The Consumption and Perception of Japanese ACG (Animation-Comic-Game) among Young People in Hong Kong

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Japanese animated series, comics, and games have been dominant in Hong Kong since the late 1970s (Ng, 2008a:211-222; Ng, 2002:30-33), interacting with and influencing different facets of Hong Kong popular culture, media, and youth consumption (Iwabuchi, 2002; Ng, 2003:184-193). As a major consumption center and distributor of Japanese ACG in Asia (Fung, 2005:432-448), Hong Kong has been under the spell of the Japanese in developing its own ACG (Wong, 2006:23-46; Ishii, 2001:113-134). Hong Kong artists incorporate Japanese elements into their works, whereas young people prefer Japanese style to Hong Kong or U.S. style. Consuming Japanese ACG has become an integral part of mainstream youth culture in Hong Kong. Based on a questionnaire survey conducted on 500 Hong Kong young people aged between 13 and 29 in May 2008, this study examines how young people in Hong Kong consume and perceive Japanese ACG. Although there are surveys about the consumption and perception of Japanese ACG in the U.S. (Napier, 2000:239-256; Brenner, 2007) and Japan (Nomura Research Institute, 2005; Yano Economic Research Institute, 2008), this survey-based research conducted in Hong Kong is the first of its kind. It aims to deepen understanding of issues in global popularization, youth consumption, and perception of Japanese popular culture in an Asian context in the age of globalization.

There are 40 questions in the survey (see Appendix 1). Based on the data provided by 500 respondents, I narrowed down my analysis to three major issues, namely the popularity of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong, changing consumption mode of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong, and the people's attitudes towards Japanese ACG in Hong Kong.

The Popularity of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong

The survey shows that the dominance of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong remains unchanged. "Do you like Japanese anime?" (Question 3) The responses are overwhelmingly positive, with the endorsement rate at 87.8 percent (28.6 percent like very much; 59.2 percent like).

Japanese anime has no rivals in Hong Kong, doing extremely well on the TV, cinema and DVD shops. Popular Japanese animated series, such as "Doraemon," "Dr Slump," "Dragonball," "Slam Dunk," "Crayon Shinchan," "Sailormoon," "Chibi Maruko-chan," and "Full Metal Alchemist," can achieve 20-30 points (1 point is 70,000 audiences) in TV ratings. Miyazaki Hayao's animated films often topped the box office and his "Sen to Chiiro" (2000), having pocketed 25 million Hong Kong dollars, remains the most popular animated film ever screened in Hong Kong. Although U.S. animated films and TV animated series are popular globally, they fail to challenge the dominance of Japanese animation in Hong Kong. "Which animation do you like most by origin?" (Question 7) The result is one-sided; 97.4 percent of the respondents prefer Japanese anime, whereas only 1.4 percent like U.S. animation the best.

Likewise, Japanese comics in Hong Kong show a similar pattern in popularization. "Do you like Japanese manga?" (Question 11). 84 percent
Japanese manga has won the hearts of young people. "Which comic do you like most by origin?" (Question 15) 96 percent of the respondents prefer Japanese comics, whereas only 3 percent like Hong Kong comics best. Hong Kong comics are losing ground to Japanese comics. While some middle-aged males continue to patronize Hong Kong comics, young people have a very strong preference for Japanese comics.

Compared with their comic and animation counterparts, Japanese games are relatively less dominant in the survey. "Do you like Japanese games?" (Question 19) 69 percent of the respondents replied positively (like very much 24 percent; like 45 percent).

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Question 15 - Which comic do you like most by origin?

Question 22 - Which type of Japanese game platform do you like most?
The Japanese are very strong in arcade, handheld, home console, computer, and mobile phone games, but their Achilles’ heels are on-line games. Since the on-line game is the fastest growing area in global gaming, this drawback has weakened Japan’s competitive edge and Japanese game makers are losing some ground to their U.S., Taiwanese, and Korean competitors. However, Hong Kong has fewer on-line gamers, compared to Mainland China, South Korea, and Taiwan. “Which Japanese game platform do you like the most?” (Question 22) Only 6 percent of the respondents regard on-line game as their favorite game platform and thus Japan’s weakness in this area does not have a very strong negative impact on the market share.

“Which game do you like most by origin?” (Question 23) Eighty one percent of the respondents prefer Japanese games. Though not as one-sided as their comic and animation counterparts, Japanese games continue to have an advantage over their competitors.

Question 23 - Which game do you like most by origin?

“Which one do you like most in Japanese ACG?” (Question 40) The top choice is animation (27 percent), second is comic (26 percent), and last is game (18 percent). However, the margins are quite close. The majority (29 percent) of the respondents like the three ACG forms at the same level, showing that they are inseparable and reinforce.

