Mecha, Meka: American, Japanese, or what? Debunking Cultural Imperialism

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ABSTRACT

Although Japan's mass culture has long prevailed in many parts of Asia, little has been said about why anime appeals to Asians. Japanese animation, or 'anime', is making global landmarks with its steady growth into the mainstream, despite its 'cult favourite' origins. While anime's popularity is marked by an abundance of literature that provides readers with a deeper understanding of Japanese animation, many of these seem authored by American researchers. This paper aims to fill this lacuna by putting forward the hypothesis that 'cultural proximity' is the main reason for much of anime's popularity among Asian viewers. It situates the localisation of anime in the context of global flows and audience reception studies, before undertaking a semiotic analysis of three anime programmes: *Saiyuki Reload Gunlock*, *Otogizoushi* and *Gankutsuou*. The study finds that anime does not propagate homogeneity; rather it depicts a hybrid of Asian cultural icons, values and practices, to better appeal to diverse Asian consumers.

Keywords: ***Japanese animation, Malaysia, audience reception, cultural icon, cultural imperialism***

INTRODUCTION

Like most people living in a media-saturated environment, we grew up in Malaysia on a stable diet of children's education programmes and animated cartoons. But unlike some of our more media savvy peers, we took for granted that most of the animated features we watched during our younger days originated from the United States of America, when in fact, they were Japan-produced animations. For instance, we once thought that *Transformers* came from America, in view that all the 'mecha' characters featured on screen spoke with distinctively American accents. On the other hand, having watched *Slam Dunk* and *Dragonball* in Cantonese, led us to believe that both types of animated programmes came from Hong Kong. The lack of Japanese-speaking characters played a huge part in 'masking' the origins of

such cartoons, and with many anime drawn in non-conventional Japanese settings, it was even easier to assume that the origins of these animated programmes were dependant on the language spoken by the characters. While there were exceptions to these, such as *Doraemon* which clearly looked Japanese, due to the inclusion of *tatami* mats and various Japanese desserts, because *Doraemon* was broadcast with Malay-speaking characters, it never occurred to either of us Malaysians to question the origins of *Doraemon* as being anything but from the Malay archipelago.

Nevertheless, we learnt from two focus group interviews that our personal experiences were not unique. Participants for our study were chosen based on their preference for anime, and the two focus groups of six participants each consisted of university and high school students, all of whom belonged to the Malaysian Chinese community, studying full-time in Melbourne. We discovered that many of our interviewees shared the same (mis) conception about anime, and only after anime's appearance became more prevalent did they realise that most, if not all, of the animated features they consumed in their younger years originated from Japan. The following responses highlight this point:

Jeff : Is *Transformers* anime?
Mod : Yes.
Henry : I thought it was an American production.
Mod : That is really interesting. Why do you say so?
Jeff : Eh… they pirated it.
Henry : I always think [*sic*] it was American.
[…]
Henry : I think it's because the voices are so American.
Louis : It's all American voices.
[…]
Jeff : All these mecha, mecha, is, are Japanese.
Louis : *Voltron*, *Transformers*…
Henry : But *Transformers* only the original one was Japanese right? Everything after that was…
Mod : It's still Japanese.
[…]
Henry : But don't they, don't they have dinosaur, *Transformers*…
Jeff : Yeah.
Henry : All these were Japanese.
Jeff : Mmm.
Henry : I always thought they were American.
Louis : Yeah.

On that note, it does seem that anime has found little difficulty in appearing 'American', through the usage of American-sounding voice dubs. This focused interview response is a relevant starting point to springboard questions about cultural globalisation and issues regarding localism. As we have come to realise, despite anime's indisputable Japanese origins, it remains at a nexus point in global culture, whereby its position has allowed it to inhabit an amorphous new media message that crosses and even intermingles national boundaries (Napier 2001: 22-

23). Though we are still far from experiencing McLuhan's (1964, 1967) version of a 'global village', the nature of globalisation has nevertheless attributed to global movements of cultures and products. The compression of time-space entities, as well as the advent of new media technologies has further accelerated the mobility of anime, leading to a more instantaneous consumption of anime. Paradoxically then, in a world where American domination of mass culture is often taken for granted and local culture is frequently seen as either at odds with or about to be subsumed into hegemonic globalism, Napier (2001: 9) asserts that anime is a relevant field of study as it offers insights into wider issues of the relationship between global and local cultures.

