

THE PRODUCTION OF A “MANGA CULTURE” IN FRANCE: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A SUCCESSFUL INTERCULTURAL RECEPTION

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Introduction

Manga and *anime* are now part of the cultural habits of different generations of French readers, and they are a major cultural space where images and meanings about Japan and Asia circulate. From the end of the 1970's, intercultural relations with Japan developed mainly through this Japanese media culture¹. The success of manga and *anime* contributed to a strong interest in different aspects of Japanese culture, but there are still few studies of this successful intercultural reception.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the reception of manga in France as an historical process challenging French traditional cultural hierarchies. The reception of these global commodities in France has involved conflicting discourses and representations, and has eventually resulted in the production and recognition of a specific set of activities and cultural resources about manga and anime. This “manga culture” is however far from being homogeneous, and is even more and more diverse: distinctions and boundaries have been created within this specific cultural domain, and the perception of manga is shaped by various French stereotypes and cultural myths about Japan. I will try to show how this form of “cultural capital”² was built up and used, and how it relates both to an interest in Japanese society and to skills related to Information and Communication Technologies, especially among teenagers and young adults. Two dimensions of these processes will be more precisely developed in this paper:

- A discourse analysis of the symbolic conflicts between traditional cultural “gatekeepers” and fans, which led to different forms of cultural acknowledgement of manga and *anime*.

¹ See Rafoni Béatrice, « Le néo-japonisme en France : de l'influence de la culture médiatique japonaise », *Compar(a)ison*, 2, 2002

² I refer here to the sociological concept of “cultural capital” elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu in *La Reproduction*, Minuit (1970) and *La distinction*, Minuit (1979). It describes forms of knowledge and skills providing prestige and a higher social status: this cultural capital can be embodied (dispositions, competences and categories of perception), objectified (cultural goods and discourses) or institutionalized. This concept has been specified and applied to the local context of fandom: see Jeffrey A. Brown, “Comic Book, Fandom and Cultural Capital”, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30-4, Spring 1997, p.13. This specific form of “cultural capital” about manga and *anime* is not generally recognized in the society, but it can operate as a source of prestige and distinction within the manga and *anime* fandom, or within peer groups at school. Moreover, fans have mobilized more traditional forms of cultural capital to produce the cultural acknowledgement of manga and *anime*.

- A sociological analysis of the cultural and media practices of a group of French manga readers, in order to understand how they appropriated these textual, visual and technological materials.

These two levels of analysis are complementary and allow us to understand the interactions between the individual reading experiences and the collective production of a “manga culture” in France.

I. The symbolic struggles about the reception and the meaning of manga and *anime* in France

First, I will try to analyze the actors and “cultural entrepreneurs” of the reception of manga in France, from the 1990’s controversy to the current processes of legitimization. What I would like to stress here is the transformation of the frames of reception of manga over this period. I will distinguish two moments: between 1988 and 1997, the public and media representations of the “manga phenomenon” were mainly shaped by traditional cultural “gatekeepers” (cultural critics, journalists, psychologists, educational and political authorities): they dismissed manga as a “toxic” product, whereas young fans began to organize a “shadow cultural economy”³ to resist this dominant cultural legitimacy. In a second moment, at the turn of the century, the sophisticated cultural capital accumulated by fans became more visible and produced new forms of legitimacy for manga, thanks to several factors: fans’ “professionalization”, the viability of the manga and *anime* markets, the opportunities offered by new participatory media technologies, the blurring of traditional cultural hierarchies. A whole set of competences was involved in the reception of manga, and the process of its legitimization took multiple forms.

