Japanese pop culture has been famous worldwide for more than a decade now, as has been acknowledged by the journalist Douglas McGray in his article Japan’s Gross National Cool, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2002. In his article, McGray sheds light on the topic of the ‘coolness’ of Japanese pop culture, with icons like Pokémon and Hello Kitty; an idea that was soon taken by the Japanese government, under the label “Cool Japan”. This expression points to a process of influence through soft power, and was so successful that it became a keyword with which to designate the global diffusion of pop content, mainly represented by manga and animation series and movies.

The process was, however, running long before this moment in Europe, specifically in France. Japanese animation has been broadcasted on French TV since the end of the 1970s, and manga books began to be translated and published during the 1990s, before the worldwide success of the Pokémon and the collective debate about cool Japan. Focusing on that context, the notion of cultural diffusion is an efficient way to look at

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1 Soft power has been defined by Joseph Nye as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye 2004: 256). It is a power of co-optation, in opposition to hard power, which lies in strength and obligation. Media and cultural contents can be vector for soft power, since they present culture and ideology of a specific country.

2 And also in Italy, these two countries leading the craze for Japanese pop culture in Europe. However, I am going to focus on the French case in this article.
how these Japanese productions became part of the imaginary of Japan in France. In anthropology, the idea of cultural diffusion emerged with diffusionism, a school of thought which stated that most human creations were in fact spread as cultural items and patterns. Progressively reworked and sophisticated, the notion of cultural diffusion has been divided into different types of processes, one of the most productive being acculturation, defined as: “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Herskovits, Linton and Redfield 1936). Since then, the definition has been re-elaborated many times, and I will not go further into that debate. The important suggestion here is the idea of cultural elements spreading into another culture, and the various stages of this process: superimposed phases of discovery, integration, rejection, adaptation and appropriation of the foreign elements integrated into a different cultural landscape.

The setting up of Japanese pop culture content (like manga and cartoons) can be considered using this scheme, and so with this framework in mind we are going to examine the success of Japanese pop culture in France. As a result, we are going to look at the way it has become a part of the imaginary of Japan in France.

Since the Meiji era, Japan has had a long tradition of exchanges with France, a tradition that began with the Japonist movement; the current interest in pop culture content raises the question of neojaponism, that is to say the renewal of French images of Japan through contemporary pop culture.

1. Diffusion of Japanese pop culture in France: between scandal and praise

Diffusion here can be taken as having two dimensions: first of all, as the cultural dissemination of a specific element, in the anthropological way; but also as television broadcasting, since Japanese pop culture came to France through television animation. Therefore, we can follow the cultural diffusion of Japanese pop culture in France as an anthropological phenomenon that initiates its success and settlement into the French cultural landscape.
The first stage of diffusion and the first criticism

Indeed, for Japanese pop culture in France, the first element that came to a large audience was television animation, with the first series broadcast in the middle of the 1970s. These were Tezuka Productions' *Jungle Tatei* (translated as *Le roï Leo*) in 1972, and *Ribbon no kishi* (translated as *Princesse Saphir*) in 1974. At that time in France there were only three channels and the television was public, so the diffusion of Japanese animation was not really competitive. The following series to be programmed were *UFO Robot Grandizer* (*Goldorak*) in 1978, *Candy Candy* in 1979, *Captain Harlock* (*Albator le corsaire de l'espace*) in 1980, and *Cat's Eyes* in 1986. This first wave of Japanese animation was successful, but also criticised: the series were merely chosen for their price more than their quality, and the contents were quite different from what was usually produced by the French or American companies.

At that time the first criticisms were about the low quality of the drawings and animation; there was also mistrust toward these foreign productions from a far country well known as an intensive exporter of manufactured products. For some critics, anime were at first sight suspected to be part of an invasive commercial strategy from Japan, with the white skin, the coloured hair and the big round eyes of the characters as proof of this strategy (this appearance was interpreted as Western characteristics). A book published in 1981 by Liliane Lurçat, a psychologist, summarises that state of mind: titled *A cinq ans seul avec Goldorak* (*a five-year-old alone with Goldorak*), it denounces the harmfulness of the series, which is in fact taken as a symbol of violence on television. The point here is neither to discuss the study of that psychologist, nor the real harmfulness of television, but to point out the direct association, which was, in France, made very soon between Japanese animation and the theme of danger and mediocrity.

Japanese animation invading French television

The second stage came during the 1980s, with, in 1987, the privatisation of some French channels (the most important was TF1, the first and most popular channel) and the creation of La Cinq (1986), a free channel partly held by Silvio Berlusconi (and based on the Italian model of La Cinque).

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3 Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989) is one of the most famous manga artists, known for his numerous works.

4 Mainly because the number of frames per second is lower in Japanese productions than in Western works. The Japanese studios are also known to use a same drawing many times for different shots.
From then on, there was intense competition between the private channels and children’s programs were filled with Japanese animation, specifically with two major programs on the First Channel (TF1) and on La Cinq. This situation was the result of the low prices of the Japanese series and the exclusive partnership between producers of the content and broadcasters. The two main content producers were both exclusively associated with one channel. Mediaset, founded by Berlusconi, which was the provider of children’s content for La Cinq, and AB Production, created by two Frenchmen, gave birth to a children’s programs for TF1 Club Dorothée⁵, a show that was the most popular in its category for ten years. In fact, the model was almost the same on both channels: buying a large amount of anime from Japan, dubbing and adapting the series and then using it to fill the time slot dedicated to children. The system was already working before, although the content was still diverse with, in addition, American and European productions. After 1987, Japanese animation was almost the only content offered to children in France⁶.

