

Inspiration from the Development of Japanese Magical Girl Animation

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Abstract. With the worldwide popularity of magical girls portrayed in Japanese magical girl anime, such as *Card Captor Sakura* and *Maiden Warriors*, magical girls have become a cultural symbol and have developed into an industry. The daily magical girl anime has not only become popular in Japan and around the world, successfully exporting elements of Japanese culture, but has also become commercially successful, making huge economic profits for those involved in the industry through the sale of derivatives and other means. Chinese cultural industry workers have also imitated Japanese magical girl anime but without success. This study will explore the reasons for the popularity of Japanese magical girl culture in Japan and China from three aspects: industry development history, narrative characteristics, and cultural connotation, and further analyze the reasons for the unsuccessful local magical girl anime in China, in the hope of providing references for the future development of China's local anime industry and the future transnational cultural export of Chinese cultural industry. From the perspective of industrial development, the success of Japanese magical girl animation comes from both the innovation of content and technological means in line with the development of the times and from the investment of resources and cooperation in each link of the complete industrial chain. Meanwhile, successful cultural export needs to consider how to weaken the negative impact of cultural depreciation on viewers' cultural identity and how to make reasonable use of cultural differences to arouse viewers' interest through the sense of strangeness.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication, Japanese Cartoons, Magical Girls, Cultural Studies.

1. Introduction

In 2018, the classic Japanese anime *Card Captor Sakura* was re-released in an animated version, with a new series titled *Card Captor Sakura: Transparent Card Chapter*. As a work that cannot be ignored when it comes to magical girl animation, *Card Captor Sakura* has had a huge impact on animation lovers in Japan, as well as in Asia and other parts of the world.

Not only this work, magical girls as an important cultural product of Japanese ACG culture, popular around the world, influencing many otaku culture lovers. Moreover, the Magical girl has not only existed as a cultural product, but it has also become a cultural symbol, a calling card of Japanese animation, and has even formed a cultural industry.

In China, under the influence of Japanese magical girl culture, a series of local magical girl cartoons or special features have emerged. Both the plot development method, character image, and IP operation mean to refer to the successful Japanese magical girl anime. However, the audiences of these local magical girl works are limited to Chinese children, and no successful works have achieved the breakthrough.

This study will explore the reasons for the popularity of Japanese magical girl culture in Japan and China from three aspects: industry development history, narrative characteristics, and cultural connotation, and further analyze the reasons why local magical girl-themed works in China have not been successful, hoping to provide references for the future development of China's local anime industry and the future transnational cultural export of China's cultural industry.

2. What is the magical girl

Before discussing magical girls as a culture, we need to understand the definition of magical girls further. Magical girls (Japanese: Mahou Shoujo), as the name implies, are young girls who have magic or magical powers and can use them.

As a stereotypical character in Japanese otaku culture, magical girls generally have the following characteristics. First, magical girls are generally underage girls. Most of the magical girl anime in this frame has a clear definition of the age of magical girls. However, there are some characters who do not fit into this setting but are still recognized as magical girls. For example, the little flower fairy in *Pretty Little Flower Fairy* is not human, so her age cannot be measured according to human age. Even *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, in which the main character appears as a horse, is considered a magical girl animation because of its inherently female character and related magical settings. In recent years, there are also a few works in which male characters act as magical girls, such as *Is this a zombie*. In addition, magical girls usually have the power to trigger supernatural phenomena or control supernatural energy, and this power is often called magic [1]. In many works, there are specific names for magic and magical power in the works. Some girls with magic in a non-traditional sense are also considered magical girls, such as the main character Haruhi Yuki in *Cyber Guardian Star*.

3. The development of magical girls in Japan

Initially, the magical girl in Japan was also an import from Western culture. The origin of the magical girl genre is the popular sitcom *Bewitched*, which premiered in 1964 in the US. In this comedy, the heroine is a beautiful young blonde witch named Samantha, who falls in love with and marries a mundane human. Samantha, who aspires to a normal life, enjoys herself in her daily life and often uses some witchcraft her life, which adds many laughs to the humdrum life. Japan introduced and aired a dubbed version of the film in 1966 and changed the title to *The Wife is a Witch*, which soon caused a huge reaction in society.