Indeed, Japan's mass culture has long had a dominant presence in South and Southeast Asia, and anime is no exception. One article featured in *Asiaweek* for instance, claims that 'Japan is Top of the Pops' in Asia, in view of the cultural affinity between Asian consumers and Japanese products (Tesoro 1996). As Shiraishi (1997) argues, despite the undisputable importance of Hollywood in the production of image-based culture products, contemporary Asian popular culture is not solely Western, in view that Japanese values actually resonate well within many Asian societies. To illustrate her hypothesis, Shiraishi (1997: 264-8) presents her readers with several case studies of anime's popularity in various parts of Asia, including a thorough discussion of *Doraemon*'s popularity in Indonesia and Taiwan, as well as citing *Astro Boy* as the first foreign animated television series to run in China. Shiraisihi's article demonstrates that the textual appeal of Japanese television programmes to Asian audiences is one of the significant factors in the prevalence of Japanese television programmes in Asian markets, and as a result, anime has little problems finding acceptance in many parts of Asia. Animax, the world's first-ever 24-hour channel dedicated to Japanese animation, now broadcasts into many parts of Asia, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Asia and Southeast Asia (Animax 2005). In Malaysia, anime is available on every free-to-air network, and can be easily acquired in many of the nation's VHS/DVD shops, such as *AnimeTech*, *Speedy* and *Tower Records*.

While anime's presence in Asia is not a recent phenomenon, and indeed, it can be argued that Japan's mass culture has long been rooted in Asia, in recent years anime is also slowly finding an appreciative audience in the West. Beginning with the release of Ootomo Katsushiro's hugely popular animation film *Akira* (1988), the quality and attraction of "Japanimation" is gradually being acknowledged by the American market (Iwabuchi 2002: 30). In November 1995, the animated film *The Ghost in the Shell* was shown simultaneously in Japan, America and Great Britain, while its video sales reached number one on the American *Billboard* video charts (Reesman 2002). A *Los Angeles Times* report even cited the export value of Japanese animation and comics to the American market amounting to $75 million in 1996 (Manabe in Iwabuchi 2002: 30). More recently however, the *Pokémon* phenomenon has taken America and the rest of the world by storm. Though it came to life as a piece of software to be played on Nintendo's Game Boy, *Pokémon* quickly diversified into a comic book, a television show, a movie, trading cards, stickers, small toys and other ancillary products such as backpacks and T-shirts (Tobin 2004: 1). And like the situation in Asia, there appears a linear growth of networks and cable channels dedicated to Japanese animation, further signifying that anime has removed itself

from its former 'cult' status, into the mainstream. As Dong (2005) observes, when the Cartoon Network first started showing anime, many years ago, variety was scant and few, but flash forward to now and the differences are phenomenal.

DEBUNKING AMERICANISATION

Katsuna and Maret (2004: 82) assert that the phenomenal popularity of *Pokémon* provides media researchers with the opportunity to examine issues of globalisation and localisation from a different point of view, outside of the usual concerns about Americanisation. Indeed, Iwabuchi (2004) argues that *Pokémon* was rid of some of its "cultural odour" as part of its "glocalisation" for markets in the East and the West. Both these studies suggest that efforts to localise seem more structural, as Nintendo appears to have taken a pro-active approach in re-producing the original Japanese *Pokémon* animation, so that the re-produced version easily blends in with the cultural, societal and political values of the average American. Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2003: 380) argue that the global success of *Pokémon* is partly a result of its ability to 'speak' to shared aspects of childhood experience, and of the ease with which *Pokémon* can be integrated within the routines of children's everyday lives. While the authors clearly demonstrate the ways in which *Pokémon* is able to appeal to the different levels of complexity that follow the different age groups, as well as the fragmentation of interests between girls and boys, their argument for cultural proximity among *Pokémon*'s young fans is less convincing. Nevertheless, their study highlights the importance of glocalisation, which they concede, has manifested the global success of *Pokémon*.

While the abovementioned looked specifically at one type of anime programme, other works on anime tend to provide what Levi (1996: ix) refers to as "a shameless attempt to introduce Americans to the world of Japanese animation", through discussing a wider variety of titles. In *Samurai from Outer Space* (1996), Levi provides a descriptive account of the different genres commonly found in America, to illustrate that many of anime's symbols and stories are influenced by religious beliefs such as Shinto and Buddhism, as well as by Japanese art. Similarly, McCarthy's *The Anime! Movie Guide* (1996) introduces readers to a wide range of anime titles produced between the years 1983 and 1996, while *The Anime Encyclopedia* (2001), co-authored with Clements, presents subjective synopses of the different types of anime produced between the years 1917 and 2000. Although both guides provide an exhaustive list of English-language anime releases and some anime currently available on Japanese video, McCarthy (1996: 6) concedes that the list remains incomplete, due to insufficient time for additional research. In *Hayao Miyazaki* (1999) however, McCarthy's focus is more specific, as she discusses the acclaimed animator's numerous works, with a focus on storyline synopsis and character information. Other books situated in the same category as the titles mentioned include Poitras' *The Anime Companion* (1999) and *Anime Essentials* (2001), both of which seek to identify some of the Japanese things, people and places that consumers may come across in anime. Essentially, this list of readings serves as important 'guide books' into the realm of anime, as they seek to demystify the 'strangeness', or rather, the 'Japaneseness' of anime through a discussion on the nation-state's cultural details and traditional aspects.