Considering the type of series that were shown, the fact is that content was very diverse, not to say heterogeneous. As I mentioned above, animation content was considerably cheaper in Japan compared to the West, and the choice was vast. Consequently, the European producers bought various series at the same time, without paying scrupulous attention to the content and the audience it was made for in Japan. The cartoons were therefore not exclusively shôjô and shônen⁷ made for young audience, but also had more teenage- and adult- oriented content. These animated series were not exclusively fit for a young audience, although in France animation was completely associated with children’s programs. The more violent or sophisticated series were then adapted: they were dubbed with silly dialogue, the overly violent scenes were cut and sophisticated dialogue was

⁵ This show is still famous today, and lot of manga fans call themselves “la génération Club Dorothée”.
⁶ Except some co-productions created through collaboration between Japanese and Western studios, like The Mysterious Cities of Gold (French-Japanese-Luxemburg production 1982-1983), Ulysse 31 (French-Japanese production, 1981-1982) or Jayce and the Wheeled Warriors (French-Japanese-American production, 1985-1986). Some series were also completely French: Il était une fois...l’homme (created in 1978), Il était une fois...la vie (1987), Moi Renart (1987), or Molierissimo (1987). These series were broadcast many times on different channels. Some series were also created from famous bandes dessinées, such as les Schtroumpfs (the Smurfs) or Tintin, but Japanese animation really dominated.
⁷ These two categories composed the majority of manga stories. Shôjô are for girls and shônen for boys.
simplified. Indeed, everything was done to erase dramatic connotations and to make animation accessible for children. Moreover, the Japanese aspects and references were also changed, with Western names for characters and places, and western references disseminated through the plots. The results were often surprising, as the set and habits were obviously different (not to say exotic) and the dialogue completely blind to the context, creating hybrid content that was neither explicit, intelligible nor really localised.

The two main broadcasters, La Cinq and TF1, used that model, but the series were chosen differently. La Cinq used Mediaset’s Italian catalogue, and the cartoons were also provided by Mediaset dubbed and adapted for Italian television. The most famous anime proposed to children belonged to the typical repertoire of shōjō and shōnen with titles like Captain Tsubasa, Princess Sarah, Ai shite Knight, Attack N°1, all centred on school life, sports or romantic love stories. So, the gap between the Japanese version and the French was not so big. However, on the other channel, TF1 and its children’s program le club Dorothée showed some series that staged complicated, dark and violent stories, sometimes with suggestive allusions. Soon afterwards, with Hokuto no Ken as the symbol of the violence and harmfulness of Japanese animation, moral panic again increased.

**Ken le survivant: the scandal**

The French companies who sold the content to the channels used to adapt them to erase the adult contents, but with Hokuto no Ken it was obviously not enough: the series is extremely violent, and the story is set in an apocalyptic world where everything is destroyed and where the survivors fight against each other. Add to it blood and violent body explosions, and you can guess that it was not to convince parents of the virtues of Japanese animation. The series was first shown in September 1988, and soon caused a huge wave of moral panic, with vigorous claims from parental associations as well as petitions and debates. The pattern of “sex, violence and low quality” was still the central argument, and from then on, the critics grew

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8 One famous example, often quoted by fans, is taken from Lucille amour et rock n’roll (Ai Shite Knight), a romantic love story. The father of the heroine owns an okonomiyaki restaurant, a typical Japanese dish, which has been translated as crêpes, while the set is obviously very different from a traditional French crêpes restaurant. The character also wears getta, traditional sandals, completely unknown and exotic in France, but there were no remarks about that in the dialogues, although it looked really weird to French children.
harsker, with the following leitmotifs: the stupidity and harmfulness of the programs, which were denounced as violent, stupid and pornographic.

This judgment is exemplified by Ségolène Royal, a French politician, who published a book in 1989 denouncing the dangers of television, dangers caused mainly by the ‘foreign’ invasion of American detective series and Japanese cartoons. She went on to define Japanese animation in the following words: “Almost animated drawings, down market products, rubbish (...) blows, murders, torn heads, electrocuted bodies, repulsive masks, horrible beasts, howling demons. Fear, violence and noise”9 (Royal 1989: 45). Hence, the critics were stronger than ever, and the polemic became a public question. Some parental associations vigorously denounced the violence of Japanese animation, and, in doing so, they designated the whole category dangerous and mediocre; the association between Japanese productions and harmfulness then became almost automatic.

