

On the Global Transformation of Japanese Culture

When Japan's popular culture travels abroad in the form of manga, anime, and video games, its media is viewed in contexts that differ from its own. Some forms of consumption may simply change the public's perception of Japan, but others have the potential to shape future pieces of media as artists in Japan adapt in order to appeal to a wider audience.

Language is one prominent way that a piece of media can garner different interpretations, but the inclusions of different stereotypes may also give the audience a glimpse of how Japan views different aspects of life. These vectors lead to a transformation of Japanese popular culture as it's consumed within different contexts.

In translating one language to another, countless layers of connotations and cultural contexts may be lost. Since many series of manga and anime take a while to be localized to other languages, while some of them never leave Japan, many fans have taken it upon themselves to translate the dialogue for other people. In the case of manga, this phenomenon is called a 'scanlation', or a scanned translation, while in anime this leads to fan-made subtitles matched to Japanese audio. These types of translations often include a variety of author's notes, where the authors are aware of the cultural diffusion taking place and so attempt to educate the reader on lost contexts. Yet, as McGray asserts: "most foreigners will never penetrate the barriers of language and culture well enough to see Japan as the average Japanese sees it" (52). Their attempts have had mixed success.

In *Princess Jellyfish*, for example, the main characters call themselves the Amars. To a reader who does not understand Japanese, this name means nothing, but with the help of the

translator's note, the reader learns that Amar is based off of the kanji for 'nun'. This knowledge helps the reader to understand how these women relate themselves to the outside world, from which they secluded themselves in order to freely focus on their otaku passions. In some cases, translator's notes can be superfluous and lead to confusion within the reader; one prominent example is a fan-subbed line from a particularly dramatic scene in *Death Note*, where Light says "just according to keikaku", accompanied by an author note detailing that "keikaku means plan" ("Just as Planned," Know Your Meme). This scene was now viewed in a more humorous light because of this translation, which transformed it from its original form. It also allowed more people to learn this word of Japanese- and to slip it into conversations where others understood the joke. Official translations, too, have the potential to disregard the Japanese origins of some anime in order to appeal to their audiences. In one episode of the *Pokemon* anime, 4Kids changed a few lines of dialogue so that the characters referred to onigiri as jelly-filled doughnuts ("Pokemon Jelly-Filled Donought," Youtube). In this case they took a Japanese food, the rice balls known as onigiri, and attempted to appeal to Americans with a pastry that they were familiar with. In the process, the audience lost an opportunity to learn about a staple of Japanese cuisine. Both of these examples have led to memes that poked fun at the translations, leading to the spread of associations that were not originally related to the media in question. In shedding the original cultural contexts from a piece of media, foreign consumers experienced it differently from Japanese consumers.

To elaborate on McGray's point, foreign readers may not understand the Amars in *Princess Jellyfish* as Japanese readers would view them. The Amars are a group of fujoshi, female otakus, who also happen to be NEETs. These three terms: fujoshi, otaku, and NEET are

all culturally significant within Japan. To the uninformed reader, the only word they may have already had knowledge of is otaku, and the American perception of otaku is not too aware of the contexts surrounding it in Japan. An otaku is, generally, someone with an obsession over a very specific type of popular culture. This seems to be fairly similar to the American terms for nerd and geek. Where nerd and geek are starting to gain traction in mainstream media and gain a positive connotation, however, otaku does not follow so closely. In Japan, otakus are considered to be so obsessed with their subject of interest that they start to disconnect with reality.

Fujoshi adds an element of gender to otaku, and literally means 'rotten girl'. It began as a word specifically for women who enjoyed boys love- or homosexual, romantic- manga and literature, but has since extended as a general term for female otakus (Suzuki). NEET is an acronym for 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training'. None of the Amars have paying jobs, except for the head of the household, who is a BL manga artist. In Japan, this NEET status carries a generally negative connotation. NEETs are associated with laziness and a lack of desire to work, but are majorly unemployed as a result of a recession in Japan, from which jobs are especially difficult for young women to find (Reiko). With the context of these three words taken together, the reader can now understand the degree to which Tsukimi's group is ostracized from society, when before they might have considered them just a group of geeks who are lacking in social skills. Knowing the background of these words can help the reader to understand the viewpoint of the characters as the Japanese would see them; without this knowledge the media would not be consumed in the same manner.

When Pokemon was first created, it would take years for the games to be localized to other countries. Now, Nintendo has strived to accommodate fans all over the world by launching its newest Pokemon games on the same day- or at the least within the same week. Pokemon fans no longer have to wait months for translations and details to be released online in anticipation of buying their own copies, and everyone has the opportunity to experience new things at the same time. Similarly, Pokemon has transformed over the years in its inclusion of other cultures. Many of the early games, from Red/Blue all the way to Diamond/Pearl, had their geographies inspired by locations within Japan. Red/Blue's Kanto is based on the region of the same name in Japan, Gold/Silver's Johto is based on Kansai, Ruby/Sapphire's Hoenn is based on Kyushu, and Diamond/Pearl's Sinnoh is based on Hokkaido ("Pokémon World in Relation to the Real World," Bulbapedia).

The two most recent generations of games, Black/White and X/Y, however, have their geographic inspirations based in the United States and France, respectively. Unova in Black/White features many bridges, and its central city is a direct analog to New York City. X/Y's Kalos is home to opulent mansions and cafes, and even has an Eiffel Tower replica within its center city. These games seem to express a Japanese perception of American and French stereotypes. Black/White brings sports arenas containing football, baseball, and basketball. Trainers with darker skin colors are introduced, and some of the region-specific Pokemon include a buffalo with an afro (Bouffalant) and a red, white, and blue eagle (Braviary). X/Y introduces the ability to customize your character with expensive boutique clothing, and the lore in the region is based in medieval castles and battles. Some of the Pokemon introduced in that region include a customizable poodle (Furfrou) and a floating sword and shield (Aegislash).

This shift in geographical inspiration may be seen as an attempt to appeal more to both the Japanese audience and the world at large. When Miller explained the significance of Japan's marketing of its cute culture, she mentioned that "global and male-authored mining of Japanese cute often leaves behind some of the more interesting and meaningful aspects of the aesthetic" (24). Similarly in this case, Nintendo focused on the particular aspects of each culture that may be more appealing to each player demographic, without necessarily understanding the significance. Japanese players got the opportunity to explore aspects of American and French culture that may not be quite so prominent within their cultures, while European or American players got to experience a familiarity with their surroundings. Within the Japanese-based regions, foreign players were less familiar with the aesthetic unless clearly Japanese aspects were present, such as the magnet train and pagodas within Gold/Silver. These aspects helped to make each game look more exciting and cool to different audiences for introducing aesthetics that were both foreign and familiar to each group.

This shift in culture inclusion may as such work as a counterpoint to the idea that Japanese culture appears to change when it's consumed in another country. In this case, the creators of Pokemon considered their audience and changed their product beforehand so that it would be consumed in the way that they desired. This was not a case of fan interpretations completely changing the meaning of a piece of media; to players in Japan, X/Y is very clearly French-inspired, and American and French players would all agree to this same notion. The games were tailored so that these meanings would not be lost across cultural boundaries. However, this example can also support the notion that Japanese culture is being transformed

in a preemptive response to possible outside influence. In either case, the exchange of ideas between countries has led to a product that is fundamentally changed from its original form.

When cultural connotations are lost in translation, or game content is changed to appeal to a wider audience, this leads to a transformation of Japanese culture. The first case is merely a change in one culture's perception of another, but the second has direct consequences on how Japan will evolve its popular culture to appeal to the rest of the world.

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