# Anime and Construction of Japanese Identity: Perspectives from Malaysia.

Research Summary

Japanese animation or, as it is popularly known, anime appears to be the most celebrated Asian television product around the globe today. Anime began in 1917 and developed well into the 1970's in Japan. The boom began in the 1980's when anime was accepted as one of the successful television products in Japanese television industry. By the 1990's anime series, such as *Dragon Ball, Pokemon,* and *Sailormoon* became worldwide successes (Patten:2004). By the year 2000, the proliferation of Japanese animation in the global market is beyond imagination. Japanese animation plays a major role in Japan. As a form of cultural product, anime is recognized by the Japanese Government as one of the important symbols of Japanese 'unique identity and pride' (Lam:2007). Interestingly, Iwabuchi (2002:2004) asserts that this type of popular transnational cultural product ought to be called *mukokuseki* (something or someone lacking of nationality) due to 'misrepresentation' of what constitutes Japanese culture and identity. To this end, anime's role in 'representing Japan' is indeed problematic. Thus, questions need to be asked as to what constitutes 'Japaneseness' in anime in an attempt to project Japanese culture and identity to the outside world, and how do Malaysians interpret and understand these aspects. In this larger context, the study aims to understand how 'Japaneseness' has been negotiated in representing Japan unique identity in anime. It is examined through critical content analysis of selected anime programmes on Malaysian television and the use of focus groups discussions to explore Malaysian teenagers' interpretations of anime.

The results from this study indicate that anime features seem to suggest a degree of ideological and cultural ambivalence, to the point that the 'Japaneseness' in this cultural product is ambiguous. On the other hand, one could also argue that the cultural ambivalence in this Japanese popular culture is deliberate so as to ensure a universal appeal for the international audience and cultural consumers. This 'ambivalence' has been perpetuated via anime to such an extent that there are international consumers who tend to equate easily anime with Japan and 'Japaneseness'.

Anime provide a convenient appeal to Malaysians in general. The Malaysian audience can relate to the storyline as well as the social values that weave into the various situations in anime. But equally important is that the Malaysian audience in general tend to equate the anime with things Japanese even though the collective identity promoted by it may go beyond what is 'Japanese'.
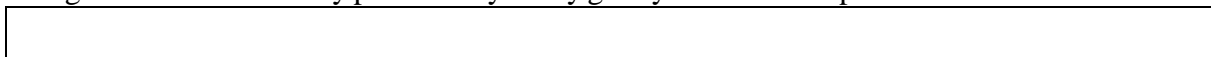
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