Outside the list of anime guide books, Napier's *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke* (2001), guides readers through three of anime's more popular themes: mecha-technology, gender and historical types of contemporary Japanese animation. Through utilising a variety of methods such as questionnaires, interviews and personal correspondence, her research develops a profile of the anime fan, attempting to discover what draws Americans and other Westerners to the world of anime, and what relation their interest in anime have with Japan (Napier 2001: 241). However, Napier delimits her research to the intellectual and aesthetic aspects of anime, saying little about the cultural values of anime that might resonate with American viewers.

Another recent publication on anime is Patten's *Watching Anime, Reading Manga* (2004), which is a collection of essays and reviews spanning 25 years of Patten's career. Patten divides his work into five different themes, including an introduction to the anime fandom, the business of anime, biographies of certain anime artists, Japanese culture in anime, and the final section is devoted to some of the more popular anime titles that have hit America since 1980. Here, Patten demonstrates the growth of anime in America and draws the reader further into the contemporary scene, affording a deeper understanding of the changes in consumer behaviour, albeit a very American-centric one.

A search for studies that discuss anime consumption in Asia yielded little results, an exception being Cooper-Chen's (1999) article 'An Animated Imbalance', which looks at some of the gender issues in relation to Japanese anime, as well as the impact popular heroines, such as *Sailor Moon* and *Chibi Maruko-chan*, have on female Asian children. Her study found that boys' animation have a tendency to dominate the programmes available (Cooper-Chen 1999: 304). Another article on anime in Asia is Shiraishi's (1997) piece on *Doraemon*, mentioned earlier. Through a detail analysis of *Doraemon*'s story development and its many characters, Shiraishi highlights the textual appeals of Japan's most popular post-war character in many parts of Asia such as Hong Kong, China, Southeast Asia, including Latin America and the Middle East. A third article somewhat relevant to this area of study is Ng's (2002), which identifies the impact of Japanese comics ('manga') and animation in Asia. Ng (2002: 1-3) argues that most Asian comic and animation artists, as well as Asian popular culture and the entertainment industry, are strongly influenced by Japanese comic and animation. He offers case studies of the different Asian countries that share the Japanese style of drawing, as well as the common practice of Hong Kong directors turning Japanese 'manga' into live-action movies (Ng 2002: 3), some of which include *City Hunter*, *GTO*, *Prince Peacock* and *Initial D*.

ANIME: A NEW UNDERSTANDING

As we have seen, anime has come a long way since its stigma as a 'cult' favourite, and considering its steady growth over the last several years into the mainstream, it is almost pivotal that we pay close attention to the new landmarks that are being made. While the works reviewed here provide a deeper understanding of Japanese animation, there remain areas that can be further explored for a more rounded understanding of anime. For instance, much of the current scholarship available on anime is written for Americans, and by American authors, with little academic

attention devoted to the consumption of anime in Asia. Although Japan's mass culture has long prevailed in many parts of Asia, too little has been said about why anime appeals to Asians. Furthermore, while authors like Levi (1996) and McCarthy (1996, 1999) present potential anime viewers with a large catalogue of anime titles through episode reviews and synopses, their lists remain limited to English releases available in America, and to anime released before 2001. An insight into the various titles available in Asia, particularly some of the more recent and popular ones, can help media researchers achieve a better understanding of the textual appeals of anime that interest Asian consumers.

A second limitation in this field of study is the lack of theoretical framework that situates and explains anime's popularity among consumers. Although Napier (2001) has included a preliminary study on audience reception in her book, she tends to approach the subject of anime as single whole, and provides no key examples of anime titles that might otherwise inform her readers about the semiological details of anime most attractive to American audiences. By contrast, the *Pokémon* researchers, such as Allison (2004) and Iwabuchi (2004), look at the issue of localisation and translation from a structural point of view, without considering the audience's motivation that has led to *Pokémon*'s success. While Lemish and Bloch (2004) and Brougére (2004) approached the *Pokémon* phenomenon in Israel and France respectively, the situation in Asia remains unrecorded. Thus, despite the book's claims that *Pikachu* has travelled the globe, how Asian fans appropriate and consume this type of anime remains little known.

Following these two limitations, this paper aims to fill in the vacuum by contributing a semiotic reading of some of the anime programmes currently available in Asia. In an expansion of the preliminary interviews conducted earlier, this paper employs semiotic analysis on several examples of anime programmes currently broadcast in different parts of Asia, to better identify to what extent the values and practices in anime resonate among Asian consumers. It situates Asia's preference for anime based on the hypothesis of 'cultural proximity', following the claim by Tesoro (1996) that many Asians are increasingly choosing anime over Disney cartoons. Again, our own preliminary study bears out this claim, as one of our interviewees, Jeff, expressed his irritation over the "corniness" of Disney production, while another interviewee, Louis, complained that some of Disney's work "had no plot". Below, Adam's opinion, to an extent, helps sum up our hypothesis that anime's popularity is due to its cultural proximity to Asia.

Adam : Erm, Japanese anime tends to have, uhm… like they use reference, throughout in real life, and yeah, they use reference so you have some reality to it, whereas Disney is just totally pure fantasy animation.

