

The ir/relevance of "Japaneseness" in North American OEL manga: On Japanese American artists deploying manga style

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[This is a draft, so it is not intended for readership beyond the members of the conference. It is still in need of modifications, revising and images. Thank you for your consideration.]

Introduction

Outside of Japan, Japanese manga have been well received especially amongst young people some of which look towards becoming manga artists themselves, deploying the “manga style” in their comics. In North America, these comics are called “OEL (Original English Language) Manga”. Many OEL manga artists voice a desire towards “Japan” which, upon closer inspection, is mostly equated with a specific way of graphic storytelling, that is to say, the deployment of a highly codified mode of expression which favours the shared visual language over idiosyncratic style and narration; an enormous variety in regard to page layouts, speed and impact lines, comics-specific pictograms and onomatopoeic signs; a preference for clean (at first glance impersonal) line-work and monochromy, for mechanical rather than manual lettering, etc. Due to their roots in special magazines, manga narratives are usually extensive serializations that eventually come to an end (as distinct from American superhero series). In terms of story content, OEL manga tends to favor fantastic and unrealistic stories that serve as a form of escape from daily life. Also noteworthy is the use of Japanese language (mostly in the form of sound effects and symbols) as a form of decoration rather than text.

However, in the case of artists from Japanese descent raised in North America who decide to become manga artists, questions such as these arise: Did they get in touch with manga in a different way because of their background? Do they apply manga style differently, for example, to tell stories about clearly recognizable identity issues instead of using it as a tool for “escapeism”?

In order to clarify what kind of “Japanese-ness” is at play in regards to OEL manga (whether it is style, language, fanbase and/or the discourse around it), and more specifically, what this entails for Japanese-American OEL manga artists, this paper focuses on namely, OEL manga artist Miyazawa Takeshi¹, who is Canadian-Japanese, as a case study.

1. Asian Americans graphic narratives

Zhao Shan Mu explains in his thesis that the concept of “Asian American” originally reflected solidarity against the stereotype of the oriental (Zhou 2010: 1, 4). Being perceived as a “true” Asian was obviously considered a failure at assimilating into American culture. According to Zhao, they felt that their “Asianness” was holding them back in their professional and personal spheres.

Asian Americans have been creating comics mainly within the context of American comics and their particular genres and conventions (such as superhero comics and recently also manga). According to Zhao, comics artists who are Asian American can claim America by projecting visible Asian presence into the comic book industry and working within the medium in an American context. And as Asian Americans engage with American popular culture and move towards the mainstream, what is “mainstream” (or “popular”) in American culture also changes due to Asian American presence (Zhou 2010: 3, 9). However, having ties with Asia may not necessarily be ties

¹ Japanese order for the names (surname first, then first name) will be used throughout the text for Japanese personal names.

to what is traditional and allegedly “pure” culture. For example, the comic “Johnny Hiro” was created by Fred Chao [image], a Chinese American, and it features a Japanese American protagonist who encounters a character of Japanese popular culture in New York. With respect to publication format: was originally published as a serialized comic book, like the superhero genre, which also allowed it to enter a mainstream space (Zhou 2010: 48). In an attempt to also occupy this space while at the same time protest against its exclusive nature, Fred Chao “uses the mainstream popularity of rap and hip hop to show that musical genres can occupy both a resistant position and a mainstream one [...] and the characters liking this music represent Asian American participation in both resistant and mainstream forms of popular culture” (Zhou 2010: 36).

Asian American comics are regarded as part of an ethnic subculture which challenges the mainstream through play and not necessarily through straightforward resistance (Zhao, 2012: 12). While counterculture tries to be radical and oppose the mainstream outright, subcultures participate in the mainstream culture while altering it, leaning heavily on style, or aesthetics. Zhou argues that Asian Americans as they engage with American pop culture through a form of pop culture, what is “mainstream” (or “popular”) in American culture also changes due to Asian American presence.

However, Asian American graphic narratives need not be limited to American-style comics or graphic novels. Asian American artists also do manga. How are these above-mentioned identity issues addressed in a style that is more collective, more community oriented, rather than focused on personal identity and its (quest for) legitimacy? This paper focuses on Japanese American narratives existing within OEL (Original English Language) manga, a product that stems from the desire of fans of Japanese manga in the West to create their own manga. Outside of Japan, manga readership is a subculture in the larger world of comics and thus, manga is often regarded as one “genre” of comics. OEL manga is then an even smaller part of this subculture, which tries to engage in the mainstream through play instead of resistance. In this regards it might resemble the subculture of Asian American graphic narratives. But OEL is aiming at the Japanese mainstream instead of the American one, its ‘Japaneseness’ being the criteria by which closeness to this goal is measured.

2. Manga in North America

2002 was an important year in the world of manga in North America as this was the year Tokyopop, a manga publisher and major player in the arena of manga in the U.S, began its campaign of “100% authentic manga”. This meant that from then on, all their manga would be published meeting the following standards: leaving the pages “unflipped”, that is, in their original (Japanese) reading direction (right-to-left), leaving the sound effects untranslated, employing a smaller book format similar to Japanese *tankōbon* (small book volumes in which manga is published after magazine serialization) and selling them at an affordable price, not going higher than \$9.99 a book.

Prior to this “standardization” strategy, Tokyopop (called Mixx Entertainment before their name change also in 2002) had battled against Viz, the other key player in the arena of manga publishing in North America, for higher and higher sales but neither were getting the desired numbers. Viz, the American subsidiary of Shogakukan (the largest manga publisher of Japan), had been publishing manga since their origins in 1986, and had tried to keep as close to the Japanese publishing system as possible by putting out unmodified manga titles². As the sales yielded unsatisfactory results, Viz switched their strategy in 1997, intending to make manga more appealing to the American comics fandom: adapting the manga to fit traditional American comics formats in order to attract readers who were not familiar with manga (Matsui 2009: 3). This meant more specifically, flipping the

² their very first ones were *Area 88*, *The Legend of Kamui* and *Mai the Psychic Girl*.

pages so they would read left-to-right and translating the sound effects into English. But Tokyopop put a complete stop to this attempt to make manga “fit in” the standards created by the American comics industry and instead, embraced manga’s foreign qualities and promoted them, the sales of manga grew exponentially going from \$60 million in 2002 to \$210 million by 2007, year by which the North American graphic novel market was around 375 million dollars, out of which 56% of the market share was represented by manga. (Brienza 2009: 103, 113; Matsui 2009, 10).

