Representations of Women in Japanese and American Pop Culture: A cross-cultural examination of the superheroine

CarrieLynn Reinhard
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“I don’t look like a superheroine, but I am one.”
-Usagi Tsukino, aka Sailor Moon,
*Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon*

**Introduction**

The Oxford American College Dictionary defines a superhero as a benevolent character with superhuman powers. They define a hero as a person, ‘typically a man’, who is admired for his courage and nobility. While the dictionary has a place for ‘heroine’, there is no entry for ‘superheroine.’ In their article on children and role models, Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) say that superheroes are “larger-than-life symbols of American values and ‘maleness’.” (p. 162). From a socialization point of view, is there reason to be concerned about the ‘superhero’-centeredness of a segment of the American pop culture to which many children are exposed? And if this is the case in America, where many believe women are on a more equal alignment with men, what is the situation in other societies, such as Japan, where the inequality is perceived to be more common? Both the United States and Japan have a segment of their pop culture devoted to fantastic stories about individuals with superhuman powers. These stories tell of heroes with strengths that children may identify with in the hope becoming as successful as these characters (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). It then becomes imperative to understand how these heroes are portrayed. Are the women in media, which is directed towards tomorrow’s women, being portrayed as strong and independent rather than as victims and damsels-in-distress?

**Socializing Theories and Women in Culture**

According to LeVine (1969), socialization is the process through which a child is trained to become a productive member of the society through the internalization of society’s norms, creating conformity to society that is not challenged but accepted as normal. Children are shown a role that is portrayed as a successful means for participating in that society, and the child comes to believe he or she must enact this role to be just as successful. Kelly and Donohew (1999) point
out that while the mass media should be considered a secondary source, it could be more prominent should primary sources fail. The mass media can serve as a child’s window to the outside world, shaping how they view reality and those who live in it. The mass media can shape not only how the child thinks about herself, but how she relates to others and society at large in (Muramatsu, 2002). The mass media can reflect society’s norms, thereby providing exemplars of how to exist in that society.

However, the media also has the ability to generate and cultivate new norms. The mass media can work to subvert the norms of the society by providing a battleground for existing dialectical tensions to be presented, with the hope that by addressing these tensions in a “viewer friendly” arena, the tensions can be resolved (Anderson, 1997; Kellner, 2000). “Expressive culture, be it folklore or mass media, reflects and influences contemporary attitudes concerning issues that are not readily confronted, such as the grueling controversy in the gap between women’s actual positions and their expectations in the rapidly changing society.” (Shiokawa, 1999, p. 121). The question remains, are comic books and cartoons reinforcing stereotypes of women? Or are these media in a state of dialectical flux, where the representations of women are re-imaging the boundaries placed upon them by their society?

Understanding the current state of affairs for women in both cultures is a logical next step. Americans have the perception of Japanese women being domicile, rigidly oppressed by the men in their lives and not actively working to overthrow such oppression. “The kimono-clad, bamboo parasol-toting, bowing female walking three paces behind her husband remains the image many Westerners hold of the typical Japanese woman.” (Iwao, 1993, p.1). According to Iwao (1993), the women of Japan are not necessarily more or less oppressed than their counterparts in America, only that they view equality differently, more as a balancing of power, and that the powers ascribed to those traditional roles are different. In Japan, while the man has the power outside of
the house to make the money to support the house, it is the woman’s job to determine how that house is run, which includes, perhaps subtly, how the people in that house are run. This power structure differs from traditional Western roles for women, who were for so long considered as much as property as the land their husbands and fathers owned.

