

Localizing Japanese Subculture in China: A Case Study of Japanese Boys' Love Manga

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Abstract:

While Japanese subculture gains increasingly active fans in China, the lack of cultural adaptation prevents it from further expanding its popularity. Therefore, this paper takes Japanese boys' love (BL) manga as a representative case to explore the localization strategies for Japanese subcultures. Combined with a questionnaire survey method and content analysis, this paper compares the Chinese and Japanese BL market and finds the differences in distribution channels, cultural preferences, and perceptions. These differences lead to inconvenience for Chinese readers, discouraging them from continuing to read. Based on the findings above, this paper provides insights into feasible approaches. Given the essential role digital platforms play in the daily lives of the Chinese, it is suggested to build an online distribution system to deliver content effectively. Moreover, the importance of market research is also emphasized. To achieve precise communication and personalized delivery, implementing a targeted content delivery strategy is an effective approach. In order to further open up the market, holding commercialized campaigns in a local context, such as pop-up stores and exhibitions, can also play a positive role.

Keywords: Subculture; boys' love manga; localization; cross-cultural comparison

1. Introduction

Featuring creativity and individuality, Japanese subculture has been leading the global trend. From anime, manga, games to Lolita, Harajuku fashion and gyaru style, these subcultures thrive on its ability to connect deeply with a focused group, providing platforms for individuals to express their personalized narratives and identities [1]. With the rapid development of the internet, Japanese subculture has gained great popularity and has gradually formed a

stable fan base in China as well. One representative example is Boys' Love manga. Boys' Love (BL) is a genre that portrays male-male romantic relationships in diverse formats. It originated from Japanese shōjo manga in the early 1970s and quickly attracted female enthusiasts across the world [2]. With the strong output of Japanese subculture, the literary work of BL was brought into China in the 1990s and has become a prevalent cultural phenomenon. However, due to the notable differences between Japanese and Chinese society, BL manga needs adjustments to

adapt to the Chinese market. In order to provide insights into the localization strategies of Japanese subculture in China, this paper will take BL manga as a core case study and compare the Japanese and Chinese markets.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach using an online survey and a qualitative research approach using content analysis to examine the differences between the Japanese and Chinese BL markets.

The anonymous questionnaire was designed to examine Chinese readers' preferences from multiple dimensions. The questions focus on: (1) respondents' approach to accessing BL manga; (2) their likes and dislikes of specific BL genre; (3) their impression of Japanese BL manga; (4) their attitude towards sexualized scenes. The questionnaire includes single-choice questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. In the process of identifying respondents' preferences, respondents can either pick from the twenty-two given theme tags or use their own words to describe the genre. Respondents were targeted at Chinese aged 18 and above, with diverse geographic and social backgrounds. To ensure a basic understanding of the BL genre, they were randomly selected from the boys' love fan community.

The questionnaire employed a convenience sampling method and was distributed online through Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and Xiaohongshu groups due to the active participation of the target audience. In total, 76 valid responses were collected. The results were further analyzed and compared with the characteristics of the Japanese BL market, demonstrating a cultural distinction.

In addition, content analysis would be applied to the responses of open-ended questions in the survey to explore participants' perceptions, preferences, and cultural interpretations related to Japanese BL content. Focusing on readers' reviews and forms of participation, other materials such as Japanese BL ranking, publication statistics, and the adaptation of Japanese famous BL manga in China would also be analyzed to investigate the localization strategies.

3. Findings

3.1 Access Barrier due to Different Distribution Channels

The survey indicated that the Internet was unsurprisingly chosen as the most commonly used information source. Even though respondents were able to select multiple options as their media references, 92% of them reported that they mainly access BL manga via Chinese online reading

platforms such as Kuaikan manhua and Bilibili manga. And 50% also reported that they would frequently listen to audio dramas of BL series on platforms such as MissEvan and Manbo. The results confirm that, as same as their English-speaking counterparts, the primary medium chosen by Chinese BL fans is the Internet [3].