1. “Media panic” and underground fan organization in France between 1988 and 1997

The “manga boom” in France was largely based on the success of some anime on French private TV channels engaged in a fierce competition to attract young audiences with cheap programs, between 1988 and 1997: *Saint Seyia*, *Dragon Ball*, *Hokuto no Ken*, *Sailor Moon* were broadcasted on the major French commercial channel, “TF1”; *Captain Tsubasa*, *Kimagure Orange Road* on “La Cinq”, a private channel owned by Silvio Berlusconi. An increase in manga's popularity has taken place mostly since 1994-1995, when the original manga linked to these popular *anime* were published. Manga was then visible as a distinct cultural product. Previously, since the middle of the 1970’s, there had been *anime* on French TV in the first programs targeting children: *Prince Saphir*, *Mazinger Z*, *Candy Candy* were successful programs, but were not so much perceived as Japanese products, and not accompanied by manga publishing on a large scale. Manga and *anime* only appeared on the agenda of public problems at the end of the 1980’s, when French television system was deregulated and the major channel privatized (1987): numerous articles, talk-shows, special television reports, commentaries, books..., were produced about the “manga phenomenon”, the “mangamania”, especially between 1993 and 1997.

³ John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, in *The Adoring Audience*, Ed. Lisa Lewis, New York, Routledge, 1992, p.30

Manga appeared then as derivatives of these commercial and cheap TV programs, and stood in sharp contrast with legitimate culture, French youth literature and comics. Manga and *anime* were considered a lowbrow commercial form of child entertainment: a “moral and media panic” emphasised their dangerous psychological effects. The traditional highbrow prejudices against television and mass culture resurfaced: the same arguments about the negative effects of this cultural practice were used in France to criticize “industrial literature” in the XIXth century, American comic books in the 1930’s and 1950’s, video games in the 1980’s and 1990’s. A moral and cultural boundary was constructed to isolate manga from more respectable and “pedagogical” forms of entertainment, more legitimate art forms, controlled by adults: the confusion between manga, *anime*, pornography and violence reached its highest point. Manga were indeed seen as a purely commercial and temporary craze, whereas French “bande dessinée” (comic books) had reached a more artistic and legitimate status since the 1970’s. Manga were even opposed to Japanese legitimate literature and art, and to traditional forms of “Japanism” in France.

Manga and their commercial propagation crystallized many anxieties: about the cultural effects of TV privatization; about French economic “decay” compared with the rise of Japan; about the transmission of national culture; about a decline in literacy and morality among French youth. The advocates of traditional culture feared the invasion of a cultural offer they couldn’t control: the success of these programs took place within peer networks, outside the traditional structures of adult guidance and oversight. As Sharon Kinsella wrote about Japan, “it is the widespread access youth have had to manga that stimulated concern amongst political and educational authorities.[...] This debate expressed a sense of insecurity about uncontrolled and unregulated cultural activities”⁴.

These cultural critics dominated the public discourses about manga: they stressed the negative role of manga in the imaginative lives of children, and used Japanese representations of fandom (as *otaku*) to describe these dangers. The people who had the cultural authority to talk about manga in the media were psychiatrists, psychologists, cultural critics, i.e. adults who had not been socialized to such a reading practice, and who excluded manga from official modes of acknowledgement. One result of this hostile attention were the censorship measures against some *Dragon Ball* TV episodes and the interdiction to sell some manga (*Angel* by U-Jin, in 1995). Because of this pressure, the main TV channels stopped programming anime from 1997 on, replacing them with American or French cartoons. *Anime* only progressively reappeared from 2002-2003, mostly on cable channels.

2. The resistance of young French manga fans: the production and uses of a “cultural capital” about manga and *anime*

It’s interesting to see how young French fans organized themselves collectively to resist this dominant cultural legitimacy, to promote their passion through associations, fanzines, and conventions. Most fan interest in France was stimulated by the release of *Akira* in 1991, the anime broadcasted on French TV, and the establishment of the fanzine *Animeland* in 1991.

These fans elaborated underground networks of distribution. They resorted mostly to English, American or Italian translations. Some students from Parisian elite universities, mostly in

⁴ Sharon Kinsella, “Amateur Manga Subculture and the Otaku Panic”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Summer 1998

scientific and commercial schools, played an important role in that process: they mobilized their competences in computer and ICT, in management, in English and Japanese, to organize the first screenings and conventions at the beginning of the 1990s. The “giant robots” anime were the most popular among these first “animefans”, in keeping with their cultural preferences for science-fiction and fantasy: the first anime screenings took place in the French science-fiction and fantasy fandom. These fans also strongly advocated Hayao Miyazaki’s animated films: these latter played a major role in the cultural recognition of Japanese popular culture.

