

Towards Manga as Cultural Potpourri: Dramaturgy of Ethnicity and Diversity in Selected Malaysian Manga

Ke Arah Kepelbagaian Melalui Manga: Dramaturgi Etnisiti dan Kepelbagaian dalam Manga Malaysia Terpilih

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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been an increase in the consumption and production of Japanese comics or manga in Malaysia, to the extent that Malaysians are producing their own homegrown manga titles. For example, Gempak Starz, a Malaysian comics and manga publisher, has been instrumental in spearheading the launch of many localised manga titles. Manga, which originates from Japan, has often been the topic of debate, regarding its depiction of characters, especially in terms of ethnicity. Iwabuchi (1998) used the term “culturally odorless” to describe the way in which many manga characters do not appear to belong to any particular ethnicity or culture. My research question is, how does Malaysian homegrown manga differ from the standard Japanese manga? For example, are there visual and thematic differences? Does it have potential for social critique and education? This paper analyses the way ethnicity and diversity are depicted in several selected manga titles from Gempak Starz’s most popular manga series, highlighting the ways in which ethnicity and culture are made recognisable. I comparatively analyse the dramaturgical approach in selected Japanese manga and selected Malaysian manga published and translated by Gempak Starz. I ultimately confirm that there is indeed a second wave of manga in Malaysia that transcends the initial “culturally odorless” appearance of traditional Japanese manga as outlined by Iwabuchi (Chan, 2018).

Keywords: Malaysian manga; cultural odorlessness; dramaturgy; ethnicity in comics; diversity in comics

ABSTRAK

Semenjak dewasa ini, terdapat peningkatan di dalam kepenggunaan dan penghasilan komik Jepun ataupun manga, di Malaysia, sehinggakan Malaysia telah mulai menerbitkan manga tempatan sendiri. Sebagai contoh, penerbit komik Jepun tempatan, Gempak Starz, telah menjadi pelopor dalam menghasilkan manga oleh penulis dan pelukis Malaysia. Manga, yang berasal daripada Jepun, telah menjadi isu perdebatan, mengenai cara watak-wataknya dipersembahkan, terutama sekali apabila berkait dengan topik etnisiti. Iwabuchi (1998) telah menggunakan istilah “tanpa bau kebudayaan” untuk menggambarkan bagaimana kebanyakan watak dalam manga seperti tidak mempunyai etnisii atau kebudayaan yang jelas kelihatan. Persoalan kajian saya adalah, bagaimana manga tempatan Malaysia berbeza daripada manga Jepun yang biasa? Sebagai contoh, adakah perbezaan dari segi visual dan tema? Adakah ia mempunyai potensi untuk kritikan sosial dan pendidikan? Makalah ini menganalisis bagaimana topik etnisiti dan kepelbagaian digambarkan di dalam manga popular oleh Gempak Starz, menyerlahkan cara ia dikenalpasti. Saya membuat analisis perbandingan di antara manga Jepun terjemahan dan manga tempatan Malaysia terbitan Gempak Starz yang

terpilih. Akhirnya, saya mengesahkan bahawa terdapatnya manga tempatan Malaysia yang bukanlah “tanpa bau kebudayaan” sepertimana yang dinyatakan oleh Iwabuchi (1998).

Kata kunci: Manga tempatan Malaysia; “tanpa bau kebudayaan”; dramaturgi; etnisiti dalam komik; kepelbagaian dalam komik

INTRODUCTION

This paper asserts and demonstrates the argument that the depiction of ethnicity in Japanese comics, or *manga*, is existent, especially when adapted into localised versions. *Manga* has historically been a Japanese art form, evolving from *ukiyo-e*, eventually gaining place as a contemporary form of entertainment. However, due to its monocultural origins, and coupled with the fact that it tends to be associated with fantasy, *manga* is not considered as a serious platform in dealing with the discourse of ethnicity. This paper thus highlights how *manga* has evolved into a platform which is capable of encompassing issues of diversity such as ethnicity, as part of the human experience. The argument is thus that we should elevate the status of *manga* as an international art form or medium of communication that enables the understanding of the human experience from a dramaturgical standpoint.