Regularly solicited by complainants and the French television authority (Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel), which has to regulate and supervise all the programs, AB production organised a ‘psychological’ review and adaptation of the shows broadcast in Club Dorothée, an initiative which reinforced the gap between the original scenarios and the French versions. Superimposed on adaptations that had already been made, these “psychological cuts”10 gave birth to more confusion: more than ever, the Japanese cartoons seemed like stupid and pointless productions. To mention some famous examples, I can quote City Hunter, from Tsukasa Hôjô, which stages a private detective in Tokyo who lived in a dark world filled with murders, yakuza and danger, and who is quite obsessed by women. Translated into French, the main character Ryo Saeba became Nicky Larson, a funny guy who always want to “kiss” women and whose dark side remains mysterious because the violent or dark scenes were cut. Different series suffered the same treatment, for example Saint Seya (les chevaliers du Zodiaque), in which scenes showing blood were removed, or Maison Ikkoku (Juliette je t’aime), in which alcohol was pronounced soda, a fact that made the behaviour of the characters quite difficult to understand. In these cases the “psychological censorship” (Animeland H-S 5 2003: 30) reinforced the

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9 Personal translation from: “Dessins à peine animés, bas de gamme, nullissimes (...) coups, meurtres, têtes arrachées, corps électrocutés, masques répugnants, bêtes horribles, démons rugissants. La peur, la violence et le bruit” (Royal 1989: 45).

10 This expression was used by the media at that time, and is still common among fans, although I was unable to find where it came from first.
absurdity of the stories and dialogues, and definitely discredited Japanese animation.

In 1990, another measure was taken: proposed by Catherine Tasca, the French minister of Culture, it imposed a 40% French content quota on cinema, television and radio (and a total of 60% of European content for television). This edict was taken in the broad context of the tense GATT negotiations\textsuperscript{11} and asserted the will to maintain the “\textit{exception culturelle française}” (French cultural exception), which was perceived as under attack by foreign cultural imports. In that perspective, Japanese animation was one symbol of those invasive and aggressively commercial foreign programs\textsuperscript{12}.

Despite the critics, Japanese series were broadcast in huge number during the first part of the 90s, even though La Cinq disappeared in 1992. AB production, the company that provided content for the direct competitor TF1, bought Mediaset’s catalogue and the series joined the huge list shown on \textit{Club Dorothée} (Animeland H-S 5 2003: 32). Even if the audience decreased slightly, this program remained successful until 1997, when it was stopped. At that time, the context was different because specific cable channels were created and the programming was completely renewed: Japanese animation disappeared from French national television, and even if some series were hits later (like \textit{Card captor Sakura}, \textit{Pokémon}, \textit{Digimon} or \textit{Yu-Gi-Oh}), the massive diffusion was definitely over. Despite this, the audience was still there. Even if their parents were alarmed and anxious about Japanese animation, the children liked it, and the series were extremely popular among them. Over a period of twenty years, French children and teenagers were fed with \textit{Goldorak}, \textit{Dragon ball}, \textit{Candy} or \textit{Ranma}, and they did not forget everything once the television stopped providing it. Moreover, it opened the way for another popular Japanese genre, manga.

The second stage of diffusion: the rise of manga

We are now moving to another phase of the diffusion process, a phase which can be associated with the appropriation and integration of foreign elements following discovery and first reactions (the craze among children and subsequent rejection among most of their parents). We left the history

\textsuperscript{11} From 1986 to 1994 the Uruguay round ran, a period of intense negotiations about international commercial exchange. Many problems occurred relating to cultural and media content as countries like France defended their right to limit foreign imports. Japanese cartoons and American series and movies were at the heart of the debates.

\textsuperscript{12} American movies and television dramas were also strongly attacked.
of Japanese animation in France in 1997, when *Club Dorothée* stopped and, consequently, daily broadcasts of Japanese cartoons. However, during this twenty-year period, children were exposed to these series and they liked them, so much so that they also began to read. Manga appeared in France in 1990, when Jacques Glénat, a publisher specialising in comic books, decided to translate *Akira*\(^{13}\). The eponymous animated movie\(^{14}\) was released in 1989 and was a hit lovers of Japanese pop culture, opening the way for manga to follow. As for the cartoons, the French version\(^{15}\) was an adaptation: the drawings were filled with colours and the pages were flipped\(^{16}\). Major success came later, in 1993, with *Dragon Ball*, which still holds the record for number of copies printed\(^{17}\). In the second part of the 90s the success of manga grew continuously; the table below gives a good synthesis of the phenomenon.

1 table. The rise of manga in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of volumes* published</th>
<th>Number of editors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005**</td>
<td>1,142 (947 Japanese manga)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1,428 (1,152 Japanese manga)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>1,460 (1,297 Japanese manga)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1,477 (1,355 Japanese manga)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: annual review of ACBD, [http://www.acbd.fr/bilan/les-bilans-de-lacbd.html\(^{18}\)]

* Different volumes of one series can be released during the same year.

** After 2005, the total figure integrates other Asian comics (like *manhwa* from Korea or *manhua* from China), although these are a minority.

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\(^{13}\) There were other attempts before, but they remained confidential. In addition, some comics about *Goldorak* (*Mazinger Z*) and *Albator* (*Captain Harlock*) were made from screen captures or even redrawn by French artists.

\(^{14}\) *Akira* is a science-fiction manga created by Katsuhiro Otomo in 1982; it became an animation movie released in 1989.

