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Enlightenment through Culture: *Naruto*'s Significance to Japan

For years, many have tried to grasp an understanding of the workings behind the Japanese mind. Studies by numerous people have led to ideologies and concepts that have been utilized in attempts to comprehend the lifestyle of the Japanese. Such studies have resulted in themes that are perhaps familiar to a student of Japanese culture, yet foreign to the common Westerner. Themes include that of belongingness, occupying one's proper place, dependency, and so on. Though themes such as these are not themselves alien to the West, the way the Japanese perceive them are of a totally different scale. Literary works by scholars such as Takie Sugiyama Lebra give us an idea as to how these topics play a role in the lives of the Japanese. However, novels and books are not the only method of studying and understanding these concepts surrounding the Japanese mind. Japanese comic books, better known as *manga*, also serve as a modern medium to learning these concepts. Being written by Japanese themselves for the enjoyment of national as well as international audiences, *manga* not only acts as a representative of Japanese popular culture, but it also characterizes the thought of the contemporary Japanese. In particular, the *manga* known as *Naruto* is abundant in Japanese themes and ideas. Upon reading, the connections to these themes as well as Japanese mythology and religion become quite apparent. Furthermore, its cross over into other countries and influence on an array of by-products illustrates its importance in the world of Pop Culture as well. The clever weaving of central aspects in Japanese studies along with its booming popularity

across the globe makes *Naruto* a perfect example of using popular culture as a means to better comprehend the complexity that is the Japanese mind.

*Naruto* is the self-titled tale of a boy who becomes an orphan at birth after the death of his parents. He lives in the Hidden Leaf Village (木ノ葉隠れの里), also known as Konoha. Konoha resides in the Fire Country(火の国), which is but one of many that make up the Ninja world in which the story takes place. On the day of his birth, the catastrophic nine-tailed beast known as the Kyuubi(九尾) attacked the village of Konoha resulting in the death of many, including Naruto's parents. In order to save the village and protect the people, the leader of Konoha at the time, the Fourth Hokage(四代目火影), used a sacrificial technique that sealed half of the Kyuubi's power into Naruto's body, while the other half disappeared with him into the underworld. Cursed as the bearer of the beast that destroyed the village and killed many, Naruto was shunned as a monster from the day of his birth. Growing up, he was an outcast with no family or friends. Villagers who survived the Kyuubi attack prohibited their children from interacting with him. Everyone spoke cruelly of him and criticized him. They looked down on him, looked at him with hatred, or worse, didn't look at him at all. However, rather than letting this bring him down, he uses the village's aversion towards him as motivation to advance in life. Thus, his goal is to become Hokage, and have the entire village acknowledge his existence and respect him as a ninja. A goal that he boldly states countless times without shame, and refuses to give up on even in the toughest of situations. He refers to his philosophy of staying true to one's word as his "Way of the Ninja"(忍道). It is this Way of the Ninja that allows Naruto to earn respect, gain companions, become stronger, and ultimately be recognized and accepted by his village.

In the beginning, Naruto seems to lack one of the key concepts of the Japanese lifestyle: belongingness. To the Japanese, knowing where you come from and being aware of your identity is crucial. According to Lebra, author of *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, belongingness to the Japanese “relates to the tendency toward collectivism, which is expressed by an individual’s identification with the collective goal of the group to which he belongs” (25). In short, to “belong” means to be a part of a certain group, and to make it clear that you are. Yet, this concept becomes convoluted for Naruto due to his exclusion from the village. He is in fact the outsider of the group. Even during his days at the Academy before graduating to become an official ninja, he cannot completely say that he is part of the group. Being dead last in his class and having failed examinations, the rift between Naruto and his classmates is rather clear. Yet, instead of studying to improve in class, he spends his time partaking in mischief and playing practical jokes, in an attempt to attract others’ attention and have them notice him. In the end, however, his peers and other villagers only see him as a nuisance, thus making him “the antithesis of ninja in a ninja world...a failed Shinobi from page one” (“Ultimate Naruto Essay”). Naruto’s longing to be part of the group is reinforced through his conversation with his strict yet understanding teacher, Iruka. Although Iruka lost his parents during the Kyuubi attack, he is unexpectedly one of the few people to acknowledge Naruto from the beginning. Having been orphaned at a young age like Naruto, he understands that his acting out is actually a cry for attention, for he conducted in the same type of behavior during his own childhood. The night before his third attempt at examinations, Naruto asks to borrow Iruka’s forehead protector. Lebra states that there are “visible indicators of belongingness that the Japanese have taken to: school uniforms, badges, caps” (24). In the Ninja world, the forehead protector serves as the visible indicator of the group, and is obtained upon passing examinations and graduating from the Academy. Each one has the

symbol of one's village engraved into it, and it is representative of one's official acceptance into the "group". Naruto's failure to acquire his own forehead protector displays the difficulty he experiences trying to become a part of the group.