Perhaps, a similar assertion has been made by scholars in other nations, hence this paper aims to do the same for Malaysia. Numerous studies have been made regarding *manga*'s increasing global outreach, especially in Europe, topped by consumer markets in countries such as France, Italy, and Germany, as well as expectedly so in other Asian countries. In addition, Chinese *manhua* and Korean *manhwa* are closely connected comic genres. *Manga* is equally popular in North America, and is gaining attention in Latin America. It is thus nearly global as a medium of communication. Beyond communication in the form of entertainment, this paper outlines its more profound abilities. It does so by comparing the visual, thematic, and structural differences between Japanese and Malaysian *manga*, highlighting its potential for teaching and learning, especially with regards to understanding diversity.

Of course, *manga* is not without its critiques, where detractors view it as trivial or even prone to unsavoury content, but one must argue in response that the same observation could be made regarding any medium of communication, including but not limited to books, art, music, and movies. Thus the approach of pigeonholing something is not an objective or fair way of assessing the merits of a particular medium of communication. With that explained, we shall proceed to analyse *manga* as one would analyse any other medium of communication, which are not exempt from the formulation of public opinion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Manga is a form of Japanese comics that originated from Japan in a form known as *ukiyo-e*, woodblock prints, or "pictures of the floating world" (Brenner, 2007; in Chan, 2018). Its outstanding characteristics include a unique drawing style, in which characters are depicted with large expressive eyes, up-close perspectives of characters' facial expressions, framed in panels laced with textual vocalization of sounds, as well as explanatory notes or comments by the *mangaka* (*manga* artist). *Manga* genres are categorised based on the age and gender of its target readers, for example, *shonen manga* (for teenage boys), *shojo manga* (for teenage girls), *josei manga* (for women), and *seinen manga* (for men) (Wong, 2006; in Chan, 2018). The God of Manga, Osamu Tezuka (Power 2009), author of the famous *manga Astro Boy*, was

convinced that manga's format could be used to tell every kind of story, from adventure, to comedy to serious drama (Brenner 2007). *Astro Boy* was a Japanese comic book or *manga* series originally called *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Iron-Armed Atom*, 1951–1958), with *Astro Boy* originally called *Atom* in the original series; and had later been adapted into an *animé* (Natsu Onoda Power 2009). Comics meanwhile, may be understood as a form of visual language. Cohn (2005) problematised the definition of “comics” in terms of distinct features: images, text, sequentiality, and the ways in which they interact; remarking that although comics consist of images and text, comics utilise those differently from other mediums, such as children's' books. Cohn (2008) further pinpointed the unique characteristics of *manga* through the concept of Japanese Visual Language (JVL), namely the “*manga*” style, which includes the “big eyes” and “small mouth” schema as well as specific graphic emblems that form *manga*'s conventional visual vocabulary, with a total of 73 conventionalised graphic schemes in Japanese manga (Cohn & Ehly 2015).

Manga is more than just a “genre” or “medium”, but a cultural cycle, consisting of the publication cycle, the participation cycle, and the consumption cycle (Beaty & Weidenbaum 2012). In addition, Beaty & Weidenbaum (2012) state, that to read *manga* outside Japan involves several acts of distancing, which include the translation process, the time lag of *manga*'s storyline contexts, and the absence of the weekly or monthly serial cycle, as *manga* outside Japan is generally consumed in paperback collections reprinted years to decades after their original serial publication, known as *tankōbon*, which resemble graphic novels.

Concurrently, there are also other types of graphic novels, including American comics, French *bande dessinée*, and East Asian variants of *manga*, namely Korean *manhwa* and Chinese *manhua*. The latter two are most similar to Japanese *manga* in terms of structure, but there are also significant visual, thematic and structural differences. Malaysian cartoon or comic art is also an established field and has evolved over four main periods, namely the Pioneer Era (the 1930s to 1957, or Malaysia's Independence from the British), the New Era (1957 to 1970s), the Glory Era (the 1980s), and the Pluralist Era (since the 1990s) (Muliyadi Mahamood, 2012; in Chan, 2018). Malay comics, such as the famous *Gila-Gila*, *Ujang*, and *Utopia* also has its own specifications, such as being A4 sized, and is thus bigger sized than *manga* (Roslina Mamat et al, 2015). Meanwhile, Tan (2014) observed that the Malaysian Chinese comic scene emerged in the 1970s and reached its peak in 1970; but although produced by Malaysian Chinese authors and written in Chinese, did not fulfil the three criteria of style, namely unique illustration, content and culture, and thus does not constitute a fully developed contemporary comic style (Tan 2014; in Chan 2018).