There are studies that explain how and why Tokyopop’s standardization strategy of 2002 had such impressive results at more length (Brienza 2009: 111-113; Matsui 2009: 10, 19). But noteworthy is a media-specific innovation: in 1997, Mixx Entertainment, the company that later became Tokyopop in that iconic year, took their serialized manga magazine, *Mixxine* and began to sell it at bookstores in the fiction section, moving it away from comic book shops. *Mixxine* serialized different manga titles, but it consisted mostly of *shōjo* (girls) manga. This move which was odd to many proved to be very insightful on the company’s behalf, who clearly understood the market they were catering to: women read and purchase more books than men in almost every category (except history and biography) and they represent 80% of the book market. It has also been widely noted that girls are often more willing to read books that appeal to boys, but not the reverse. Tokyopop understood that “growth within the comics field as a whole, given the overarching structure of the field (its insularity, its narrow demographics, its boom and bust cycles), was already spectacularly difficult; specificities of the manga field made it nearly impossible.” (Brienza 2009: 108). Moving from the insular comics field and into the more open book field resulted in an increase of sales (bookstores now drive approximately two-thirds of manga sales) (Brienza 2009: 113). Furthermore, by placing their magazine in bookstores instead of comic book shops where it would be passed over by boys and men, they provided manga the necessarily visibility to attract young women (Brienza 2009: 110). This, combined with the airing of *SailorMoon* by the USA network in 1998, solidified that readership into a strong (female) fan base of manga. This has also placed manga closer to the book (and graphic novel) field rather than to the comics field.

Another important factor was that Mixx had also been trying to follow Viz’s localization strategy and had been flipping and translating the sound effects of their manga titles. This resulted in many conflicts with publishers in Japan when trying to get the licenses to titles. Tokyopop’s 2002 standardization strategy was a response to this problem, seeking also to cut down on the expenses of flipping and modifying artwork and to import more titles to the U.S, but it also echoed the fans’ request for more “authenticity” in the manga. They wanted to read manga as close to its original form, which is what made the strategy so successful, but it would have never worked out so well had Viz not gone to such lengths to do “stigma management” for manga³ in their early years. The strategies these two companies launched in 1997 and 2002 helped create and cultivate an entire generation of manga readers in America, some of whom made a shift from readers to creators, and began to create their own original stories in manga style. This shift was widely encouraged by Tokyopop’s original manga talent-seeking contest, “Rising Stars of Manga” (started in 2002 and cancelled in 2008) whose purpose was to find and launch the careers of Original English Language (OEL) manga artists.

However, as much as Tokyopop was instrumental in the creation and development of the OEL manga movement, they could not stop its hasty demise. OEL manga did not sell well, and the contest and publishing of OEL manga by Tokyopop was very short lived. Most American readers of manga disliked OEL manga because it was “not Japanese”, or not “Japanese enough,” even if the works published were very faithful to manga technique-wise. Iwabuchi (2002) has explained (with regard to Asia) that only popular cultural which has been divested of all distinctive, identifiable “Japaneseness” succeeds in the West, and this trend still prevails (Brienza 2009: 108), but as

³ Stigma management: the effort by local publishers to prevent the stigmatization of manga and establish the legitimacy of manga as acceptable form of entertainment (Goffman 1963; Lopes 2006) (Matsui 2009: 4).

distinct from Asian consumers, American readers of manga have consistently put down any attempts to diminish the “Japaneseness” of manga, first in the imported titles and later in the original ones. This “Japaneseness” that fans advocate so much, appears to be the fuel of the success of Tokyopop’s 2002 “100% authentic manga” campaign and a central aspect of OEL manga.

2.1 - ‘Japaneseness’ of Manga as a consequence of the translation of manga in North America

Part of the allure of Tokyopop’s “100% authentic manga” campaign came from guaranteeing that one would be getting hands on unmodified, straight-from-Japan manga and it was this promise of “authenticity” what manga fans so ardently pushed for in their demand. But this was an issue complicated further by the fact that what Tokyopop was publishing wasn’t exactly “100 % pure” manga, but translations of Japanese manga. These were inevitably altered to suit North American readers (who usually cannot read Japanese script). Not only was the text translated into English, along with a localization of all its puns, slang and wordplay (which after being translated took on a different reading altogether) but it was also altered visually (Western micro-reading direction and Japanese macro-direction) and graphically: Japanese sound effects were removed and replaced by English versions, and although the pages were left unflipped, publishers still felt the need to remind their faithful readers (and educate their new ones) that pages should be read in the Japanese reading direction (right-to-left) by placing small arrows on the borders of the pages, showing the right direction and also placing some warning illustrations at the end of the book (where the English cover would go in a flipped book), explaining to the reader that they are on the back of the book instead of the front [image]. Some other elements that were left untouched were the size and placement of word bubbles and leaving pages uncolored.

Consequently, translated manga looked very different from original Japanese manga, but these differences were not (consciously) noticed by manga fans, who accepted this form of manga as “100% authentic” as promoted by Tokyopop. This led some of them to believe that only manga that looked like the Tokyopop products could be considered “authentic”. This assumed authenticity of manga soon became a tenet of the ‘Japaneseness’ of manga and its visual characteristics the benchmark of what OEL ought to become. But what are the visual characteristics of “100% authentic manga”?

Formalist Characteristics of OEL manga

- Panel layout and “flow”: the way a page is designed depends greatly upon the reading direction of the comic, as it is fundamental to the flow of the page and the way the gaze of the reader moves upon it. In manga, it is imperative for the intention of good storytelling that the artist create a good visual flow of panels so that the story can be carried smoothly throughout each page. Manga fans expect panel layouts to resemble those found in “100% authentic manga”, but they forget that they are looking at unflipped yet re-arranged pages. An example of this is the case of the manga “Blade of the Immortal” (*Mūgen no Jyunin*, in the Japanese version), first published by Dark Horse Comics in the United States in 1996. Dark Horse did not alter the panels or artwork in any way (an innovative move at the time) and they even left the sound effects untranslated on the page, offering a translation of them at the end of the book in a glossary. But they changed the reading direction to fit English-speaking audiences, and so, the books read from left-to-right. The panels were then re-arranged by cut-and-paste method on each page to follow this reading direction. If one looks at the pages, it will then be obvious that while the story reads in the English reading direction, the artwork on each panel suggests “flow” going in the opposite direction, i.e the

direction the characters are facing or running towards⁴, the visual composition of the backgrounds, etc. [image]. This dichotomy was not all uncommon in most translations of manga, but fans unfamiliar with original Japanese manga mostly likely did not notice it and it soon entered the image of a “standard” manga.

