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Gender Roles in Japanese Comics

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GENDER ROLES IN JAPANESE COMICS

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The status of women in Japan after the World War II has been slowly moving toward equality but is still one of subordination to men outside of the home (Reischauer, 1988) Iwao (1993) has differentiated between generations of Japanese women born before the war, who sought to be the "good wife and wise mother," and the subsequent post-war generations exposed to models of sexual equality.

The social change toward gender equality is reflected in women's language use. This is evidenced in Matsuda's (1982) study which investigated the changes in the language of Japanese women after the war. The results suggested an evolution in Japanese women's language, and reflected a society in transition

Gender role research in Japan has also shown evidence of the effects of modeling upon gender role development (Shirakawa, Shiraishi, & Sukemune, 1992). Ito (1981) has argued that there are different types of orientations toward gender roles among women in Japan today: masculinity-femininity, gender-role conception, career pattern, and adaptation to one's own sex.

Even with these social and gender role changes, gender inequality is still prevalent in Japan (Kamo, 1994). While Japanese women constitute more than 40 percent of Japan's work force (Reischauer, 1988), their careers are frequently fragmented (Brinton, 1993). Moreover, their jobs tend to be less complex, more supervised and more routinized than those of their male counterparts (Naoi and Schooler, 1990).

Purpose of Study

Comic stories reflect the culture of the society they portray (White & Abel, 1963). Japanese comics are said to be "the dominant force in Japanese pop culture" and a "window of Japanese society" (Adams and Hill, 1991). So, we were interested to see how men and women are portrayed in Japanese comic strips and whether images of women in the comics reflect the stereotypical roles of Japanese women. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the depiction of gender roles, particularly Japanese women's roles, in popular Japanese cartoons, or manga (the Japanese word for comic, cartoon, and animation).

Background of Manga

Schodt (1983), the author of Manga! Manga! the world of Japanese comics, asserted that the Japanese comics have become an integral part of Japanese culture. The proliferation of the comic books or magazines has made manga an important mass medium in Japan.

Japanese comic books, available at every kiosk and book shop across the country, are very popular to readers of all ages because

they are "faster and easier to read than a novel, more portable than a television set, and provide an important source of entertainment and relaxation in a highly disciplined society" (Schodt, 1983, p. 25). The following statistics compiled by Loveday and Chiba (1986) indicates that manga is indeed an almost essential constituent of daily Japanese life: there are more than 300 types (with more than 2,000 titles) of regularly published comic magazines on a weekly, twice or thrice-a-month or monthly basis; more than 950 million comic magazines were sold in 1982; high school children in 1982 spent on average 13% of their allowance on comic books; a 1976 study showed that blue-collar workers spent nearly as much as one third of their leisure time reading manga; and the revenue received by Japanese comic publishers is higher than the world's largest steel corporation.

Schodt (1983) further reported that 27% of the books and magazines published in 1980 in Japan were comics in magazine and book forms. He also observed that "the over 1 billion comics published in 1980 represented about 10 for every man, woman, and child in Japan, or slightly over 27 for every household" (Schodt, 1983, p.17). The closest U.S. parallel to the Japanese manga, in terms of audience loyalty, would be the following of the regular installments of the Sunday comic strips.

Types of manga include young boys' comics (shonen manga) and young girls' comics (shojo manga), which, is read today by many adult women just as their male counterparts (Loveday & Chiba, 1986). Boys' comics generally deal with such topics as sport, school life and relationships with parents and friends. Current female comics, typically contains romantic stories, portrays two quite conflicting heroic characters: "the self-sacrificing maternal figure who fulfills the male need for security, and the romanticized, nonconformist lady who independently and individually carves out her hedonistic existence" (Loveday & Chiba, 1982, cited in Loveday & Chiba, 1986, p. 166). Much of the background for the girls' comics are very un-Japanese with western-style buildings or apartments. Further, according to Loveday and Chiba (1986) the Japanese heroes and heroines of the female comics have a pronounced Caucasian physical appearance (big eyes, blond hair) which is much less so in men's comics. This Western orientation in female comics "appears to be a symbol of an alternative life-style, a liberation from the suppressive rigidities of traditional social organization" (Loveday & Chiba, 1986, p. 167).

It is worth noting that the content of Japanese adult male comics offers a mix of horror, crime and pornography in which women are portrayed as sex objects. There is also an increasing concern about an inclusion of sexual element in children's comics (such as boys lifting girls' skirts and pulling down their pants). However, Loveday and Chiba (1986) stated that many Japanese comic stories stress the

value of comradeship, loyalty, personal strength, and are "essentially moral with good invariably triumphing over evil."

Gender Roles Research

To the authors' knowledge, there is no previous research on gender roles in Japanese comics. So the authors reviewed gender roles in American comics to guide this study.

Content analysis studies of the American Sunday comics show that females "continue to appear less frequently and to remain in the home more often than males. They also continue to be portrayed in stereotypical roles" (Brabant & Mooney, 1986, p. 141). The six cartoons Brabant and Mooney (1986) analyzed showed sons to be more likely to be engaged in active rather than passive play while the reverse was true for daughters. Their results were consistent with Chafetz's (1974) analysis of commercials for children's programs, U'Ren's (1971) study of children textbooks, as well as Weitzman et al's (1972) and Heintz's (1987) investigations of children's picture books.