\(^{15}\) It was made after the American translation, but this was an exception: usually, manga translated in French are directly adapted from the Japanese version and the French market for manga is independent of the American market.

\(^{16}\) Manga are usually in black and white, and, like other Japanese books, the reading sense is reversed compared to western standards.

\(^{17}\) 17 000 000 copies is claimed by the publishing house [http://www.glenatmanga.com/histoire-du-manga-5.asp](http://www.glenatmanga.com/histoire-du-manga-5.asp) (accessed on 12th October 2011).

\(^{18}\) The French association of journalists specialised in comic books. Figures of printed and released copies are presented every year, and I used their data to prepare this summary.
To complete the picture, I can add that manga now occupies around 40% of the comic sector in France and that sales are high and consistent: in 2010 currently the most successful series, *Naruto*, sold 250,000 copies of one volume (3 were released that year); *One Piece* sold 100,000 copies of one volume (5 released), *Fairy Tail* around 80,000 copies per volume (5 released), *Black Butler* 72,000 copies per volume (3 released), and so on. In the first place, the editors chose to translate famous TV series titles, already famous among children, like *Dragon Ball*, but they soon diversified the choices and many kinds of manga are now represented. The most popular titles in France today are, unsurprisingly, *Naruto* and *One Piece*. A final relevant detail is that the books are no longer colourised and do not flip, but rather they are published in black and white and in the Japanese sense of reading, i.e. beginning at the back. So, Japanese manga has become part of the *bande dessinée* genre, with its regular audience. The moral panic resulting from Japanese TV cartoons was initially associated with manga although it faded away as time went by. Now it seems that manga has became one type of leisure among others, not as scandalous as it used to be and with its detractors and with those who loves it.

Japanese animation is no longer seen as programming for children: there are specific cable channels and a market for DVDs. I will not detail here the history of this market but it is important to specify that the fans were very influential. When animation disappeared from television in 1997, and contrary to the critics who classified them as stupid and perverted (because of the association with “sex and violence”), fans tried to preserve the entertainment they liked, and to enjoy it in its original version. Among the children who grew up with Japanese cartoons, some became deeply interested in that type of content and developed other ways to enjoy these series, through video tapes, then DVDs and since the 1990s, dedicated websites. Today, lovers of animation and manga are a huge community, and, as fans, they gather around the objects they love.

19 First ten series sold at least 50,000 copies per volume, and around 40 series have sold at least 20,000 copies per book. All the figures are available on the ACBD’s website: [http://www.acbd.fr/bilan/les-bilans-de-lacbd.html](http://www.acbd.fr/bilan/les-bilans-de-lacbd.html) (accessed on 15th October 2011).

20 One conference held in 1996 and titled “Faut-il brûler les mangas?” (Do we have to burn manga?) is a good summary of the context and the worries of the parents.

21 Websites are numerous, with legal and illegal contents, as groups of fans make their own translations of the series and offer free downloads.

22 We can also mention the youth, who discovered Japanese pop culture with the Pokémon craze and are currently a huge audience for manga and animation.
After a tumultuous history, with a problematic debut, Japanese pop culture (mainly manga and animation, but also elements more favoured by initiates, like TV drama or especially music) is now recognised in France as a kind of hobby, enjoyed and praised by more and more people, even if there are still some critics. So, we can consider that the diffusion process has gone through phases of discovery, rejection, adaptation and appropriation to become part of the cultural landscape. The aim of this paper is to present that diffusion as a process which led to a renewal of the image of Japan in France, and this long introduction was necessary to understand how the Japanese origin of manga and animation was considered during that chaotic phase of dissemination.

2. The building of a fandom: pop culture and images of Japan

At first, the Japanese origin of the cartoon was hidden: we saw that the contents were adapted and dubbed to erase the origin as much as possible. This process is now well known as glocalisation, and defined by Mike Featherstone in these words: “(a) global strategy which does not seek to impose a standard product or image but instead is tailored to the demands of the local market” (1995, mentioned in Iwabuchi 2002: 46). This same content is then moulded following the cultural context to which it is proposed. To give an example: the *Power Rangers*, an American live series based on the Japanese series *Kyōryū Sentai Zyuranger*, where the shots of the main characters were remade with Caucasian actors instead of Asians (Allison 2000: 263). The Pokémon are also one of the most famous illustrations of glocalisation. The names of the entire bestiary of pocket monsters were changed depending on the country in which the series aired\(^2\), and all the references and jokes were also adapted for the different cultural contexts (Allison 2000.). From a critical perspective, Koichi Iwabuchi calls this process a “local camouflaging” (Iwabuchi 2002: 46), to point to a hybrid and polysemic result, as the original version is still perceptible, while at the same time the adaptation unties it from its exotic aspects.

Indeed, before the globalisation of Japanese animation, French

\(^2\) The Japanese version was sold directly in other Asian countries, but everything was remade for the American version, which was then translated for other Western countries with complementary adaptations (i.e. in French the names of the Pokémon are different from the English version) (Katsuno and Maret 2004).
producers were doing the same work, and, at first, the children who enjoyed Japanese cartoons were unaware of their Japanese origin. Paradoxically, as we learn from the history of animation in France, it is through the strong denunciation and rejection of the cartoons that the young audience discovered that they were from Japan. From then on, not everyone has developed a specific interest for that place, but the fans, deeply involved in their taste for manga and anime, have established a direct link between the content they like and its country of origin.