Figure 1, Kishimoto Masashi, *Naruto*, Chapter 1, Page 13, 1999

Although Naruto fails his examination many times, with the help of Iruka he is eventually able to graduate from the academy and become an official ninja. This introduces the next important concept, dependency. Lebra offers a range of different situations in which dependency is present, and notes that in Japan, "a dependency relationship is a desirable one" (65). This is an extreme contrast to the mindset of the West, where independence is highly promoted. Whether one has independence forced onto them upon reaching adulthood, or simply wishes to be free from authoritative constraints regardless of age, it is clear that the independent lifestyle is dominant and preferred in the West. On the other hand, Japan gladly welcomes the concept of dependency. In "The Utopian 'Power to Live'", author Hiroshi Yamanaka explains this contrast

through his comparison between the Western tale *Robin Crusoe* and the Japanese animated film *Spirited Away*. As a story of a man who rebels against his father only to end up shipwrecked at sea, *Robin Crusoe* is an example of the common Western tale of individualism. While trapped alone on the island, he learns to fend for himself, thus embodying the idea of the West that one can “achieve independence and salvation solely through the individual self-effort” (244). This clashes greatly with *Spirited Away*, the tale of a young girl (Chihiro) who ends up trapped in a mysterious otherworld from which she must escape after freeing her parents from captivity.

Yamanaka notes that although Chihiro is initially alone in this foreign world, she is able to achieve her goal of saving her parents through the help of the personal relationships she makes along the way. Because of their assistance and advice, she “saves herself not through her own solitary efforts, but through the help offered by her friends” (244). The same can be said about Naruto. Having been alone in the beginning, it is only through the bonds he establishes that he is able to progress and overcome challenges. Upon graduating from the Academy, he is placed with fellow members Sasuke and Sakura into Team 7, which is led by their sensei, Kakashi. Aside from Iruka, these are the first real bonds Naruto is able to form, thus rescuing him from his solitude. It is his salvation from loneliness that enables him to create more and more relationships with other ninja in Konoha. Thus, throughout the course of the series, Naruto comes to depend on many people around him. In fact, during most, if not all battles fought by Naruto, he is able to persevere and prevail by relying on some sort of outside source. It is important to note that the source he comes to rely on the most for physical energy is indeed the Kyuubi that was sealed inside of him. The Kyuubi becomes a power supply which Naruto depends on greatly in times of need. However, these times of need are, for the most part, times when he wishes to protect others. Though there are many occasions where Naruto’s fellow

comrades come to assist him, situations in which his saviors lack the power themselves to defeat the enemy are just as plenty. In cases like these, Naruto becomes driven with the will to protect his comrades from harm, which leads him to tap into the Kyuubi's energy supply. Thus, the tables turn, and Naruto in effect triumphs as the savior with the help of the Kyuubi's power. It is Naruto's will to fight for others that causes them to consider him as a "little sprout", because of "the implication that he is the sort to grow into a great sheltering tree because of his desire to protect everyone" ("Ultimate Naruto Essay"). Therefore, it can be said that although Naruto depends on others greatly, they also depend on him, thus illustrating that "dependency is interactional: dependency leads to interdependency" (Lebra, 60).



Figure 2, Volume 15, Chapter 133, Page 139

Having such a strong presence of interdependence and teamwork, it is easy to see the importance of the collective in *Naruto*. The importance of the collective is reinforced by the concept of occupying one's proper place. Lebra describes this concept with the Japanese word *bun*, meaning "part". To know and to be committed to one's *bun* is essential in Japanese society. According to Lebra, there are three implications to the concept of *bun*, one being the previously discussed topic of interdependence. Before interdependence can be established however, one must first acknowledge one's *bun*; meaning they are not one, but rather a fraction of the whole.