Some Hong Kong youth share the identity of being an otaku or die-hard fan. Otaku fandom is a globalizing phenomenon and has exploded on a global scale (Newitz, 1994). “Are you an otaku?” (Question 27) Thirteen percent of the respondents said they are otaku. Like their Japanese counterparts, otaku in Hong Kong are absorbed in collecting ACG products, writing commentaries on the web, and engaging in ACG activities, such as going to a comic convention or game show.

Changing Consumption Mode of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong

If we merely look at sales and circulation, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that the heyday of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong is gone. For instance, in the early 1990s, the HK edition of Dragonball sold 180,000 copies per issue. Now, the bestselling Japanese comics, such as Naruto, Bleach, One Piece, 20th Century Boys, and Deathnote, sell only about 20,000 copies per issue. In other words, the circulation of the best-selling Japanese comics has dropped by nine-fold. Likewise, the same trend can be found in Japanese animated series on HK TV. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Japanese animated series had more than 30 points in TV ratings. However, after the Millennium, most only received single-digital ratings. In the past, many Japanese animated series were aired in primetime (from 6 to 6:30 P.M.); now, their number is cut...
and many are screened in the late night or early afternoon hours. The sale of Japanese game software and the business of game arcades show a similar declining trend.

If young people in Hong Kong are buying fewer Japanese comics and game software, as well as watching less Japanese animated series on TV, does this mean that the heyday of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong is gone? Do you think Japanese anime, manga and game are declining in Hong Kong? (Questions 10, 18, 24) The majority of the respondents do not agree (anime 32 percent, manga 45 percent, game 56 percent).

**Question 10 - Do you think Japanese anime is declining in Hong Kong?**

- **Agree**: 227 (25%)
- **Disagree**: 369 (41%)
- **Not Answer**: 7 (8%)

**Question 18 - Do you think Japanese manga is declining in Hong Kong?**

- **Agree**: 99 (11%)
- **Disagree**: 227 (26%)
- **Not Answer**: 14 (16%)

Most tend to think that the popularity of Japanese ACG remains at the previous level (anime 43 percent, manga 36 percent, game 30 percent), if not getting higher. It seems that the sale figures and TV ratings are somewhat deceiving. Hong Kong young people are probably consuming more Japanese ACG than ever before, but they have changed their consumption mode. The rise of ACG in youth consumption is indeed a universal trend. A recent study also demonstrates that the consumption of ACG in Japan has been increasing (Yano Research Institute 2008).

**Question 6 - What is the most regular way for you to watch Japanese anime?**

- **Internet**: 326 (65.2%)
- **TV**: 121 (24.5%)
- **VCD, DVD**: 41 (8.4%)

Internet, in place of TV and pirated software, has become the major way of watching Japanese anime. "What is the most regular way for you to watch Japanese anime?" (Question 6) Internet is chosen by 65.2 percent of the respondents as the main way to watch Japanese anime, trailed distantly by TV.
(24.2 percent) and DVD/VCD (9.4 percent). Though illegal, digital downloading is prevalent because it is free and relatively risk-safe. More importantly, the internet has more titles than TV. Hong Kong TV stations screen 21 Japanese animated series a week (TVB 13, ATV 8, all together 10 hours 30 minutes a week) and they are usually not very new (at least one season behind) and children-oriented. On the other hand, the latest Japanese works are abundant on the Internet. Fansubbing (amateur subtitling by fans) plays a significant role in the global popularization of Japanese anime (Leonard, 2005:281-305). China is the center for fansubbing and internet sharing of Japanese ACg in Asia. In many cases, unauthorized sources are uploaded in China, and usually, in fewer than 24 hours after the screening of an anime in Japan, it can be downloaded for free on the web with Chinese subtitles.

Even in reading Japanese manga, internet has also become the most important means (Ingulsrud and Allen, 2009:192). “What is the most regular way for you to read Japanese manga?” (Question 14). More young people read Japanese manga on the Internet (37 percent) rather than buy (30 percent) or borrow (29 percent) the books themselves. The attraction, of course, is that the “books” are free. China is the major source of Japanese manga digital piracy, uploading and distributing manga on the Internet for free downloading.

**Question 14** - What is the most regular way for you to read Japanese manga?

- **Manga rental, 134, (37%)**
- **Internet, 187, (57%)**
- **Purchase, 148, (40%)**
- **Others, 31, (8%)**

With Japanese games (Question 22), the most popular platforms are console games (35 percent), PC games (28 percent), and handheld games (23 percent). Compared with animation and comic, games are facing more serious problems with piracy and unauthorized Internet downloading. Once again, China is the major source of game piracy. Very few Hong Kong young people buy authorized game software (Spontiens, 2005:64-67). Arcade and on-line games are less popular than other genres, because they are less prone to piracy and unauthorized Internet downloading. For the same reason, Sony PS3 is less well-received than Nintendo Wii in Hong Kong.