Manga has its equivalents or contemporaries worldwide. In Korea, comics are called *manhwa*, while in China and the Chinese-speaking world, it is called *manhua*. According to CBR.com, Korean *manhwa* was inspired by Japanese culture and language through the 1910s to the 1940s, rose in popularity in the 1950s, and declined in the 1960s, but has recently become popular again due to the proliferation of ‘webtoons’ in platforms such as Daum Webtoon and Naver Webtoon (Peralta 2020). Bae (2017) notes that in Korea, ‘webtoons’, or online comics have now become a staple of popular culture for over a decade, and have long since overtaken print *manhwa* in popularity and market size. Readers used to access print *manhwa* in *manhwa* rental stores, which was the primary space where print *manhwa* was read (Bae 2017). However, the shift towards ‘webtoons’ resulted in a change of space, and led to a change in sociocultural connotations attached to the genre (Bae 2017). Today, Korean *manhwa* has been developed into educational material such as applications and e-books for children, in order to boost reading activities amidst a decline, and is now the second largest book segment after

educational books (Korean Publishers Association and the National Library of Korea; in Siti Ezaleila Mustafa & Azizah Hamzah, 2014).

Wong (2002) defines *manhua* as a Chinese term which is commonly used in Hong Kong as an equivalent to cartoons or comics. In its traditional sense however, the Chinese term *manhua* referred to satirical and caricatural art containing social critique, though it has since evolved to include other foreign influences (Hung, 1994; in Wong, 2002). Wong (2002) also observed that the development of Hong Kong *manhua* led to the establishment of a unique local style and a flourishing industry by the 1990s. De Masi & Chen (2010) however note that the word *manhua* is used in China today to describe not only cartoons and comics published in China, but also translations of Japanese works and, in general, to comics in the Chinese language. Among others, contemporary successful Chinese *manhua* titles include ‘Zibuyu’, and ‘Confucius Did Not Say’, published by Shueisha Publishing Co. Ltd, one of the largest production and distribution companies of Japanese cartoons and *manga* (De Masi & Chen, 2010).

The manga market abroad has been thriving since 2005, when Asia (excepting Japan) comprised 42% of it, the US 36%, and the rest of the world 22% (Japan External Trade Organisation, 2005); and in Europe, France, Italy, and Germany were its major consumers (Boissou et al, 2010). France is the most developed export market for *manga*, even ahead of the United States, where since 1990-1991, *manga* had gained a 38% share of the French comics market (Bouissou 2006). In France, comics are called *bande dessinée* (strip cartoons), and are also known as *les BDs*, "lay bay day"; and there are also *roman graphique* (graphic novels) (Library of Congress). *Bande dessinée* have short one-off narratives, while *roman graphique* have long-running narratives stretching across many chapters or volumes (Library of Congress). In 1996, the *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême* (Angoulême International Comics Festival) which was held since 1974, discussed the origins of *bande dessinée* (Grove 1993). The definition of *bande dessinée* has become more fluid and dynamic in terms of definition compared to twenty years ago, when *Tintin* was seen as the epitome of the form (Smolderen 2009). It is considered the “ninth art” (*Le Neuvième Art*) and thus holds a high status as an art form, occasionally exhibited at art galleries such as the Louvre; while French bookstores carry *bande dessinée*, American comics, as well as *manga* (Library of Congress). Many BDs as well as *roman graphique* tackle serious subjects, and as they continue to evolve, there has been a demand especially among today's youth for the representation of greater diversity, such as women and people of colour (Library of Congress).