In other words, one only “becomes a somebody through occupying a fractional place and contributing to the whole society or group” (68). As mentioned before, Naruto occupies his proper place in society upon joining Team 7 as an official ninja. From that point on, he learns the importance of fighting for others, and most importantly, fighting for one’s village. However, he is not the only one in Konoha with this mindset. The ninja of Konoha greatly recognize their roles in society, and do their best to contribute to their village. This introduces the last part of the *bun* concept that “every member of society is supposed to be a *bun*-holder” (68). If every person in a society holds their own *bun*, the society is therefore complete as a whole without any missing fractions. Hence, acceptance of one’s *bun*, dependence on others, and having a *bun* for each member is what it means to “occupy one’s proper place”. This idea is exemplified significantly during the joint-attack on Konoha from the outside villages of Sand (砂隠れの里) and Sound (音隠れの里). During this time, extreme cooperation is displayed between the members of Konoha, as they all work together to defeat the enemy and protect their village. The Hokage even states to the enemy that “The shinobi of Konoha, in order to defend their village...will all fight with everything they’ve got!” (Vol 16, page 39). This shows that the Konoha ninja clearly understand their role in the village, as well as their “capacity and willingness to fulfill all obligations attached to that place” (Lebra, 67).

The concept of role goes hand in hand with the idea of status. With one’s role, comes one’s status, which underlines the importance of hierarchy to the Japanese. The presence of hierarchy in Japan can be seen through many factors, such as titles of honor, use of *keigo* (formal speech), and extreme competition. *Naruto* illustrates this importance of hierarchy completely with its use of the Ninja ranking system. There are many levels that make up the ladder of status in the Ninja world. First and foremost is the *kage*, or the leader of the village. Next comes the

three ranks of Ninja, starting with the highest rank of *jounin* (上忍). *Jounin* are the most skillful and experienced Ninja, and thus this role is most often taken by adults or young adults. The next rank is *chuunin* (中忍), which, being made by the characters for “middle” and “ninja”, clearly states that this is the middle rank. All teachers are of either *jounin* or *chuunin* rank, whether they are an Academy teacher or teacher of a three-man cell. Thus, only these two ranks can receive the title of sensei. Following *chuunin* are the *genin* (下忍), who are considered to be of lowest rank. Lastly are the Academy students, who are still in preparation to join the Ninja force and earn a rank of their own. In addition, it is not only the Ninja themselves, but also the techniques they use and the missions they receive that are classified by rank as well. Techniques and missions are ranked by difficulty, with S-rank being the highest, followed by A, B, C, D, and E-ranks respectively. Thus, S and A-ranks are usually reserved for *jounin*, whereas E ranks are exclusively for Academy students who are still learning the fundamentals. With this in mind, Naruto’s opposition to the low-rank missions reinforces the significance of rank in the Ninja world, which simultaneously symbolizes the hierarchical society of Japan. Furthermore, along with the hierarchy comes the climbing of the ladder to higher ranks. As a result, status elevation is also present in *Naruto*.



Figure 3, Chapter 9, Page 6-7



According to Lebra, the Japanese people “subject themselves to a long-range effort to elevate their status through education and occupation” (75). The most strenuous effort the Japanese put out in attempt to raise their status is for university entrance examinations. This is a time so stressful and demanding that it has been referred to as “examination hell”. It is ultimately what will determine an individual’s status, for if one were to be accepted into a prestigious university, “the person can relax as if he were on an escalator that would take him upward without much effort on his part” (75). This laborious effort of examination and competition can be seen in *Naruto* through the *Chuunin* Exams. Being a three part exam, it thoroughly tests ones knowledge, skill, and strength. With a written exam, obstacle course, and tournament, the pressure is exceedingly high, and so is the chance of death. Despite knowing this, many *genin* teams still participate in the *Chuunin* Exams, in hopes to climb the ladder to a higher status. It is clear that hierarchy plays an important role in *Naruto* just as it does in Japan.

Concepts such as the above mentioned are not the only features in which *Naruto* represents the Japanese mind. Emotional themes such as empathy and rancor, which are prevalent in the Japanese lifestyle, play big roles throughout the story. According to Lebra, empathy or *omoiyari* ranks high amongst the Japanese. *Omoi-yari* can translate to “the ability and willingness to feel what others are feeling, to vicariously experience the pleasure or pain that they are undergoing, and to help them satisfy their wishes” (38). This concept is widespread in the story of *Naruto*. In fact, an essential characteristic of Naruto is his ability to understand his enemies and transform them into allies. A considerable amount of the opponents Naruto faces partake in wrong-doings for generally the same reason: loneliness. They have faced the horror of solitude, resulting in their malice towards others. Since Naruto himself experienced the same sort of loneliness growing up, he is able to comprehend the pain his enemies suffer. His compassion