That is not to say that traditional Japanese women have equality with their men. “Compared to Europe and the United States, women in Japan have had their sex roles rigidly defined and their socialization with the opposite sex restricted.” (Schodt, 1983, p. 94). A gender dichotomy was established where men were seen as ‘worldly’ and women as ‘unworldly.’ (Tsurumi, 2000). However, things in modern Japan are not as traditional as they have been. Since their defeat in World War II, and their subsequent occupation by American military and cultural forces, Japanese women have been moving into the male-dominated world of work and higher education (Ledden and Fejes, 1987). But this is causing a clash of cultures. “The uneven pace at which male and female attitudes and behaviors are changing is a current source of stress in Japanese society.” (Iwao, 1993, p. 4). And one arena in which this clash is being addressed is the popular media, like anime (cartoons) and manga (comic books) (Ledden and Fejes, 1987). “Comic art not only offers information about the beliefs, values and practices or the culture, but offers access to understand stress points or points of tension relative to beliefs, values and practices.” (Grisby, 1998, p. 62). Content analyses are a good means of understanding the existence of such a struggle, and understanding the portrayal of superheroines can speak volumes about the current status of a culture. “What kind of heroes a culture promotes reveals a great deal about that culture’s values and desires.” (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002, p. 161). What do the saviors of Japan and America say about their respective culture?
There is a common conception in the United States that cartoons and comic books are “kids’ stuff.” While this may be changing since the box office success of recent animated films, such a perception commonly does not apply to the genre that includes superpowered beings fighting to save the world. The audience of these stories in the United States is generally adolescent boys (Schodt, 1996). As a CBS network executive pointed out, the majority of children who watch Saturday morning cartoons are boys and successful shows cannot have female leads to appeal to boys (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995). This is not the case in Japan, where boys are as likely to read manga and watch anime with female leads as girls are (Levi, 1996). In Japan, the industry dwarfs its American counterpart. “In no other country in the world is animation such an important part of mainstream television and video programming, and nowhere else is it, like its parent medium, manga, so popular across the entire social and demographic board.” (McCarthy, 1991, p. xiii). Because of anime and manga’s centrality in Japanese popular culture, many scholars have looked at the portrayals of women therein to understand the current status of the society’s regards towards women (Tsurumi, 2000).

Traditionally, Japanese manga and anime contained stereotypes of women, as sex objects to be victimized and saved (Schodt, 1983). The idea was for women to represent the ideal of kawaii, which can be translated as an object completely lacking anything threatening to others, or being “cute” (Shiokawa, 1999). According to Shiokawa, this conception of women began to change in the 1960s as shojo (girls) manga evolved to cater to the girl audience, and more and more women artists rose to prominence in the industry. In the 1970s, the active heroine took shape as their heroines into sport competitors, first focused on winning the man of their dreams, but this gave way to career goals. At the same time, the shonen (boys) manga continued to show stereotypes, the virgin to save and the whining girlfriend to contend with. As the 1970s
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progressed, these women wore less and less clothing and developed more sexual figures. While opposite their shojo cousins, the girls in the shonen manga adopted the big eye characteristics that first appeared in shojo.

Yet, as the 1980s progressed, that was not all they adopted. In time, the girlfriend joined the men in their fight. “Although true work-place equality is still a barely achieved ideal for most Japanese women, these animated women fight alongside their male colleagues, utilizing their increasingly large weapons and lethal abilities.” (Shiokawa, 1999, p. 112). The women in such manga are a combination of the kawaii of shojo manga and the aggressive tendencies the boys were used to in their main characters. Cute but deadly, Shiokawa believed such a combination prevailed because it appeals to both genders; it provides a strong role model for girls, without intimidating the boys. Yet at the same time, saying the only strong woman is a cute yet otherwise non-threatening woman, subverts women’s attempts overthrow their oppression.

Other researchers proclaim that there are examples of subversion against oppressive stereotypes. According to Levi (1996), these popular media provide the area for the dialectical struggle to be played out because both the traditional and the non-traditional roles can be weighed against each other. “Anime tends to stress the advantages as well as the disadvantages of being female. It does not ignore oppression, but it also recognizes that there are trade-offs.”(p. 131). While some may say the trade-off is the need to appear sexually desirable to men to be allowed to be a strong, independent woman, Levi asserts that many artists really want the girls to be themselves, and make the men accept them as such.