However, the primary way of distribution in Japan is physical books. According to data from the research institute for publications in Japan, the share of books still takes up over 60% of Japan's publishing sales after declining by nearly 30% due to the development of electronic books [4]. This suggests that the traditional publishing industry remains more mature and developed than digital publishing in Japan. When it comes to the overseas sales of Japanese manga, over 90% of them are consumed in physical form, implying that the primary issue of physical manga is a common approach in global circulation [5].

This difference in distribution channels has made it difficult for Chinese readers to access Japanese manga. According to the survey results, 60% of respondents had not read Japanese boys' love manga before due to the lack of electronic versions and translations. From the participants who had read Japanese BL manga before, the most mentioned work is "Dakaichi", followed by "Classmate", "Hitorijime My Hero", and "The World's Greatest First Love". It should be noted that all the works mentioned above have been adapted to animations with subtitles and can be purchased in electronic form. Therefore, the importance of media selection in the localization process can be inferred.

3.2 Divergent Perceptions towards Japanese BL manga

The survey results showed that regarding the Japanese BL manga, 68% respondents demonstrated a clear cultural preference. They favored the Chinese artistic style while finding it difficult to appreciate the Japanese style of manga.

3.2.1 Different preferences regarding the relationship settings

According to the survey responses, the most favored romantic dynamics were wholesome romance (57%), school romance (56%), and equal-strength pair (54%). 42% of respondents reported that as long as the storyline showcased a sufficient degree of romantic purity, they could accept the absence of sexual content. In addition, besides 21% who reported that they do not have a dislike for a certain setting, the three least favored setups from the rest of the respondents were father-son relationships (54%), SM (33%), and incestuous tropes (17%). 87% claimed that the appearance of the settings mentioned above would play a decisive role in whether they continue to read, especially the father-son relationships. This indicates that Chinese

readers hold rather conventional views on romantic relationship setups, demonstrating their pursuit of true love with equal relationship portrayals and a particularly strong rejection towards incestuous settings due to the influence of traditional family values [6].

However, it is common for Japanese Boys' Love works to explore niche relationship settings [2]. For instance, "shō-ta," which portrays underage boys in sexually charged situations as objects of attraction, has gained great popularity in Japan, while commonly associated with child abuse in other nations [7]. A representative example of this is a Japanese BL manga called "Super Lovers". According to the 2025 BL manga popularity ranking, it was ranked 18th out of 238 works by Japanese readers after 15 years of publication [8]. Contrary to its enduring popularity in Japan, it triggered heated discussion regarding whether this story involves themes of pedophilia in China. Given the storyline that the little brother developed a crush on his older brother at the age of 8, the anime was frequently criticized by some of the Chinese viewers for promoting immoral values on love to teenagers, and was eventually taken down around 2018. In addition, a wide range of settings such as student-teacher relationships, yandere characters, and non-human entities, which are normalized in Japan, remain relatively unfamiliar or even taboo for Chinese readers. It's predictable that manga with these unconventional settings will face resistance from mainstream audiences when trying to enter the Chinese market.

3.2.2 The delayed perception towards Japanese BL manga

According to the survey results, regarding the keywords that describe Japanese BL manga, 75% of respondents chose the imbalanced relationship portrayals between protagonists. To be more specific, submissive uke (bottom) with little personal autonomy (66%), emotional or physical manipulation (40%), non-consensual sexual acts (26%) and unequal social power such as minor-adult relationships (13%). Respondents claimed that the repetitive appearance of these plots in Japanese BL manga makes them perceive the relationship as toxic, thus diminishing their interest in reading. 17% even reported that they would not consider Japanese BL manga as an option since the imbalanced relationship portrayed can be predicted to be the mainstream.

However, this impression of inequality is still in the past state of Japanese BL manga. In the 2000s, the type of dominant seme (top) and tsundere uke (bottom) dynamic indeed became a trend due to the popularity of BL works such as *The World's Greatest First Love*, *Junjou Romantica*, and *Love Tyrant* [2]. These works feature a common relationship pattern which starts with seme's possessive and forceful love, ending with uke giving away resistance to affection. Other themes such as relationship anxieties,

terminal illness, rape and incest are also popular in that time [9].