At the beginning of this amateur movement, the problem was also the perception of manga and *anime*: the aim of fan associations was to fight against highbrow prejudices and television programming policy. Fans considered manga a cultural and artistic medium, and criticized the “mutilations” of anime and manga by commercial publishers and channels. Their claim to legitimacy and to cultural authority led them to gather accurate pieces of information about manga, and to build connections between manga and Japanese culture, manga and “sequential art”. As Sean Leonard wrote, “in their effort of distribution and reproduction, their aim was to remain faithful to the original work”⁵. These “cultural entrepreneurs” produced a secondary literature and a “collective cultural capital” about manga: these resources were made of various types and stocks of information (news, reviews, commentaries, special events, dictionaries, interviews with *mangaka*...). This group of pioneers contributed to a new sphere of economic and cultural activity. They became cultural experts in their field and benefited from job opportunities: “many fans started anime companies, becoming the industry leaders of today”⁶. As fans grew older, they gained access to financial, cultural, organizational resources to promote and legitimate their cultural preferences. Their rise to prominence led to the diversification of the manga titles available in France, with the introduction of *shojo* and *seinen* manga.

Fan activities first focused on the distribution infrastructure, and on the critical commentary about manga, taking advantage of the possibilities opened up by new technologies. Institutions like the conventions, the specialized press, the manga associations, played a major role in the formalisation and in the informal transmission of a “manga culture”. Brent Allison described it very well as an “informal educational practice”: “Like any other culture, the task of anime [and manga] fan subculture is inherently a pedagogical one. Meanings, norms, frames and the experiences that contain them are forged, transmitted, shared, and interpreted in ways that build an educational basis for a culture’s continual perpetuation and change”⁷. Magazines like *Animeland*, *le Virus Manga*, many manga and anime clubs in France, considered that their duty was to teach readers how to “decipher” a manga, to give information and points of reference both to the audience and to publishers. But this pedagogy is no longer restricted to the anime and manga fandom, and has begun to take place in new cultural spaces and institutions.

3. Different processes of cultural acknowledgement of mangas

Adult fans are indeed now in position to produce and publicize a legitimizing discourse about manga. Some of them work as journalists, librarians or teachers: they have built many bridges

⁵ Sean Leonard, “Celebrating Two Decades of Unlawful Progress: Fan Distribution, Proselytisation Commons, and the Explosive Growth of Japanese Animation”, *UCLA Entertainment Law Review*, Spring 2005.

⁶ Sean Leonard, *op. cit.*

⁷ Quoted by Brian Ruh, “Creating Amateur Manga in the US: Pedagogy, Professionalism and Authenticity”, *International Journal of Comic Art*, 7-2, Fall/Winter 2005, p.376.

and connections between manga and more traditional and legitimate artistic forms. Manga is also perceived as a legitimate and genuine source of information about Japan, and many discourses underline its contribution to visual and comic book culture. Many libraries and cultural centres have organized exhibitions and activities about manga: the success of manga is used to teach young readers a “critical” manga literacy, and to give them pieces of information about Japanese history and society. Manga and anime are thus embedded in the Japanese artistic and cultural history, as well as in the functional and aesthetic definition of sequential art.

Since 2000, there are many celebratory articles about manga in legitimate magazines and media (like *Télérama*, *ArtPress*, *Arte*, *Beaux-Arts magazine*, *Libération*, *Les inrockuptibles...*). A decade ago, some of them delighted in stigmatizing manga and anime as “japoniaiserie” (a French word for “Japanese rubbish”): from now on, they apply the legitimate categories of literary or artistic discourse to describe some *mangaka* like Taniguchi Jiro, or Yoshiaru Tsuge. They also produce new hierarchies between “manga d’auteur” (literary manga, *seinen* manga, *gekiga*) and commercial manga for teenagers (mostly *shonen* manga). Prestigious literary publishers (Le Seuil, Casterman) have begun to publish these legitimate manga: they reinforce this cultural hierarchy and contribute to the formation of a “manga canon”. This elitist discourse is nonetheless criticized by some manga fans.