**Fandom and list of references**

To develop that point, it is important to present the fandom as a group that shares common references. As Henry Jenkins has explained in his research about sci-fi lovers, fans are poachers who navigate among the content they favour and who pick up specific references. By doing so, they appropriate the objects they love, and share references they have selected from it. Jenkins speaks of the “metatext” to qualify the “shared interpretative conventions” (1991: 35) that circulate the community of fans. To put it differently, they elaborate a collective way of understanding and interpreting specific content, a way that is only relevant for the people who share the same code, which is to say the same list of references and the same manner to decipher it. So, we can use the expression coined by Benedict Anderson and say that the fandom is an “imagined community”24, as each member knows that there are others who share the same taste and the same list of references. Moreover, being familiar with the references and opinions spread in the fandom is the only way of being a member of the fandom.

Consequently, the fandom is characterised by its collective dimension: everybody is free to appropriate and manipulate the list of references in a collective movement, since the list is available for all members of the community. But it is also an individual and identity process: a fan is free to appropriate and praise some elements and to reject others, in order to assert his or her own taste. Moreover, every individual can also immerse themselves in their own fantasy world, built on the images elaborated from the content they enjoy. To summarise, fans gather around references

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24 Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined communities: reflection on the origin and spread of nationalism* (1991) developed the idea of the imagined communities as groups of people indirectly linked by the fact that they share the same ideology and that they know they are many, even if they don't know each other.
that they also use to create their own “fantasyscape” (Napier 2007: 11), an imaginary world in which they can escape and which they can use to picture a pleasant and marvellous world.

It is in that way fans of manga and animation elaborate their own perception of Japan through pop culture elements. The references shared by fans come from the content (history, characters, set, places) and also from judgment about the works (famous mangaka, cult series, good or bad taste, etc.). It is in that process that Japan fits into the list as the country of origin and the context of the series. French fans perceive a strong bond between Japanese manga and animation and the Japanese nation and culture, and many signs confirm this idea. The specific knowledge of the fandom is visible in the media that talks to the community, like magazines dedicated to manga and animation (or more generally to Japanese pop culture), and a brief review of this press clearly shows the place of Japan in the minds of the readers: the titles or subtitles of the magazines25, articles on Japanese society, traditional culture, food, history or landscapes. Another sign is perceptible during conventions - those periodic meetings where fans gather and enjoy various activities dedicated to what they love. The most famous convention in France is Japan Expo, which began as a small exhibition in 1999 and which is now a big event, gathering 192 000 visitors in July 201126.

Going to Japan Expo (which is subtitled: le festival des loisirs japonais) is a way of immersing oneself in the world of the fans, and of confirming the fact that Japan is the frame of their common fantasy world, based on a mix of pop culture content and Japanese motifs. Like most fan conventions27, the space is filled with professional stands selling books, DVDs, goodies, merchandising, clothes, etc., while others are dedicated to fanzine activities and amateur cartoonists. Usually some conferences are organised, cartoons are shown in dedicated rooms, there are games and shows, and some stars are invited (famous mangaka, idols, etc.). Within that context, Japan occupies a central place: not only are manga, animation and music celebrated, but also the whole country and its culture. Some specific stands offer various

27 Henry Jenkins (1992) and Susan Napier (2007) vividly depict some conventions, respectively among sci-fi and manga lovers.
information and activities about the country, such as language schools, travel agencies, food shops, kimono exhibitions, ikebana and calligraphy demonstrations, etc. Japan is everywhere.

The interviews I have conducted with fans confirm that importance:

You can’t separate Japan from manga and animation, they are communicating vessels. (Méko).

My interest in Japan came with manga - before it was just a country among others. (Nicolas).

I wanted to go further, to know what was behind manga and anime. (Ann-Laure).

To enjoy manga, you need to comprehend Japanese culture, you can just not pay attention but then you miss things. (Jérôme).

It is really with manga that I became interested by Japan, it is inevitable because when you read manga you picture to yourself what’s inside, you imagine things and then you want more information. (François).

These quotes point to one of the main arguments invoked by fans to explain why it is so important for them to go further with Japan once you fall in love with anime and manga culture. The link is the need to go further and to really comprehend what is shown by the series. Against the work of adaptation and glocalisation, fans seek ‘authenticity’, that is to say being as close as possible to the original work. This idea explains why lot of them prefer original versions with subtitles rather than dubbed versions, and reject en masse the censored and transformed versions broadcast by French television. Moreover, they all insist on the fact that, to fully enjoy Japanese content, people need to know the cultural context these works are set into, otherwise some details are lacking. We could deduce here that they reject the glocalisation process, but I would not be so affirmative: most of the fans remember the series they saw on television with nostalgic affection,

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28 During my research, I conducted interviews with fans in France. I met them on recommendation, at some conventions, or because they were working in manga shops. The interviewees were selected on their own declaration that they were fans of manga. We spoke about one hour, following some questions I prepared but with a plenty of time for chatting. Following the method of the comprehensive interview elaborated by Jean-Claude Kauffman (2004), I always kept a basis of questions I asked to everyone, while I also allowed space to my interlocutor to develop his or her own feelings and ideas.

