

*Consuming and Interpreting Japanese Television Dramas: Attitudes among
University Students in Malaysia*

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Abstract

Japanese media cultures have become diversified in Malaysia, providing opportunities for local audiences to gain access to media products from varied sources and participate in its consumption. This triggers an increase in recognition for audiences as producers of rich cultural readings resulting from cross-border media consumption. This study examines the interpretations of Japanese television dramas as media text among Malaysian university students, who actively produce meanings out of their consumption. The 'foreign' aspects of Japanese dramas attract the students to perform negotiated readings and contested meanings in reflecting similarities and differences between Japanese and Malaysian society. Malaysian university students as audiences are capable of employing the creative process of identification with the knowledge of Japan that they already hold by sharing self-reflexive thoughts generated from the stories of their viewing experiences. I argue that cultivating discussions using Japanese television dramas serves as a platform for exploring the changing attitudes in audiences who constantly acquires cultural knowledge, values, and ideas through their consumption experiences. It is imperative to discuss the dynamics of audience narratives by considering the local socio-cultural influences towards the meanings produced. This helps to facilitate the idea of using media to enhance cultural connections that acknowledges multiple interpretations of transnational media consumption.

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Introduction

Young people in Malaysia grew up exposed to various Japanese cultural products. Yamato, Krauss, Tamam, Hassan, and Osman (2011) analyze the engagements of ordinary Malaysians with Japanese popular cultures such as *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (Japanese comic books), and television dramas. Their study highlights that consuming Japanese cultural products has not only become a part of everyday life among young Malaysians, but also a source to seek gratification. Young Malaysians appear to expand their continuous consumption of Japanese media products through the use of Internet in order to access media files without much restriction.

This research analyzes the active engagement of Malaysian students who consume Japanese television dramas under the context of audience reception analysis. Additionally, this study assumes that every audience produces diverse meanings out of media images and texts. The meanings in the viewing narratives generated by audiences will be examined to investigate the audiences' attitudes towards Japan.

Active audience consuming Japanese television dramas

Previous studies in relation to television reception recognize audience as being 'active' in producing textual interpretations and open discussion about their consumption experiences (Ang, 1985; Roscoe, Marshall, & Gleeson, 1995; Livingstone, 1998). Efforts to explain the diverse readings of television programs acknowledge the ability of audience to 'actively' interpret media text elements, suggesting that audiences are capable of forming some kind of relationship with different elements in the program's narrative. Additionally, audiences are able to selectively translate elements in the media text for daily use. According to Kim (2008), people depend on their engagements with the social and cultural environment to make sense and produce their own views of the world. This contributes to the idea that audiences make sense out of all that is happening in the media narrative based on knowledge and awareness about everyday life. In the context of this study, viewing an episode of the drama requires the audience to read embedded messages that relies on the audiences' experience and knowledge of the world to produce meanings and describe them.

Japanese television dramas gained its popularity with Asian audiences towards the end of 1990s. Studies that attempt to explain the popularity of Japanese television dramas suggest the idea that Asian audiences sense 'cultural proximity' with elements represented on screen (Iwabuchi, 2002; Leung, 2004). Additionally, audiences who actively rework with familiar and different cultural elements in the media text enhance their interpretive activity, providing greater believability and identification. Other studies on audiences consuming Japanese television dramas also explore the ways in which they actively identify with the storyline, themes, visuals, and characters in the text (Iwabuchi, 2001; Hu, 2008). According to Ko (2004), Japanese television dramas find success outside Japan due to the way narratives have been presented. Also known as "trendy" dramas, many stories reflect individual pursuit of success in modern urban settings, depicting their endurance with struggles and hardships encountered in life. Audiences are attracted to such elements because they suggest a way of life that corresponds to their own stories in actual reality (Iwabuchi, 2001). This also has implications towards attitudes among audiences.

In this study, focus group discussion was used to explore the reception of Japanese television dramas among university students under the assumption that every respondents produce different readings out of the media text. Five focus group discussions were conducted in 2011, with a total of 36 university students who participated in this research. The respondents composed of students between the ages of 18 to 24 years old. All respondents have experience watching Japanese dramas and are willing to share their interpretations, through recollections of their viewing experience. The respondents also have a vested interest in learning about Japan, as twenty one participants are Japanese language major students and fifteen students are members of the university's Japanese cultural society. This study acknowledges that each respondent holds their own knowledge about Japan, and such diversity brings out greater reflexivity and contested meanings in producing rich cultural readings.