The sophisticated language of “bande dessinée” critics and specialists was also used to describe manga as a legitimate and original form of sequential art: in the 1990’s, some comic books specialists and scholars were the first in France to produce serious analyses of manga as a medium, in the fanzine *Mangazone*. The first general survey in French about manga was published in 1991: *L’univers des mangas*, by Thierry Groensteen, a scholar and specialist of the “Ninth Art”.

Thus, some categories of manga have entered new legitimate cultural spaces, and the production of a pedagogical discourse has allowed them to enter public libraries and schools. Some teachers and librarians underline the intellectual and visual work required by manga reading. They also put forward the positive effects of identification and emotional readings on the construction of teenagers’ personality. Manga have undergone a process of “pedagogization” and “culturalization”. Different forms of knowledge and legitimate cultural capital were used in that process, involving a whole set of competences: aesthetic and semiotic knowledge about manga as an artistic medium; cultural and historical knowledge about Japan; linguistic competences. Manga is no longer seen as a commercial invasion, but sometimes as part of a “new Japonism”, in reference to the XIXth century artistic movement of Japonism in France.

All these legitimate discourses about manga have created new distinctions and hierarchies between different manga titles and genres, and different categories of readers. These discourses have focused on the respect of the artistic integrity of manga, and have allowed more analytical and “cultivated” readings. Like manga studies in Japan, these forms of manga criticism have “conferred intellectual respect and cultural value on manga, and provided an appropriate interpretation of its significance in society”⁸

Distinctions have also appeared between different generations of manga readers and animefans. Those who discovered manga and anime at the beginning of the 90’s were a more “select” group of “pioneers”, and some think of themselves as an elite, by contrast with

⁸ Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga*, Curzon Press, 2000, p.97

younger generations benefiting from a wider availability of manga. Thus, manga and anime are shaped by multiples hierarchies and forms of legitimacy.

4. The “creative” and participatory appropriation of the manga culture in France

Beyond these evaluative and interpretative skills, a second generation of fans has begun to engage in a wider variety of “creative” and participatory activities, which testify to a new step in the appropriation of this culture: “French manga”, cosplay, Japanese fashion and music are more and more popular. Indeed, since 1996-1997, manga fans have begun to create amateur manga-influenced stories and fanzines, and since 2003-2004, some of them have become professional artists. Writes Brian Ruh about the USA, “concurrent with the rise in popularity of manga and anime has been an increased popularity of the creative aspects of anime/manga culture”⁹. The wider transmission of the “manga culture” in France has enabled some readers to more actively participate in creating media content. Instructional books about manga drawing techniques have multiplied, and, as in the USA, Italy or Germany, there is now a new generation of French authors who create manga, or “hybrid” comic books, even if there are debates in the manga fandom to know whether a French author can pretend to create a “manga”. The “French manga” are *Pink Diary*, by Jenny, *Stryke*, by Patricia Lyfoung, *Sentai School*, by Philippe Cardonna and Florence Torta, *Pixie*, by Aurore Demilly, *Dys* by Moonkey, *Dreamland* by Reno, *Les guerriers du silence*, by Philippe Ogaki, and many more.

New “cultural entrepreneurs” also try to develop activities related to Japanese music and fashion, thanks to the cultural references of some successful manga, like *Nana* and *Beck*.

II. A Sociological Analysis of the “reading careers” of a group of French manga readers

The previous analyses were mostly concerned with fandom institutions and discourses, or with legitimate public discourses about manga: these representations favour the point of view of the “connoisseurs”, the most knowledgeable readers, those who are more strongly engaged in “creative” forms of reception. We showed that there were various forms of cultural capital involved in the public reception of manga, but this point of view can nonetheless foster an impression and illusion of homogeneity among manga readers. The category of “fan” itself can imply an excessive coherence of the cultural practices of manga readers: the risk is to define them only through an exclusive relation to this single type of cultural good. The pervasive success of manga is precisely due to the diversity of readers concerned, from hardcore fans to ordinary and occasional readers, with very different levels of cultural commitment to manga. Manga readers are also engaged in a great diversity of other cultural and media practices, and their manga readings are shaped by these different “horizons of expectations”. If common references about manga are widely spread, manga constitute yet a much diverse cultural domain, and they are appropriated in various ways by fans and ordinary readers.