29 These quotes are taken from various interviews I made with some fans in France, during fieldwork in 2006. I chose them from among a wide range of interviews because they were very explicit and illustrate very well and precisely a broad idea shared by all the fans I met.

30 Nevertheless, some fans seem unconcerned by these precise examples. However, they always find arguments to explain why it is better to be familiar to Japan.
they generally don’t speak Japanese and they are not specialised enough in Japanese culture to be comfortable with no translation or adaptation. The point here is more that idea and desire for immersion and the affection and fascination they express about Japan, rather than the concrete skills they develop.

I evoked the notion of fantasyscape developed by Susan Napier to characterise the way fans develop an imaginary world based on the references they share, a word Napier created following the model developed by Arjun Appadurai\(^\text{31}\). He also insists on the “work of imagination” (1996), that is to say the fact that people are appropriating foreign cultural elements and then using them to build their own pictures of a place\(^\text{32}\). In the case of French fans of Japanese pop culture, the work of imagination can be compared to the creation of a fantasyscape. So, as they told to me, once they are interested in Japan, French fans not only read manga or watch animation, they collect information about Japan and put together all the elements they have to create an image of Japan, which they consider “real” and “concrete”, as in the following examples: “Series which speak of samurais, Japan in the past, you learn things, you see the way of life” (François), “The cartoon GTO really shows how school life is in Japan” (Hélène), “Galls is a series which speaks of Shibuya girls, it is very realistic” (Caroline).

This dreamy Japan is composed, then, of multiple elements, drawn from the various sources used by fans, with, of course, a central place for manga, animation, and the pop culture universe. To be more precise, this imaginary of Japan is mainly positive as fans discover and enjoy the country through its pop culture, even if it is not a homogenous and simple picture. I will not detail here all the elements that are manipulated by the fans, because they are many. In any case what is more interesting is to look at how these elements are put together. The structure of the list of references fans of manga use to draw their own picture of Japan is a specific kind of exoticism, which lies in the notion of paradox. Questioned about what they know about Japan, fans always mention the theme of paradox, and, as its main consequence, the constant cohabitation of tradition and modernity. Hence they use that pattern to define and to categorise the Japanese way of life and also their

\(^{31}\) This anthropologist proposes in his book *Modernity at Large* (1996) a comprehensive scheme to clarify the diverse dimensions taken by globalisation, with some specific terms based on the suffix –scape.

\(^{32}\) Calling these kinds of group “deteritorialised communities”, he mainly speaks of children of immigrants who don’t know the country of their parents.
own representations of the country. François, a young student, summarises it very well: “It is the country of all paradoxes!” Of course, pop culture and manga also occupy an important place in that portrait, as in the mind of Raphaël, who told me: “Manga everywhere: Japan is a paradise!”; and many fans mentioned areas like Akihabara, Shibuya or Harajuku, which are known to be meeting points for young Japanese involved in manga and pop culture.

Indeed, the association made by manga lovers between pop culture and Japan led them to develop specific representation of the country and its culture, in a way which reminds exoticism and orientalism: they understand and look at the country through the prism of their previous images. We will examine this point now; while making the comparison with the usual representations of Japan in France will show how this new repertoire is deeply rooted into the specific paradigm of Japan in France.

3. Neojaponism and exoticism

The expression “neojaponism” comes from an article published in 2004 by Béatrice Rafoni, a French researcher in communication. In her paper, she uses the word to qualify the craze for Japanese pop culture and the new images of Japan associated with the movement. We saw previously how fans of manga are elaborating and sharing some pictures of the country, and how it can be considered the result of a cultural diffusion process. From this perspective, Rafoni draws a parallel with the japonist movement, since she sees similarities in the two phenomena: both are associated with the diffusion of images from Japan and both are related to popular culture and media. In her own words: “the repetition of the main characteristics of these two important moments of French and Japanese interculturality made them twin phenomena, at an interval of one century” (Rafoni 2004: 22). So, the word “neojaponism” was coined to point to the current phenomenon of the success of Japanese pop culture in France, with the idea of a revival of the japonist paradigm. Moreover, these two phenomena

33 If it is clear that manga and animation belong to pop culture, we can remember here that European japonist artists were inspired by woodblock prints and craftwork, all objects from popular culture too.

are both inscribed into a specific type of exoticism, which is “caractérisée par le regard “égaleitaire” qu’il porte sur l’objet étranger, considéré comme digne et valable dans son altérité radicale, et utilisé à des fins de renouvellement” (Rafoni 2004: 27).

I will call this the exoticism of the equal otherness, following the idea of Rafoni when she specifies that Japan is considered as “le parfait alter ego, cet autre soi, à la fois proche et lointain dans l’espace et dans son altérité radicale” (Rafoni 2004: 27).