Under this influence, the famous manga artist Mitsuki Yokoyama launched a local magical girl-themed manga, *Magician Sally*, in the same year. In this work, the imported magical girl is transformed into a localized magical girl [2]. Japanese society was influenced by Confucianism, and the concept of male superiority over females was rooted in the people's consciousness. Therefore, it is against the mainstream values of society to let adult women take the role of the main character who has a great ability to change the world. However, the main audience of anime works at that time was teenagers, so there was no such problem if the main character was a teenager, and it also increased the reader's sense of empathy and sympathy [3]. As a result, the first localization adjustment of the magical girl theme appeared.

Another landmark magical girl work of this era is the *Sweet Little Angel* broadcast in 1969. This work was a breakthrough in the setting of the spell, the setting of the character relationship, and the development of derivative works and peripheral toys with innovative attempts [4]. This unprecedented model caused an uproar in the Japanese animation world at the time, and it was the first time that Japanese magical girl-themed works were launched as peripheral products. Since then, the "Sally" model, which is the influence of orthodox witches on the human world, and the "Atsuko" model, in which ordinary humans use magic props to gain magical powers, have become the two basic models of Japanese magical girl animation.

Japanese magical girl anime has gone through three main stages of development so far, the exploration period, the booming period, and the post-traditional magical girl period.

The exploration period is from the birth of the magical girl theme to 1990, the main audience of magical girl anime in this period is mainly teenagers, but at the same time, there are also some magical girl anime through idols and other elements to attract some otaku. In this period, the protagonists are usually elementary school students, chanting elaborate magic spells and using beautiful magic props, transforming into the appearance of adults. The works of magical girls of this period also began to

incorporate elements of love, and the main character often lived in an environment where there was an older male character that the main character longed for. At the same time, Japan was in a state of rapid economic development, and Japanese animation practitioners born in the late 1940s and early 1950s were among the first young people to be influenced by the idea of sexual liberation. As a result, there were many violent and pornographic elements in the magical girl anime of the 1980s, while the proportion of adults in the magical girl anime audience was expanding. There are also previous studies that link the sexy elements in magical girl anime of this period to female liberation. It is believed that in the 1980s, many female stars were active in politics and culture, and they initiated many activities calling for women's rights, which led to the inclusion of more female self-affirmation and self-expression in magical girl anime, as well as a confrontation with their own beauty and sensuality [5].

The formation of the booming period of Japanese magical girls is also inextricably linked to the economic and political environment of the society. Most of the animation practitioners of this period were born in the 1960s, and they enjoyed the privileged living conditions of the fast-developing capitalist society in their childhood and went to school in the heyday of Japanese culture and education, with surprisingly high enrollment and advancement rate. At the time of their graduation and employment, Japan's bubble economy was booming, all industries were expanding, and the whole society was thriving. Their childhood is also the birth stage of magical girl anime; in other words, the practitioners of this period are the first generation who grew up watching magical girl anime.

As a result, when they became involved in the anime industry, magical girl-themed anime emerged many classics, and the audience expanded further. *Maiden Warrior* and *Card Captor Sakura* are both representative works of magical girl anime of this period. These two works have laid the foundation for both the battle-based magical girl anime and the everyday magical girl anime and have had a profound impact on the subsequent magical girl anime.

The works of this period were not only popular in Japan, but many of them were also translated into different languages and broadcast on TV stations around the world. For example, in 2001, *Card Captor Sakura* was ranked 46th in the Top 50 Anime released in North America by the magazine *Wizard's Anime Magazine*, and its introduction has also received a lot of attention and discussion from European and American anime critics.

Another important event in the magical girl anime industry during this period was the maturation of the peripheral product industry. A good example of this is *Maiden Warrior*, which has so far generated over \$13 billion in derivative sales, providing huge economic profits for the related derivative industry groups [6]. In magical girl anime, it is not just the anime IP that exports material for the derivatives industry in one direction, but the demand for derivatives is also influencing the content production of magical girl anime. Magical girls generally need to use magic props when they use magic. One reason for this is that in Western legends and folk culture, wands can enhance the power of magic, and most magic props have evolved from wands. In fact, the deeper reason is that the toy sponsors of magical girl anime hope to gain economic benefits through magic props. Magic props are divided into two categories: transformation props and non-transformation props, to increase the variety of peripheral toys that can be sold and to target audiences with different payment abilities. Transformation props often change shape during the character transformation process in the animation, and these advanced toys with organs are more expensive and more playable. Many magic props will also consider the practicality and decorative nature in order to improve the use of toys and exposure and increase the stickiness of fans for IP. Magic props generally meet five characteristics. The first is the beautiful design. The second is the moderate difficulty of play; too simple props have low playability, but if the props are too complex, it may be difficult to control the cost of making toys while easy to damage and difficult to promote. The third is to consider the safety elements because many magical girl anime audiences are teenagers, and if the toy is not safe, it will affect the willingness of parents to pay. The fourth is the need for a certain degree of interactivity, several props can be directly interactive, or props need to be upgraded, which can often enhance the possibility of repeat consumption. The fifth is the need for easy packaging and transportation, and peddling.