Meanwhile, the American comic market comprises among others, American superhero comics, its most popular genre, as well as imported *manga* from Japan. There had also been an effort to produce its own homegrown *manga*. Original English language (OEL) manga originated during the manga boom in the West (2002-2008) (Acosta 2016). This was originally intended to create original works to be consumed in the same manner as imported Japanese *manga*, but instead the public considered OEL as inferior to Japanese *manga* (Acosta 2016). OEL was then rebranded into “global manga” (Anime News Network, 2006). Despite the fact that American and Japanese publishers dominate comic book sales globally, there are significant differences in both contexts and products (Hernandez-Perez 2016). For example, as mentioned, the superhero genre is the most popular genre in American comics, and is often criticised for being considered mainstream (Hernandez-Perez 2016). Instead, Japanese comics, which are particularly diverse in terms of demographic and generic segmentation, show a greater homogeneity in the use of stylistic codes which have come to be known as Japanese Visual Language (JVL) (Cohn 2010; in Hernandez-Perez 2016). At the beginning of the 21st century, the American publishing market attempted several strategies to reap success from the

international appeal of *manga* and *animé* (Japanese animation; from the French word *animé*) (Hernandez-Perez 2016). These strategies included introducing Japanese cultural elements, and the adaptation of Japanese Visual Language, via publishing products of Japanese and international authorship – an attempt which was executed through the publishing imprint Mangaverse (2000-2003; 2005-2006) (Hernandez-Perez 2016). These strategies were composed of elements such as aspects of the story, the deconstruction/appropriation of characters, different forms of transcultural adaptation, and hybridisation of media and genres (Hernandez-Perez 2016). Concurrently, the issue of race and ethnicity was tackled in an American superhero comic, namely the now-worldwide famous Black Panther, made into a Marvel movie recently. Hudlin made the character of Black Panther an icon of a 21st century (“race man”), by rendering him symbolic of a society superior to Western ones; making his land as aspirant for all Black people, especially Black Americans; displaying what could be accomplished by maintaining dynamic traditions and internal control; and presenting a man who completes himself with an equal partner (Yates 2017). America’s first Black Superhero, Marvel Comics’ Black Panther (T’challa), has been a symbol of Black Pride, Black Unity, and Black Superiority in his various iterations for nearly 50 years (Yates 2017). The Library Journal also charts the evolution of American *manga*, noting that the first wave began with traditional Japanese *manga*, followed by the second wave which contained Korean *manhwa* and Chinese *manhua*, followed by the third wave consisting of original English language (OEL), and finally the fourth wave which is global *manga* - listed by graphic novel publisher, Saturday AM.

“Diversity” as a concept has a unique personal history, within the paradigm of social theory. One of its leading scholars, Steven Vertovec, remarked that “in the last decade the proliferation and mutually conditioning effects of additional variables shows that it is not enough to see diversity only in terms of ethnicity, as is regularly the case both in social science and the wider public sphere” (Vertovec 2007: 1025). Across the globe, more people – from more varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, subject to more varied conditions of mobility and legal status – come into regular contact with one another in today’s growing cities (Vertovec 2015: 1). Recently, there have been efforts to problematise the concept of diversity, especially regarding its enhanced form, super-diversity. Vertovec (2007: 1024) defined super-diversity as a concept created to express the following phenomenon in the United Kingdom, which is “distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of immigrants who have arrived over the last decade, who are: new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated, and legally stratified”.

In Chan (2018)’s paper on how Malaysian *manga* acts as dramaturgy of “everyday-defined realities”, the author applies Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (1996)’s concept of “everyday-defined realities”, namely people’s grassroots ways of defining their identity, to explaining the function of Malaysian *manga* for the reader. Chan (2018) uses Goffman (1959)’s theory of dramaturgy to outline the ways in which Malaysian *manga* (for example, Dreamerz and Leoz’s *Kepahitan Tersembunyi*) acts as a stage for the dramatization of these everyday-defined realities and its impact on individual identities. Goffman (1959) devised the concept of dramaturgical analysis as a sociological framework in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Life was viewed as a stage where individuals managed their desired self-image to be projected upon the eyes of others. The front stage is the sum total of this desired self-image to be publicly projected; while the actual preparation is achieved behind the scenes, in what is called the back stage. This could include learning a language, affecting an accent (to suit a depiction of an associated social class); following a fashion trend; maintaining one’s figure and beauty; and adopting the fashionable opinions and values of the present day. All this hard work goes on behind the scenes and an individual’s personal struggles with acquiring

these is not meant for the public eye. With that said, this present paper limits itself to analysing manga's ability to express diversity through its visual, structural, and thematic aspects. It demonstrates how *manga* is particularly adept at portraying these machinations artfully and seamlessly through its very structure.