Nonetheless, this pattern is replaced by a more complicated and diverse narrative in recent Japanese BL manga. According to Japanese BL elections, the top three most popular manga over the past 3 years have demonstrated emphasis on exploring the inner world of characters [10]. Rather than simply submitting to or depending on one another, both the seme and uke act based on their complex motivations. A representative work is Sasaki and Miyano, which has sold over 2 million copies in total and ranked first in the 2023 Pixiv web manga election [10]. While Miyano looked like a typical passive uke, he demonstrates a clear agency towards his future and sexual orientation throughout the story, repeatedly making clear the boundaries of their relationship. On the other hand, instead of making rational, forceful movements, Sasaki values Miyano's feelings and tries to build a relationship based on mutual respect and consent. The popularity of this manga indicates the shift of favorable relationship dynamics in Japan, displaying the tendency to a more balanced and equal narrative.

4. Suggestion

4.1 Building an Online Distribution System

When it comes to Japanese subculture, whether it is comics, cosplay, or idol culture, the spread and participation of these contents in Japan is mainly in the form of offline activities. For instance, physical publications, exhibitions, and autograph sessions. However, influenced by different consuming habits, relying solely on offline promotion in China limits its popularity. Therefore, building an integrated online promotion system has become an essential approach to the localization of Japanese subculture in China.

4.1.1 Cooperating with local reading platforms

According to the 2024 China mobile internet report, the scale of China's digital economy industry accounts for about 10% of its GDP, with online reading being the main contributor [11]. It indicates that online reading is gradually rooting in Chinese readers' lives and becoming a major source of entertainment. While Japan has developed several digital reading platforms such as Piccoma, Line manga, and Pixiv comics, those applications are unavailable to Chinese users. In addition, mainly aiming at the Japanese market, companies generally do not spare effort to provide translations for foreign readers [12]. Therefore, it would be more effective for them to expand the market by collaborating with domestic Chinese reading platforms. For example, for comics, it is practical to launch works on leading platforms such as Kuaikan Manhua, Bilibili

Comics, or Tencent Comics. Above platforms enjoy great popularity among young Chinese readers, gaining 33.64 million, 15.66 million, and 14.29 million monthly active users respectively [11]. For literature, cooperating with the Tomato novel or the Qimao novel is an effective choice. With 218.07 million and 87.88 million monthly active users, respectively, it can rapidly gain exposure. In addition, domestic reading platforms have already established a highly differentiated user segmentation system [11]. For example, Tomato Novels targets light readers, Kuaikan Comics focuses on the young female market, while Tencent and Bilibili have a strong ACG user base. By utilizing this segmentation system, it enables the subculture contents to accurately reach the targeted readership at a low cost.

4.1.2 Leveraging social media

In the digital age, social media not only serve as a way of entertainment, but also as a platform for users to obtain and exchange various information. Therefore, utilizing the broad reach of Chinese social media can deliver the updates of Japanese subculture to the targeted audience efficiently. One practical approach is to create an official account on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo. Compared with the large investment in developing a new application solely targeted at Chinese readers and the difficulty in long-term maintenance, creating an account is a cost-effective alternative. By posting content such as sales of merchandise, release of new works, or solicitation of feedback, not only can it accumulate a stable fan group of potential readership, but also create an interactive and dynamic environment. For instance, chillchill is a Japanese company that delivers manga updates and related products. It has launched an official account on Xiaohongshu for half a year and already gained nearly 60000 subscribers. Chinese readers actively participate in posts such as BL ranking voting, goods sales and recommendation of works, exchanging ideas in the comment section. The repaid gain of a modest following in this account reflects that social media is not only a platform for content display, but also an important space for users to form an emotional connection. This interactive environment creates a sense of belonging, making users a part of a common cultural experience. By sharing the connection to a certain cultural identity, a subculture can expand to a wider range of consumers.