This perspective is then enlightening the specific perception of Japan in France, a perception that lies in a paradigm defined through exoticism and otherness. Exoticism is a common way of picturing otherness, and it is concentrated around the idea of the picturesque, that is to say some outstanding characteristics, which strike minds and seem inexplicable and completely foreign to outside observers. These radical strange elements form the basis of the clichés, the images that gather every astonishing characteristic in one portrait and thus form stereotypes. The most common image of exoticism is the Noble Savage myth, elaborated on the ideology of primitivism: for Modern societies, the radical otherness was embodied by the native people who lived without technology. But primitivism is not the only way to depict otherness. We can follow Tzvetan Todorov in his idea of an axis of exoticism, with two extreme points: the native-primitive, and, on the other side, the extremely sophisticated, “an exoticism of electronics and sky scrappers” (Todorov 1989: 299).

This sophistication is not only a matter of electronics and giant buildings, it is a way of facing different cultures and mentalities, and it seems that Japan has always been considered from that perspective in the Western world, as a radically different country with possibilities of being a concurrent, both as a partner or an enemy. Since the Meiji era and the japonist movement in France, Japan has been alternately praised and denigrated, and the country is at the same time seen as “utopia and dystopia” (Napier 2007). To go further, we can make the link with the notion of orientalism explained by Edward Saïd, as a paradigm that determines the way a country, a culture or an area can be associated with a set of particular characteristics. For Saïd, the process is based on “a group of related ideas and a unifying set of
values which proved their efficiency in different ways. These ideas explain the behaviors of Orientals, and they give them mentality, genealogy, atmosphere; moreover, they allow Europeans to treat Orientals, and even to see them, as a phenomenon endowed with regular characteristics’ (Saïd 1980: 57). Keeping that definition in mind and looking at the history of representations of Japan in France (and more largely into the Western world), we can see some peculiar patterns appearing. Following the synthesis proposed by Susan Napier in her book *From Impressionism to Anime* (2007) we can divide that history into different periods. During these successive moments, the broad context and the relationships between Japan and the West (with, for that presentation, an accent put on France) are associated with dominant representations, and Japan is seen through that mainstream filter.

Firstly, we began with the opening of Japan during the Meiji era, and with japonism. The japonist trend was specifically first an artistic and avant-garde movement before the taste for Japan spread to a larger audience, soon after becoming a craze for all *japonaiseries* (small Japanese objects available in department stores, like fans). Japan was then seen as a mysterious and distant country, where nature and traditions were still strongly alive. According to Napier, the deep roots of exotic Japan appeared at that time: “sweet”, “playful”, “childlike” were associated to Japanese arts and people (2007: 29), while the notion of paradox emerged almost immediately. This can be explained by the quick modernisation of the country: Westerners discovered a nation that remained enclosed for centuries, but which also rapidly adopted Western ideas and techniques. As Napier wrote, “this was not simply a nation that created beautiful woodblock prints of boats in a harbor. It was also a nation capable of creating a warship that could steam into French waters” (2007: 49). There were also negative opinions and denigrations of the country, with an inversion of the emergent motifs.37 Then, we clearly see the patterns of the equal other and the paradox emerging, and the following periods are filled with these elements.

After that, we can distinguish 3 other periods38: until the 1960s Japan remained a distant and mysterious country. After this period, we also find

37 For example, Kyoko Koma is doing a detailed analysis of the way the Japanese woman is represented by the French writer Pierre Loti in *Madame Chrysanthème*. This representation gave birth to a tenacious stereotype, built around the ideas of mawkishness, sickly affectation, smallness and docility (Koma 2010).

38 This synthesis is centred on France. Consequently, some major elements are left aside, like the Second World War, which had a strong influence on images of Japan in the United States.
the same perspective, with intellectual works like *The Empire of Signs* by Roland Barthes (1970). However, at the same time Japan began its economic rise, and the country began to be seen as a rival, a potential competitor who was dangerous and sly (a pattern that was not new, i.e. the “yellow peril” theme, popular at the beginning of the 20th century). This second period is dominated by the emergence of Japan as an economic power. Critics grew harsher during the 1970s and 1980s, convincing people that the Japanese were industrial spies, ferocious exporters and a bizarre society. Some books were then published, to explain to French people how weird and dangerous (and also ridiculous) the Japanese were: excessively polite, they were presented as a group of non individual people, acting only for the sake of the nation39, with the recurrent metaphor of the “anthill”, an image even publicly used by prime minister Edith Cresson in 1991.

The third period, often called techno-Japan (Napier 2007) or techno-orientalism (Ueno 1996), began during the 1980s and 1990s, when Japan started to be systematically associated with modernity and the future. The development of robots and advanced electronic industries provided the basis for these images, but pop culture is also strongly implicated in the diffusion of these representations. Lots of manga and cartoons famous in the West stage future and science-fictional universes, with recurrent figures like cyborgs and giant robots (like *Ghost in the Shell*, *UFO Robot Grandizer*, *Gundam* and *Evangelion*). The space-opera genre is also common (as in *Captain Harlock*, *Macross* and *Space battleship Yamato*) while some series depict post-apocalyptic future worlds (*Akira*, *Hokuto no Ken*). This imaginary of Japan as the future of the Western world has been then incorporated into Western popular culture40 and manga and animation provided perfect illustrations. Moreover, Japanese everyday life is associated with this repertoire, and the central paradox pattern is renewed with this techno-Japan motif.