Diversity in Manga

An evolution

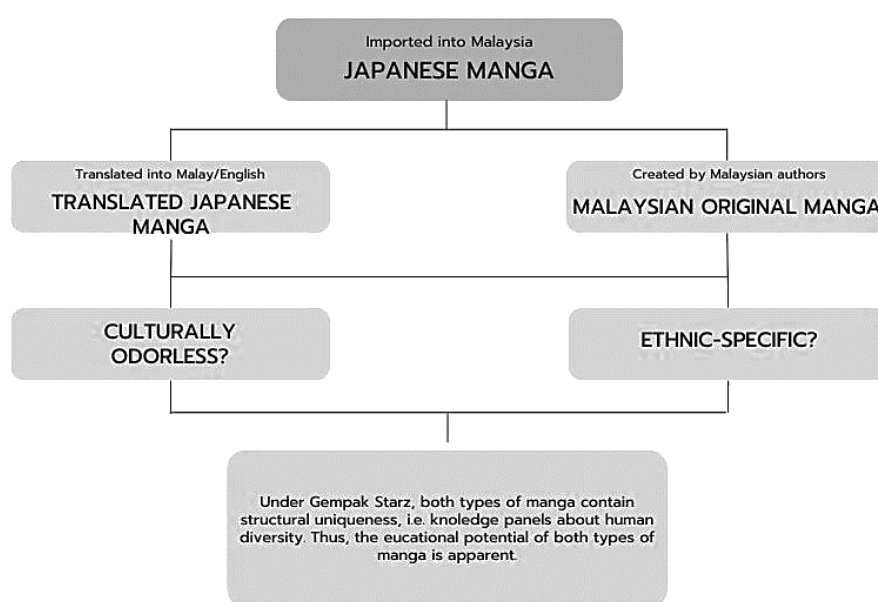


FIGURE 1. Evolution of diversity depictions in manga, from Japanese manga to Malaysian original manga (diagram created by Chan, 2022)

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

From the review of the existing literature and its main themes, I have formulated the following research objectives, which are to discern and outline the differences between Malaysian and Japanese *manga*, visually, thematically, and structurally, to decide what makes Malaysian *manga* unique. This is in relation to its depiction of diversity and ethnicity in a culturally recognisable context, which is Malaysia. It also aims to outline the educational content and potential of Malaysian original *manga*.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to answer the following research questions, namely:

1. What are the visual, thematic, and structural differences between Malaysian *manga* and Japanese *manga*?

2. Does Malaysian *manga* express diversity, including but not limited to depictions of ethnicity?
3. Is there educational potential in Malaysian *manga* and how is this demonstrated?

METHODOLOGY

For both Japanese and Malaysian *manga*, comics from the publisher Gempak Starz were selected, as it is currently the largest and most influential *manga* and comics publisher in Malaysia, among others. Gempak Starz carries translated Japanese *manga* and publishes local homegrown Malaysian *manga*. Several series which aim to be educational were selected, and a title selected from each. Selected *manga* consisted of Japanese graphic novels translated into Malay, and selected original Malaysian *manga*. Four *manga* titles were selected for each category. *Manga* consists of one-shot titles (standalone single volumes) and multiple volume series (serialised *manga* chapters in magazines which are later compiled into book volumes ranging up to tens of volumes). One-shot *manga* titles were prioritised, since the volume would be already complete at the time of analysis. The comparison from the visual, thematic, and structural approaches, as well as educational and content about diversity is presented in the following tables.

RESULTS

VISUAL, THEMATIC, AND STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALAYSIAN MANGA AND JAPANESE MANGA

Aspect	Japanese <i>Manga</i>	Malaysian <i>Manga</i>
Visual	Contains culturally odorless and culturally specific types.	In some titles, ethnicity is made specific and recognisable.
Thematic	There are moral values and other themes but the reader is supposed to detect them on their own.	Moral values spelt out explicitly.
Structural	Authors' comments.	Authors' comments. Knowledge panels.
Educational	Is not explicitly spelt out as a learning objective. But some titles do have potential to educate on specific topics such as culinary arts, martial arts, social stratification, history, etc. There are specific educational <i>manga</i> , e.g. focusing on topics like statistics/science, etc.	Knowledge panels added specifically for this purpose, perhaps to elevate the status of comics/ <i>manga</i> .

