

A New Dawn of the Samurai –The Insight of Kimeitsu no Yaiba’s Success and Comparing it with the Chinese Anime Industry

Haoxiang Tan

Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies Indiana University Bloomington, IN,
47405, United States

tanhao@iu.edu

Abstract. The Japanese Anime industry has grown wildly during the last few decades and has become one of the dominant forces in the media market in the 21st century. Among all the anime of Japan, one specific anime gained massive success in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic started. The “Demon Slayer” (Kimeitsu no Yaiba) has defeated the well-known Spirited Away by Miyazaki Hayao and won the best-selling manga and movie of all time in Japanese anime-making history in a depression session of the industry. Its influence also went viral worldwide, especially in the younger generation, ages 10 to 20. The story of this anime is a traditional fairy tale of the brave saving the world, but the context of it is more Japanese-styled than others when the main characters are all samurai, and the villain is the “oni” (Japanese term for the monster). This study discovered several factors that contributed to Demon Slayer’s success from two perspectives: one is the usage of vital culturally represented elements, and another one is the shift made by the industry. This paper then discussed the anime industry in China. It used the “Nezha” anime to compare the existing inadequacies in the market and the possible ways to develop Chinese anime in an international market.

Keywords: Demon Slayer, Japan, Anime, Culture Study, Chinese Anime.

1. Introduction

All Organization of the Text The history of Japanese anime is approximately 100 years, but it did not gain an international focus until the 21st century when the “Cool Japan” project was established. Since then, this form of exporting national culture and value in animation has had massive success worldwide [1]. In 2020, a vast pandemic made both world and Japan’s economies a big hit, including the anime-making industry. However, one anime was not influenced by this. Instead, it has become one of the icons of Japan, and that is the Demon Slayer (Kimeitsu no Yaiba). According to the data, the Demon Slayer anime has made approximately 270 billion Japanese yen, and the movie “Demon Slayer: Mugen Train” is over \$507 million from more than 41 million tickets sold, making it the highest-grossing film of 2020 as well as the highest-grossing anime and Japanese film of all time [2]. Those are remarkable achievements.

Moreover, that success did not just happen in Japan. The Demon Slayer also brought another trend of Japanese culture in the United States, especially among the younger generations; according to data, many more young Americans are thinking of either traveling to Japan or working in Japan in the future. Moreover, according to AJA (The Association of Japanese Animations) [3], China is also a significant anime-consuming country. One discussion that needs to be made is what makes Demon Slayer so popular. According to the anime industry report by the Association of Japanese Animation [3], the whole anime industry market had a decline of approximately 100 billion yen in the year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the data could be worth without the publication of Demon Slayer, especially with the influence internationally. According to data, there was approximately a 50 percent increase in anime viewing in 2020, and Demon Slayer was the highest-growing anime of all time in the US [4]. Besides, the number of plays of this anime on the Chinese platform reached 800 million per episode. So, the aim of this article is to find out what makes this anime appealing to people that much and what the logic behind it is one of the focuses of this article.

In this article, the main focus is on the case of the Demon Slayer's international success and anime as a sub-genre of pop culture, the value and identities introduced in the anime, and what the Japanese want to export to people from different countries. Especially the Japanese cultural characteristics in the anime, for example, the samurai and the katana (Japanese sword). Furthermore, discovering how those terms have meaning to overseas audiences and the hybridization of Japan's and Western cultures in the scene. Moreover, the primary reason this anime gained such achievement during the pandemic era is the metaphor of the villain identity in the anime to diseases and traditional Japanese mythology. This article aims to look at the influence and success of this case and seek the changes that the Chinese domestic anime-making market can make in promoting its own culture.