for others is found admirable, even by his foes, thus altering them into his companions. The best example of this situation is his confrontation with Gaara, a ninja of the Sand Village. Having also been cursed with the spirit of a tailed-beast sealed inside his body, Gaara has been hated and feared by his village since birth, just like Naruto. Unable to control his powers, he is deemed a threat to the village that must be disposed of. The leader of the village, the Kazekage (風影), who is also Gaara's father, orders the assassination of his own son at the hands of Gaara's uncle. Despite being Gaara's only companion, his uncle/caretaker claims to have followed the Kazekage's orders willingly, stating that he had truly hated Gaara ever since taking the life of his sister (Gaara's mother) upon his birth. This traumatic experience turns Gaara into a murderous beast, as he declares from that point on to live by the words "love only yourself... and fight only for yourself" (Volume 15, page 94). Having this philosophy burned into his mind, Gaara is unable to comprehend Naruto's motives during their fight together. Along the course of the battle, Naruto is able to increase his power due to his desire to protect his friends. Gaara, as someone who has only fought for himself, does not understand how Naruto is able to become increasingly stronger. At the end of the battle, once the both of them have reached their limits, Gaara questions Naruto as to why he would fight for others. Naruto responds saying: "They saved me from my pit of loneliness... and they understand me... I couldn't live without them... I love them" (Volume 16, page 64). It is with these words that Gaara's eyes are opened, and from that point on comes to greatly respect Naruto. Consequently, he makes great efforts to try and reshape his life to one resembling Naruto's, in which he is needed rather than feared by others. This is but one of the many examples in which empathy is employed in *Naruto*. His ability to understand others, and experience their pain makes Naruto well-versed on the concept of *omoiyari*.

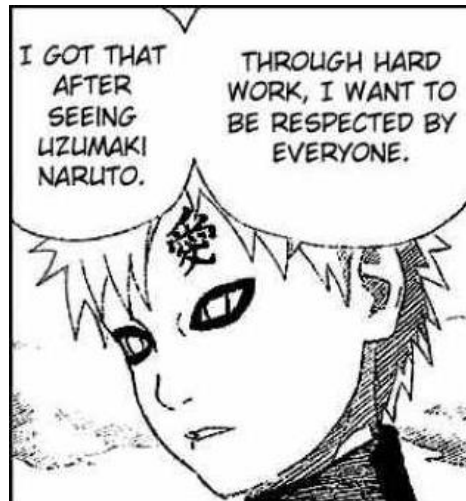


Figure 4, Volume 28, Chapter 249, Page 95

With empathy or *omoiyari*, comes the contrary of rancor or *urami*. Lebra describes the term *urami* as follows: “When the lack of empathy is shown deliberately and unjustly, the wound is likely to fester, instead of being healed, into an *urami*, ‘a grudge’ or ‘rancor’” (43-44). *Urami* can be characterized by one character, Sasuke. Having lived a pleasant life as a young child, his world is turned upside down when his beloved older brother, Itachi, unexpectedly murders their own parents along with everyone else in their clan. Itachi claims to spare Sasuke’s life simply because he is not even worth killing. He personally tells Sasuke to hate him and hold a grudge, so that if one day he ever becomes strong enough, the two of them could battle and test their true “capacity”. This paves the way for Sasuke’s future, and turns his sole goal in life to one of revenge. His *urami* towards Itachi turns him into an avenger. Though Sasuke and Naruto become best friends, Sasuke soon realizes after seeing Naruto’s progression from dead last to a powerful ninja that he himself had not advanced at all. He starts to see the bonds he has made as a hindrance on his ultimate objective of murdering Itachi and avenging his clan. Thus, he cuts all his personal ties, and leaves his village for the dark side in search of power. Sasuke’s wound was indeed one left to fester, as can be seen through his excessive need for revenge.