- Reading Direction: manga fans expect “authentic” manga to be laid out in the Japanese reading direction, even if it is a translation. Therefore, OEL manga is also expected to follow the Japanese reading direction, even if it’s originally conceived in English. However, this would involve the opposite direction for inserting the script.
- Word bubbles/speech balloons: as mentioned before, most publishers left the word bubbles on Japanese manga untouched and just translated the text inside. However, in Japanese manga, the text inside word bubbles is not just written right-to-left, but also vertically instead of horizontally. This naturally leads to word bubbles to be very thin and tall, to better accommodate vertical text. A manga artist takes this into consideration when designing a panel, so as to not have the word bubbles obstruct the underlying artwork, and vice-versa. However, when publishers translated the text in Japanese manga, they had to place the English script in a horizontal direction within the word bubbles (which were not to be altered under the new “authenticity” policy). Also, English tends to use more words than Japanese, which can depend on the use of *kanji* (Japanese pictograms) to encompass an idea into less space, therefore, translations are usually very lengthy which leads to cuts and re-writings in most cases. This led to word bubbles in translated manga to contain a lot of English text inside word bubbles with too much blank space on the bubble’s top or bottom [image]. Even though this was due to an adaptation strategy by North American publishers of manga, manga fans adopted this style of word bubble as part of the ‘Japaneseness’ of manga, and consequently many OEL manga artists started to design their word bubbles in the same fashion, even if their text was horizontal⁵ [image].
- Screentone: Japanese manga is normally published in monochrome form, but artists make use of “screentones”, an adhesive paper with half-tone patterns on one side used on the original artwork to depict depth and help distinguish objects instead of doing so with color. They are easy to reproduce when copied over many times, which is why manga artists prefer them. Their use gives manga a very distinct look which is another characteristic of what manga “should look like” in the ‘Japaneseness’ issue. OEL manga artists also make use of screentone patterns in their manga, but since they tend to make manga digitally, they do not use original sheets of screentone but rather create the half-tone patterns digitally using graphics software (such as Photoshop). It is unclear as to why most OEL manga artists prefer to make manga digitally. This may be due to the difficulty to find the “proper” tools for manga-making (the same paper, screentone sheets, pens, quills, ink that Japanese manga artists use) and in lieu of them, the computer was the easiest (and cheapest) alternative. Although it is currently possible to find these products in North America at art and specialty shops, most OEL manga artists still prefer to make manga on their computers (perhaps out of plain convenience) though they still mostly stick to monochrome. Some artists like to combine methods and will work traditionally up to a certain point (drafts, panel layouts, pencils), and then use the computer for the rest of the process (editing, inking, lettering).
- Speedlines, sweatdrops, nosebleeds, and other comic-specific symbols: the “grammar” of manga as a visual language (Cohn, 2010) employs certain visual elements that convey a specific idea or emotion. These visual elements are native to manga, having evolved within the context of Japanese society and manga reading culture over time. First, there are the “speedlines” [image],

⁴ Takemiya Keiko (*Kaze to Ki no Uta*) explained that in order to ensure a good flow of the page (and therefore a good flow of the story) the characters and elements on the page must face the reading direction. (Source: personal conversation, October 2011, at Kyoto Seika University, Kyoto Japan).

⁵ This also applies to Thai *shōjo* manga and Korean *manhwa*.

lines drawn straight at angles to convey speed/urgency, and also bring attention to the action/character they surround (*emanata*/効果線 as impact lines). Next, are “sweatdrops” **[image]**, used proficiently in most genres of manga to convey embarrassment or exasperation. There are also the “nosebleeds”, used mostly in *shōnen* (boys) manga to express sexual attraction. We can also find others such as “bulging nerve”, which is an expression of anger or frustration, “dropping lines” which mean fear or anxiety.

- Physical deformities to express emotion: “SD” (Super Deformed) characters **[image]** is when characters are drawn as their smaller, chubbier versions whenever something funny happens to them (a tool usually used in *shōjo* (girls) manga but not exclusive to it). “Bulging eyes” is when, like the name explains, eyes are drawn in an exaggerated size, usually to express rage or extreme surprise **[image]**.
- Backgrounds: There is also the use of stylized backgrounds to express the inner feelings of characters. Within the grammar of manga, backgrounds are not drawn and used exclusively to signify a character's spatial position. By using certain visuals inside a background, it may be possible to “read” into the emotions of the character in the foreground **[image]**, emotions such as nervousness, fear, anger, etc **[image]**. These tools are proficiently used to invite the reader into the inner world of characters. This aspect has been described as a defining factor of Japanese manga, and part of its allure to fans (McCloud, 1993). They create a window into the character's souls and allows fans to participate in the drama and emotionality of the story. OEL manga artists do not fail to include them in their work, and there are also many non-manga artists who have become familiar with them and interpret them in their own comics.
- Storytelling: manga has its own unique way of telling a story and thus, writing for manga differs from other forms of comics writing. As previously explained, manga usually starts out serialized in magazines, and the series may run over long periods of time in these magazines (sometimes decades). The contents are, therefore, shaped over time. Characters may disappear to be introduced later, or new ones created. It's different from other forms of comic writing, such as graphic novels, where the complete story may already exist in finished form prior to the drawing stage. Also, readers play a very big part in the creation of the manga narrative. Their fan letters praising or criticizing certain events or characters can lead to changes, usually enforced by the editors, who sometimes have more power over the story than the artist him/herself. Normally within the mainstream manga industry, alterations in the story are business decisions designed to ensure the profitable edge of a manga series. This may sound similar to superhero comics techniques, but the difference lies in that manga tends to be linear in their storytelling (every manga series eventually ends) where as superhero comics' narratives tends to be open-ended so that they may run indefinitely.

Another good example manga storytelling particularities are “cliffhangers”, unexpected twists in the story which the manga artist introduces into the end of each chapter as motivation for the reader to continue reading the series. As stated before, most manga start out serialized in magazines and each publishes one chapter a week. These cliffhangers serve as a way to keep the story fresh and exciting for old and new readers alike. By keeping a high number of readers, the series stays in serialization longer, which lead eventually to *tankōbon* sales that can then bring in royalty fees for the artists. Usually, the artist earns very little from serialization (the higher cuts go to publishers, distributors and editors), but they can earn much more once their series are bound into volumes. It is therefore in the manga artist's interest to utilize writing tools as these to ensure their (and their manga's) success.