2. Background Information

The story of the anime Demon Slayer happened in the Taisho period (1912-1926) in Japan. One day, the protagonist, Kamado Tanjiro, and his younger sister Nezuko from a farmer family encountered the 'oni' (traditional Japanese mythology monsters) readapted and mixed with the plagues and diseases. The story mainly depicts the fight between Tanjiro and his sister and his teammates fighting against the oni, and the bond of family and friendship and brave are the characteristics being praised by the anime. The fighting between Tanjiro and Muzan (the major villain) can be seen as a metaphor for the people fighting COVID-19. A critical characteristic of the anime is that it contains a lot of traditional Japanese elements, for example, the swordsman and the samurai. Moreover, because the time ground is the Taisho period of Japan, which is after the Meiji restoration, there are a lot of Western elements involved as well. There is a great deal of academic research conducted on the anime "Demon Slayer" focusing in different directions. One perspective is on the national cultural semiotics within the anime in its spread globally, which is also this article's main focus. Another perspective is on the media focus, which discusses based on the financial success, also studies of "Demon Slayer" within the context of anime.

3. The "Japonism" in the Scene

The phrase "Japonism" is a French term used to describe the influence of Japanese art on Western art after the Meiji restoration; Western artists consider Japanese art, especially the ukiyo-e, as pure and simple but beautiful at the same time. This idea is carried to the anime industry as well; Japanese animations had a lot of positive comments within the industry, especially towards the vast traditional Japanese art depicted in anime. For example, the design of the clothes on the main characters is the traditional Japanese Wagara (specific patterns on clothes), a specific pattern on clothes with ritual and cultural meanings. Moreover, the sword skills in the animate, Tanjiro's Mizu no Kokyo (the Water Breathing), a specific skill of using his katana to eliminate the "oni". Including the reference to the most famous ukiyo-e, The Great Wave off Kanagawa by Katsushika Hokusai. Another skill he had is the Hinokami Kagura (Dance of the fire god), which refers to the "Kamakura," a traditional Japanese ritual ceremony that ought to seek blessing and protection from gods. All of those specific cultural characteristics involved in the anime attract more viewers, especially international viewers, to get to know and learn about Japanese culture. Especially when the cultural elements included were the most iconic and signature ones; moreover, those elements also satisfied most viewers' expectations of the nation, especially Western society. Creating those cultural identities that fit the international market's expectations minimizes the possible barrier brought by cultural differences and allows international viewers to experience it better.

Just as the term used in the very first paragraph of the paragraph, "Japonism." The great wave, Shinto, samurai, and Japanese mythology are the most well-known and accepted Japanese identities in the US and Europe. Exporting those cultures and even national values allows viewers to understand and become less resistant to Japanese culture because of the enormous differences between Eastern and Western cultures. The anime "Demon Slayer" is an excellent cultural and commercial success

case, especially in the anime platform. This can also be seen as the mark of the rise of the Eastern anime-making industry as a whole, and because of it, it is not hard to predict that younger generations, especially Gen Z, will become more accepting and fond of Japanese anime in general.

There is another example in the anime *Demon Slayer* that can show the characteristics of the “Japanese” elements. Tanjiro and all his teammates from the “Kisatsutai” all originated from the traditional Japanese warrior identities, which are now known as the “samurai.” This is one of the Japanese iconic cultures in their cultural propaganda, along with elements like geisha and mount fuji, which are all depicted in the anime. Speaking of the samurai, they are usually bonded with another term, “bushido,” which appeared in the late Edo period and was used to define samurai’s virtues similar to the chivalry in the West. Samurai’s spirit is loyalty to the lord, bravery, and power; they consider honor as their top priority, even their life. In the anime, characters like Kyōjurō Rengoku, who is from the “Kisatsutai,” have performed this “bushido” spirit in a detailed way. Rengoku sacrificed himself in the fight against the “oni” and saved hundreds of lives on the train (*Demon Slayer: Mugen Train*). This is a model of the samurai identity, a man who stuck to his mission and gave up his own life to save others. The distinction between Japanese samurai identities and chivalry culture in the West is that the ending of the heroes is not always good; they usually sacrifice themselves for the greater good. The depiction in this part interprets it in the best way. Those are the characteristics and spirits in Japanese history that the anime wants to convey to its audience internationally.