**Question 22** - Which type of Japanese game platform do you like most?

- **Online Game, 31, (68%)**
- **Console game, 19, (38%)**
- **PC Game, 139, (28%)**
- **Arcade game, 95, (22%)**
- **Handheld game, 115, (22%)**

Needless to say, Internet piracy has become a major consumption mode of digital commodities in the digital age (Bowrey, 2005). Hong Kong is no exception (Lai, 2007) as young people have joined the practice of free Internet downloading of Japanese ACg software. Then, is Japanese ACg a zero-sum game? Not really. In Japan, according to a survey by Nomura Research Institute, there are 1.72 million otaku who spend 400 billion yen a year on pop culture-related products and services (Nomura Research Institute, 2005:52). Likewise, Hong Kong young people spend considerably on ACg-related spin-offs, such as figurines, toys, posters, and card games. “What is the proportion of your expense on Japanese ACg products?” (Question 32). Of the 500 respondents, only two said they do not spend on Japanese ACg products, while eight percent (42/500) spend a major proportion of their expenses on such products.

**Question 32** - What is the proportion of your expense on Japanese ACg products?

- **No expense, 2, (0%)**
- **Small, 555, (77%)**
- **Medium, 95, (20%)**
- **Large, 42, (5%)**
Question 34 - Have you participated in cosplay?

Yes, 65, (23%)
No, 455, (77%)

Question 36 - Have you published your dojinshi?

Yes, 53, (11%)
No, 447, (89%)

Question 38 - Have you patronized maid café?

No, 455, (97%)
Yes, 47, (3%)

In addition to the consumption of ACG-related products, quite a number of Hong Kong youth engage in ACG-related activities, such as cosplay (dress like Japanese cartoon characters), dojinshi (fan drawing), and maid café (served like master by waitresses in maid uniform). In the survey, the participation rates for cosplay, dojinshi, and maid café are 13 percent, 11 percent, and 9 percent, respectively.

Cosplay and dojinshi events and maid café business are attracting new participants and media coverage. In Hong Kong, what used to be a subculture for die-hard Japanese ACG fans is becoming a part of mainstream youth culture.

Japanese ACG promotes pop culture tourism. Many Hong Kong youngsters travel to Japan to pay cultural tribute, such as to Akihabara to buy ACG products or to Odaiba to attend the Comic Market, the world’s largest comic convention (Ng, 2008b: 183-192). Some visit the actual sites that certain ACG works have used for reference. For example, Mt. Akina is very popular among Initial D (a work about illegal car racing) fans in Hong Kong.

All in all, fandom has a very strong impact on youth consumption and Japanese ACG is getting bigger than ever in Hong Kong. Ironically, like the role of piracy before the 1990s, Internet downloading has served as the major force behind the global popularization of Japanese ACG in the 2000s and in Hong Kong, China, not Japan provides the larger share of Japanese ACG software (mostly unauthorized).

**Hong Kong People’s Attitudes towards Japanese ACG**

As has been said, ACG is well-received among young people in Hong Kong. For instance, the number of people who attend the Animation-Comic-Game Hong Kong (ACGHK), the largest ACG annual event in Hong Kong, has jumped from 220,000 in 1999 to 600,000 in 2008. While young people are mesmerized by ACG, mass media, government, religious groups, teachers, parents, and the older generation in general have a bias against ACG as a form of entertainment, teaching tool, and means of communication. In particular, Japanese ACG is often criticized for being addictive, having excessive sex and violence, and causing youth crimes (Chan, 2007; Youth Research Center, 1994; Wong, 2004:537-553). Young people do not often agree, but their voice is not influential in the society. The survey shows that besides enjoying Japanese ACG, Hong Kong young people believe that Japanese ACG provides a good reference for Hong Kong and China to develop their own ACG industries.

Japanese ACG male fans are subject to teasing and stereotyping. For instance, when a Japanese man stabbed seven people to death in Akihabara on June 8, 2008, Hong Kong newspapers reported the crime as a case of otaku killing otaku, ignoring that the offender was not an otaku. Hong Kong media tend to associate ACG with otaku and otaku with crime (Ng, 2009:32-35). “What kind of attitude that the general public have towards otaku?” (Question 26) Seventy-five percent of the respondents believe that the public holds
negative attitudes towards otaku.