- Characters and Locations: a particularity of the ‘Japaneseness’ of manga is the design of characters and their surroundings. Naturally, Japanese manga tends to have characters with

Japanese names (usually, but not always as in the case of fantasy and/or sci-fi manga), and be located in Japanese locations (again, recognizable rather by their names or verbal inserts than pictorial representation - usually but not exclusively). Reference to Japan whether in character's names or in the name or location of the story is another way to stress 'Japaneseness' in OEL manga. This was done not just in OEL manga, but in manga from other countries as well, as in the case of Christina Plaka's work (German manga) [image], and Kaoru's work (Malaysian manga) [image]. Kaoru is an example of how this 'Japaneseness' can be stressed not just in the work but through the artist him/herself: Kaoru's real name is Liew Yee Teng⁶ and she a Malaysian citizen of Chinese ethnicity, but publishes using this Japanese pseudonym in order to "reduce" her "Chineseness" so that it does not take attention from her manga, and at the same time make her accessible to a Malay/Muslim/non-Chinese audience. Although she publishes in Malay and for a primarily Malaysian audience, she strives to make her manga "odorless", to accommodate her fans' demands of 'Japaneseness'. It is a global occurrence not limited to North America though the "odorlessness" of it is different in this case because of Asia's colonial memory of Japan, and in Kaoru's case there are the inner-Malay tensions between Chinese minority and Muslim majority to be aware of. Kaoru is referencing Japan by drawing stories set in places removed from reality but that relate to it through visual cues, such as the use of Japanese text on signboards or price labels. Christina Plaka addresses this same issue in her manga *Yonen Buzz*, by placing her characters (who all have Japanese names) within a meticulously drawn Tokyo, even though the entire story is told in German and is made for a German audience.

2.2 'Japaneseness' in the work of Japanese-American manga artists

Nina Matsumoto is an OEL manga artist of Japanese-Canadian descent. She is best known for her manga titled *Yōkaiden*, a story about a boy named Hamachi who is fascinated by a type of Japanese spirit called the *yōkai*. It documents his travels into the spirit world in order to search for and retrieve his grandmother's soul, stolen by one of the spirits [image].

Nina's gained recognition as an artist when an illustration she did depicting the characters from *The Simpsons*, went viral on the internet which led to Nina being offered the chance to draw in the official *Simpsons*' comic book, where she wrote a story for the "Treehouse of Terror" special titled "Murder, he wrote", a cross-over⁷ between the popular manga series *Death Note*⁸ (Ohba Tsugumi and Obata Takeshi) and *The Simpsons*. This comic won her an Eisner Award⁹ at the 2009 San Diego Comic Con. In later interviews, Nina stated that her biggest artistic influence is *The Simpsons*¹⁰.

Yet prior to that, she had been discovered on "DeviantArt", an online portal for artists where they can create groups and critique each other's works. It has become the site of most OEL manga, fanart and *dōujinshi* (fan creations) communities on the internet. Her personal gallery on this site received notice by a publishing agent at Del Rey Manga, a subsidiary of Kodansha (a large Japanese manga publisher) through Random House Books¹¹. The agent asked her for a proposal for an original manga and she came up with the concept for *Yōkaiden*. The agent reported that he liked the concept in its original conception and that he liked the main character because it reminded him

⁶ For more information on Kaoru, please refer to Gan Sheuo Hui's essay on this topic, "Manga in Malaysia: An approach to its current hybridity through the career of the *shōjo mangaka* Kaoru" in IJOCA, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2011.

⁷ A storyline combining characters or settings from separate fictional properties.

⁸ First serialized by Shueisha in the Japanese manga magazine *Weekly Shōnen Jump* from December 2003 to May 2006.

⁹ She won in the category of "Best Short Story".

¹⁰ Source: <http://animealmanac.com/2009/12/04/manga-review-yokaiden-vol-2/> (Last access 2012/04/15)

¹¹ Del Rey stopped all activities in October 2010 after they were taken over by Kodansha's U.S division, publishing directly through Random House since December 2010.

of Son Goku from *Dragon Ball* (Aoki, 2008). *Yōkaiden* received many compliments from the critics, being named the best OEL manga of 2008 in several online manga and anime portals¹².

However, Carlos Santos of “Anime News Network”, the biggest manga and anime online portal in English, claimed that while *Yōkaiden* is certainly beautifully drawn and has a creative story, it lacks a certain depth that stops it from being truly “haunting”¹³. This perception was shared as well by several other critics which mentioned that Matsumoto’s storyline in *Yōkaiden* lacks coherence and a good understanding of manga writing. One critic from an online portal called “Anime Almanac” reviews the second volume¹⁴ of the series, and states that the story was almost impossible to follow and that it was unclear as to the main character’s motive for going into the underworld to search for the soul of his grandmother. The reviewer also commented that although the series had been praised in the past for being a fusion between Japanese and Western cultures, and even though Matsumoto had claimed that her biggest influence had been *The Simpsons*, that influence was completely absent from this work. Ultimately, the reviewer dismissed *Yōkaiden* as being “fake” Japanese, “like a North American *otaku*”¹⁵ trying to write an authentic Japanese story”¹⁶.

The reviewer in question cast the main blame of his perceived inadequacy of this series on Matsumoto’s natural inexperience in manga publishing since this is her first multi-volume series. Matsumoto’s manga (as is typical of OEL manga) was not serialized in a magazine prior to being bound into volumes, which of course, affects the contents of the story. Conversely, Japanese manga artists cannot depend on their readers being up to date with all the chapters of the story, and must sometimes assume that they will pick up the story at any point in time but they should still be able to understand the story and connect with the characters. This means constantly re-establishing their relationships to one another within the story. Matsumoto failed to do this by relying on the mode of publication of her manga, volumes instead of issues, and thus expecting her readers to understand the story only if they read the volumes in order. Even though she offers a recap in the beginning of volume two, the reviewer claimed that it wasn’t enough for him to fully grasp the story and enjoy it.

This comment, obviously harsh, when looked at deeply can illustrate the problem of “authenticity” that many OEL manga encounter in the face of critics and fans. It is likely that the reviewer made such a comment because, being an American manga fan himself, was likely to have been “educated” in manga thanks to the “100% authentic manga” campaign, and expected something alike to what he came to understand as “manga”. Ultimately, even though Matsumoto is of Japanese ethnicity and she is writing about Japanese folklore, according to this critic, she did not convey “authentic” ‘Japaneseness’ as imagined through early manga publishers’ established benchmark. It may be possible to say then, that what American manga fans/critics are expecting of OEL manga are manga that resemble the translations they grew up reading on.

2.3 Manga-Style in mainstream American Comics

¹² Aoki, Deb. "[2008 Best New Manga List - Top 16 New Manga Released in 2008 - Best Manga of 2008](http://manga.about.com/od/recommendedreading/tp/2008BestNewManga.htm)" [<http://manga.about.com/od/recommendedreading/tp/2008BestNewManga.htm>] (Last access 2012/04/15).

Finnegan, Erin; Katherine Dacey, Sam Kusek, Michelle Smith, Ken Haley (December 15, 2008). "[Our Favorite Manga of 2008](http://www.popcultureshock.com/manga/index.php/features/our-favorite-manga-of-2008/)". *Manga Recon*. PopCultureShock. [<http://www.popcultureshock.com/manga/index.php/features/our-favorite-manga-of-2008/>] (Last access 2012/04/15).

¹³ Santos, Carlos (December 12, 2008). "[Rosario and Clover - RIGHT TURN ONLY!!](http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/right-turn-only/2008-12-23/)". *Anime News Network* [<http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/right-turn-only/2008-12-23/>] (Last access 2012/04/15).