4. The Fusion of East and West

Despite Japan successfully promoting its culture worldwide, there are still a lot of adaptations and fusions with cultures from other countries to fit the audience’s preference overseas, such as the globalization of indigenous culture, for example, in the anime *Demon Slayer*. On the side of justice, the protagonist Tanjiro is more characterized as a Japanese samurai; they use their Japanese katana and show loyalty to their lord. All those characteristics and Japanese identities are the cultural products that the Japanese want to export to the world. On the side of villains, they took many characteristics that are well-known worldwide, for example. Although the significant villain, “oni,” is adapted from Japanese “yokai” (strange apparition) culture, it’s added with Western characteristics like fear of sunlight and living by absorbing human blood. Those are all Western vampire ‘identity’ characteristics [5]. Moreover, this kind of opposition and setting made the story more interesting and widely accepted by people from different cultural backgrounds, which further resulted in its widespread; this pattern of anime-making made Japanese anime break the limits of nations and culture and finally become worldly adored. By looking into history, Japan, as a country from the past, has always been learning and absorbing other cultures and mixing with their own to form new traditions. From the ancient period, Japan took and learned from China, and in the modern period, Japan, as the very first country to become a democratic capitalist country because of the influence of the Meiji Restoration and the objects they learned from changed to the Western countries. So, it is evident that Japan has an excellent tolerance for different cultures and is willing to learn from them. Those natures made this anime-making industry successful and helped it stand out in the international market.

5. Behind the International Success

The Japanese anime industry has successfully shifted from localization to globalization, and several factors can be discussed. In fact, according to the graph shown by the anime industry report for 2021 [3], the international market has already overtaken the domestic market in 2020. With a 3.2 percent increase and a total of 1.239 trillion yen in the international market, compared with the domestic market, with a 9.7 percent decrease and a total of 1.186 trillion yen [6]. The industry did change the content they were making a lot; this is being displayed by the changes made in the anime *Demon Slayer* as compared with the anime from previous years, and it’s more “Japanese,” meaning

the culturally represented semiotics used were much more. Because of the trend and the massive potential of the international market, the anime industry is becoming more and more culturally related. The content included in the anime itself will focus more on promoting its country's core values and culture, just like films and books, because anime watching has become a popular entertainment among the younger generation since the pandemic. The first step of the Japanese shift is the "Cool Japan" project, which aims to promote Japanese "soft power" through all kinds of entertainment products, including music, TV shows, and anime [7]. The project showed a weak performance at first, and the anime industry within the category has been criticized as inadequate for Japanese-represented characters due to being "nationless" [8]. This means that although all of the characters within the episode speak Japanese, people cannot feel the "Japanese" from it, which is true because the theme of a specific anime could vary a lot. This phenomenon can be explained by the beginning of the promotion of Japanese anime; the primary focus is to decrease the cultural differences and allow the audience to understand it easily.

Moreover, the lack of Japanese characteristics and cultural nationalism caused much criticism of the anime industry. Nevertheless, the easily approachable and understandable anime as a cause of the significant increase in international viewers brings later on the success of those anime, which introduces its audience to Japanese society, religions, or traditional cultures. This can be seen in the annual report given by AJA [3]: at the beginning of the establishment of the "Cool Japan" project, which is 2010, the Japanese anime market still mainly relied on domestic consumption, with over 80% profit generated within Japan. However, in 2015, the international market's scale doubled and exceeded the domestic market in 2020. This huge alteration in the Japanese anime market is supported by the contents of the products being produced every year. Demon Slayer is the most significant case; undoubtedly, this work has brought a ton of profit to the industry and the "cool Japan" project but also as a cultural product. Another factor that is also important is the overall shift in the tools for watching anime, from traditional television to a computer or smartphone and any devices that can have access to streaming media. This kind of improvement in technology gives its audience a lot more convenience and allows viewers overseas to watch anime on streaming platforms as well. One major event happened during the year 2020, which further pushed the progress of the use of streaming media, which is the pandemic. Due to the pandemic, people were forced to stay at home. As a result, the proportion of anime viewers considerably increased, especially in the US, the top anime industry consumer worldwide, according to the report by Eser [4]. Moreover, popularizing online platforms like Netflix and Crunchyroll from the US and Bilibili from China contributed a lot to the international success of the Japanese anime industry.