Though the themes discussed so far are significant in order to understand the Japanese mind, we must also take into consideration other factors from Japan's past that have helped to shape the thought-process of the Japanese today. Such factors include mythology and religion. Japan today is primarily a Buddhist and Shinto country. References to these two religions can be seen lingering throughout the story of *Naruto*. An online article, titled "An Introduction to Japanese Mythology Symbolism in 'Naruto'", explains these references in great detail. Firstly, there is the concept of *chakra*. *Chakra* is the internal energy source utilized when performing techniques or *jutsu*. This derives from the Buddhist "concept of spinning vortices that act as energy focal points within the body" (par 8). Furthermore, the power of *chakra* is accessed through the use of hand seals, which resembles the Buddhist tradition of *mudras*. A *mudra* is a hand gesture that "has both symbolic and practical purpose; they are used to aid one in meditation, and in some cases actually hold one's muscles and chest in a position to regulate breathing and focus concentration" (par 14). Another Buddhist concept that finds its way into *Naruto* is the idea of reincarnation. This is symbolized particularly by the *jutsu*, "Six Paths of Pain" (ペイン六道), in which the user controls six corpses that have been reanimated with the use of *chakra*. In the Buddhist belief, there are six domains into which a person is reborn, and each person "ascends or descends through these levels with each reincarnation depending on their karma, or how they lived their preceding life" (par 49). Hence, the Six Paths of Pain represent the six domains of Buddhism into which a person is reborn, and are named after each domain accordingly.

Alongside Buddhism in Japan comes the national religion of Shinto, from which the creation myth stems. The creation myth is the tale of Izanagi and Izanami, who were summoned by the gods to give birth to the physical world, resulting in the creation of the islands of Japan.

Upon giving birth to Kagutsuchi, the God of Fire, Izanami loses her life, and Izanagi travels to the underworld in an attempt to save her. He is unsuccessful however, and after returning to the living world, he “completed a purification ritual, and as he washed his face three new deities were born; Goddess of the Sun ‘Amaterasu’ was washed from his left eye, God of the Moon ‘Tsukuyomi’ from the right, and God of the Sea and Storms ‘Susanoo’ from his nose” (par 23). These three are present in *Naruto* through the use of Itachi’s eye techniques. From his left eye, he creates colossal, deadly flames with the Amaterasu technique. From his right, he can trap his opponent into a torturous underworld with the illusionary technique, Tsukuyomi. Lastly, the Susanoo technique creates a massive being which acts as a guardian, at the exchange of a great amount of *chakra*. From this, we can see a clear correlation between the Itachi’s techniques and the creation myth of Shintoism.

Connections to Japanese mythology don’t end there. Another folktale that is extremely evident in *Naruto* is “The Tale of the Gallant Jiraiya” (児雷也豪傑物語), the story of a ninja, Jiraiya, who is gifted in toad magic and marries a woman named Tsunade who is a user of snail magic. Furthermore, it is said that “one of Jiraya’s followers, Yashagoro, was overcome by the spell of a serpent and became skilled in serpent magic. He took the name Orochimaru and attacked Jiraiya” (“References Materials”). These three can be seen in *Naruto* almost precisely as they are in the folktale. The Legendary Three Ninja (伝説の三忍), or simply, *Sannin*, is the name of the former three-man cell consisting of members with the exact same names, Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Orochimaru. They also share the same types of techniques with their counterparts in the folktale, being able to summon a giant toad, slug, and snake correspondingly. Furthermore, in *Naruto*, Orochimaru turns on his team and attacks Jiraiya in the same manner as seen in the folktale. What’s more, aside from the tale of Jiraiya, Orochimaru’s character has even further

connections to Japanese myths. Before introducing those connections, however, it should be noted that Orochimaru is the source of dark power which Sasuke seeks in order to defeat Itachi, as mentioned during the explanation of *urami*. After having trained under him for two years, Sasuke ultimately defeats Orochimaru and absorbs his powers. This brings into play the tale of *Yamata no Orochi*, the eight-headed serpent in Japanese mythology. According to the myth, Susanoo is banished from the heavens after quarreling with his sister Amaterasu. As he roams the world, he comes across a distressed couple, who explain that the eight-headed serpent had come every year to devour one of their daughters, and that this year he would come to devour their eighth and final one. Susanoo gives them the proposition of slaying the serpent in exchange for their daughter's hand in marriage. After agreeing, he orders the parents to brew eight vats of sake, and place them at eight gates where the serpent would arrive. The result is as follows:

When the *Orochi* arrives, he is lured in towards the sake, and dips each of his heads into one of the vats. The drunken beast is now weakened and disoriented, allowing Susanoo to quickly slay it with his sword *Totsuka-no-Tsurugi*. Inside its tail, Susanoo found the great magical sword *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi*, which he then gifted to his sister Amaterasu as a peaceful gesture to end their grievance. (“References Materials”)