The interest of a qualitative research about manga readers is precisely to investigate their singular reading experiences, and to identify the variations and oppositions in their uses of

⁹ Brian Ruh, “Creating Amateur Manga in the US: Pedagogy, Professionalism and Authenticity”, *International Journal of Comic Art*, 7-2, Fall/Winter 2005, p.375

manga. From 2002 to 2004, I realized 20 lengthy interviews with manga readers to understand how they had discovered this culture, how they appropriated these symbolic goods. These readers were young adults between 18 and 25, who had discovered manga in the second half of the 90's: 10 girls and 10 boys, from different social backgrounds, studying in "scientific" or literary high schools and universities. I also interviewed some librarians and manga booksellers. This population is of course not representative of a wider manga readership, but the aim was to explore the "reading careers" of this specific group: they were among the teenagers who discovered the first manga published in France in 1994-1995, and they experienced the explosive growth of the manga market and the production of the French "manga culture". Their personal histories with manga are intertwined with the history of manga publishing in France, over the same historical period. Unfortunately, statistical or socio-demographic data about the manga readership are difficult to find: manga publishers do not disclose these strategic data, and manga are not taken into account as a distinct category in official surveys about cultural practices in France.

I will briefly develop three points related to these reading trajectories and to the different receptions of manga: the role of peer groups and television in the first appropriation of manga; the progressive acquisition of a "manga culture"; the "media repertoires" associated with manga reading.

1. The role of television and peer groups in the appropriation of manga

The reception of manga in France participated in a broader renewal of cultural hierarchies. Surveys about the French cultural practices throw light on this historical transformation¹⁰. The success of manga has not been regulated by traditional institutions: it illustrates the role of peer networks and the growing importance of the media on the "market of symbolic goods". This cultural and media convergence accelerated in the 1980's in France, when manga and anime were introduced.

Traditional literary values of school culture were indeed engaged in a fierce competition with scientific culture, and with other media outside school. Thus, literary reading and artistic culture have lost their central value in the French school system. The decline in legitimate reading practices, in the faith in French classical culture was accompanied by the development of new forms of reception, characterized by a fluid circulation between different media forms: "there are many communications between books, films, television, video games, and the book is no longer the centre of this media universe"¹¹. Manga and the cultural logic of the "media mix" fit in this new form of cultural socialization, marked by the rise of audiovisual media and an early familiarisation with a "screen culture". These global commodities allow younger generations opportunities to develop specific skills and forms of distinction.

The manga readers I interviewed had first discovered the world of Japanese culture through anime broadcasted on TV in the first half of the 90's. The manga they read afterwards appeared to them as a "print version" of the anime, and were not distinctively perceived as Japanese products. However, these two experiences can be disconnected: the manga readership and the audience for anime are partially distinct. The circulation between the

¹⁰ Donnat Olivier, *Pratiques culturelles des Français*, Paris, La Documentation française, 1998 ; Lahire Bernard, *La culture des individus*, La Découverte, 2004

¹¹ Baudelot Christian, Cartier Marie, Détrez Christine, *Et pourtant ils lisent*, Paris, Seuil, 1999

anime seen on TV and the first manga read was stronger for some of the boys interviewed, who appreciated *Dragon Ball* and *Saint Seyia*, two of the first manga published on a mass scale in France.

During the 1990's, television was a privileged media for the appropriation of manga. This has sometimes led to specific reading practices of manga in Japanese, where the readers could only understand the images, not the text. The access to this reading practice was mediated by peer networks: high school friends, brothers or sisters, which transmitted their cultural taste for manga. This collective appropriation of manga by teenagers marked indeed the participation in a more autonomous and generational culture, whereas these young readers, until then, depended more on the choices and tastes of their parents. French and American comic books could not allow this game of generational distinction, because they were also read and transmitted by parents, and part of a cultural heritage.