6. Case Study on Chinese Anime: "Nezha"

At about the same time where world is having a "Demon Slayer" trend, China also released an anime movie, "Nezha". "Nezha" has grossed approximately 700 million USD [6], even more significant than the Demon Slayer movie, which shows that Chinese anime also has the potential and power to make good anime. Nevertheless, the "Nezha" movie made 99.5% of its gross from the domestic market, whereas Demon Slayer had about 60-70% [9].

This reveals a problem existing in the current Chinese anime-making industry: it's too "native", so the demand from the international market is almost nonexistent. This situation made it a lot harder to express cultural value through semiotics within the anime, and this is certainly one of the major deficiencies in the Chinese anime market. One thing that needs to be focused on is how to grab the attention of international viewers based on the cultural values that Chinese anime is trying to export to others. To do this, one important factor is to reduce the amount of localization. Because in the "Nezha" movie, there are collections of dialects and internet memes which will only confuse overseas viewers who did not know about the culture. Those content-wise issues act as the barrier to block the development of the international market and make people less interested in the anime, because it requires a higher level of knowledge of the culture. This can be fixed by instead of using the regional

cultural semiotics; it's more reasonable to apply more significant, well-known cultural semiotics in the anime just as Japan did.

However, the anime "Nezha" did succeed in the domestic market, showing the overall high quality of the anime. Chinese anime-making industry is technically more advanced than before, and the domestic market has a huge potential. The domestic success is not enough, especially in the internal world nowadays. Consumers enjoy watching other country's anime and Chinese anime is indeed competitive in the global market. In order to gain the international market, Chinese anime industry needs to shift from localization to globalization, which is the main focus in the current phase. Also, it is possible to look at Japanese successful cases as examples and learn from them, just like the "Demon Slayer" series. Many takeaways can be learned, for example, the display of its own culture and the mix under the process of globalization, making the boundaries of different cultures not exist, allowing viewers from overseas to enjoy it.

7. General Review in the Anime-Making Market in China and Looking Towards the Future

Compared to the development of the anime industry in Japan, China had a relatively slower start, and there are several problems that are possibly affecting the development of the industry. Firstly, because the market itself is still developing, the effectiveness of corresponding industries, which also plays a big role, can be fewer. Due to the industrial chain of the anime market, anime always bonded with music, manga and even tourism; those sub-genre markets also contributed a lot to culture exporting to international audiences in cooperation with anime [10]. By looking at cases from Japan, one successful anime always comes with high-standard music and manga. Moreover, the popularity of anime can also boost local tourism since people's interest in traveling to the place increases after watching the anime. Those developments in not only the anime market but also the corresponding industries are that Chinese anime is still lacking. The second factor is the lack of government support; the Japanese government has funded and sponsored the anime-making industry financially through the "Cool Japan" project. The international success in anime returned to the government the huge profit made and the number increased in tourism. Those government supports are not enough in China, especially for those corporations with financial problems. Moreover, one thing specifically in anime-making is the copyright. Japanese anime-making industry has a really developed and strict legislation on it whereas this problem is not treated importantly in China. Society's opinions towards anime-making are another crucial factor. People's general opinions of anime are often childish and naïve, this idea is often seen among older age groups. This sort of bias is definitely preventing the development of the anime industry and is not true, people need to change their stereotyping ideas in order to allow the industry to grow. Lastly, the focusing market of the Chinese anime-making industry is still domestic. This is understandable since the market of China is already big enough financially wise, but if the industry really has the ambition and wants to introduce authentic Chinese culture to the rest of the world through their anime. There is still much effort that needs to be made, and it's possible to learn from successful Japanese cases.