[…]

Adam : Some, most people won't realise, [anime] really reference a lot to (), but erm, after a while you watch often enough, you can tell that it actually has pretty much a lot of reference, to real life.

RE-VISITING CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Is 'global culture' simply another name for 'American culture'? The media and cultural imperialism thesis argues that the one-way flow of media products and services from the advanced industrial countries to the less advanced nations undermine their existing cultures, morals and values, and its central argument points to the dominant dissemination of Western culture via the mass media. One of the most consistent proponents of this view is the theorist Herbert Schiller (1970, 1976) who pressed the case that transnational mass media corporations provide the ideological support for a capitalist world system. Schiller (1970: 79-93) eluded capitalist culture with American culture, following America's principal role as a major exporter (and small importer) of movies, popular music, television programmes, news, books, magazines, advertisements, and associated lifestyles and values. Considering the economic success of American capitalism, the political-economic power of these transnationals and their global reach is allegedly influential in determining the ethos and values of 'global culture', which in turn, overrides indigenous cultures through imposing an American way of life on 'local' productions.

This political-economy approach to cultural hegemony in favour of 'Americanism' remains a strong strand in much of the analytical literature on international media systems. As Croteau and Haynes (2000: 346) observe, a supposed conflict of traditional values and the erosion of local culture follows the close ties between ownership and media content, with much of the latter embedded with the values and images of Western society. Herman and McChesney (1997: 35) argue that the accelerating concentration and integration of the ownership and control of global media systems in the hands of a few main transnational corporate players has resulted in a dominant influence that extends not only within the economic and political spheres, but also basic assumptions and even modes of thought. The cultural imperialism thesis therefore claims that the economic and cultural power of the media, and the cultural artefacts of America and other dominant western powers, have allowed them to dominate or unduly influence and put into a dependency relationship the media and cultures of less economically advanced countries (Herman and McChesney 1997: 152).

Since Herman and McChesney's book was published, greater and more powerful mergers between media transnationals have emerged, most notably the merger between Time Warner and America Online on January 10, 2000, which has been cited as "the most expensive marriage ceremony in history" (Bagdikian 2004: 30). Tomlinson (1999) concedes that the claim for a single hegemonic 'homogenised' global culture continues to constitute an important and widely used critical perspective even to the present day, based on several irrefutable empirical observations and arguments. One of the key debates highlighted by Tomlinson (1999: 83) in support of the cultural imperialism thesis is the ubiquity of Western (American) cultural goods, many of which are global brands and mass-cultural icons now increasingly synonymous with Western cultural hegemony. He argues that there is a wealth of evidence that Western cultural practises and tastes are becoming global ones, such as clothing, food, music, film and television (Tomlinson 1999: 83). As the cultural imperialism thesis draws attention to the locus of control of lived experience and underscores distanced influences on our everyday lives, the convergence and the standardisation of cultural goods around the world serve as

a pointed reminder on the possible negative effects that our interaction with these goods may bring.

Tomlinson's argument gained support from other writers who conceded to the on-going issue of media and cultural imperialism. Giddens (2002: 15) for instance, argues that cultural homogenisation follows the fact that American names like McDonald's, Coca-cola and CNN, are among the world's most visible cultural expressions of globalisation. Tunstall (1997) on the other hand, draws a linear line linking Anglo-American media with imperialism, and by declaring that "the media are American", he argues that a non-American way out of the media box is difficult, given that the only way out of experiencing an American dominant hegemony is to construct a new box. Holton (1998: 166) also points out that the Americanisation thesis is being further strengthened by the visible capitalist control of various forms of mass media, such as the manufacture and transmission of culture, including satellite systems, information technology manufacture, news agencias, the advertising industry, television programme production and export, and the film industry. With much of the so-termed 'global' mass culture being largely American, the West (or more specifically North America) is often recognised as taking a leading role in many recent phases of globalisation. As Storey (2003: 153) cynically notes, following the cultural imperialism thesis, the world is supposedly being slowly reduced to an American 'global village'.

As the debates in favour of the cultural imperialism thesis have shown, the emergent consensus amongst observers is that globalisation evokes an unrelenting and all-absorbing, linear process of cultural homogenisation, in which Western values and beliefs are supposedly implanted unilaterally onto non-Western audiences through the mass media. While we do not deny the pervasive influx of global images into our everyday worlds, as media researchers it is also necessary to take into account the complicated relationship between global media and local meanings. Cvetkovich and Kellner (1997: 1) contend that it would be a mistake to focus on one side in favour of exclusive concern with the other, that is, to either reject the local in favour of exclusive concern with the global, or to reject the global and all macrostructure for exclusive concern with the local. Instead, they suggest that it is necessary to think through the relationship between the global and the local, through observing how global forces influence and structure local situations, as well as how local forces and situations mediate the global (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997: 1-2). Despite the fact that the cultural imperialism perspective continues to hold sway in many of the debates on the cultural implications of globalisation, as well as on the extensive global media and cultural flows that characterise the world today, there is also a vast body of literature that refutes the claim of cultural homogeneity. Consequently, rather than simplifying the concept of globalisation into a one-way flow of Western cultural commodities into non-Western nations, Featherstone (1995: 6) suggests that globalisation needs to be thought of as a "form, a space or field made possible through improved means of communication in which different cultures meet and clash", or simply put, as a "stage for global differences".