¹⁴ There are only two volumes published currently, with no expected date for the third one.

¹⁵ A Japanese word for someone who is a very devoted fan, which has negative connotations.

¹⁶ <http://animealmanac.com/2009/12/04/manga-review-yokaiden-vol-2/> (Last access 2012/04/14).

OEL manga, as previously explained, is a type of manga made in English by fans of anime and manga in the West, primarily in the U.S. Here, Manga is a sub-genre of books and comics, which means that OEL manga is an even smaller sub-category of manga in general. Like independent comics and graphic novels, they do not belong to the American comics mainstream, normally (at least for male readers such as Zhao) dominated by the superhero genre. There exist, however, some comics artists within the American mainstream that make use of manga-style to draw comics about superheroes, and some of them are Asian American, such as Takeshi Miyazawa, who is of Japanese descent but born and raised in Toronto, Canada. Miyazawa is the main author of *Spiderman loves Mary Jane*, a spin on the Spiderman narrative, in which the protagonist is Mary Jane Watson, Spiderman/Peter Parker's love interest. It is a series first published by Marvel Comics in 2005, which was highly popular and led to many sales. The comic is in color and does not fit within the specifications of (OEL) manga, so it would not be precise to label it as one. Rather, this can be seen as an example of "manga-style" in American comics. However, Miyazawa's page design reads like a manga page. Not only that, but the story contents are also manga-reminiscent. How exactly is this so? Can it be regarded as a hybrid of styles? A closer look at his work may clarify these questions.

Spiderman loves Mary Jane, Vol. 2, "The New Girl"

by Miyazawa Takeshi - an attempt at content and form analysis/comparison with Japanese manga.

- Page flow **[image]**: In this image, we see a double-spread¹⁷ depicting the scene where Flash, a friend of Mary Jane, is trying to convince his teammates to stop an attack on the drama club, of which Mary Jane is a member of. The writing of the scene calls for tension between Flash and his teammates, which Miyazawa has illustrated by placing Flash inside very constricted panels, echoing his internal struggle between going along or standing up against his friends. But the manga aspect of this page spread is the way panels read into each other. Miyazawa has designed both pages to read together seamlessly: on the top corner, we have Flash standing, his figure facing right. Three panels later, we have a close up of his face also facing right, which bleeds into the third panel of the next page, which is a mid-length shot of him. This is then placed next to a violent close-up of his eyes on the last panel, facing left. Thus, when reading these pages, the panels with Flash facing in opposite directions bring cohesion to the page spread as a whole, as well as allowing the eye to gaze from Flash at the top-left corner through both pages in a diagonal pattern, going through all of Flash's moods and inner feelings in the process. Double spreads that flow in similar patterns appear frequently in manga, **[image]**.

On the following page spread, we see an example of what Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*, 1993) called "moment-to-moment" frame shifts. McCloud explains in his book that this, along with aspect-to-aspect transitions abound in Japanese manga, and not so much in American superhero comics. In the first panel, Flash is pushing one of his teammates into a locker (which also uses speedlines and a visible onomatopoeic sound effect). This is followed by seven panels that although are silent, move from moment-to-moment through Flash's surrender to his team's final decision on the attack. Without any text, we are able to understand Flash's feelings and decision by following this panel flow or micro-moments. This silent transition is common in manga, which tends to favor visuals over text in regards of story flow. It is also noteworthy to point out the fire flames in the second panel as a representation of Flash's "inner" anger (his "outer" anger clearly visible on his face) and the use of sweatdrops (and complete black background) on the third panel, expressing frustration and surrender. **[images]**

¹⁷ when two inward-facing pages are designed as if they were one page.

- Manga-native visual symbols: As shown in the previous examples, Miyazawa has used speedlines on the second panel of the second page where Flash is yelling at his teammate, as a visual representation of his anger [image]. He uses them in other instances throughout the book as well. As previously explained, speedlines constitute part of the “toolbox” of manga to illustrate inner feelings visually.

He also uses sweat drops to express anxiety [image] and breath to express exasperation [image], as it is usually done in manga [image]. He also tweaks the background a little when a character is having an intense emotion known only to themselves [image], which is not only common in manga, but especially in *shōjo* manga [image].

- Word bubbles: His word bubbles fit the way English is read (horizontally and left-to-right), but they are carefully hand-drawn in a way that they complement the art of each panel they are in, instead of looking like a free-floating element carelessly placed in afterwards. OEL and Japanese manga typically regard word bubbles part of the decorative elements of the art, not just a functional object, and are usually hand-drawn [image].

- Genre: In regards to genre, although this work is part of the Spiderman franchise, the focus is on Mary Jane, and on her normal high-school girl condition. It is unusual to see comics within the superhero genre that have a woman protagonist that does not have any superpowers. She is however, related to Spiderman, but the entire story is driven through Mary Jane and her feelings towards him and towards Peter Parker, his real identity (which touches upon the issue of identity on another layer). This places this comic in the teenage romance genre [image], which is not so big in American comics but is a huge part of the industry of manga (both in Japan and the West) under the name of *shōjo*.

Furthermore, by having a more female focus, the contents also have shifted in the way they have originally told the story of Spiderman and Mary Jane in past, more male-oriented versions. In the story, Mary Jane struggles with her own identity post-breakup though altering her looks to separate herself from the “mainstream” [image] which is regarded as immature by her friends. Later on in the story she examines her attraction to Peter and Spidey though more personal and internal ways [image], and finally confronts the problem head-on, earning the respect and admiration of her peers. It encourages cooperation and community, instead of being a one-man army kind of hero.

- Publication format: *Spiderman loves Mary Jane* is not an auto-conclusive story. The book analyzed is book 2 of a series of 4 books, but the series continued up to issue #20 until the series was cancelled in 2007. It is a high-school romance story that develops over many chapters. It is very similar to Japanese *shōjo* manga in this respect. The size of the books is also very similar to Japanese *tankōbon* and are cheaply priced (\$8.99).

The story in Miyazawa’s book may not discuss the issues of identity relative to Japanese-Americans in the same manner as works by Adrian Tomine, for example. A reader who is aware of Japanese-American identity issues may very well read Miyazawa’s comic from that perspective. She or he would perhaps focus on the hybrid style as an equivalent to living experiences as an Asian-American. However, ‘Japaneseness’, seen as an issue of identity and ethnicity is present in Miyazawa’s work not as a character or in the contents/subject matter of the story, but in his choice to employ an Asian (and more specifically, a Japanese) drawing style and a narrative twist (female) to create a comic that is different from yet posited in the American comics mainstream. This may be

in fact another method of “claiming America”, in addition to those which Zhou suggests in this thesis.