Identifying with the appeals of Japanese dramas

When the respondents were asked to explain why they enjoy watching Japanese dramas, many of them attributed their viewing experiences to visual and emotional pleasures, citing elements such as 'good looking actors and actresses', beautiful locations', 'stylish fashion', 'inspirational themes', and 'humorous storyline' that appear in Japanese dramas. This points to the functional relationship between television program and audience. Sherry (2009) states that the audiences engage with media programs to experience enjoyment and relaxation, temporarily diverting from the issues one need to deal with in reality. Audiences have been found to derive pleasures from watching television dramas, as they identify with the storylines, characters, plots, emotions, and filming locations. While the respondents take pleasure from the visual qualities that appear on screen, they are nonetheless attracted to other aspects of Japanese dramas. For example, several respondents also regarded their consumption of dramas a learning experience in which they can translate elements such as language for practical use in everyday life. This can be exemplified by the following statements by two respondents:

At first, it [watching Japanese drama] was just a pastime because my brother watches it. I relied on subtitles back then and did not even know it was a Japanese drama. After I learn Japanese language, it became a learning method for me. (Ying Ting, 22 years old)

Sometimes I watch drama without subtitles to test my level. I found out that yes, I can understand. (Voon Hui, 21 years old)

According to Chua (2008), while audiences take pleasure in identifying with familiar elements in the drama, they are also attracted at the foreign aspects by "looking at a different world" (p. 197). Here, the attractiveness of Japanese drama is based on the lives of Japanese people interacting with others, and making connections with their social environment. In attempting to understand why the respondents favor watching Japanese dramas, many claim that they are able to view the lives of the Japanese people and witness how the society portrays social themes. For instance, the respondents shared Japanese drama titles that include stories about protagonist that becomes a victim of school bullying, domestic violence, and life threatening illness, such as *LIFE*, *Last Friends*, and *One Litre of Tears* respectively. The statements

below point out how respondents express admiration towards Japanese drama titled *LIFE* for the realistic depiction of issues related to bullying:

LIFE really gives an impact. I think I used a lot of curse words watching that. It's about bullying. It plays with your emotion a lot. I also liked the theme songs, the narratives. It's perfect. It taught me about true friendship and how to stand on your own when you are bullied. (Zakri, 24 years old)

I believe that after you watch *LIFE*, you will change somewhere in between your life. It's mostly about bullying in high school. I have yet to watch the last episode, but I really recommend it because probably in the future, you'll be a parent or teacher and this drama is about understanding the students or your own children. You might think you know your son or daughter well but it may not be the case. (Kristin, 19 years old)

The statements above demonstrated that respondents critically engage with the social themes presented in the drama storyline through empathy and emotion. Respondents who engage consciously with such dramas tend to position themselves as the fictional main character and evaluate the behaviors and decisions that the character made as the storyline progress. Furthermore, the respondents would describe the appropriateness of those decisions, by corresponding to the actual decisions they would have made, when given the same situation in reality.

In relation to the discussion about Japan's attractive cultural aspects that are considered different, words that were frequently cited by the respondents are 'discipline', 'moral values', 'cleanliness and hygiene', and 'efficiency'. For instance, in terms of discipline, the respondents expressed that they are impressed by portrayal of Japanese individuals and groups who are constantly working hard in daily routines such as work, studies, and attending to family obligations. The respondents noted differences between the idea of work ethics in Japan and Malaysia. For instance, working overtime is a common characteristic in Japanese work culture, but not obligatory in Malaysia.

Audiences who identify with elements in television dramas are also known to be capable of rejecting elements on screen. According to Chua (2012), the alternative to identification is known as 'distancing', and is used to explain how audience can detach themselves from accepting unfamiliar elements. The respondents do not necessarily accept the images in Japanese dramas directly without thinking of the implications for local practices. In terms of culture, there are certain elements in Japanese cultural characteristics that are considered complex and disagreeable. For instance, Siu Jen (22 years old) remarked that Japanese women enjoy putting on heavy makeup and wear loud fashionable clothes, suggesting that it is difficult for Malaysian women to identify with such portrayal of fashion because they tended to be more conservative. Here, she distanced herself from accepting Japanese fashion viewed in Japanese dramas.

