid (1997), 'Manga: comics Japanese style', in Publishers Weekly, v244 n26.

Jennifer Robertson (1998), Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan, USA, University of California Press.

Lorraine Savage (1998), 'The Anime Invasion', in Computer Graphics World, v21 n4.

Frederik L. Schodt (1983), Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics, USA, Kodansha International/USA.

John Walker (ed.) (1997), Halliwel's Film & Video Guide, Harper Collins Publishers, Great Britain.

-Filmography-

Dragon Ball Z (1996, Akira Toriyama/Toei Animation Co. Japan/Fuji Television)

Ghost in the Shell (1995, Masamune Shirow/Kodansha Ltd./Bandai Visual Co., Ltd./Manga Entertainment).

Kodomo no Omocha (1996, Miho Obana/Gallop/Sony Music Entertainment of Japan).

Love Hina (2000, Ken Amaratu/TV Tokyo).

Majo no Takkyubin (1989, Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli).

Mononoke Hime (1997, Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli).

Sen to Chihiro to Kamikakushi (2001, Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli).

Tonari no Totoro (1988, Hayao Miyazaki/Studio Ghibli).