As described by Levi, one such character is Usagi Tsukino, also known as Sailor Moon from Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon. Sailor Moon is seen as a hybrid, displaying both feminine and masculine traits as her ideals are love, friendship and saving the world (Allison, 2000). She is clumsy, academically challenged and lazy, but she emerges to be a brave and loyal leader of a
band of female Sailor Warriors who use their magic powers to thwart evil demons. She is boy crazy, and soon falls in love with a masked man named Tuxedo Kamen (Mask), who appears out of nowhere to save Sailor Moon when she is in trouble. While enormously successful in Japan, the series received only tepid reception in the United States in the early 1990s, where she was thought of as too “girly” (Allison, 2000). In fact, Grisby (1998), in her analysis of the show, says Sailor Moon incorporated more American gender stereotypes than Japanese stereotypes. While the series may have served as a means for bridging the masculine and feminine in Japan, many Americans perceived her as still too feminine (see Appendix A). Being over a decade old, Sailor Moon was an early attempt at creating a superheroine who could serve as a positive role model for girls negotiating their position in a patriarchal society.

But there have been other introductions since Sailor Moon. In particular, Inu-Yasha, a series currently on Cartoon Network, which is also a high-selling manga (Johnson, 2003), has a less gender-stereotyped portrayal of a superheroine. Kagome is a schoolgirl, dressed in a sailor uniform very similar to Usagi, but instead of Usagi’s more American blonde hair and blue eyes, Kagome has black hair and brown eyes. She traveled through time to medieval Japan, and now fights with half-human half-dog demon Inu-Yasha to find the shards of a powerful jewel, which all the demons seek for their own. While not the title character, Kagome is the Yang to Inu-Yasha’s Yin, as she is the one who finds the shards and he is the one who secures them. This relationship matches what Iwao (1993) describes as the Japanese ideal of gender equality: a balance of power between the sexes, each with their own job but neither more important than the other. While sometimes the damsel-in-distress, she is just as likely to save the day with her magic-enhanced archery or by encouraging Inu-Yasha, whom she loves. While Sailor Moon has to transform into another being to fight evil, Kagome merely has to pick up a bow and arrow. She also does not display any of the negative feminine traits such as whining, cowering and so forth,
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although her steadfast love and loyalty to a man who has trouble reciprocating does clash with American romantic ideals. However, she does have the advantage of being able to control Inu-Yasha due to a magical necklace, commanding him to “Sit boy!” if he needs to be reprimanded.

While perhaps not as popular, and a few years older, the series The Slayers provides a very subversive take on the need for strong women to be kawaii. Lina Inverse is a tremendously powerful teenage sorceress with a short-temper and a big stomach for thieving and eating. She is accompanied by a dim-witted swordsman, Gourry, who claims to be her male protector, but she rarely needs his help. In fact, when Gourry first comes to her rescue, she was about to dispatch a group of bandits, but instead sarcastically decides she should be the helpless damsel and let him handle it. She screeches, in a higher than normal voice, “The heroine’s supposed to be all scared and shriek here. Gotta play the part right!” She represents the physical ideals of kawaii – big round eyes and extra petite body – and yet her prepubescent appearance is the constant butt of jokes. While Kagome can be seen as a modern Sailor Moon, attempting to bridge the masculine and feminine, Lina is almost purely in the masculine, rarely making time for feminine concerns like love. But she can also not be considered as a sex object as much as Sailor Moon can, whose superheroine costume and transformation process leaves little to the imagination.

These then provide three examples of superheroines in Japanese popular culture. And their counterparts in American popular culture? A content analysis conducted by (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995) indicated that since the 1980s, the portrayals of women in cartoons became less stereotyped and more numerous. Women were independent, intelligent and strong, and there were more of them than before. However, focusing on genres, Leaper, Breed, Hoffman and Perlman (2002) found that women in traditional adventures series (Batman, Spiderman) were less numerous and more stereotyped than in other genres studied, such as non-traditional adventures series, defined as such because they included at least one girl in the fighting group. Interestingly
enough, **Sailor Moon** was one of the series studies as non-traditional. In this genre, the women were as likely as the men to be physically aggressive. Thus, there are some non-stereotyped portrayals in cartoons. In a study of other media, Signorielli (1997) also concluded that portrayals were better than they had been in the past. Women were being portrayed as strong, smart, independent and honest. However, at the same time, they were shown as being overly concerned with their appearance and usually depicted in the context of a relationship and not the context of a career. Signorielli concluded the media were sending out mixed messages about what a woman in the United States should be, similar to the perceived signals from Sailor Moon.