2.4 ‘Japaneseness’ as part of the identity of OEL manga artists

In an interview, Yukari Shiina¹⁸, agent of OEL manga artists in Japan who has represented Miyazawa before, clarified how being Japanese has been somewhat of an advantage to Miyazawa, but not as much as it might be expected. Takeshi learned Japanese thanks to his father, who worked for Toyota and would take business trips to Japan and bring him back issues of *Doraemon* (Fujio Fujiko) and *Asari-chan* (Muroyama Mayumi). He also swapped manga at his Japanese Saturday school, and thus grew up reading *Dragon Ball* (Toriyama Akira), *Dokaben* (Mizushima Shinji) and *Buddha* (Tezuka Osamu) in their original language. He believes his parents let him read so much manga because it would improve his Japanese language skills, although he is not sure if they liked the fact that it also inspired him down the career path of manga making¹⁹.

Being exposed so early to Japanese manga in its original form gave Takeshi an advantage over his fellow OEL manga colleagues in that he started to create manga at a younger age and developed his drawing skills a little earlier than the others. But it did not predict a future in the world of manga for Takeshi. Instead, he became part of the work force of Marvel Comics and entered the American comics mainstream, where he was highly successful. However, he felt the need to “go back to the roots” (perhaps from both personal and professional standpoints) and he moved to Japan in 2007 and has been drawing “Lost Planet”, a sci-fi manga for *Dengeki Comics* since 2011. But he is having many difficulties getting his manga to sell well in Japan, and one reason Shiina offers is related to his style: Takeshi (born in 1979, before manga started to be published in North America) grew up with more access to manga than non-Asian kids in his surroundings. Nonetheless, he also grew up with the same TV shows and music and other popular cultural media. This also means that he had access to the same (limited) imported Japanese manga titles, which at the time (1986-1997) were being selected and altered to cater to American comics readers. These early imported manga titles were often already old in Japan, and having proven their popularity there, were thus exported to reap sales overseas. Takeshi’s main difficulty in selling in Japan is that his Japanese readers regard his style as being “old”, “out of fashion”, more resembling “classic” manga (it is often cited as having influence from Otomo’s *Akira*, for example), which is not a judgement on the prowess of his technique but rather on the issue that it does not “fit” the current fashion of Japanese mainstream manga scene.

In contradistinction is the case of Felipe Smith, a Jamaican-Argentine artist who was raised in the United States. He also makes OEL manga and like Takeshi, moved to Japan in the same year to debut as a manga artist there. He was also represented by Shiina, who commented on how proficient Smith was in his speaking abilities, having no trouble at all in communicating with his editors in Japanese. He also had the advantage of having a more “up to date” and eclectic style than Miyazawa, giving his manga a fresh, original look. Felipe had also translated part of his manga into Japanese by himself, proving his command of the idioms and slang often used in manga, and these were up to date as well.

The difficulty in adapting to the Japanese manga mainstream for Felipe came in regards to working pace. By shifting from working in OEL manga to mainstream Japanese manga, he could no longer

¹⁸ Personal interview in Tokyo on March 28th, 2012. Referenced through audio recording.

¹⁹ As stated in Shiina’s artist biographies in the leaflet of the OEL manga exhibition: “Is this Manga Too? Manga artists active in North America” at the Kyoto International Manga Museum, January 5 - February 5, 2012 [http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/event/exh/manga_style_2011eng.php] (Last accessed 2012/04/20)

take as much time as he wanted to develop story, characters and plot. Also, he was no longer doing it alone. His editors had as much say (if not more) in the important details of his story and were the final decision makers, not him. So the method of making manga had changed drastically and Felipe was some difficulty adapting to the incredibly fast pace of putting out full chapters weekly, instead of working on a book for months and publishing once or twice a year. While Takeshi had already accustomed himself to a mainstream environment already while at Marvel, Felipe hadn't, and this was a major factor in his struggle and eventual decision to return home in March of 2012. When asked if Felipe's ethnicity (he is half-black) presented any obstacle for him in regards to publishing in Japan, Shiina explained that it did not, and that his difficulties at work had nothing to do with how he looked.

What can be expected of Asian Americans in the world of comics, graphic novels and manga? How is how Asian identity is being addressed in these graphic narratives? An example of the direction the newer generation of Asian American OEL manga artists is the work of *dōjin* (fan) manga, "Yuumei"²⁰. Her real name is Wenqing Yan and she is of Chinese origin. She was born and raised in China but later moved with her parents to the U.S when she was still very young. Currently she is a student at University of California at Berkley, majoring in Art but with a focus in environmentalism and cyber activism. It is interesting to note that despite being Chinese and writing stories about China, she has chosen to express herself visually using a Japanese drawing style. An example of this is her digital comic titled *Knite*, a combination of the words "kite" and "night". The story is based on the relationship between Sen, leader of a secret group of people who fly kites over the Beijing night sky and Kai, the son of a politician. Yuumei has chosen to express "Asianness" through content (the story is set in China and touches upon differences in social classes) and style (her drawing style is recognizable Japanese, including her use of color, which is influenced by typical manga illustration techniques) [image]. However, she points out on her website that her screen name is not Japanese ("yuumei" can be translated to "famous" in Japanese) but is actually Mandarin for "light and darkness"(kanji). She writes in the introduction of her story, that it is dedicated to her land of birth, China²¹. She is also experimenting with format: *Knite* is drawn digitally and published as a flash comic, which includes animations, instead of the traditional (digitalized) static manga page.

3. 'Japaneseness' and 'Asianness' through the Legend of the Monkey King: *Dragon Ball* and *American Born Chinese*, an attempt of comparison between manga and an independent Asian American graphic narrative.

Dragon Ball (Toriyama Akira) is an example of what that is considered a classic and 'proper' manga both in the West and in Japan, and a good example of the 'Japaneseness' that was so eagerly accepted in the West. It tells the tale of Son Goku: a young boy raised in the middle of nowhere by an old man, who has super strength and special powers and is soon thrown into a world of adventures, mythical quests and battles with equally impressive opponents. It is based on the ancient Chinese tale of the Monkey King, on which *American Born Chinese* (Gene Luen Yang) is also based. It is clear that formalist differences will be apparent between these two works as they are representative of very distinct comics styles. But how does the "Asian-American" or "Japanese" aspect of the work (or authors) become visible through their use of style, contents and form? Through a comparison of these works that share the same premise, it may be possible to see how issues of identity are represented by Asian-American graphic novels and Japanese manga.

²⁰ Her website is <http://yuumei.deviantart.com/> where she uploads all her illustrations, manga and writings.