After the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the recession in the economy and job market also caused a change in the mentality of the Japanese nation. The magical girl anime of this period also showed three characteristics that were different from those of the past.

First, the subject matter of magical girl anime changed. The evil magical girl anime and the dark magical girl anime were born in this period. Evil magical girls now mostly refer to works that take otaku and adult audiences as their main audience groups and are parodied as funny under the name of magical girls. These stories are mainly funny and break the conventions of magical girl works, so there is often violence, mockery of society, and adult plots that parody traditional magical girl works. The audience of the dark magical girl department is also mainly adults, and its representative work is *Magica Quartet*. Most of these anime have a very dark story background and plot, blood and flesh, horror and frightening, and killing each other is a common occurrence. Even in the traditional magical girl theme, much anime has been influenced by the Akihabara series of anime and have begun to favor adult audiences in terms of artwork and plot. There are two main reasons for this change; the first is that the economic downturn has affected the industry's market confidence, and therefore the need to expand the audience for animation is more conducive to economic gains. The second is that the change in the political and economic environment has caused more reflection among the Japanese people, and at the same time, people's thoughts are more pessimistic in this environment.

At the same time, magical girl anime has undergone many changes in its setting, most of which are experienced in cultural works as a result of scientific and technological developments and changing social attitudes. For example, in *the Magical Girl Nanoha*, the combination of magic and high technology has attracted much attention and discussion. There is also some anime where men transform into magical girls, such as *Is this a zombie* and *I want to be a twin ponytail*. As well to the emergence of "Yuri" in magical girl anime, this type of anime depicts the love between women of the same sex, challenging the traditional gender norms challenge, breaking free from the constraints of heterosexism, and depicting lesbian love between the same sex by fighting together against the outside world to maintain. The emergence of these anime works is inextricably linked to changes in feminism and ideas about sexual minorities in Japan.

The third is that magical girl anime of this period focused more on the creation of mix-media platforms. With the development of computer technology and related entertainment, video games gradually came into the life of Japanese people. In this period, the Japanese manga publishing and tv animation production industries were extremely depressed and reshuffled, but the whole industry of magical girl games was thriving. This has led many talented people who used to work in manga publishers and animation companies to turn their heads to the rising industry of game companies. However, gal games were still relatively niche compared to anime, so many of the more successful magical girl-themed gal games would choose to be animated, which promoted the mix-media development of magical girl anime in Japan. Another more direct reason is the influence of the *Maiden Warrior* on the industry. Maiden Warrior's peripheral profits were far more than the animation itself, but the anime production company Toei was never the biggest beneficiary of the Maiden Warriors explosion; it brought huge benefits divided up by channel operators, toy manufacturers, and television stations. This situation has prompted the animation company to accelerate the process of mix-media to expand its profit margins.

4. The cultural export of Japanese magical girl anime

When exporting Japanese magical girl anime abroad, it has encountered certain problems in the European and American markets, mainly due to cultural differences and different grading systems. These reasons make only the Japanese magical girl anime, which does not contain excessive content, has a healthy theme, and the audience is mainly teenagers, can be successful in Europe and America, such as *the Magical Girl Doremi*.