Despite the fact that the Chinese anime industry currently does not gather the focus in the global market, it is undeniable that the technology and quality of Chinese anime are at the top level in the world, especially as people are living in the age where AI technology is growing rapidly and China is the top in the field. With the future of the anime-making industry, it is showing a trend towards more tech-relied instead of the previous hand drawing, which favors the Japanese anime-making (craftsman spirit) more. The Chinese anime industry has an excellent potential to beat Japanese dominance in anime making in the future, with more and more government support and cooperation and a well-developed supply chain nowadays. The Chinese anime-making industry can take a new path and bring a different anime culture to the world.

8. Conclusion

Anime as a genre of media and a subculture has thousands and millions of followers, and the number is still rising; Japan, as the world's top anime-producing country, has successfully exported and sent people about their national culture with it, which earned them a considerable increase in country's soft power and global recognition. *Demon Slayer*, as one of the most well-known and famous Japanese anime, the overall success and balance between "nationality" and "globalization" earned an amazing achievement cross-culture with all these vividly depicted characters and abundant culture, allowing its audience to experience it without boundaries. China, as a country with a long history and more cultures, is falling behind in the industry, and there is still a long way to go on the road of anime globalization. The movie "*Nezha*" already showed the Chinese market's potential and capacity. In the process of exporting Chinese-style anime to the world, it is necessary to look at the successful example of Japan and learn from it. By learning from those examples and keeping up with their own style, Chinese anime can bring the world more authentic Chinese aesthetic anime in the future.

This article analyzed several factors that brought both locally and internationally success to the Japanese anime "*Demon Slayer*". Then used the Chinese anime "*Nezha*" as an example to display the current situation of the Chinese anime-making industry and market, stated the advantages and inadequacies of the Chinese anime-making industry, given Japan's successful case in "culture exportation". Several insights focusing on content, society, and anime production were given. Nevertheless, the article only had two examples from each country, and the period is post-2020. There are many more Japanese anime, such as Miyazaki Hayao's "*Spirited Away*" and Shinkai Makoto's "*Your Name*," which also had substantial internal cultural and economic success. Hopefully, in the future, there will be more studies focusing on "culture exportation" within the context of the anime industry.

References

- [1] Valaskivi, K. A brand new future? Cool Japan and the social imaginary of the branded nation. *Japan Forum*, 2012, 485-504.
- [2] Ben, D. What Pandemic? Japanese Film Draws a Record Flood of Moviegoers. *The New York Times*, 2020.
- [3] Association of Japanese Animation. *Anime Industry Report 2021*. The Association of Japanese Animations, 2022, March 28.
- [4] Eser, A. Essential Anime Popularity in America Statistics In 2024. *Zipdo*, 2023, July 10.
- [5] Qi-Lin She, Dong-Hyuk Choi. A Study on 'Oni' Cultural Archetype Reproduced in Animation Focused on *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie - Mugen Train*. Korea Contents Society, 2021.
- [6] Lyu, B. Contemporary telling of national mythological stories: value reconstruction, technological innovation and market thinking - based on "*Demon Slayer: Mugen Train*" and "*Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes to the World*". *Jingwenchuang*, 2023.
- [7] Kawashima, N. 'Cool Japan' and Creative Industries: An Evaluation of Economic Policies for Popular Culture Industries in Japan. *Asian Cultural Flows, Creative Economy*, 2018.
- [8] Otmazgin, N. *Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture*. Pacific Affairs, 2014.
- [9] *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba - The Movie: Mugen Train*. Box Office MOJO, 2020.
- [10] Lu, A. S. The Many Faces of Internationalization in Japanese Anime. *Animation*, 2008, 3 (2), 169-187.