Each of these components can be found in *Naruto*. To begin with, the *Kusanagi no Tsurugi*, or Grass Cutter Sword, is also the name of Orochimaru's blade, which he hides inside his body and extracts from his mouth. The *Kusanagi no Tsurugi* is one of three treasures which make up the Imperial Regalia of Japan, with the other two being the *Yata no Kagami*, and the *Yasakani no Magatama*. The *Yata no Kagami* is present in *Naruto*, as the shield which is wielded by Itachi's summoned guardian, Susanoo. Thus, the ultimate battle between Sasuke and Itachi completely mirrors the tale of *Yamata no Orochi*. During their battle, Orochimaru's powers awaken within

Sasuke, as he emerges from his body as an eight-headed serpent. Itachi is able to counter and defeat him with the use of Susanoo, who wields the *Yata no Kagami* shield and the *Totsuka no Tsurugi*. Like Susanoo in the myth, Itachi's technique slays the eight-headed serpent Orochimaru with the *Totsuka no Tsurugi* sword, which is formed from a large gourd of sake. This, along with the others mentioned, make up but a small part of the symbolism that can be seen in *Naruto*. In short, *Naruto* is cleverly laced with connections not only to modern thought-processes of the Japanese, but also to historically significant concepts such as religion and mythology. Thus, it can act as a gateway to understanding the frame of mind of the Japanese people. However, though it may be used as a method of study, *Naruto* is, in the end, a *manga*. Therefore, we must not overlook its importance to the world of Pop Culture as well. As one of the top *mangas* of its time, *Naruto* certainly plays a chief role that contributes greatly to Japanese Popular Culture.

It is said that Pop Culture is accessible culture, and *Naruto* is exactly that. *Manga* in general has been sweeping the nation of Japan for years now, and is abundantly available across the country. In fact, it has been noted that Japan "now uses more paper for its comics than it does for its toilet paper" (Schodt, 12). With over 20% of its printed material being comprised of *manga*, it becomes clear that Japan's "vaunted pop culture apparatus...is really a *manga* industrial complex. Nearly every aspect of cultural production...is rooted in *manga*" (Pink, 3). *Naruto* has been contributing to this *manga* craze ever since its debut in *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine in the year 1999. Having been an ongoing series for over ten years, it's no surprise to find that *Naruto* is one of the best selling *mangas* to date. Thus, it has lived the appropriate life of a popular *manga*, with many resulting forms of media created from the foundation of its major popularity. In fact, "most anime (animated) movies and television series, as well as many videogames and collectible figures, began life as comics" (Pink, 3). This rings especially true for

*Naruto*, which has had an ongoing anime adaption, eight animated movies, countless video games, and an array of merchandise ranging from figures to key chains, even to replicas of characters' clothing and accessories. It is plain to see that *Naruto* is extremely influential in the world of Pop Culture, not only in Japan, but around the world.

Pop Culture is indeed, culture that appeals to the masses, and thus the concept of globalization cannot go unmentioned. The popularity of *manga* has reached overseas, to places such as France where “*manga* has gained a 38% share of the French comic markets” (Bouissou, 1), and the U.S., where certain titles have garnered enough attention and sales to make their way onto best-sellers list. *Naruto* is not excluded from this phenomenon. In 2006, Volume 9 of *Naruto* made its way to number 29 on the USA Today's 150 Bestsellers List. This feat “was the highest placement any *manga* title had ever achieved on that list at the time, and is indicative of the infiltration of anime and *manga* into American popular culture” (Jiao, par 1). It isn't however, the *manga* alone that has made its way into other countries. The anime adaption as well has been dubbed into other languages and broadcasted outside of Japan. In America, the English version of the anime has been bounced around quite often. It has also suffered from translation problems, which occur often when globalizing a product. *Naruto* had initially aired on the program Toonami, which was aimed for a demographic of children to teenagers. However, the original anime of *Naruto*, along with many others broadcasted on Toonami, were considered too violent for children in America, and so “materials within some of these anime were adjusted and censored” (par 26). *Naruto* received a more “appropriate” slot on American television after the cancellation of Toonami, resulting in its move to Adult Swim, a program designed for older audiences that strictly airs late at night. However, in more recent times, the second half of the anime, better known as “*Naruto: Shippuden*”, has made its way to Disney XD, a channel aimed



relatively at younger male audiences, where it has once again been stripped of original content and suffered the typical censorship. It is strange to see the shifting reception to the anime in America, yet it illustrates the fact that Pop Culture is, in the end, “culture consumed, and consumed in various ways, by different people” (Martinez, 6).