In Europe and the United States, anime is generally rated. Although Japan also has a rating system, this system is basically null and void, so most Japanese magical girl anime will be censored or adapted

when introduced to Europe and the United States. For example, *Card Captor Sakura* was introduced by Nelvana in North America and given to Ocean Productions for music and dubbing work and aired under the name *Cardcaptors* [7][8]. In this version, the plot, music, and the show's name have been modified. The plot deleted a small part of the plot and similar same-sex relationship plot, the names of people and the words used in the show are localized and adapted; kids' WB Warner Animation World adopted the version produced by Nelvana and further modified. This adaptation received a lot of negative reviews in the European and American markets, with Jake L Godek writing that "this is the worst name for an anime when the original English name is so good" [9]. Animefringe reviewer Adam Arnold reviewed the *Cardcaptors*, saying it was "just watering down a fan favorite". The order of the episodes in the DVD was also criticized, saying that from episode 8 onwards, "there is no background for the actors" [10]. This shows that the cuts and adaptations made by *Card Captor Sakura* in Europe and America to comply with the grading system, as well as the impact on the integrity and coherence of the plot, raised the cost of understanding for the audience.

The cultural differences are another important reason why many Japanese magical girl anime cannot succeed in Europe and America. This phenomenon can be explained by the concept of "cultural discounting" developed by Hoskins and Mires (1988). That is, "a program, which is rooted in one culture and therefore attractive in that environment, maybe less attractive elsewhere because viewers find it difficult to identify with the styles, values, beliefs, institutions, and behaviors of the events it addresses" [11]. Although western audiences are very receptive to battle themes, due to ideological reasons, western audiences often cannot accept the values of Japanese anime and cannot understand the motivation and meaning of magical girls' battles. Therefore, it is very difficult for anime such as *Maiden Warrior*, *Maiden of Light*, and *Magical Girl Nanoha*, which are very popular in Asia, to gain recognition and resonance in the mainstream market in Europe and America. At the same time, the love-oriented magical girl anime that excessively promotes the concept of love and the otaku-oriented magical girl anime that contains too much male gaze content cannot open the market in Europe and America. Due to the differences in history, tradition, and religion, the relationship patterns of European and American people are very different from those of Asian people, so it is difficult for Asian love content and cultural works to gain strong resonance in Europe and America. At the same time, the feminist movement in Europe and America is more radical than in Asia, so audiences are more sensitive to and reject the heterosexual hegemony and patriarchal content implicit in cultural works.

The success of Japanese magical girl anime in China can be explained by the concept of "cultural proximity" proposed by the American scholar Straubhaar, who points out that audiences move between the local, regional, and international levels, mainly because foreign programs also have different "cultural proximity". Straubhaar points out that audiences move between the national, regional, and international levels, mainly because foreign programs also have different cultural proximity. He argues that global media systems are gradually adapting to the complex entanglement of global commercial media models, cultural patterns, and genres and that for foreign mass culture to fit in with the established culture, it must first have "cultural appropriateness", the program must first be popular with the local culture [12]. Therefore, programs with cultural proximity tend to be more popular than the average international television program.

Most Japanese magical girl anime masterpieces follow the journey of magical girls as they grow up, involving their dealings with their teachers and classmates at school, dealing with the little problems they encounter in life at home, and the common worries and longings of teenagers. In East Asian countries, with a more similar upbringing and social backgrounds, these themes about love, friendship, hope, and growing troubles can trigger recognition and resonance among audiences in different areas. Magical girl anime in the form of unit drama through the heroine's personal experience to show the basic matrices of these teenagers growing up; in the animation is often not too much interpretation and moral judgment, which also brings a more open, more diverse possibilities of interpretation space for viewers of different understanding horizons.

Compared to hot-blooded Japanese anime, which often involves battles and value discussions, magical girl anime involves very little national emotions and war-related value discussions, which also avoids the appearance of related content hurting the feelings of Chinese nationals.

In addition, the success of magical girl anime in China is also due to moderate cross-cultural communication. According to the theory of "borderline people" developed by Park based on the concept of "stranger" by G. Simmel and others, cultural differentiation refers to the degree of difference between the two sides of the communication participants. Due to historical and geographical reasons, cultural difference is an unavoidable issue in intercultural communication. Once the cultural differences are effectively utilized in the process of intercultural communication, it will not only hinder the communication but also promote intercultural communication. For example, in magical girl anime, there are often some school culture or national culture contents that are unique to Japan, such as cherry blossom festival, school culture festival, and firework convention. These contents are new and exotic to the Chinese audience and can have an artistic effect of "strangeness".