²¹ <http://yuumei.deviantart.com/art/Knite-Chapter-1-151132545> (Last access 2012/04/20)

Style and Form

- Panel layout and page “flow”: *American Born Chinese* may look like a self-contained book, but it actually started out as a webcomic series²². When the series was made into a graphic novel, Yang re-edited the panels to fit into a book format, but as previously explained, panel layout and story flow depend greatly on the publication method the story is first conceived for. This shift from digital to press format is apparent in the shape of the panels: they are all the same size and in successions of four panels per page. This, of course, affects the design of the pages (which contain 3-4 panels only and there are no double-spreads), and the flow of the story [image] when presented in print form.

- Signature style: Yang’s drawing style does not lean on “personal traces”, meaning he relies heavily on digitalized lines and color. Since this story was initially idealized for digital publication, it makes sense to have an artistic style that is very clean and almost “generic”, though this makes it difficult to distinguish from other webcomics that likewise rely on the digital tools of graphic software [image]. This makes the “personal tone” of Yang’s drawing style be difficult to observe. Toriyama’s style has often been considered as very “clean” as well, but since he was not drawing for an online medium, he was dependent upon on print tools to convey his personal style faithfully. This meant use of physical tools of manga-making previously mentioned (paper, screentone, ink) as well as a personalized interpretation of manga symbols (speedlines, sweatdrops, SD characters, etc.) [image]. By having a limited range due to manga’s monochromatic nature, Toriyama relies on his personalized linework to make his work distinguishable from other manga artists. This is a common stance taken by mainstream manga artists in Japan, where the field is crowded and one must have some personal mark to be identifiable by fans [image].

- Manga-specific symbols: Yang has made use of stylized backgrounds to convey extreme emotions [image], a tool widely used in Japanese and OEL manga.

- Storytelling/Writing: It is important to remember that contents of the story are greatly influenced by the way a comic or manga is published. As a typical mainstream manga, *Dragon Ball* was first serialized in a weekly magazine before being put into volumes. The story plot and twists in it were dictated by the popularity fluctuations of the series. Characters or events were introduced to “spice things up”, others “brought back to life” because the readers requested it so. These decisions, made by author, editors and even readers, shaped the overall product over a long period of time (*Dragon Ball* ran in serialization for close to 10 years). Yang’s *American Born Chinese* is largely a one-man effort and its content may have deviated little, if at all, from its original intention when subjected to outside influences²³, which is the typical stance of American graphic novel writing. Also, it is important to note that Yang makes comics that don’t belong to the American mainstream, therefore they have a smaller publication range whereas Toriyama’s *Dragon Ball* is considered part of the canon of mainstream manga in Japan.

Characters

²² As stated on its amazon.com page [<http://www.amazon.com/American-Born-Chinese-Gene-Luen/dp/product-description/1596431520>] (Last accessed 2012/04/22)

²³ which in Nina Matsumoto’s case is what has been causing the criticism of her manga series, for falling back on to American graphic novel writing conventions although it is trying to sell as “manga”.

In regards to protagonists, Yang has separated the human and the animal sides of the Monkey King, into three separate characters: the Monkey King of Flower-Fruit Mountain as the animal side and Jin/Danny as the human sides **[image]**, where as Toriyama integrated the identity of the Monkey King into the same character: Son Goku when he is human and the animalistic Giant Monkey form he takes on whenever he looks at a full moon. However, Goku does not remember anything he does while under the monkey phase, suggesting a mental separation of identity rather than a physical one like in Yang's comic **[image]**.

As for the rest of the characters, in *Dragon Ball*, as in *American Born Chinese*, there is a multi-ethnic cast (most characters aren't even human) and their differences are heavily stressed. In *American Born Chinese*, these differences are stressed in the form of physical difference which is then ridiculed and criticized, pushing the characters to question, reject and transform their identify via physical alterations: the Monkey King grows taller to resemble a human being (he also starts wearing shoes) and Jin sheds his "Asianness" and transforms into Danny, a caucasian-looking boy. Visually, Yang stressed this point not just by enlarging or transforming the physical forms of the characters, such as stature, hair style, clothes, etc., but also through his use of color: Jin's skin changes from having a yellowish tone to a more pinkish tone when he transforms into Danny.

Conversely, in *Dragon Ball*, although there are visual differences between characters **[image]**, these physical differences do not play a very relative part in the story. Rather, the difference stressed between characters in the manga is focused on their levels of strength. Son Goku is the star of the story because he is the strongest, not because he is the Monkey King. There is discrimination between characters and there is ridicule as well, but judgment is based on their abilities and power, and not so much on their looks. Since the focus of difference is placed on an internal quality rather than on an external one, color is not very necessary to visualize this difference, leaving Toriyama to rely mainly on storytelling to point out character difference.

That is not to say that there are no mentions of physical difference in *Dragon Ball*. For example, in the story it is well known that Goku is an alien, not even human, and that he had a monkey tail as a child **[image]**. He was visually different from his peers. However, his tail got cut off after one of his Giant Monkey phases to avoid him transforming again and harming people. When he leaves the isolation of his mountain he enters a very multi-ethnic society, but doesn't change physically (or psychologically) to conform to it, with the exception of the removal of his tail (which was not so much not for personal gain but for the safety of others). It does not mean he is instantly accepted into society. He also has to fight for his place in it, but his struggle is about asserting his power precisely through his difference. With regards to gender difference, one of his closest friends, Bulma **[image]**, is not excluded from going on adventures with Goku on her looks (she looks to be a different ethnicity than Goku) or on being a woman, but actually is the one that pushes Goku to go on the "journey to the West" in the first place and the leader of that expedition. In some rare instances of the story, she doesn't participate in a fight because she simply isn't strong enough, but the cast of *Dragon Ball* is full of female characters who are and fight on par with the male characters **[image]**.

Contents

Both stories place great importance on friendship. Jin and Wei-Chen became close friends, despite Jin initially rejecting Wei-Chen for his too-apparent "Asianness". In the story, both characters end up changing the way they look as a response to bullying. Both also find ways to insert themselves into mainstream society as a way to rebel: against responsibilities (Wei-Chen) and against stereotypes of "Asian" (Jin), which may be able to be proven wrong if one seamlessly integrates

into the mainstream. The two of them, along with Suzy Nakamura, constitute a small but close-knit group of friends who share a similar cultural background. However, neither of them feels very integrated and operate on very individualistic agendas. Their friendship is founded upon their feelings as outcasts, thrown together by circumstance (being the only Asians in the class, ostracized by all the others). They became friends because they had no other choice, which does not make for a solid base for deeper connections. Nonetheless, one does develop between Suzy and Wei-Chen when they start dating and between Wei-Chen and Jin (which is why they can go back to being friends later).