So how fare the American superheroines if women in general are generating mixed messages? Since Wonder Woman made her debut in 1942, women have not been as prevalent as men. While superheroines are more numerous in Japan, “one can argue that the preferred model of superheroism (in both the fantasy and the ‘real’ realms) remains strongly masculine in the United States and strongly biased against a female hero, particularly one who behaves in a feminine or girlie manner.” (Allison, 2000, p. 275). Young (1991, 1993) conducted content analyses of the 1991 trading cards Marvel Comics published to promote their comic franchises. He found that there were less superheroines in the Marvel universe, that they fought in fewer battles than their male counterparts (1991), and that the men had greater strength and stamina than the women (1993). “In superhero teams the women tended to have softer powers, often with an (sic) magical or psychic component, where the men had the more dramatically physical powers.” (Burrows, 5 April 2004, online). Marvel Girl of the X-Men started out with just telepathic abilities, but during the women’s liberation movement of the 1970’s she became the Phoenix, one of the most powerful people in the world. However, she became the Dark Phoenix in the 1980s, and was later found out to be an imposter. The power that had been Marvel Girl’s was taken away, because it was never hers in the first place! Her teammates have fared slightly better.
Rogue started out with a rather weak power, but was given physical strength and the ability to fly; however, her original power curses her to never know another human’s touch. Storm fared better, being able to control the weather, but she had been worshipped as goddess in Africa, which she gave up to sacrifice herself time and time again to save the world.

American superheroines just have a similar problem with their Japanese counterparts. They can be powerful, but they have to give up something to get this power. Sailor Moon gave up being a normal girl. Kagome gave up being at home with her family. Lina gave up her femininity and any chance for love. Rogue cannot touch another. Marvel Girl had to lose herself, literally. Storm had to leave adulation. Still others, since the 1990s, have had to give up something else – their decency. The American women of comics since the 1990s have been criticized as being little more than hyper-sexed pin-ups with impossible physiologies (Burrows, 2004), a trend started by Lady Death (See Appendix B) and followed by almost every other character. With the weakening of the women’s movement, and the need to attract boys away from distractions like video games, the women developed figures of enormous breasts, big hair, continuously arching backs, all supported on high heels – regardless of how such a configuration would impair their fighting abilities (Robbins, 1996). Even Wonder Woman, who started it all for superheroines, was given the treatment in 1994.

However, there is hope. A new writer and input from women artists have brought Wonder Woman more in line with the original woman, creating a strong and positive role model for girls (Burrows, 2004), although she still has a rather provocative physique (see Appendix B). Also, 1997 saw the introduction of Buffy Summers, from **Buffy the Vampire Slayer**, who shares many similarities with Sailor Moon. Buffy laments in the beginning about wanting to be a normal girl. Seen first as a teenager, she is also academically challenged, and has a man who appears out of nowhere to give her guidance and assistance. Yet Buffy is a new breed of character, more inline
with Kagome and Lina. Like the magic of Kagome and Lina, Buffy’s power is internal, the physical strength and prowess normally bestowed only to superheroes. While she may not like doing her schoolwork, she is very intelligent, receiving a high score on her SATs, whereas Usagi continuously receives low marks on her tests. Her “male protector”, Angel, is more her equal, as they are likely to save each other from danger, making them similar to Kagome and Inu-Yasha. While the romance storyline is central for Sailor Moon, for Buffy it is secondary, as it is for Kagome. Buffy, like Sailor Moon, bridges the masculine and feminine, as she fights to avert Apocalypses and lives for her friends, but at the same time she does not have the negative stereotypes, which makes her akin to Kagome. And this portrayal of Buffy is found not only in the television series, but also in the comic book that bears her name, although the character there is a little more sexualized than on television (see Appendix B). Like her Japanese counterparts, the character appeals to men and women alike, as can be seen by visiting online message boards.