Aside from censorship, there have been other negative connotations in terms of the globalization of *manga*. In recent years, it is said that “young people are turning their attention away from the printed page and toward the tiny screens on their mobile phones” (Pink, 2). The relatively new creation of “scanlations” has become a recent issue in the *manga* industry. Hyu-Kyung Lee of King’s College London, UK explains the concept of scanlations thoroughly in his article entitled “Between fan culture and copyright infringement: manga scanlation”. He defines scanlations as “the phenomenon where ardent fans scan in *manga* titles, translate them from Japanese to another language and release the translated version free of charge via the internet” (1011). This should come of no surprise, for Pop Culture, as we have stated before, is accessible culture. With the increasing development of technology, it is only plausible that *manga* would spread not only across the physical world, but the cyber world as well. However, it is argued that the use of scanlations is hurting the *manga* business. Technically, the scanning, translating, and re-uploading of *manga* is considered copyright infringement, and many are quick to compare it to that of music pirating, making the claim that sharing *manga* through the internet results in the decrease of sales, thus negatively affecting the industry. This argument however, proves to be trivial, for the purpose of mostly all scanlators is to promote *manga*, rather than hinder it. It can be said that scanlators “place a great emphasis on the desire to ‘share’ their favourite *manga* and want to see the *manga* ‘reach a wider audience’” (1016). As discussed, *manga* is gaining attention from all over the world, and thus, fans from outside of Japan want to be able to keep up

with and read their favorite *mangas* as well. However, the globalizing of *manga* through licensed companies is not as quick as one may imagine. This creates “an inevitable time gap, from a few months to a few years, between the publication of *manga* in Japan and overseas and between different language territories” (1014). For example, the volume form of *Naruto* reaches up to number 58 in Japan as of November 2011, whereas the latest volume to be released in America this month was number 53 (“List of Volumes”). It is because of reasons like this that scanlators come into play. They become a resource to the latest installments of series, and provide the fans with translated materials that they would not have otherwise been able to receive for a considerable amount of time. In fact, the newest chapters of *Naruto* that are released in *Weekly Shonen Jump* on Mondays in Japan can be up on scanlation websites in English as early as Wednesday of the same week. Thus, some are concerned that this sort of convenience and access to this sector of Pop Culture will inevitably become the downfall of the *manga* market, as all readers will come to rely on the internet to get their *manga* fix, rather than purchasing the comic itself. This is not the case, however. *Manga* has become such a prominent part of Pop Culture, that it is hard to imagine its end anywhere in the near future; especially for exceedingly popular titles such as *Naruto*. In fact, in the case of “popular ongoing series such as *Naruto*, it is difficult to know if scanlation has had a harmful effect on their sales because ‘the series that are most scanlated have sold the best’ and ‘they are so popular that even people who are reading on scanlation would buy physical copies as well’” (Lee, 1019). Therefore, the concept of scanlation should be of no harm to *Naruto*’s critical success. Rather, it is a method of fans to show their appreciation. By translating and distributing the manga at no cost for the sake of other fans, scanlation simply promotes *Naruto*’s popularity, and accelerates its rise to fame.

That being said, fan appreciation can also be used as an indicator of one's stance in the world of Pop Culture. In addition to promotion through scanlation, fans of *Naruto* have many ways of expressing their love for the series. Such forms of expression include fan art, fan fiction, *doujinshi*, and *cosplay*. Art drawn by the fans themselves can be seen posted throughout the internet on art communities such as *deviantART*. Fan fictions are stories written by the fans, usually in which characters from the series are paired up as a fantasy couple. The two works unite as one through what is known as *doujinshi*, or fan comics. *Doujinshi* have been under the same heat as scanlations, because by using copyrighted characters and selling their work, *doujinshi* artists are "trampling intellectual property rights" (Pink, 4). In spite of this, the fact that fans enjoy the series to the extent that they engage in creating works of their own should be acknowledged. There is a vast amount of artists who adjust their drawing style to resemble that of *Naruto*, and *doujinshis* that look as if they were drawn by the original artist himself. This shows the immense impact *Naruto* has had on its readers, in so far as it has influenced the creation of fan works, not only in Japan, but across the world. For example, a Filipino artist currently residing in the United Kingdom, who goes by the name of "pokefreak" on *deviantART*, holds one of the top spots on the website's list of most popular pieces of all time. His illustration entitled "Hogging the Spotlight Rerender" bears a striking resemblance to the official artwork of *Naruto*, and has accumulated nearly 1,600,00 views since its upload in 2006 ([deviantart.com](http://deviantart.com)). As we can see from this, it is not just the *manga* itself, but works that have stemmed from *Naruto* that have gained popularity amongst the masses as well. Furthermore, public displays of appreciation also give us an insight as to how prominent *Naruto* has become on the pop cultural scene.