Storey (2003: 159) expands on Featherstone's point, as he cautions against thinking of America as the only global power, in view that this perspective ignores the global economic status of Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and especially Japan. By downplaying the role of nation-states from within the Asian sphere,

the cultural imperialism thesis leaves little room for understanding the impact non-Western cultures have been making on the West. Pieterse (1995: 53) disagrees that cultural experiences are moving in the direction of cultural uniformity and standardisation, while Giddens (2002: 16) attest to globalisation as being only partly Westernisation, in view that much of the non-Western countries are increasingly influencing development in the West. Morley (1996: 349) suggests that "modernity (or post-modernity) may perhaps in the future, be located more in the Pacific than in the Atlantic". Sony's purchase of Columbia in 1989 and Matsushita's purchase of MCA-Universal in 1990, have not only dramatised the ascent of Japanese global media conglomerates through the merger of hardware and software, but the acquisitions have also exposed the anxiety that Japanese investors are "buying into America's soul" (Morley and Robins 1995: 149-50). As Japan continues to outperform the economics of the West, Morley and Robins (1995: 160) further claim that the possibility that the West may have to learn from the most (post) modern societies has accordingly "called into question the supposed centrality of the West as a cultural and geographical locus for the project of modernity". With signs of 'reverse colonisation' occurring on a more widespread basis, this phenomenon signifies that the relationships between cultures are becoming increasingly diverse and multilateral. Hence, the debates surrounding globalisation theory need to shift away from a straightforward homogenisation thesis driven by Western cultural imperialists, and need to take into account the power of the local in resisting, negotiating, and appropriating global influences on a daily basis.

GOODBYE IMPERIALISM?

Despite the vast amount of literature citing globalisation as equating Westernisation, or more specifically Americanisation, some authors have attacked the media imperialism position for its reliance on the so-called hypodermic model of media effects, which presupposed that the mass media is a manipulative agent capable of having direct and unmediated effect on audiences' behaviour and world views. These theorists argue that audiences actively interpret, negotiate and even resist media content, following which, the type of widespread cultural domination portrayed by media imperialism should be opened to question (Ang 1996; Morley 1992, Liebes and Katz, 1993). As Ang (1996: 153) argues, local responses and negotiations that are both culturally diverse and geographically dispersed need to be taken into account to better understand the complex and contradictory dynamics of today's 'global culture', in view that mass-mediated cultures are actively and differentially responded to and negotiated with in concrete local contexts and conditions. Likewise, Tomlinson (1999: 84) contends, the receiving culture often brings its own cultural resources to bear, in dialectical fashion, upon 'cultural imports', and as a result, the movement between cultural and geographical areas always involves interpretation, translation, mutation, adaptation and the process of 'indigenisation'. Local discourse and practices are increasingly defining the contemporary scene, and it would be a mistake to focus on one side in favour of exclusive concern with the other. Ang (1996: 152) also points out that the cultural imperialism thesis provides a flawed account of 'global culture', as the thesis concedes to an unambiguous domination of subordinated peoples and cultures by a

clearly demarcated powerful culture, usually designated as American or European, or more generally, as 'Western' culture.

Besides debunking the myth of cultural imperialism, findings from various audience reception studies have also demonstrated the process of 'glocalisation', a phenomenon Robertson (1995: 28) maintains is formed through "telescoping global and local to make a blend". Following the ongoing influx of global cultures, glocalisation is offered as an alternate viewpoint to cultural homogeneity, as the process of localising the global signifies greater freedom for different people in different places to use external cultural products in different ways, and adapt them for their own uses and to create their own meanings. Lull (2000: 244) argues that through the negotiation of external influences, imported cultural elements are hybridised to take on local features, for the purpose of 'domesticating' the exotic, unfamiliar and foreign. He uses rap music as a case study to illustrate how the unfamiliar, imported cadence and attitude of rap is appropriated by local musicians, resulting in a musical hybrid that adopts local aspects involving lyrics that refer to local personalities, conditions and situations (Lull 2000: 244).

As Lull's example illustrates, cultures simply do not transfer in a unilinear way from one end of the hemisphere to another, but often involve the reworking and reproduction of 'global culture' to suit local flavour. In this respect, we are presented with a hybridisation of 'global cultures', in which world cultures are being continuously re-contextualised into new provinces of meaning. Appadurai (1990: 295) concedes that "as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenised in one or other way". This is true of music, housing styles, science and terrorism. So unlike the cultural homogenisation thesis which stresses the growth of 'sameness' and a presumed loss of diversity, audience reception studies have shown that increasing global integration does not result in the elimination of cultural diversity, but instead, globalisation provides the context for the production of new cultural forms which are marked by local specificity (Ang 1996: 155). Furthermore, local and regional ways of thinking and living do not disappear in the face of imported cultural influences, as the active audience are seen as negotiating the influx of 'global cultures' through incorporating particular elements into their everyday lives.