Question 26 - What kind of attitude that the general public have towards otaku?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(67%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(93%)</td>
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The attitude of the government is not better than that of the media. Although the government has said it wants to develop Hong Kong as a regional base in cultural industry, this applies mainly to film production and less to ACG. John Tsang, the finance secretary of Hong Kong, is perhaps an exception. On Dec. 7, 2007, in a keynote speech presented at the Future Leaders Forum, he praised Hong Kong comics for their creativity and influence (Tsang, 2007), and in 2009, he asked the Hong Kong comic artist, Chi-ching Lee, to draw the comic version of the government budget consultation document. Despite Tsang’s efforts, no significant change in the government sector’s attitude towards ACG has been seen. The Hong Kong government seldom uses ACG for education, propaganda, or cultural policy, unlike the Japanese government that makes the best use of manga and anime as “soft power” for cultural diplomacy, education, and administration (Watanabe and McConnell, 2008). Recently, the Japanese prime minister, himself an otaku, set up the so-called “manga diplomacy” to promote the image of Japan overseas (Peng, 2007:349-363).

Schools in Hong Kong generally are hostile to ACG, seeing such comic art forms harmful to children and refusing to use them for educational purposes. For instance, in 2005, George Ngai and Timothy Yuen, two lecturers of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, a major training center for teachers, condemned comics as nothing more than portrayals of males as bandits and females as prostitutes (Ngai and Yuen, 2003:22-27). They see comics as poisonous and thus discourage teachers from using them in teaching. Most Hong Kong teachers refuse to use ACG to teach and school libraries purchase few comics. Another example relates to a Hong Kong publisher, which launched a comics history textbook series in 2005. When the first issue came out, it was under fire by the media, teachers, and parents. An associate professor of the City University of Hong Kong publicly stated he will never recommend this textbook for teachers and students, because it contains graphics about battles. He added that in the comic, generals from two battling camps looked at each other angrily and thus this book promotes hatred and violence. Very few schools purchased and used this textbook.

Under this unfriendly and conservative social atmosphere, some young people who like Japanese ACG are under stress. Twelve percent of the respondents reported experiences of discrimination or criticism because of their passion for Japanese ACG.

Question 29 - Have you been criticized or discriminated against due to your passion for Japanese ACG?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
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Question 28 - Would you publicly admit that you like Japanese ACG?

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<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>4 (0%)</td>
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For self-protection, only 59% of the respondents said they would confess their passion publicly. If one confesses a passion for Japanese ACG, he or she will likely be labeled as otaku or “trainman” (nicknamed from the Japanese TV drama Densha Otoko), and like in Japan, otaku has negative implications in Hong Kong, labeled as being fanatic, autistic, anti-social, and perverted. Most
Concluding Remarks

This study examines the popularity, consumption, and perception of Japanese ACG among young people in Hong Kong based on survey analysis. It indicates that Hong Kong follows the trend of global popularization of Japanese ACG, having been a consumption center of Japanese ACG in Asia since the late 1970s. Japanese ACG remains dominant in Hong Kong and basically has no competitors.

However, the consumption pattern has been changed from printed comics, TV programs, DVD, and game software to internet downloading (mainly illegal) and sharing (such as YouTube and NicoNico). The role of China has become very important, since it is the largest supplier of pirated products and the main source of digital piracy. Ironically enough, Hong Kong young people consume Japanese ACG not directly from Japan, but indirectly through China. These unlicensed editions imported from China or downloaded from Chinese websites are usually localized in terms of language, genre, and content. Although the problems of piracy and illegal downloading are becoming very serious and the sale of Japanese licensed products and software is declining, Japanese ACG is not a zero-sum game because of its lucrative spin-offs. Young people are enthusiastic about Japanese ACG-related products and activities.

Regarding the perception of Japanese ACG in Hong Kong, while young people are huge fans of Japanese ACG, the mainstream society has a negative image about it. Although the Hong Kong government has worked to develop Hong Kong to be a regional base in cultural industry, its policies do not see ACG in a positive light and provide very limited support. The conceptual gap between the youth and old has forced some young consumers to hide their interest in Japanese ACG for fear of discrimination.

References


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Ngai, George and Timothy Yuen. 2003. “Values and Gender Study: A Review of Comics of Martial Art in Hong Kong.” (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Teachers’ Association).
Appendix 1

Survey on the consumption and perception of Japanese ACG among young people in Hong Kong

Question 1 - Sex
Question 2 - Occupation
Question 3 - Do you like Japanese anime?
Question 4 - Which type of Japanese anime do you like most?
Question 5 - What is the main reason for your interest in Japanese anime?
Question 6 - What is the most regular way for you to watch Japanese anime?
Question 7 - Which animation do you like most by origin?
Question 8 - Do you think Japanese anime provides a good reference for Chinese and Hong Kong animation?