Aside from artistic displays, there is also the previously mentioned *cosplay*. *Cosplay*, being short for “costume play”, is a phenomenon originating from Japan where fans dress up as characters from certain *manga* titles. Whether it is done for a convention, or simply for a photo shoot, *cosplay* is another aspect of popular culture that exhibits fans’ dedication to their favorite series. Furthermore, *cosplayers* are assisted in their attempts to become *Naruto* characters by the mass production of *Naruto* merchandise. Not only has the series earned itself an assortment of products (i.e. pencil cases, cell phone charms, plush toys, etc), but fans can also purchase clothing precisely resembling that of their favorite *Naruto* character. From the headband to the Konoha Ninja vest, virtually all parts needed to become a *Naruto* character are accessible to the people. This reinforces the idea that it’s not “how and what people produce that constitutes postmodern culture, but how people consume the products of capitalism, and what products, that constitutes culture” (Martinez, 4). Although *Naruto* is the basis of many goods, it is the fans’ consumption and utilization of said goods that eventually shapes its cultural position.

Lastly, the most important aspect of Pop Culture is its capacity of symbolic value. Pop Culture, particularly, forms of mass media have a “political, or ideological, dimension and a deeper, more symbolic and psychological aspect which allow the messages they convey to mean diverse things to different people at different times” (Martinez, 2). With this in mind, it can be said that *Naruto* is symbolic of Japan itself. Apart from the connection to themes discussed previously, there are a few other aspects that allude to *Naruto*’s symbolic representation of Japan. These aspects deal primarily with postwar Japan. First, there is the idea that the generation of Japanese today has had to deal “with their parents’ participation in war. The later generations must deal with the burdens of previous generations” (Jiao, par 17). This theory can be seen by the burdens inflicted on *Naruto* by his own parents. In the later chapters of the *manga*, it is

revealed that the Fourth Hokage, who sealed the Kyuubi into Naruto, was in actuality his own father. With the belief that Naruto would learn to master the Kyuubi's power and use it for good, he sealed the beast into his own son, thus saving the village. Though it was done with good intentions, the Fourth Hokage's actions imposed an immense burden on Naruto; one that tormented him for a great deal of time.



Figure 5, Chapter 440, Page 7

Furthermore, Naruto himself can also be representative of Japan's stance in the world after the war. Following the war, the Japanese "have identified themselves as victims in an isolated archipelago—the underdog ready to make a comeback" (par 22). This concept of the underdog making a comeback is one of the central themes in *Naruto*. Being a lonely orphan as a child, who would always claim to become Hokage in hopes to get others' attention, Naruto makes a complete turn-around as he matures into a skilled ninja who is respected by his entire village. Thus, it "speaks strongly of Japanese psychology—it portrays the desire for the world to acknowledge them and not be isolated from the world any longer" (par 24). In short, the Kyuubi can be representative of World War II. It caused destruction to the land and took the lives of many people. Its damage was imposed on the following generation, as can be seen through the Fourth Hokage's decision to seal the monster into his son, Naruto. The new generation must live with this burden, as clearly portrayed through the village's rejection of Naruto. Finally, in the aftermath of the destruction comes the recovery, in which Japan tries to make their comeback

into the world. This is signified through Naruto's wish to be acknowledged by others, and his underdog motif. Through these examples, it can be seen that *Naruto* is extremely symbolic and possesses great allegorical meaning in relation to Japan, thus emphasizing its pop cultural significance.

The road to understanding the Japanese and their way of thinking is full of psychological, cultural, societal, historical, religious themes and so on. Such themes include topics that many outside of Japan may be unfamiliar with. Thus, one must uncover methods in which they are able to study such subjects in depth. As an accessible symbol of the people, Pop Culture is an ideal tool for analyzing a society. In Japan, the most prominent form of Pop Culture, manga, proves to be extremely useful in helping to grasp a better understanding of the lives of the Japanese. In particular, *Naruto* is rich in themes relating to Japan, making it an exceptional method of Japanese studies. With its utilization of central Japanese themes, religion, and mythology, as well as its stance as one of the most popular mangas in the world, *Naruto* plays a dual role as a representative of both the Japanese Mind as well as Japanese Pop Culture. Thus, *Naruto* perfectly demonstrates the connection between the two, in addition to the effectiveness of using one as an approach to understand the other.

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