TABLE 1. Comparison of visual, thematic, structural and educational differences in Japanese and Malaysian manga (Chan, 2021)

MALAYSIAN MANGA AND ITS EXPRESSIONS OF DIVERSITY

Sociological Concepts/Themes	Japanese <i>Manga</i>	Malaysian <i>Manga</i>
Ethnicity	√	√
Social Class	√	√
Family & Relationships	√	√
Gender	√	√
Power	√	√

Moral Values	√	√ (explicitly stated)
“Japanese-ness”	√	√ + Malaysian-ness
Relevance to social issues	√	√

TABLE 2. Thematic Comparison of a Japanese Manga and a Malaysian Manga

EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL IN MALAYSIAN MANGA

Educational Feature	Learning Outcome
Knowledge panels	Cultural festivals, customs, traditions, heritage
Author’s explanation/comments	Understanding of purpose of structural element
Explicitly stated discussion of moral values	Acquiring moral values experientially (albeit vicariously)

TABLE 3. Educational features in Malaysian manga

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

From the findings above, it is apparent that Japanese as well as Malaysian *manga* possess significant social commentary embedded within, including but not limited to: ethnicity, social class, family and relationships, gender, power, moral values, and relevance to social issues. This offers readers informal exposure to these sociological concepts and themes, thus enhancing one’s understanding of abstract concepts. In addition, this platform opens up discourse into the cultural similarities and differences between Japan and Malaysia, and can also involve cultures from more than just these two countries, such as those mentioned above like France, the United States, Korea, China and other countries. As of the present, *manga* has demonstrated potential to actively act as a tool for expressing diversity. Malaysian *mangaka* Kaoru, for example, has authored at least one specific volume whose theme centres on learning Japanese culture, as part of a series. *Manga*, and especially Malaysian homegrown *manga*, is thus a promising platform to create dramaturgical understanding, allowing viewers to imagine its characters as social actors in the readers’ own personal social contexts.

There are certain differences between Malaysian homegrown *manga* and Japanese *manga* (or other transcultural adaptations). Chief among these would be that Malaysian *manga* contains the following uniqueness: visually, ethnicity is deliberately made specific and recognisable especially to a Malaysian reader; thematically, moral values are spelt out explicitly instead of being left open to interpretation; structurally, authors’ comments that exist in Japanese *manga* also exist in Malaysian *manga*, except in the latter it is complemented by knowledge panels listing down facts and figures beyond just the author’s opinions. Thus Malaysian *manga* appears to very intentionally posit itself as educational material in an infotainment sense.

Graphic novels, including but not limited to *manga*, provide valuable insights into its characters’ front stage and backstage behaviours. This is the essence of dramaturgy. What differentiates *manga* from other mediums of communication such as films, television programmes, and other graphic novels, is that *manga* emphasises a direct view into the motivations of its characters, through its structural and narrative aspects. Thus, its readers can

be instantly drawn into engaging with the storyline through the eyes of the characters by delving into their psyches, root for those characters, and experiencing the plot through the perspective of the character as a social actor. This is dramaturgical because it portrays, for the reader's benefit, what goes on in the characters' minds as they evaluate a situation and the way in which those characters engage in impression management. This is one aspect that is uniquely emphasised in *manga* through its use of the up-close perspective, such as macro shots. The reader is able to put themselves in the characters' shoes and understand their situation, despite it possibly being foreign to the reader. Therein lies the potential for understanding diversity in terms of characters' experiences. As Boissou et al (2010) also observed, *manga* is not just a reading format, it also allows fans to interact with like-minded people. The social dimension of the fandom as a community played a role of great importance for a significant majority of the fans, with the Internet being an important medium (Boissou et al 2010).

Essentially, the process of reading *manga* requires its own specific cultural capital, which is not difficult to accumulate, and, as Kacsuk (2016) highlights, is also distinguishable between Bourdieu's concepts of pure and popular aesthetic disposition. Knowledge panels, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, provide the necessary social, cultural, and historical information and skill for the reader to follow the story. As Boissou et al (2010) found, fans' motivation for reading *manga*, besides escapism, was also because respondents found it easy to identify themselves with. Boissou et al (2010) also discovered that fantastic *manga* stories often required a high degree of attention and seriousness from the reader, because of a complex narrative together with syncretistic association of themes, figures, and objects coming together from many different cultures, and that when comparing *manga* and European comics, respondents rated *manga* characters as "more emotionally attractive" than those of European comics.