4.2 Promotion based on Market Research

In the process of localizing Japanese subculture in China, conducting market research is a core and indispensable link. The current promotion strategy still features a direct export of works based on the Japanese market, lacking an investigation into the Chinese audience. It leads to the mismatch between supply and demand and becomes

a barrier to further expanding its popularity in China. Therefore, cross-cultural adaptation should be given great importance in strategic planning, exploring the different characteristics in users' preferences, consuming habits, and acceptance.

4.2.1 Targeted content delivery strategy

Combining the wide coverage of mainstream themes and a precise promotion of niche topics can utilize the best use of resources and deliver subculture content efficiently. For instance, in the promotion of animation and manga, for themes such as school romance and superpower battles, which enjoy a broad readership base and can evoke emotional resonance easily, the platform can adopt a large-scale promotion strategy. Putting advertisements on multiple channels enables the product to gain attention in a short period of time, creating a trend and a stable communication power.

On the other hand, for niche subculture content such as Lolita and Visual kei, it would be better to adopt a precise strategy. Carrying out dissemination solely among small fan groups can strengthen the bond with the targeted audience and create in-depth interaction, creating a sense of belonging and avoiding the risk of raising controversy in the public community, which is especially important for fans of niche subculture [13]. For example, sending birthday discounts, behind-the-scenes production highlights, or limited lucky draw opportunities to fans who have been paying attention for a long time can not only strengthen the internal bonding but also maintain the vitality of the cultural community.

4.2.2 Commercialization in the Chinese context

Due to the indigenous characteristics and bold expressions of Japanese subculture, they face the challenge of high acceptance thresholds in the Chinese mainstream context. In this case, a moderate degree of commercialization can play a positive role in opening up the market. One representative example is Japanese Lolita culture. In the past, it was often misunderstood as "odd clothes" and even linked to gender bias, but through exhibitions, pop-up stores, and cross-border cooperation like co-branding with Sanrio, this subculture has gradually caught public attention. In the Chinese market, famous Lolita brands such as Baby and Angelic Pretty created the "everyday Lolita" series in Taobao stores, providing opportunities for non-fan groups to get in touch with this style and successfully expanding their reach.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that the commodification of subculture content often provokes negative reactions in fan groups [14]. They believe that in the process of commercialization, the superficial elements are highlighted while the spiritual core of these subcultures is neglected [14]. Therefore, to reconcile the relationship between fans

and the market, the repackaging strategy is more suitable for use in the early stage of promotion, such as expanding popularity.

5. Conclusion

Combining survey results and content analysis, this paper has explored the challenges of localizing Japanese BL manga in the Chinese market. Findings suggest that compared to the habit of reading physical books in Japan, the primary medium chosen by Chinese BL readers is an online platform. Going through the successfully localized BL works in China, the importance of changing media is demonstrated. Moreover, from the analysis of character setups that Chinese readers favored, it is evident that they prefer emotionally balanced relationships under rather traditional moral values. Given the diverse attempts to explore niche relationship dynamics in Japan BL manga, the cultural differences might cause resistance from Chinese readers during localization. A gap in perception was also observed. The outdated impression of Japanese BL manga that Chinese readers hold has a direct influence on discouraging them from reading Japanese BL manga, which serves as a significant barrier to the successful localization.

Based on this case study of BL manga, insights into the localization strategies of Japanese subculture in China were provided. Through building an online distribution system, such as cooperating with Chinese reading platforms and leveraging the power of social media, the content can be delivered to the audience more efficiently. In addition, market research should be conducted to implement integrated promotion strategies. For mainstream content, delivering in multiple channels is effective. For niche genres, carrying out precise dissemination among small targeted fan groups and providing preview chapters can reduce readers' resistance, gradually opening the market. Additionally, conducting commercialized campaigns such as pop-up stores and co-branding can further expand popularity.

Despite these insights, this study is not without limitations. In the process of localization, factors such as age, gender, and social identity also have a significant influence on the degree of acceptance, preferences, and participation model. For example, females as the main consumers of BL content, their consuming habits and community may differ with the man's. Future research could expand on this study, controlling variables such as gender or age to explore the complex context of localization.

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