It is in this framework that neojaponism takes place: young lovers of animation and manga had discovered a country through manga and cartoon, an everyday life leisure activity that proposes images and references rooted in contemporary Japan. With the massive diffusion of pop culture, the imaginary of Japan has been renewed and incorporates different


40 *Blade Runner*, the movie by Ridley Scott released in 1982, is often cited as the first mainstream movie using Japanese images to represent the future.
contemporary references about the country. However, the structure remains the same: representations are articulated around the main ideas of paradox and equal otherness, as is perfectly exemplified by some of the French fans I met: “Japan is a mix of the West and the Far East” (Thomas), “Japan is both familiar and extremely mysterious, extremely distant” (Jenny). The pattern of exoticism of Japan seems to be solid and stable, but also flexible enough to incorporate all the various and contradictory elements that could seem problematic. Hence comprehension of Japan has been modelled on that basis and it influences fantasies and stereotypes, as well as common understanding and representations of Japan. Acculturation and exoticism are related, as these concomitant phenomena influence the production of the imaginary and knowledge about the incarnations of otherness embodied by foreign nations and cultures.

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To conclude this paper, I would like to bring up the question of the japaneseness of the content. Indeed, after an explanation, which insists on the fact that the exoticism of Japan is fed by images from manga culture, it seems necessary to give some elements of debate. We are going back here to the idea of “cool Japan”, briefly mentioned in the introduction, an idea that assumes that the success of pop culture will give more soft power to Japan. The complete efficiency of this process is certainly not asserted, and many discussions are still currently running about it, but we can see that the diffusion of pop culture is far from being neutral, and that the efforts made to promote Japan through the “cool Japan” label are meeting a new imaginary of the country, which certainly integrates this contemporary and positive aspect. That’s why the analysis of Koichi Iwabuchi, who stated that the content created by the manga and animation industries are “culturally odorless”, needs to be tempered. In Recentering Globalization (2002) Iwabuchi explains that, due to their non-Asian aspect, the characters and drawings typical of manga culture are mukokuseki (without ethnic characteristics) and, consequently, that these elements are free from cultural odor:

I use the term cultural odor\(^{41}\) to focus on the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way

\(^{41}\) Underlined by the author.
of life are associated positively with a particular product in the consumption process (2002: 27).

Then, to him, the aspect of the characters (which are not explicitly Asian, with big round eyes, white skin, colourful hair) generates possibilities for the glocalisation process and testifies their ethnically neutral character, that is to say non-japaneseness. To Iwabuchi:

The cultural odor of a product is also closely associated with racial and bodily images of a country of origin. The three C’s (consumer technologies\(^2\), comics and cartoons, computer/video game) are cultural artifacts in which a country’s bodily, racial, and ethnic characteristics are erased or softened (Ibid.: 28).

So, “cool Japan” would be an empty shell, and the link drawn between those culturally odorless contents and an image of Japanesess is an illusion (ibid.: 34). However, Iwabuchi doesn’t deny the association made by some foreign (i.e. non-Japanese) fans between manga and Japan, but to him the connection is kind of artificial. Nevertheless, I think this point needs to be developed: we saw that the exoticism of Japan has been fed by images and references from pop culture content and, consequently, that the paradigm of comprehension of Japan in Western minds has incorporated these manga-related images. By doing so, the mukokuseki contents are now recognised as specifically Japanese, not only by fans but also on a larger scale. The drawings in manga are not explicitly Japanese (nor Asian) at first glance, but they are explicitly associated with a Japanese aesthetic and style. Thus, far from being neutral, the mukokuseki style is incorporated into representations of Japan, not, of course, as an accurate image of the Japanese people but rather as a typical representation and the imaginary of the Japanese mind. Here representations and virtual contents become part of the repertoire which forms the foundation of the perception of Japan, and, more than the direct influence of that type of representations, a consequent question would be about their effect: are fantasy images giving birth to eccentric stereotypes, or are they simply joining the various elements already organised as a pattern?

References


\(^2\) I.e. hardware.


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**Abstract**

In 2002, the worldwide success of Japanese pop culture was labelled by Douglas McGray as “cool Japan”, a way for the country to gain influence through its export of content, a phenomenon analysed as “soft power” (Nye 1990). McGray was emphasising the massive success of characters
like the Pokémon or Hello Kitty, which were recent global hits at that time. Then the expression “cool Japan” was so successful that it became a key word with which to point to that global diffusion.

Nevertheless, the process was running long before this moment in Europe, specifically in France. Japanese animation has been broadcasted on French television since the end of the 1970s, and *manga* began to be translated and published during the 1990s. Consequently, generations of French children grew up with Japanese pop culture as background entertainment. Some became so involved that they gathered as a fandom, an imagined community of Japanese pop culture lovers who share knowledge and references about what they love and the country from which it comes. Therefore, these fans are making a direct link between manga, animation and Japan, as they do so building dream images of the country.

This process can be linked to exoticism as a way to represent otherness through symbolic and imaginary pictures. Since the Japonist movement, France has had a long tradition of exoticism focusing on Japan, and we can therefore raise the idea of new manga-related images as neojaponism, a way in which to renew traditional clichés.

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**Santrauka**