This may be because in *manga*, flashbacks are often provided for the reader to understand the characters' pasts, motives, and intentions, in a way that is informative instead of purely aesthetic. This enables the reader to form connections with the characters in *manga*, beyond the constructs and scales of good versus evil, protagonists versus antagonists, and so forth. It allows for a portrayal of the spectrum of the many shades of grey between pure black and white depictions of heroes versus villains in other forms of media. *Manga's* format allows for emotional engagement and a sophisticated comprehension of the many layers of human interaction, from the ego, to the culture, and the superstructure of society. Also, characters in *manga* often tend to focus on micro problems rather than problems that relate to saving the entire world, and therefore this makes it very relatable to the individual. According to Cohn, Taylor-Weiner & Grossman (2012), research on visual attention has shown that Americans tend to focus more on focal objects of a scene, while Asians attend to the surrounding environment, while Cohn (2014) noted that how a scene is framed appears to differ across cultures. For example, Cohn (2014) explained that Japanese *manga* proportionally show less than a whole scene (monos, micros) more often than they show a whole scene (macros), which is different than American comics, where whole scenes are provided outright.

Malaysian *manga* has also come a long way in being able to depict the everyday-defined realities of its people. In Roslina Mamat et al (2015)'s study, the authors studied similarities and differences in external characteristics of *manga* and *dojinshi* (fan art of *manga*) caricatures in Malaysia. They found that Malaysian *dojinshi* artists, or those who drew fan art of *manga*, consisted of the following: writers who fully incorporated external characteristics of *manga*; writers who included Malaysian and Japanese *manga* characteristics in their characters; and writers who fully utilised Malaysian characteristics in *dojinshi*. Hence, it is refreshing to witness the growth of commercial original homegrown Malaysian *manga* which has its own

unique local style. Yamato (2014) and Iwabuchi (1998) also suggest that transnational media texts of Japanese popular culture may be potential materials for reflecting and discussing the “individual proximity” in people, social issues, or phenomenon (rather than “essential culture” which is linked to the national/ethnic origin) (Chan, 2018).

Finally, in response to the observation made by Tan (2014) regarding the lack of a distinct Malaysian Chinese comic style, I add that Dreamerz and Leoz’s *Kepahitan Tersembunyi* bears some resemblance in content to this Malaysian Chinese wave of comics due to its depictions of Chinese ethnicity through a *wantan mee* family business; and that subsequent to this particular volume, there have been many new *manga* volumes that followed this mould. The stories tend to depict Chinese ethnicity and consciousness from the modern and historical aspects, as can be seen in the emergence of a volume specifically on *wuxia* (Chinese martial arts), and another on the Chinese *kopitiam* (coffee shop). However, these are not exclusively written in Chinese but in the Malay language, and is thus accessible to more Malaysians.

CONCLUSION

Manga is a great dramaturgical and communication tool that could be used not only in entertainment but also in education. Compared to other forms of multimedia, *manga* encourages its readers to use their own imagination, and hence engages the reader in an interactive social learning process. The reader is able to utilise their sociological imagination to mentally locate the individual, which is symbolised by the *manga* character or characters, within the reader’s own social reality. In reading *manga*, one undergoes a different experience compared to viewing a film, as in the latter one does not need to use one’s imagination so intently and completely to understand what is happening. *Manga*’s ability to be evocative could surpass that of reading novels, as there are visual cues in addition to text. Furthermore, *manga* is often a multi-volume affair, with a continuous storyline, compiled from monthly serials published in specialised *manga* magazines. Thus, this structure requires readers to possess an understanding of the social, cultural, and historical context of the *manga*’s theme, especially if it is a historical *manga*. Engagement with character emotions as well as developing a sociological imagination is also part and parcel of the specific cultural capital developed through reading *manga*. This paper supports the observation made by Chan (2018) that Malaysia’s *manga* market has evolved from a consumer to a producer of *manga*, an originally Japanese cultural product. In the case of Malaysian *manga*, it acts not only as a dramaturgical platform for the analysis of everyday-defined realities, but also as a springboard for creating awareness of Malaysian ethnic (and other forms of) diversities.

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