The portrayal of friendship is also stressed heavily in *Dragon Ball*, also using the theme of rejection and abuse, but the story does not focus on the feelings of isolation of the characters. Rather, the stress is on their success at overcoming the barriers that obstaculize their integration into a community. An interesting point of *Dragon Ball* is that this community is not exclusive to only friends and family, but to rivals and outright enemies as well, and storylines of rival-turned-ally are used frequently. An example that is very similar to the story of Jin and Wei-Chen is that of Goku and his best friend, Krillin. Goku and Krillin met as children when both studied under the same martial arts teacher. Krillin initially disliked Goku for his “strangeness” and rejected him. He also played a lot of pranks on Goku, and would insult him constantly [image]. But Goku was not the least concerned with Krillin’s dislike of him and actually considered Krillin his best friend (which made Krillin tease Goku of being mentally retarded). As Goku grew stronger and his power increased, Krillin rejected him less and came to admire him. He understood how wrong he had been to mistreat Goku and tried to make amends with him. Goku, who could have turned him down based on years of mistreatment, instead completely accepted Krillin as if nothing had ever happened. Later on in the story, during a battle, Krillin is murdered in front of Goku’s eyes, which enrage him to such heights he turns into a “Super-Saiyan” (an evolved form that signifies having reached a transcendent level of power) [image]. Soon after, he manages to collect the Dragon Balls which summon a dragon that can grant any one wish to he/she who summons him. Even though he had just become the strongest fighter in the universe and could wish for anything, Goku uses his one and only wish to wish for Krillin to be brought back to life.

Krillin came to become part of Goku’s circle of friends, in which no fighter ever fought alone (in the story, Goku always fights alongside his friends, unless he is somehow separated from them). Also, common goals (saving the Earth) were placed above individual ones: at a certain point in the story, Goku dies in battle. Consequently, his friends gather the Dragon Balls again to wish him back to life, but Goku declines saying his strength is needed more in the afterlife/heaven than on Earth, and that they, the team, can protect it in his stead. The team manages to keep Earth safe while Goku is “away” but only through working together. Eventually he comes back, but again, joins his team in order to fight instead of doing it by himself (even though he was immensely stronger than any of them at this point). This is not to say that characters never had any personal aspirations (they all wanted to become as strong or stronger than Goku) but these were usually put at the service of a higher ideal. Characters that were highly individualistic (wanted all the power for themselves) were usually portrayed as evil. The point that Toriyama is trying to make is that *Dragon Ball* is a story about strength, but that strength is not always about physicality. Moral integrity and love for one’s friends and family is what truly makes the strongest warrior of them all.

American Born Chinese ends with Danny accepting and embracing his “Asianness” and unifying with the tale of the Monkey King that served as an allegory to his identity struggle and also as a moral lesson. However, Yang’s interpretation of the story differs greatly from Toriyama’s in this moralistic aspect. Where as Yang sees the legend of the Monkey King as a quest of acceptance and integration into a (certain) society, Toriyama is interpreting the legend as a moral battle of good vs. evil, where the Asian “odor” of the story is lacking and the ethnicity of the characters is de-exoticized to bring attention to their deeds and integrity.

Readership

Yang's *American Born Chinese* has won several very prestigious awards, namely the Michael L. Printz Award and the Eisner Award, both in 2007, and has become a title acclaimed by academic circles and regarded as a mature, though-provoking deep narrative. These praises have lifted Yang's book to a higher status, well-placed amongst literary discourse and analysis alongside works like Marjane Sartrapi's *Persepolis* and Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. Together, these works discuss identity in a way that Hillary Chute would describe as a refusal to "mitigate trauma; in fact, they demonstrate how its visual retracing is enabling, ethical and productive," refusing "to show it [traumatic history] through the lens of unspeakability or invisibility, instead registering its difficulty through inventive (and various) textual practice" (Chiu, 2008: 112). Since the awarding of the Pulitzer prize to Spiegelman's *Maus*, graphic novels have stepped away from the rest of the comic book have been regarded as "proper" works of art and literature, their status lifted from simple cheap entertainment, demanding more sophisticated attention. They are normally considered more important than commercial comics, and have more approval by parents and school systems. This might entail that their readership is not as wide as say, superhero comics, but it consists of a more intellectual community of fans than those who look to comic books for simple and easy entertainment. But its precisely this narrowness that then impedes some of these narratives to reach audiences and communities outside of their own. *American Born Chinese* is a very strong narrative about the issue of identity for Asian Americans and is this specificity what makes it so hard for non-Asian Americans to connect with this story. But not only non-Asian Americans, but those who do not share the same collective cultural consciousness (American) as Yang does and therefore cannot understand the cultural references in the book. How then, did *Dragon Ball*, a graphic narrative so 'Asian', full of martial arts references, based upon a Chinese folk legend, drawn in a style and reading direction so different from any other comic style from the West, manage to cross cultural barriers and appeal to a global audience? And by global, I mean not just geographically, but socio-economically as well, as *Dragon Ball* has been acclaimed by the mainstream and read by the rich and poor alike of many countries. It is important to note that when *Dragon Ball* was being serialized in Japan (1984-1995), its producers had only the Japanese consumer in mind and had no way of knowing how massive its overseas reception would be some years later. Therefore, the product that overseas fans consumed was identical to the one created for Japanese readers²⁴.

The answer may lie precisely in the issue of 'Japaneseness' or 'Asianness' that both works touch upon, but in very different ways. While, *American Born Chinese* is deeply concerned with the problem of 'Asianness' and its power to ostracize in American society, *Dragon Ball* shifts the concern outwards. *Dragon Ball* is a narrative that is 'Japanese' or 'Asian' in the sense that it has martial arts fighters and tournaments, characters with Japanese names, it's based on a Chinese tale and it's drawn for a Japanese audience in a Japanese medium. But it is not 'Japanese' or 'Asian' in the sense that this is not what drives the story, but the universal theme of love and camaraderie, the struggle to overcome one's obstacles and reach one's goals in life; love and respect for one's friends and family and for the Earth. These are ideals and emotions that any person from any background can relate to. It was this what appealed most to fans all over the world, despite language, cultural, economical and even gender differences (*Dragon Ball* has more female fans overseas than within Japan). The message of *Dragon Ball* unites despite differences, and *American Born Chinese* reminds of difference, which could be the reason behind their highly different readerships.

²⁴ as opposed to *Naruto*, which benefiting from *Dragon Ball*'s success in the West, used the popularity of martial arts in the West intentionally throughout the conceptualization and development of the manga in order to reap popularity from overseas markets.

Would the issue of 'Asianness' in Yang's *American Born Chinese* be received differently and by different audiences if his comic was a manga? Would his work in manga form stress his point on Asian American identity, or weaken it? How would the grammar of manga function to tell this tale? In an attempt to answer these questions, I have re-drawn 8 pages from *American Born Chinese* in Manga style.

Appendix: my 8-page "manga" on *American Born Chinese*

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