5. The current situation of Chinese magical girl anime

Chinese animation companies also followed the trend of magical girls and launched magical girl titles such as *Balala Little Magic Fairy*, *Little Flower Fairy*, *Dancing Law Heavenly Maiden*, and *Elf Dream Yeorie*. However, these animations have never expanded their audiences beyond young children and are very limited in terms of ratings, IP profitability, and IP influence. The failure of Chinese magical girl-themed cultural products is mainly due to the following reasons.

First, Chinese magical girl anime and TV series imitate Japanese traces too much and lack innovation, while the theme is too upright and lacks some in-depth thinking and exploration of complex issues. In all Chinese magical girl anime, the settings and plot patterns are basically imitated from Japanese anime. In the period when the Chinese magical girl anime was launched, there were already many Japanese magical girl anime with similar content, so there may have been some aesthetic fatigue among the audience. In addition, under the influence of the policy, there is no romance in Chinese magical girl anime, the main character's emotional development is mainly filial piety to parents, respect for teachers and classmates, and many of the plot settings are quite didactic, which makes it difficult for them to trigger more resonance with the audience. This has led to the loss of potential adult audiences for Chinese magical girl anime.

Second, Chinese magical girl animation fails to find a profit model suitable for local development. Most Chinese magical girl anime hope to learn from Japan and rely on derivatives sales to realize the IP value. However, due to the weak awareness of copyright and the developed light industry in China, pirated toys are widely available. After many magical girl anime starts, there will be a lot of pirated toys imitating the magic props in the show for sale in the streets and alleys, which seriously affects the sales space of genuine toys. In addition, the audience of Chinese magical girl anime is mainly children, and the unit price of derivatives is generally low, so the shape and production process look very cheap and even affect the brand image.

Third, Chinese magical girl anime is limited in its choice of expression. Many Chinese magical girl-themed works are presented in the form of special features or 3D animated films. On the one hand, this choice limits the audience because many adults may find live-action magical girl works embarrassing or cannot accept the modeling or painting style of 3D animation; on the other hand, this form of presentation also limits the output of derivatives and offline promotion, because live-action and 3D animation are more likely to produce deviations in color and shade than celluloid-style 2D images.

6. Conclusion

By combing through the development of Japanese magical girl anime and related industries, we can find some patterns of the success of Japanese magical girl anime. First, although magical girl

anime has been influenced by magical girl-themed films and TV shows, it has also been optimized and adapted to fit the culture of its own society. Secondly, Japanese magical girl anime is not static in terms of plot content or performance format. Advances in science and technology, diversification of media, changes in the economic and political environment, and national ideology have pushed Japanese magical girl anime to innovate and constantly develop so that both its superficial profit model and expression form and the deeper spiritual core of its works are constantly updated in line with the trend of the times. In addition, the industry chain of the Japanese anime industry is complete and mature, and each link is clearly divided and serves the production and sales of cultural products. This model of close collaboration between production and sales not only enhances the efficiency of sales but also enables cultural producers to understand the market trends and adjust cultural products in a timely manner.

The findings of this study also provide the following suggestions for Chinese animation and other cultural products for cultural export.

First, the international dissemination of cultural products cannot be separated from the high quality and rich content of the cultural products themselves. The high quality of cultural products depends not only on good use of the latest technology and the development of human resources in the industry but also on keeping up with the times, making timely adjustments in the works, and being innovative in response to changes in the socio-political and economic situation and in the perceptions and preferences of the audience.

Secondly, at the content level of cross-cultural communication, common topics or mother topics with more universality can be chosen to enhance the audience's familiarity with the communication content, thus reducing the negative impact of cultural discount on the communication effect.

In addition, the systemic nature of the cultural industry in foreign communication is also very important, which should include both the grand narrative and national discourse of mainstream media and cultural products with the perspective of ordinary people that can be permeated in daily life, such as animation and games, which can be used by audiences for leisure and entertainment. At the same time, it is necessary to consider not only the dissemination effect of the cultural products themselves but also the profit model that is suitable for local and corresponding audiences so that the cultural products can gain economic benefits while being exported, thus increasing the enthusiasm of enterprises and society to participate in Chinese cultural export.

Finally, in the process of production and dissemination of cultural products, it is also necessary to learn the latest science and technology in a timely manner to meet the communication needs of the web 3.0 era. The use of more diversified media to produce and disseminate Chinese cultural products and the use of efficient technology for the precise dissemination of cultural products.

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