GOING REGIONAL AND STAYING HOME

Several scholars have argued that in the current global media environment characterised by a plurality of actors and media flows, it is no longer possible to sustain the notion of Western media domination (cf. Banerjee 2002, 2003; Chang 2001). Instead, they emphasise that the emergence of many developing nations as both major producers and global exporters of audiovisual material, has not only altered the one-way flow of Western media content, but also, their growing importance effectively undermine the 'hegemonic' model represented by media imperialism.

Lee (2003: 51) lists several examples of regional centres for films and television programmes, and explains that such regional centres either tap into their own markets (such as Brazil or India), or tap into regional cultural markets (such as Hong Kong's overseas Chinese market including Taiwan, China and Southeast

Asia, or Egypt's Islamic market). He further claims that the popularity of these regional centres is such that Rupert Murdoch's STAR TV has been unable to compete against Zee TV in India, or in the case of the Chinese market in Asia, against the Chinese Phoenix Channel (Lee 2003: 50). Writing specifically about the situation in Asia, Banerjee (2002, 2003) offers a thread similar to Lee, as he argues that the deregulation of television in most Asian countries in recent decades has led to a proliferation of domestic television and film production companies based on geo-linguistic affinities and similarities. Using Hong Kong as one example of an emerging regional market, Banerjee (2002: 521) concedes that with an output of 200 films a year, Hong Kong has emerged as the third largest producer of film and the second largest exporter in the world. Not only is TVB, the Hong Kong-based television broadcaster, owner of the world's largest library of Chinese language programmes, but in line with the station's broadcasting and production strategy, TVB also exports Chinese programmes to Greater China, and to overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (Thomas in Banerjee 2002: 521). While the pluralisation of cultural and media production in Asia still cannot be compared to the American production industry in terms of financial profitability and the size of the export market, with the emergence of abovementioned local, national and regional broadcast markets, Banerjee (2002) concludes that the impact and penetration of Western-based programming and channels are not as powerful as the cultural imperialism thesis claims, as Western programmes are neither the most popular nor able to compete with local counterparts.

Following the widespread popularity of geo-linguistic regional markets over many continents, many global transnational companies have come to realise the importance of undertaking localisation as one of the key component in the business strategies within the Asian market. This is because fears of 'cultural invasion' and 'cultural homogenisation' are frequently voiced by Third World nations who claim that 'cultural disassociation' is the only way of protecting vulnerable indigenous cultures that would otherwise be almost certainly effaced (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1990). Furthermore, most people continue to lead local lives, and it is worth bearing in mind that even if certain cultural products have a global spread, that does not imply that the meaning of that product is the same everywhere (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996: 18). As such, to be successful in Asian markets, the domestication of, or the adding of indigenous ingredients to programming is especially inevitable for many transnational cable channel operators. STAR TV is one such transnational corporation that has taken the lead in this regard, and Thussu (1998: 69) cites Rupert Murdoch for admitting that "everywhere I go it is local programming which is proving to be the most popular. The majority of our staff everywhere are local. Local producers and editors provide the concepts and ensure the cultural priorities". Consequently, in line with this 'domestication' strategy, STAR has developed Phoenix, a Mandarin-language service just for China, and STAR Plus, the mainly Hindi-language-based channel for India, both of which draw on indigenously made programmes (Thussu 1998: 69). MTV, or Music Television, the global music television station of Western origins, is another early adopter of glocalisation, who begun differentiating its content around the world through incorporating local music with local programming and languages, after its initial campaign to establish a pan-Asian television service

faltered due to the lack of cultural specificity (Herman and McChesney 1997: 42; Sturmer in Holton 1998: 169).

Thus, despite the fact that many Western transnational media organisations constitute an undeniable and often aggressive presence within the Asian region, their domination is restricted by the dynamics of audience preference, a factor which significantly forces such global companies to either localise or regionalise their products for financial benefits. And as the case studies here demonstrate, to succeed in many parts of Asia, issues of regionalism and localism need to be taken into consideration, given that these factors affect viewers' preferences for particular types of broadcasting materials. Furthermore, in a world characterised by flows of people, goods and images, far from thinking about globalisation in terms of 'fixed' or stagnant points, Meyer and Ceschiere (1999: 4-5) suggest that we should consider the making and unmaking of boundaries, localities and 'cultures' in various forms of power constellations, given that there are no absolute boundaries unaffected by global flows. Subsequently, rather than thinking of globalisation as a process that uniformly subverts local imperatives, the future of globalisation for the world's leading television news broadcasters, and other types of mass media producers, appears to depend a lot on programme localisation, whereby the local is seen as exercising influences in constituting the global.