Thus, anime broadcasted on major TV channels in the 1990's have played an important role in the social construction of a cultural and generational taste for manga, and in the beginnings of the interviewees' "reading careers". These manga readers progressively grew away with nostalgia from this mainstream television experience, associated with their childhood, and built a more autonomous manga reading practice, associated with peer groups and more "adult" anime, watched on video, or on the Internet.

2. The acquisition of a "manga culture"

These young manga readers have progressively acquired specific cultural competencies and reading skills. This particular competence is more linked to the accumulation of reading experiences than to the reading of theoretical articles about manga, its history or its language. Certainly, these interviewees have read some magazines about manga, but they do not always have a reflexive or synthetic vision of manga, or a precise knowledge of the "manga vocabulary". The most knowledgeable are the most intensive readers, and the interviewees (especially girls) who also read a lot of literature and comic books, and who transfer their legitimate categories of perception to the field of manga. One of the most efficient ways of transmitting the knowledge of this specific Japanese vocabulary is the participation to a manga or anime club, where fans learn the proper way to read and talk about manga.

Thus, these readers have achieved a "practical" form of "manga literacy" and a "critical eye": they have learnt to decipher the graphic and narrative conventions, to make distinctions between different genres and *mangaka*, to appreciate the intertextual or visual references between different manga.

The construction of this specific horizon of expectations has led them to discover more complex manga. Their reading trajectory implies indeed an evolution in the choice of manga read, and in the ways of reading them. Manga allows a great variety of appropriation, and these readers assign different functions to the different series they read: entertainment, emotion, meditation or contemplation. These readers differentiate themselves from so-called simple-minded fans or *otaku* absorbed in the manga superficial action. They can still read basic *shonen manga*, but only with an ironic distance.

Contrary to the image of an ephemeral consumption of a disposable product, these readers often read and re-read manga. Whereas the first reading is motivated by the impatience to

discover the plot, the re-readings give them the opportunity to contemplate the details in the setting, the graphic, cultural and historical dimensions of the stories, to pay attention to a political or philosophical background. They also consider manga a source of knowledge and cultural opening, even if the entertainment and pleasures of reading come first. This reading practice opens up on other cultural practices to appreciate all the richness and subtlety of manga (discovery of Japanese language, food, traditions, history...).

3. Differences in the “media repertoires”

Differences in reading practices also depend on the media uses associated with manga. The interviewees have all distinct “media repertoires” and patterns of media use¹². They also make distinctions between these media forms according to the rapidity with which they offer the newest manga from Japan: “scanslations” on Internet are thus sometimes put forward. But other readers favour the quality of more traditional DVD and manga, in order to collect and preserve them. They use the Internet only to get information.

The different forms of circulation within this constellation of media produce contrasted readings. A first group of interviewees, mostly boys in scientific disciplines, prefer to watch anime first, and then sometimes read the original manga; these interviewees are also “small” readers, and they consider anime watching easier and more relaxing than manga reading. A second group of interviewees, mostly girls and “great” readers, always read manga first. They declare that manga reading allows a greater role to their imagination and dreams, and appreciate the manga as a material object, easier to contemplate than anime.

Thus, manga reading has taken multiple forms since manga were introduced in France: these historical and cultural variations depend on the cultural resources used by manga readers. The collective production of a specific cultural capital about manga, the diversification of the manga published, have allowed more complex reading practices, and the involvement in longer reading careers. The acknowledgement of manga testify both to the elaboration of artistic and analytic readings, and to the rehabilitation of the role of emotions in “ordinary” readings: the visual and narrative expression of emotions is a great asset of manga, and a key to their success in France.

¹² Kees van Rees, Koen van Eijck, “Media repertoires of selective audiences: the impact of statuts, gender, and age on media use”, *Poetics*, 31, 2003, 465-490