Watching Japanese drama characters can remind the respondents several distinctive characteristics and cultural practices that are different than what is practiced locally. The respondents reflect about their own society while making sense of another. They are capable of accepting several elements, and rejecting those that are deemed

undesirable or difficult to identify with. Audiences negotiate with readings derived from understanding messages obtained from their viewing experiences, and that the negotiated readings can have “hybrid meaning” (Ott & Mac, 2010, p.226). For instance, respondents enjoy watching *One Litre of Tears* because they can relate with familial endurance and human perseverance, but those who disliked gloomy narratives may refuse the distressing emotions that overwhelm the storyline.

Acquisition of knowledge and values

This research discovers that the students are also paying attention to mundane everyday routines in Japanese dramas such as the way characters are eating, interacting, and using public transportations. For example, several respondents stated admiration for the public transportations that were shown in Japanese dramas. As a result of such admiration, the respondents then downplay the local public transportation, as exemplified in the observation below:

- Azlina: They use public transport a lot. They don't really drive cars. They walk everywhere too, or use trains. I wish there was a bullet train here.
- Kristin: And they come on time. They enjoy taking busses as well. For us, it's like waiting for half an hour or more and still not coming. So we ended up comparing the countries.

Several respondents express similar interest towards the organized lifestyle of the Japanese people that involves the use of public transports such as busses, trains, and bicycles. This points out to cultural presence that is different than Malaysia, allowing the respondents to attach little importance to local public transportation when actual comparisons were made. Here, cultural differences have been reworked to enhance the attractiveness of Japanese drama as a media text.

Some of the students find it easy to associate with the attractiveness of human values in Japanese dramas, given that it is very much in line with the effort of the government to promote ideal Asian values into the roles and identities of Malaysian society. The Look East Policy that was initiated in 1982 by Mahathir¹, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, aims to promote learning from Japan's experiences on national developments. As a result of this policy, many young Malaysians were sent to various Japanese educational institutions to promote learning from Japan, particularly in the areas of management skills, work ethics, technological know-hows, moral values, and discipline. At the same time, other efforts made in response to this policy were an increase in dialogue opportunities and cultural exchanges. While the policy had no impact on people's consumption of Japanese media and cultural products, it certainly promotes a favorable cultural climate for such consumption.

The relations between Malaysia and Japan is describe by Furuoka (2007) as ‘friendly and close’, making it possible for Japanese cultural products to be favorably

¹ A speech on the Look East Policy is available online at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan website, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/malaysia/pmv0212/speech.html>

circulated and consumed in Malaysia. In their attempt to explain the popularity of the Japanese drama *Oshin*² in South East Asia, Mahathir and Ishihara (1995) indicate that Asian audiences can feel empathy with other Asians, “Our pop culture strikes a sympathetic chord across Asia. No hard sell is necessary; the audience is receptive” (p. 88). They believe that Asians can identify with the hardships and determination of other Asians, adding that one can succeed as well with effort put forth. *Oshin* became immensely popular in 1984. It was aired across countries in Asia including China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. *Oshin*’s popularity was attributed to the hopeful messages on human values related to endurance and perseverance that appeared in the drama narrative (Takahashi, 1998).

Another significant feature in Japanese dramas that attracted the respondents was the portrayal of cultural behaviors in Japanese lifestyle that seems to be different from the actual practice in Malaysia. The respondents stated that observing the way Japanese drama characters on screen behave in public setting, at home, and in workplace help them to pick up the good values and apply in actual reality. The respondents place significance on values that influence personalities. These values emphasize desirable ethical traits that one should embrace in order to project good impressions towards others. Respondents are attracted to intangible values that can be extracted from the attitudes of characters in the dramas, as exemplified in the following statements:

After I watch a drama and I discover a moral value I don’t have, then I would think whether I should do it or not. How shall I change? Can I be like that? Even if I have adapted it into my own personality, I would feel like it’s myself unconsciously. Watching *One Litre of Tears*, the value that I have learned the most is the way she (the protagonist) tried to be courageous, despite her close encounter to death. She still tries her best and motivating the rest, saying that it’s not so scary and it’s not the end. I’m the type who likes to laugh and be happy so I discovered the motto ‘don’t worry, be happy’ from this drama and it becomes my personality. (Yi Ting, 20 years old)

In *GTO (Great Teacher Onizuka)*, the character is really strong and is trying to change things. He can do things he wants and is determined. It shows that we need to be strong. (Min Lim, 21 years old)