KIMONOS, MEAT-BUNS AND ALL THINGS ASIAN

In his study on the cultural products of Japan, Iwabuchi (2002) has critically appraised Japanese animation and computer games for their 'non-Japaneseness', or *mukokuseki*, which literally means "something or someone lacking any nationality". He argues that because for the most part the characters of Japanese animation and computer games do not look 'Japanese', such culturally 'odourless' products allow for the erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics or a context, and therefore negates the imprint of a particular culture or country with these features (Iwabuchi 2002: 28). In this respect, through ridding anime of some of its 'cultural odour' as part of the glocalisation process for non-Japanese markets, it leaves space for anime to blend in easily with the cultural, societal and political values of its consuming audiences. As Sreberny-Mohammadi (1996) argues, to be successful in Asian markets, the domestication of, or adding of indigenous ingredients to, programming is especially inevitable for many transnational cable channel operators. The business of selling anime outside Japanese borders is no exception, and as the following semiology exercise demonstrates, many of Japan's cultural exports do embody distinct Asian characters and symbols to transform that which is 'exotic' and 'strange', into something that is 'familiar' and 'approachable'.

For textual analysis purpose, the study drew a sample of anime products from Animax, Asia's first and only channel dedicated to broadcasting Japanese animation 24-hours, seven days a week. They are: *Saiyuki Reload Gunlock* (2004), which draws on Chinese mythology, *Otogizoushi* (2004), a story about a female Japanese samurai, and *Gankutsuou* (2004), an anime loosely based on *The Count of Monte Cristo* by French novelist Alexandre Dumas.

Figure 1

Created by Kazuya Minekura and produced by Studio Pierrot, *Saiyuki Reload Gunlock* has 26 episodes and is the third instalment of the *Saiyuki* series. Like its two predecessors, *Gensoumaden Saiyuki* and *Saiyuki Reload*, *Gunlock* continues with the adventures of the four main characters (see figure 1)—the half-demon Sha Gojyo, the demon Cho Hakkai, the monk Genjyo Sanzo and the monkey deity Son Goku—as they journey to India to investigate the reasons behind the recent insanity among the *youkais* ('demons'). The *youkais*, who have formerly coexisted peacefully with humans in Shangri-La, have gone berserk and are turning against the humans.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Asian Chinese viewers face little problems approaching this text, as *Gunlock* draws inspiration from Chengen Wu's must-read Chinese classic *Journey to the West*. In addition to retaining the classic's original 'heroes and villains', character names are also presented in their original Chinese format. As Taylor and Willis (1999: 20) explain, central to the semiotic approach is the idea that language, signs and their meanings are historically, culturally and socially produced. On the other hand, different clothing can send out different social messages involving status, occupation, ethnic and religious affiliation, while accessories can situate the cultural resonance of a particular character. Figure 2 illustrates the traditional Chinese cheongsam commonly worn by women, while the men are clad in conventional peasant-like clothing. The scriptures that hang on either side of Sanzo's shoulders

by contrast (see figure 1), are Buddhist sutras that record the oral teachings of Gautama Buddha. In keeping with the Oriental look, the setting and props are also easily distinguishable as being part of Asia, as illustrated by the presence of Buddhist temples, monks and Chinese delicacies (see figure 3). Through using elements which are culturally proximate to most Chinese Asian consumers, such as the aforementioned Chinese scripts and traditional imagery, they anchor the 'Asian-ness' of the otherwise *mukokuseki*-looking characters.

The second sample, *Otogizoushi*, is an original anime created by Production I.G. This anime follows the adventures of the young Japanese protagonist Hikaru, who attempts to save ancient Kyoto through collecting the *Magatama*, legendary gems said to hold mysterious power. Failing the task, Hikaru and her trusted allies are given a second chance when they are reincarnated in modern-day Tokyo to right the wrongs of history made 1000 years ago. Unlike *Gunlock*, *Otogizoushi* draws heavily from Japanese culture and practices, particularly its character designs, costumes and setting. For instance, Hikaru is depicted in traditional samurai costume when masquerading as her brother, but wears the Japanese kimono at home (see figure 4). In modern-day Tokyo, although the cast has traded in their traditional costumes for casual tees and jeans, the 'Japanese-ness' of the anime is retained through the visual presence of typical Japanese 'sailor moon-style' school uniform. Character names also situate the anime in a conventional Japanese setting, as they are distinguishably Japanese in essence, both orally and scripturally.

Figure 4

To further sharpen the 'Japanese-ness', *Abe no Seimei*, an eleventh-century specialist on *onmyodo* ('feng-shui') is featured among the regular cast (see figure 5). Through his inclusion, this gives the anime a sense of what Danesi (1999:19) has described as 'tribal roots', an important factor in establishing the cultural resonance visible within the animated feature. Additionally, there is an abundance of iconic Japanese objects and places, among them *Mizuko Jizou*, bib-and-hood-wearing stone 'protectors' of prematurely dead children, *shinkansen* ('trains'), as well as various shrines and temples dedicated to Japanese deities.