Chavez (1985) examined newspaper comic strips and concluded that they do perpetuate gender inequality. Women in the comics Chavez studied were depicted disproportionately less often as main characters and in work settings and disproportionately more often in the home and in child care activities than men. Also, men were represented far out of proportion to their true ratio in the population while women were under represented. This previous research suggests that gender depictions in cartoons have not kept up with cultural changes in gender roles.

While there have been studies of American comics, there has been little research in Japan. Nevertheless, Japanese studies on gender roles revealed that the structure of gender roles seemed to be a unipolar scale rather than a bipolar one (Shirakawa, Shiraishi & Sukemune, 1992). Research also showed gender role conflict in female adolescents—they were in relative conflict regarding acceptance of their gender roles.

Research Questions

Drawn from previous research, this study asked:

- 1) Is there a difference between males and females characters as to who initiates an action (i.e., touch, aggression)?
- 2) Is there a difference in the two types of activities, namely home care and child care, engaged by male and female characters?
- 3) Is there a difference in the location of appearance (inside or outside home) of male and female characters?

Methodology.

The present study involved a content analysis of 14 cartoon stories from two manga series - *Maison Ikkoku* and *Ranma*. These comic stories were chosen primarily because they were in English, and they

were available, although not representative, in the United States. Furthermore, the cartoonist of the comics, Rumiko Takahashi, is currently popular in Japan and is considered one of the world's best-selling comic artists.

Maison Ikkoku is a romantic comedy about a young university student and his love for a beautiful young widow who becomes his landlady. Ranma is about a young female martial artist who turns into a man when she is doused with hot water and switches back to female when he gets wet with cold water.

Two independent raters made judgments involving a total of 1,808 frames of four Maison Ikkoku and 10 Ranma stories. Raters made judgments involving 12 categories, tallying number of frames in which female and male characters appear under those categories. Some of the categories were taken from Chavez (1985).

The 12 categories were: 1) Actor, when a character is acting upon a target; 2) Target, when a character is a target of some action; 3) Aggressor, when a character initiates aggression; 4) Interaction, when a character initiates interaction; 5) Touch, when a character initiates touch; 6) Target aggression, when a character is the target of aggression; 7) Target touch, when a character is the target of touch; 8) Target interaction, when a character is the target of interaction; 9) Child care, when a character provides or engages in child care; 10) Home care, when a character provides or engages in home care or domestic work; 11) At the office, when a character is shown in his career or office; 12) Home, when a character is shown in his/her home

Results

Two criteria were used to judge inter-rater reliability for the two raters involved in the content analysis. To be considered reliable measures had to meet all of the following criteria: Composite reliability $>.80$ and Scott's Pi reliability $>.70$.

Measures of males and females as initiators and targets of interaction and aggression were not reliable and were not used in further analyses. All other categories were reliable.

Regarding the first research question as to who initiated the actions, the study found that 68% of the main actors were male and 32% were female. On the other hand, 62% of the primary targets of action were female while 38% were male. In addition, 55% of the initiation of touch was carried out by males compared to 45% for females. However, females were the targets of touch 59% of the time with males being targets of touch 41% of the time.

To answer research questions 2 and 3, which investigated the work roles in which males and females were depicted, the study found that females were responsible for 100% of the home care and 75% of the child care. Paralleling this, comparisons of the settings in which male and female characters appeared revealed that female characters

appeared inside home more often than men. Specifically, 71% of the home scenes involved females and only 29% included males. Similarly, 68% of the scenes at the office included males and only 32% involved females.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the Japanese comics examined, the depiction of females relative to males in relation to child care, the home, and work all followed the traditional pattern of "good wife and wise mother." Consistent with the findings of American comic strips (Brabant & Mooney, 1986; Chavez, 1985), the Japanese comics seemed to portray women in traditional and stereotypical roles. The message inherent in this two manga series was consistent with Reishausser's (1988) and Kamo's (1994) remarks that there is still a gender inequality in the Japanese society despite many social changes in women's social position after the World War II.

The generalizability of the findings from this sample of manga to other types of manga, however, is quite limited. While the work of Rumiko Takahashi represents approximately a third of the VIZ comic market of "Japanese animation dubbed in English," other cartoonists have created wide-ranging characters and story-lines. A wider sampling of the variety of manga needs to be studied including manga widely read in Japan but available only in Japanese.

The present study seems to support a growing feeling that much of the Japanese present-day comic literature lacks in "intellectual bite and full of shallow stereotypification" (Loveday & Chiba, 1986). A positive sign, however, is that there has been a move, mostly by university graduates, to raise comics' standards from being a mere entertainment product, providing an instant introverted form of escape, toward a more sophistication and richer development of the Japanese comic story lines. It is hoped that, along with the new approach, the portrayal of females in Japanese comics would reflect a truer picture of Japanese women's changing role toward equality in the post-war era.

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