The Future: Animerica?

The success of Buffy has seen similar superheroines in the media for children, such as The Powerpuff Girls, Dark Angel, and Charmed. “To behave aggressively is no longer considered unfeminine and unattractive. Girl characters are expected to be assertive and achievement-oriented...Today’s girls don’t just want the tough action hero – they want to be the tough action hero.” (Hopkins, 2002, online). Such characterizations have been in Japanese manga and anime for the past two decades (Allison, 2000). As has been previously discussed, the reason there are more likely to be superheroines in Japanese pop culture than in American is most likely due to the American belief that only boys will read such material. Is it possible that the only thing preventing the propagation of positive superheroines in the United States is the lack of a female audience for comic book material?
Social feminism, taking its cue from Marxism, believes the reason for the oppressive stereotypes of women in the media is due to the lack of women in control of the production of those portrayals (van Zoonen, 1991). As indicated by the presence of shojo manga, women artists have had a commanding presence in Japan since the late 1960s, whereas their presence in American pop culture has been limited (Robbins, 1996; Burrows, 2004). This could possibly be due to the perception in the United States that only social rejects (aka “nerds”) read superhero stories, and for a girl, being labeled a nerd is typically twice as debilitating for her social standing than it is for a boy. Not only that, but as Robbins (1996) pointed out, why should girls want to read material that insults the average girl? And if they are not fans of the material, then the chance of their being involved in its creation is greatly reduced.

Luckily, the media industry is just that, an industry with its main goal being the reaping of profit off its product. If an audience can be demonstrated for a product with one success, then the industry will cater to that audience, even if those successive productions challenge the norm. “The concrete struggles of each society are played out in the texts of media culture, especially in the commercial media of the culture industries which produce texts that must resonate with people’s concerns if they are to be popular and profitable.” (Kellner, 2000, p. 20). If there is a struggle seen in the depictions of women in the media, it is due to those oppressed or representing the oppressed confronting a perceptually hostile reality (Kellner, 2000). According to Robbins (1996), Stan Lee of Marvel Comics sought to reach the girl audience in the 1960s, bringing stronger superheroines back to the comics. Coinciding with the women’s liberation movement, the move was successful, with even Gloria Steinem complaining over changes in the depiction of Wonder Woman (A&E Networks). Joss Whedon, creator of Buffy Summers, can be said to be following in his footsteps, as have numerous other producers since 1997. Producing one positive role model can itself become a model for how to make money, which produces more positive depictions.
The question is, where to begin? Create the role model in search of an audience or create an audience in search of a role model? If the current influx of anime and manga are any indication (Johnson, 2003), then the audience is out there. According to Schodt (1996), manga and anime have infiltrated American pop culture, starting as far back as the early 1980s with comic book artists like Frank Miller, who reinvigorated the *Batman* title for DC Comics (A&E Networks). “Our children, for that matter, are growing up watching more and more of what we think is domestically produced TV animation but which is actually repackaged Japanese anime with manga roots!” (Schodt, 1996). A current examination of the Saturday morning line-up shows that the majority of programs on the WB and FOX are Japanese in origin, such as *Shaman King*, *Pokemon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. 

What will be the result of this influx of Japanese anime and manga? While coming from a society with greater inequalities than exist in the United States, their superheroines on average offer a more positive portrayal of women than American superheroines from the same time frame. Perhaps the influx of these “foreign” portrayals will result in changes to American superheroines as the producers of the cultural products realize there is a female audience for this type of fare.

Hopefully, seeing positive superheroines will empower girls to want to make sure that their daughters can have the same role models, thereby working to subvert and change to role of real woman in saving the real world.
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