It was found that respondents who consume Japanese dramas seek learning materials associated with human values, packaged with hints that can be employed as resource to cope with real life challenges. Additionally, all respondents are in agreement that Japanese dramas exhibit public responsibilities in the form of moral values that can be extracted as a source of advice, an observation that Hu (2008) refers to as the power of “implicit therapy” (p.116). Viewing how Japanese drama characters persevere in times of adversity helps the audience to reflect their own lives and provide encouragement to cope with their own reality as well. Similarly, Leung’s (2004) study shows that Hong Kong audiences are receptive of ‘ganbaru’³ messages in Japanese

² The drama follows the struggles and hardships of a Japanese woman named Oshin throughout her life during the Meiji period.

³ Ganbaru refers to a Japanese motto that is commonly used to project motivation, encouraging individuals or groups to do their best, without giving up.

dramas. Additionally, they demonstrate the ability to apply the ideal nature of *ganbaru* in everyday life. Leung adds that Hong Kong viewers favor *ganbaru* messages in Japanese dramas because it helps them to cope with challenges in life. Audiences can alternate between reality and fictional narrative by seeking solutions from dramas and applying them in the local everyday.

However, the tendency to identify with attractive Japanese drama elements can become problematic when students carry positive attitudes towards Japan, but project negative feelings toward local aspects in Malaysian culture that has become ordinary. The attractiveness of local reality has been significantly reduced as the respondents represent Japanese drama elements as an actual reality in Japan, a reality in which Malaysia ought to achieve. The students associate Japan with advanced technologies, well structured urban life, discipline, trendy youth cultures, hardworking individuals, and punctuality. This may have been the result of the dominant messages that Malaysians use to describe their knowledge and understanding about Japan. This is in line with the tendencies among Hong Kong audiences to select elements in Japanese dramas that suit with their “longstanding stereotypes” (p.98) of Japan (Leung, 2004). In response to this, I argue that the respondents display the tendency to rely on limited knowledge and actual experiences of Japan to make sense of cultural readings obtained from watching Japanese dramas, blurring the perceived and actual reality of their own society. Other than media programs, many students claimed that they gathered knowledge about Japan from the stories they’ve heard another person, reading about Japan in publications, and attending locally held Japanese events. Some respondents also indicated that watching Japanese dramas helps them to clarify the knowledge that they collected about Japan, while others claimed that the accumulated interest may ‘bring’ them to Japan in future.

Towards the end of the discussion, the respondents were asked to explain their tendency to make comparison between what is viewed on screen and their local experiences. To some of the respondents, making such comparisons helps them to assert personal understanding and awareness about another society to counteract against the conditions in which they live in. Images in Japanese dramas can be translated into essence to be used for achieving self-realization about personal growth, a means for narrowing the disparity of social adequateness.

Conclusion

This paper examined how Malaysian students as active audiences of Japanese television dramas negotiate the similarities and differences in visual and cultural elements viewed on screen. They relied on their existing perceptions about the everyday and understanding of Japan. Japanese dramas serve as a platform for the students to explore their own attitudes while ‘looking’ at another society. It is clear that watching Japanese dramas is more than just visual enjoyment. The ability of the students in consuming transnational media product and make creative use out of their interpretations from watching Japanese dramas demonstrates diverse readings that encourage learning from observing another culture on screen. Watching Japanese dramas becomes part of their personal story that enriches their everyday lives. However, it remains to be seen whether the ongoing consumption of Japanese dramas produces meanings that can potentially challenge representations of Japan in Malaysia. Even though the screen projects a world of fictionalized characters and produces a

fantasized imagination of a society across border, watching Japanese dramas provided the respondents a platform to discover greater appreciation to simple things in life.

Exposure to Japanese cultures via drama consumption allows respondents to generate critical understanding about their attitudes towards Japan in terms of tolerating with cultural similarities and differences. This study shows that the respondents were not passively accepting all aspects of Japanese dramas, but to observe “sophisticated content that depicts universal aspects of human beings” (p.206) (Yamato, 2012). Consuming Japanese dramas allow the respondents to selectively engage with human values and acquire cultural knowledge that resonate with their current lives. It is not surprising that the respondents maintained optimistic attitudes towards learning from the content of Japanese dramas, given that they believe in the necessary accumulation of cultural values for self development and growth to cope with everyday reality.

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