

'Soft power' of manga, anime winning fans the world over

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Audience members jump to the music at an "anison" (anime song) concert at the National Taiwan University in Taipei on May 30. (Mainichi)

As a concert performed by JAM, or the "Japan Animationsong Makers" Project, in the gymnasium of the National Taiwan University in Taipei drew to a close, approximately 1,200 spectators were on their feet pleading for more -- in Japanese: "Motto! Motto!" (More! More!)

Formed in 2000 by a group of musicians that included Hironobu Kageyama, known as the "prince of anime music," the band performs theme songs from world-renowned Japanese anime and other programs featuring special effects. They toured nine countries and regions last year including the U.S., South Korea, China and France, and they wrapped up their tour this year in Tokyo after completing performances in South Korea and Taiwan.

Fans stayed on their feet for the entire three hours or so of JAM's concert, and sang along in Japanese. The show, of which the most expensive tickets sold for as much as 3,800 Taiwanese dollars (approximately 11,000 yen), took place on the same day as a concert given by the popular Japanese rock band X Japan. Lan Yushu, a 24 year-old fan in Taiwan, admitted to being torn between the two performances, but said, "I

ultimately chose to come listen to 'anison' (anime songs)." Liu Chengzhu, 22, another audience member who is currently in military service, thrust his fist in the air and proclaimed, "If Japan ever gets in a dispute with another country, I'll take Japan's side."

"Soft power" is the ability to bring about a favorable result not through the power of coercion or compensation, but rather through attraction. A theory put forth by Harvard University Prof. Joseph Nye, it is defined as diplomatic power that can overcome the limitations of military and economic might, otherwise known as "hard power." Japanese anime, special effects, manga and fashion are typical forms of soft power.

What is it about Japanese anime that charms young people all over the world?

"Songs about a young hero's experience of growing up, of justice that others can relate to and cooperation among friends and companions -- there's something very cool about that sort of worldview," says Ricardo Cruz, 27, a Brazilian-born member of JAM, himself an anime enthusiast.

"Hard work, friendship, and victory" is the running theme of "Shonen Jump," a manga magazine published by Shueisha that has recorded a circulation of 6.53 million, one of top such records worldwide. "Dragon Ball" volumes, based on the manga of the same title originally serialized in "Shonen Jump," have sold over 200 million copies around the world, and manga "Naruto" and "One Piece," also serialized in "Shonen Jump," have followed suit with record sales.

It was Disney and other U.S. companies that pioneered the field of commercial comics and animation in the global market. However, viewers and readers find it difficult to relate to stereotypical Disney heroes with their Superman caliber righteousness and powers. Rather, it is the real-life heartaches and joys of the Japanese hero with whom audiences have more easily identified. Japanese heroes have been popular in various Asian countries since the 1970s, and the anime series "UFO Robot Grendizer" created a sensation in France when it was aired from 1978 to 1979. "Dragon Ball" and "Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon" sparked a Japanese anime boom in the U.S. in the 1990s.

But Japanese anime and manga had its beginnings in the acceptance of things American. According to Nobuhiko Horie, president of manga and anime production company Coamix, Osamu Tezuka, who created the foundations of post-war Japanese manga, gathered hints for layouts from the movements of animated Disney characters.

The development of such Japanese manga into a "power" that is now distributed worldwide can be attributed to the unique climate of Japan's publishing industry, one that cultivated authors' creativity while acknowledging audiences' demands. It was an environment that did not exist in the U.S. "We published manga that Japanese kids liked," says Kazuhiko Torishima, former editor-in-chief at Shonen Jump. "And those are the manga that happened to appeal to people worldwide."

In the manga and anime industry, there has been none of the fervor or resistance seen in government and academia in their adoption of foreign institutions and ideologies. This is the result of having elevated Japanese sensibilities to the level of unique creativity without any scruples toward the U.S. The flourishing of anime gives us a glimpse into the power that a Japanese product can have on a global scale.

It has only been in the last few years that the Foreign Ministry has acknowledged the soft power of manga and anime, actively employing them in its public diplomacy efforts. While Yasushi Watanabe, an American studies professor at Keio University, remains cautious, saying, "Anime and manga are mere hooks into soft power, just as small energy-conservation efforts and recycling (are hooks into environmentalism). Foisting (cultural products) onto others could lead to accusations of cultural invasion." Yet, it is significant that Japanese manga and anime have brought an unexpected twist in Japan's post war history of accepting and adopting things American.

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