Despite *Otogizoushi*'s outward Japanese appearance, a closer analysis reveals some resemblance to Chinese culture. The practice of *onmyoudou* ('traditional Japanese cosmology') for instance, is based on two Chinese theories, the Five

Elements (Water, Wood, Fire, Earth and Metal) and Yin-Yang. By contrast, Hikaru's impersonation of a male samurai in place of her ailing brother parallels Chinese heroine Mulan's substitution as her father in the Chinese army. As Sinclair (2000) argues, the most popular imports are those that share the same language and cultural ambit of the local region, and by adopting distinct Chinese ingredients, it allows anime easier access to those living in the Asian region.

Figure 5

The third anime examined is a Gonzo Digimation production entitled *Gankutsuou*. Loosely based on Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Gankutsuou* has been reinterpreted as a sci-fi revenge story and set in a fantasy-like Paris of the future. The anime opens with the chance meeting of 15-year-old Albert de Morcerf with the Count of Monte Cristo, then moves quickly into the main theme, that of the Count's revenge against the three men who framed him for treason more than a decade ago.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Although *Gankutsuou* is inspired by a European (or 'Western') text, a semiotic reading uncovers many examples of the reworking and reproduction of its visual imagery and thematic plots to suit the local 'Asian flavour'. Character designs in particular, are devoid of any significant racial or cultural characteristics (see figure 6), which fall in line with Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of *mukokuseki*-ness. And bearing in mind

Lull's (2000: 244) argument that external influences are negotiated at every (local) level, while imported cultural elements are hybridised to take on local features, Haydee's wardrobe of Japanese kimonos (see figure 7) demonstrates the ways in which *Gankutsuou* has been 'domesticated' during the production process to allow for a more 'Asianised' viewing experience.

To further domesticise a text considered 'exotic' by many Asians, *Gankutsuou* focuses on filial piety and arranged marriages, two issues familiar to an Asian audience. Another example of glocalisation to suit a more conservative Asian consumer is the marked absence of homosexuality. Rather than retain Dumas' underlying tone of lesbianism (that of Eugénie eloping with her female piano teacher), *Gankutsuou*'s Eugénie is instead, to marry the fake Italian nobleman, Marquis Cavalcanti.

CONCLUSION

New media technologies have accelerated the speed in which cultures are translated, adapted and experienced. Proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis, such as Schiller (1970, 1976) and Herman and McChesney (1997), suggest that 'local' cultures are slowly, but surely, becoming one homogeneous body that looks suspiciously like American culture, bearing in mind that many transnational media corporations are owned by American conglomerates. True enough, we did think in our younger days that *Trasnformers* were American when in fact they were Japanese and our young interview participants were just as perplexed. While this does say much about the ingenuity of Japanese producers in capitalising and cashing on American cultural domination in Asia, and in effectively un-doing stereotypical images, it says little about homogenisation. Group discussions revealed that young participants appreciated the hybrid and localised Japanese anime over American Disney products and semiotic analysis of three examples of anime revealed the display of Asian-orientated and Western-appearing glocalisation. Audience reception studies argue that local and regional ways of thinking and living do not disappear in the face of imported cultural influences, as audiences are shown to be active interpreters of media content, who mediate and negotiate cultural meanings based on existing values and beliefs (Ang 1996; Morley 1992). To assume that anime is American may, as argued by proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis, reflect the thickness of American cultural influence in Asia, at the same time, the hybrid, occi-oriental nature of Japanese anime, underlines the ease with which such a thick American culture has been adapted enabling a smooth, tacit, reverse cultural flow.

While cultural imperialists like Schiller (1970, 1976) have argued that global exports encourage homogeneity, results from semiotic analysis indicate otherwise, as anime are more likely to depict a hybrid of Asian cultural icons, values and practices, than to portray 100 percent 'Japaneseness'. For instance, *Saiyuki Reload Gunlock* has drawn on Chinese mythology to appeal to an Asian audience, while *Otogizoshi* has included Chinese elements to minimise the 'strangeness' of its outward Japanese appearance. As for *Gankutsuou*, there have been instances whereby 'Western' elements are hybridised to take on more Asian-looking features. Clearly, 'cultural proximity' is a key criterion in making global exports more accessible to the local environment.

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APPENDIX I: IMAGES

Figures 1-3: Still Not There Yet. 2004. A Saiyuki Reload Gunlock Screencap Gallery. www.yareyare.net/Saiyuki/Gunlock/gallery/SaiyukiRELOADGUNLOCKEpisode01Screencaps (Consulted 15 September 2005)

Figures 4-5: Yummy Sushi Pajamas. 2004. Otogizoushi. yummysushipajamas.com/ipw-web/gallery/otogizoushi_nohotlinking_02 (Consulted 15 September, 2005)

Figures 6-7: Gankutsuou Official Website. 2004. Character. www.gankutsuou.com/world/character.html (consulted 22 September 2005)